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Gramsci's Party Revisited:
A Response to the Crisis of Party Democracy in the Twenty-First Century

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Political Science

by

Alexandra De Ciantis

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Simone Chambers, Chair
Professor Mary McThomas
Professor Daniel Brunstetter

2026

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DEDICATION

To

My grandmothers, Anna Maria and Clara,

for all your love and foresight

Impara l'arte e mettila da parte

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Well before I encountered political theory, my grandmothers, Clara and Annamaria, taught me the importance of developing the practical knowledge needed both to grow as a person and to contribute meaningfully to the world around me. I thank them for inspiring my vision of a world where each person can pursue their life goals freely and with dignity. It is to them that I dedicate this work.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Gramsci's Party Revisited:
A Response to the Crisis of Party Democracy in the Twenty-First Century

by

Alexandra De Ciantis
Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science
University of California, Irvine, 2026
Professor Simone Chambers, Chair

The classical problem of the relation between the party and democracy's principle of popular sovereignty has, in recent years, been the focus of major normative debates in political theory and intense political struggles in contemporary democracies around the world. What leading political scientists and democratic theorists in the field diagnose as the crisis of party democracy is best understood as a deepening division between citizens and their vital institutions of democratic representation. In response, many democratic theorists have sought to rethink and revitalize the role of parties and partisanship in contemporary democratic life. This dissertation introduces Antonio Gramsci to the ongoing debate and provides the first systematic reconstruction of his early twentieth-century thoughts on party democracy.

My central thesis is that Gramsci's concept of the party as a modern Prince offers a compelling alternative to contemporary models of party democracy because it seeks to overcome, rather than regulate, minimize, or intensify, the division between leaders and led. I develop this argument through a survey of diverse historical and contemporary perspectives, ranging from the canons of procedural democracy such as Hans Kelsen and Joseph Schumpeter to contemporary left populists inspired by Niccolò Machiavelli. Against this political-theoretical backdrop, I reconstruct Gramsci as an innovative and relevant democratic theorist of the political party, committed to the realization of popular sovereignty within a representative democratic

framework through the ongoing mediation between elected representatives and the citizenry as a whole.

The introduction provides an overview of the current crisis, as well as the theoretical debates surrounding it, and it puts forward a new democratic reading of Gramsci's theory of the party as a modern Prince. Each subsequent chapter is then organized around a critical dialogue between Gramsci and the two main approaches to the crisis of party democracy in contemporary democratic theory. Chapter 2 examines the proceduralist approach of minimalist realists and Kelsenian proceduralists, which defends parties as mechanisms for regulating competitive elections and safeguarding party pluralism. Chapter 3 turns to the left populist approach of agonistic and plebeian radical democrats, which seeks to restore popular power through the anti-elitist leadership of a virtuous "People's Prince" in opposition to the traditional party system.

Despite their differences, both approaches accept the hierarchical division between leaders and led as a permanent feature of democratic politics and regard the idea of a party capable of representing 'the People-as-a-whole' as an unrealistic or democratically dangerous myth. In contrast, Gramsci maintained the possibility of overcoming this hierarchical division and theorized the party as the institutional form best suited to building consensus around the common good through cross-class alliances and a reciprocal participatory and pedagogical relationship between party leaders, ordinary citizens, and representative institutions.

I argue that, when reconsidered for a liberal democratic context, Gramsci's theory of the modern Prince provides an important and still-relevant normative standard for evaluating party leadership and reforming political parties in ways that recover its role in stimulating widespread participation, building projects across social divisions, and realizing democracy's principle of equal freedom. In sum, this dissertation brings to light Gramsci's largely overlooked views on

the relation between the party and popular sovereignty in order to contribute to ongoing debates in democratic theory concerning how democratic institutions might be revitalized in our challenging times.

INTRODUCTION:

The Crisis of Party Democracy

> [For] other organisms it is a matter of life not to have passive and direct consent, but active and direct consent, therefore the participation of individuals, even if this provokes an appearance of disintegration and tumult. A collective consciousness, that is, a living organism, does not form unless multiplicity has been unified through the friction of individuals: nor can it be said that 'silence' is not multiplicity. An orchestra rehearsing, each instrument on its own, gives the impression of the most horrible cacophony; yet these rehearsals are the condition for the orchestra to live as a single 'instrument'.
>
> – Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*

Contemporary democracies are, once again, beset by a crisis of political parties. Once regarded as central institutions of democratic representation capable of organizing citizens around issues of common concern and translating their demands into public policy, parties today are increasingly unresponsive to the pressing socioeconomic, ethical, and political problems facing society as a whole. Over the past two decades, discussion among democratic theorists and political scientists of a "crisis of party democracy" has proliferated in response to declining party membership and the growing failure of parties to perform their basic democratic function of connecting citizens to their elected representatives and the state (Urbinati 2019b; Wolkenstein 2020; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017; Ignazi 2017; Mair 2013; Dalton and Wattenberg 2002). At its core, the crisis of party democracy reflects a fundamental breakdown in the relationship between parties and the citizenry they are meant to serve. In our twenty-first century moment, this crisis manifests in a set of interlocking and empirically observable challenges to the foundations of democratic life.

Among the most pressing challenges for democracy today is deepening popular disillusionment with representative institutions, most visible in widespread mistrust and rejection

of existing parties and party systems. Parties are no longer perceived by the public as vehicles for empowering citizens political participation but are instead increasingly seen as self-referential institutions detached from society – mere instruments with which economic and political elites acquire and maintain power. The erosion of citizens' trust in parties (van Biezen and Saward 2008), combined with a growing preference for more spontaneous and direct forms of political action (Wolkenstein and Invernizzi-Accetti 2017), reflects a deepening failure of parties to perform their democratic function of providing citizens with meaningful avenues of participating and determining public policies.

In Canada, for example, only 2 percent of the population reports an inclination to join a party or support a campaign, while nearly 70 percent express a negative perception of political parties (Manning and Turcotte 2014). This widespread detachment from party politics persists despite low levels of political apathy among the population. In 2020, over 60 percent of Canadians reported strong interest in politics, yet fewer than 10 percent were actively involved in an organization such as a union or party (Arrigada et al. 2022, 6). These trends point not to popular indifference toward politics as such, but to political despondency caused by a waning belief among citizens that parties are necessary vehicles for pursuing collective aims and exercising political freedom.

The weakening of parties as vital intermediaries between citizens and the state manifests not only as sinking trust in elected representatives, but also in dissatisfaction with the outcomes of electoral competition. This dissatisfaction takes two forms. First, procedurally, citizens feel they lack meaningful electoral choice: parties appear indistinguishable, weakening competitive elections as mechanisms for holding elites accountable (Shapiro 2016; Przeworski 2018). Second, substantively, even where electoral choice exists, party platforms often fail to address

peoples' concerns since they are not open to citizens' input in agenda-setting. When parties fail in both respects, citizens do not simply disengage but seek alternative forms of political self-expression, often outside formal democratic institutions.

This turn toward extra-parliamentary forms of political action was evident during the 2023–2024 mass protests in Israel against the judicial overhaul proposed by Netanyahu's government. For the protestors, the parliamentary system of opposition had failed both to hold the incumbent accountable and to protect the liberty of ordinary citizens. As a result, they assumed that oppositional role themselves in the streets. As one of the main protest organizations stated in an X post: "Instead of letting Netanyahu eat the dish he cooked for himself, Gantz is working tirelessly to save him from himself. There is no parliamentary opposition in Israel. There is only us and the historic protest movement in the streets. Therefore, we must rely solely on the struggle" (Kumi Israel 2023).

The increasing domination of political parties by wealthy and influential elites is well documented and widely recognized among political scientists and democratic theorists. Parties tend to recruit disproportionately from elite sectors, namely individuals with privileged access to resources and higher levels of education, rather than from the working-class sectors of the population, such as poor, unemployed, and undereducated citizens (Kesberg and Easterbrook 2025). As Katz and Mair (1995) argue in their influential study, following the decline of the traditional mass party, parties increasingly function like cartels by using state resources to limit political competition and secure their own electoral success. The capture of representative institutions by wealthy and powerful elites reinforces the dominance of a professional political class and creates procedural and epistemic barriers for ordinary citizens seeking to hold elected officials accountable (Bagg 2018).

In turn, elite entrenchment in representative institutions fuels the pessimistic feeling that all political parties are fundamentally opposed to the general interest, thereby undermining the optimism of collective human agency necessary for ordinary citizens to create new transformative institutions of participation, representation, and administration in the face of crisis (Panitch 2016). Contemporary party-based democracies thus tend toward oligarchy rather than popular rule, since elected representatives are often more responsive to powerful economic and political interests than to the public interest (McCormick 2011). Moreover, because electoral outcomes rarely result from popular participation in agenda-setting, voting often becomes a mere alignment with elite-defined programs, with citizens endorsing policies they might not have chosen had they participated more directly and substantively (Holcombe 2021).

In the context of rising socioeconomic and political inequality, the division between citizens and their elected representatives has reached a seemingly insurmountable level, leaving parties increasingly incapable of protecting equal freedom and providing citizens with meaningful institutional avenues to influence the decisions that govern their lives. As Mair (2013) famously asserted a decade ago, "the age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from society…that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form" (1). And yet, despite their failings, democracy cannot survive without political parties, that is, collective organisms capable of stimulating participation in political life and enabling a plurality of people with differing interests, class positions, values, and goals to remain united by the process of public interaction and the pursuit of solving issues of common concern.

Thus, the tension between the need for parties to ensure the democratic principle of equal freedom can be realized and their dysfunction in practice makes it appropriate to speak of a

"crisis" rather than simply a "decline" of party-centered democracy. In large-scale, pluralistic political systems, where it is not possible for all citizens to participate directly or exercise influence in every political decision without mediating institutions – due largely to the unequal distribution of resources, wealth, education, and chances to participate – parties are indispensable to democracy. This is because parties are the primary organizations through which citizens can exercise self-rule by selecting leaders who will represent them on the basis of *their* interests, experiences, and life goals.

When parties function as vehicles of collective self-representation in this way, they help maximize political empowerment and equal freedom under conditions of social complexity, exclusion, and inequality. In other words, parties are the best institutional means through which a system of collective self-government can become feasible in large-scale regimes: when they operate on the principle of political inclusion, they allow all citizens, especially subordinate groups such as women and workers, the chance to become autonomous in their moral and political convictions in determining the decisions of the nation.

Unlike elections and parliaments, parties are irreducible to their procedural democratic function of selecting individual leaders or representing interest-groups in a general assembly, even though these are among their essential functions. More fundamentally, parties are the principal political organizations through which "the People" can be transformed from a subaltern, ruled-over mass of isolated citizens into a collective ruling subject. Parties play this unique role of enabling collective self-rule in contexts of deep societal fragmentation because, unlike other representative institutions, they hold the ability to coalesce a multiplicity of citizens with differing views and interests around the formation of common political goals, thereby making popular rule a real possibility.

Despite their necessity for facilitating popular rule, many democratic theorists have either neglected political parties or treated them as a necessary evil (Saffon and Urbinati 2025). Parties are rarely assigned a positive normative function in democratic theory, and relatively little intellectual effort has been devoted to their reform (Wolkenstein 2020, 6). While some argue that popular rule and the democratic ideal of both being represented and representing in turn might be better realized in a no-party democracy (Landemore 2020), other democratic theorists maintain that democracy is "unthinkable" without political parties (Schattschneider 1942, 1; Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; White and Ypi 2016). As Saffon and Urbinati (2025) argue, parties are vital agents of equal political freedom, helping to promote the common good and regulate conflicts within a framework of constitutional order, even if they are the main culprits of the so-called "crisis of democracy".

After a long period of neglect, democratic theory has seen a renewed interest in parties and partisanship, along with new normative defenses of their indispensable role in democracy (Chambers 2023, 162; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020; van Biezen and Saward 2008).[1] What has been described as the "new political theory of parties" revisits classical arguments in favor of a democracy organized around parties as the principal modes of political representation, leadership, and democratic agency (Wolkenstein 2019b). This new wave of party theory encompasses a wide range of historical and contemporary perspectives, including Edmund Burke's influential conservative defense of parties as principled collective associations, as well as the more radical conservative views of the late nineteenth-century classical elitists – Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels – who saw parties as institutions inevitably corrupted by elites yet nevertheless necessary in the age of mass politics. This latter pessimistic view, which predominated the study of political science in late nineteenth and early twentieth-

century Europe, was subsequently developed into more positive normative accounts by liberal proceduralist such as Hans Kelsen (1929), Joseph Schumpeter (1943), and Norberto Bobbio (1963), who defended parties as essential to the method of selecting rulers and making decisions democratically.

This realistic approach to parties as essential components of a functioning electoral-representative democracy, first espoused by the canons of procedural democratic thought, has come to predominate discussions of the essence and value of parties in recent debates (Przeworski 2026; Wolkenstein 2026; Urbinati 2026; Saffon and Urbinati 2025). Alongside it, a more radical democratic tradition of partisan realism, inspired by Machiavelli's and Marx's analyses of class struggle between ruling elites and the common people, has sought to utilize party-based leadership in order to develop more direct-participatory means of popular empowerment capable of constraining elite domination and exercising control over traditional electoral-representative systems governed by multi-party democracy (McCormick 2025; Vergara 2020b). Taken together, these competing traditions have generated distinct ethical conceptions of partisanship, articulated new criteria for evaluating the role of parties in contemporary democracies, and advanced novel proposals for institutional reform. At the center of ongoing debates lies the classical problem of the relationship between political parties and democracy's ideal of popular sovereignty: a question that has long animated the history of democratic thought and modern systems of representative democracy (Urbinati 2013; Wolkenstein 2019a; White and Ypi 2016).

Three main perspectives within contemporary democratic theory have intervened in this debate, each offering a distinct account of party democracy. Minimalist realists, building on Schumpeter's redefinition of democracy as a competitive method for selecting leaders, defend

parties as instruments of elite competition and partisan turnover (Przeworski 2010; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). Kelsenian proceduralists, drawing on Kelsen's largely neglected defense of parliamentary democracy, view parties as necessary voluntary institutions that safeguard individual freedom and facilitate compromise under conditions of conflict and disagreement (Urbinati 2013; Ragazzoni 2017; Baume and Ragazzoni 2026; Wolkenstein 2026; 2019b). Left populists, in both their agonistic discourse-centered (Mouffe 2018) and plebeian-centered (Vergara 2020a) variants, draw on Machiavelli's theory of the virtuous People's Prince to defend a populist form of party leadership as a mechanism through which the many can rule over the elites (McCormick 2025). While these contemporary approaches seek either to manage or contain the widening gap between elected representatives and the common citizenry they are meant to serve, none conceives of the political party as the institutional means to overcome this division and enable the people to rule themselves more fully.

Amid these efforts to address the crisis and rethink the role of parties in democracy, one major early twentieth-century political theorist and party leader who devoted his work to overcoming this division has been largely overlooked: Antonio Gramsci. This dissertation introduces Gramsci into the contemporary debate and explores his theory of the political party, the modern Prince, as an alternative response to the crisis of party democracy. Building on his central argument that the division between leaders and led, party representatives and their social bases, can and should be overcome, I argue that Gramsci offers a timely and normatively compelling framework for revitalizing party democracy under contemporary conditions of inequality, pluralism, conflict, and widespread citizen detachment from representative institutions.

I develop this account by placing Gramsci in critical dialogue with the core contemporary perspectives on party democracy represented by minimalist realists, Kelsenian proceduralists, and left populists. In the pages that follow, I survey these approaches and explain how their proposals to either confine parties to procedural functions of elite turnover and parliamentary compromise or mobilize the people to side with "the many" against elites fall short of ensuring that parties perform their central democratic function: securing equal political freedom by organizing diverse social groups to participate actively and responsibly in the pursuit of the common good. I contend that Gramsci's conception of the political party, grounded in a reciprocal participatory and pedagogical relationship between leaders and led, provides a more promising framework for addressing the crisis and facilitating popular sovereignty than these approaches, each of which treats the division between the Party and the People as a permanent feature of democratic politics to be managed, minimized, or intensified rather than overcome.

Antonio Gramsci on Party Democracy: A Critical Intervention

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide the first critical reconstruction of Gramsci's early twentieth-century theory of party democracy in order to clarify its conceptual foundations and assess its relevance for contemporary democratic politics. Among the many concepts Gramsci developed in the more than 3,000 pages he wrote while imprisoned by the Italian Fascist state (1929–1936), none has proven more influential than his conception of the political party as a modern Prince. Yet, Gramsci's modern Prince has rarely been examined as a theory of party democracy centered on the role of an internally democratic, participatory, and educative party, and the direct exercise of democratic agency by each member, in actualizing popular sovereignty.

Through an innovative reading of Gramsci's political writings, this dissertation casts into relief the enduring significance of his model of the party to contemporary democratic theory. It also clarifies with greater precision the key elements of his political thought that traverse his early writings and *Prison Notebooks*: his understanding of partisanship as a civic responsibility to take sides in a conflict and participate in the pursuit of the common good; his conception of liberty as a fundamental right grounded in political, epistemic, and social equality of individuals to fulfill themselves as persons; his idea of the party's role in transforming inherited common sense into rational "good sense" and in guiding social groups toward a collective project aimed at freeing all from all forms of domination; his notion of politics as an unceasing struggle among divergent groups to address the problems facing society as a whole; and his theory of democracy as the continual renewal of political leadership through active and direct popular participation. This reconstruction of Gramsci's political thought recovers an ethical function of parties and partisanship that is particularly relevant to contemporary debates and issues in democratic politics.

Throughout the history of political thought, democratic theorists have grappled with the tension between political parties and democracy's ideal of collective self-rule (White and Ypi 2016). As Ignazi (2017) puts it, "the problem is in the name": the term party derives from the Latin *partire*, meaning to divide (1). The inherently divisive character of parties sits uneasily with democratic ideals of national unity and popular sovereignty. This tension is especially pronounced in modern representative democracies, where citizens do not rule directly but govern through elected representatives. The resulting division of labor between rulers and ruled, citizens and their elected representatives, poses a challenge to theories of democracy that value direct participation as the ultimate form of democratic agency (Wolkenstein 2020; 2019b). Since a

system of direct participation by all citizens is not feasible, some democratic theorists, most notably Kelsen (1929), view the multi-party system of electoral representation as the most effective means of securing equal freedom and defending party pluralism (Saffon and Urbinati 2025; Urbinati 2026). Many contemporary democratic theorists concur that the parties are indispensable to a pluralistic democracy: they enable the regular and peaceful transfer of power and channel social conflict into compromises between equally legitimate parts in society (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020).

The new political theory of parties has sought to elaborate a more robust account of the normative function of parties and partisanship that reconciles their inherently divisive character with democracy's principle of collective self-rule. White and Ypi (2016) recover the public justificatory function of parties, arguing that being partisan is not simply about pursuing narrow sectarian interests but about "adopting principles and aims that are generalizable, i.e., irreducible to the beliefs or interests of particular social groups" (5). To be partisan means to take sides with some against others. But taking sides does not necessarily contradict the sincere civic commitment to pursuing the common good (Urbinati 2019c). For many democratic theorists, party democracy is a system that ensures free and fair competition between groups with conflicting visions and deep disagreements about what the common good entails. In this way, partisanship promises a type of politics in which adversaries – those who hold differing political affiliations, views, interests, and class positions – can relate to each other as equals, even if they are in conflict. As Urbinati (2019c) explains, "Partisanship is a way of being and acting that belongs to political communities that are free and plural" (102).

Writing in the context of an ethically, politically, and socially divided Italy following the First World War, Gramsci (1982 [1917]) advanced a conception of partisanship as both a civic

responsibility to take sides in political conflict and to participate in the pursuit of the common good. Subsequently, during his imprisonment in the 1930s, and shaped by his experience co-founding the Communist Party of Italy at the Livorno Congress, Gramsci undertook one of his most ambitious intellectual projects: to develop the architecture of a mass political party capable of incorporating the subaltern classes as a whole and enabling their active participation in political life.

Against elitist models of the party, Gramsci defines "the modern Prince" as the principal vehicle through which the popular mass – individuals of differing and often antagonistic social classes – can unify around a common social cause and assert themselves as an autonomous moral and political subject. As he writes,

> The modern Prince must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organizer of an intellectual and moral reform, which also means creating the terrain for a subsequent development of the national-popular collective will towards the realization of a superior form of modern civilization…These two basic points – the formation of a national-popular collective will, of which the modern Prince is at one and the same time the organizer and the active, operative expression; and intellectual and moral reform – should structure the entire work. (Gramsci 1971 [1932], 133)

Gramsci's conception of the modern Prince, developed primarily in the pages of his "Notes on Machiavelli, on Politics, and on the Modern State" (1949 [1930–1932]), represents an attempt to realize democracy's principle of popular sovereignty by redefining the party not as an instrument for pursuing the narrow interests of a single class, but as the vehicle through which popular unity can be constructed out of the diversity and complexity of society as a whole. However, the new wave of party theorizing in contemporary democratic theory has largely overlooked Gramsci's idea that the modern Prince is the best institutional form for organizing and articulating a *unified* popular will.[2] Many democratic theorists instead regard such a national-popular conception of the party as unrealistic or even democratically dangerous, rejecting it as a veiled justification for authoritarian one-party (Baume and Ragazzoni 2026;

Urbinati 2013; Urbinati 2026; Przeworski 2010) or an impossibility given the oligarchic tendencies in modern representative systems (Vergara 2020b).

Accordingly, most democratic theorists today defend a conception of the party as a *partiality* (Rosenblum 2008; Urbinati 2019c), rejecting the view that democracy can serve as a vehicle of the common good or that any particular party can be valued on the grounds that it produces outcomes in the objective interest of all citizens. Gramsci offers an important argument against this prevailing view by conceiving the party, from a historical materialist perspective, as an institution that produces the national-popular will by channeling conflicting social groups toward a common and coherent political project. I bring Gramsci's historical materialist political thought to bear on both proceduralist and left-populist defenses of the party, each of which rejects the possibility or normative desirability of a party aimed at overcoming social divisions and ruling in the interest of all.

Minimalist realists and Kelsenians proceduralists defend parties not for their ability to produce the common good or serve in the interest of all, but for their procedural role in ensuring collectively binding decisions are made through competitive electoral selection of political representatives in large complex and pluralistic democracies (Przeworski 2026; Urbinati 2013). Minimalist realists start their defense of parties from Schumpeter's "realistic" definition that equates democracy with the procedure of competitive elections and restricts popular participation to the selection of the political class in charge of making decisions through voting. In the minimalist view, democracy consists in the procedures through which elites compete for office by securing the people's vote, and parties are to be valued not for enabling citizens to govern themselves more directly and substantively, but for organizing this competition between elites

and channeling conflicts through a relatively peaceful process of partisan alternation in office (Przeworski 2010).

Contemporary minimalist realists such as Adam Przeworski and Ian Shapiro accordingly diagnose the crisis of party democracy not as a loss of meaningful popular influence over politics, but as a breakdown of the institutional rules and the weakening of internal party structures that sustain regular partisan turnover. In the minimalist realist account, party democracy, is valued instrumentally as a mechanism for securing the peaceful transfer of power (Przeworski 2018; 2010) and preventing elite domination (Shapiro 2016) by channeling conflict through institutionalized legitimate opposition and competitive elections between elites for the consent of the majority and control of the government. Thus, it accepts the hierarchical relation of inequality and division between political representatives and the common citizenry as a permanent feature of democracy and rejects any role for parties in securing equal political freedom.

Kelsenian proceduralists, such as Nadia Urbinati, Fabio Wolkenstein, and David Ragazzoni, also advance a procedural defense of party democracy, but unlike minimalist realists, they insist that parties are intrinsically valuable to democracy because they instantiate ideals of equal political freedom and democratic self-government. On this view, party democracy approximates popular sovereignty by enabling multiple parties to advance distinct visions of the common good within a representative assembly, where opposing groups compete under formal rules of free and fair elections that treat all parties as equally legitimate parts of the whole. Parties thus facilitate the equal exercise of political agency by bringing like-minded individuals together into collective associations capable of being equally represented in parliament (Kelsen 2013 [1929]). Moreover, the internal democratic structure of parties which are open to citizens'

input and allow like-minded citizens to coalesce around shared goals enables parties to act as vital mediators between citizens' demands and the legislative process, thereby reducing the gap between society and the state (Wolkenstein 2020).

What is most important about a system of party democracy, for Kelsenian proceduralists, is that it is a decision-making procedure that enables equal individual participation, channels competing interests and represents them within the general assembly of Parliament, while producing majority outcomes through compromise among rival parties. In this sense, (multi)party democracy is said to distribute political power formally, and hence, to contribute to a non-hierarchical relation of equality among citizens. Thus, for Kelsenian proceduralists, parliamentary democracy, rather than a single mass-based party, is the best mechanism for approximating popular sovereignty by allowing diverse perspectives to be expressed, contested, and reconciled through institutionalized procedures such as parliamentary deliberation, the selection of representatives, and compromise. Yet here, too, the division between parties and the citizenry is not treated as a problem to be overcome, but as a necessary feature of large-scale representative systems. The promise of party democracy lies instead in minimizing this division through the formal protection of citizens' indirect participation in party competition and their representation in parliament.

In contrast to the proceduralists, left populists defend parties on substantive democratic grounds, arguing that parties and their leaders should be evaluated according to their responsiveness to the needs and demands of the majority and their capacity to enable forms of direct popular rule. To be a good partisan, in the left populist view, is to take the side of the people against established elites. Drawing from Machiavelli's realist account of society as divided into two opposing classes – the oligarchic few who seek to dominate and the subordinate

many who seek to resist their domination – left populists understand party democracy as a means of mobilizing and empowering the people as a unified political subject. Parties, in this view, are not to be valued simply for channeling conflict into processes of electoral turnover or parliamentary compromise, but for empowering the common people to assert their collective will against oligarchic domination and to exercise control over representative institutions. This populist conception of politics is centered on the individual figure of a people's Prince, understood as the principal agent of unifying and enacting the popular will.

Within the left populist tradition, two distinct theories of the people's Prince can be identified. The agonistic populist conception, elaborated in the post-Marxist discourses theorists of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, emphasizes the role of charismatic leadership and the party's hegemonic function in articulating heterogeneous social demands into a unified political subject through a chain of equivalences. The plebeian populist conception, advanced by radical neo-republican theorists such as Camila Vergara and John McCormick, by contrast, centers on a class-specific, anti-oligarchic form of political leadership aimed at establishing new institutions of popular rule that constrain and exclude the elites from power. In both accounts, the party is not conceived as a collective mediating institution capable of overcoming the hierarchical division between representatives and the citizenry. Rather, left populists treat the division between elites and the people as an enduring feature of political life and seek to intensify and institutionalize this antagonism as the primary means of curbing elite domination and securing popular rule.

While each of contemporary proceduralists and left populists offers important insights into the democratic value of parties and the challenges confronting party democracy today, neither approach is equipped to fully resolve the most pressing problem: the deepening divide

between representatives and the represented. This is because neither of approach seeks to overcome that class division. If the crisis of party democracy stems from a fundamental breakdown in the relationship between parties and the citizenry they claim to represent, it cannot be adequately addressed by managing, minimizing, or intensifying that divide, whether through regulating elite competition, affirming formal political equality through procedural neutrality, or mobilizing the people against established elites.

In contrast to minimalist realists, Kelsenian proceduralists, and left-populists, Gramsci refuses to accept the division between representatives and the represented as a permanent or desirable feature of democratic politics. According to Gramsci, the division of society into a ruling political class and subaltern popular classes is not a fixed or inevitable product of representative democracy, but a historically produced consequence of social and political inequality that prevents the subaltern citizenry from participating in political life as fully autonomous equals. Since the division between ruler and ruled is a "historical fact" corresponding to certain conditions rather than a natural or eternal feature of human society (as was assumed by Mosca, Pareto, and Michels), Gramsci treats this fact as problematic: as something that needs to be studied to see if and how it can be overcome. In particular, this fact presupposes, as Gramsci (1975a [1931–1932]) puts it, "the problem of the political party as a whole", that is, the need for a mass-class party which can interpret the needs of the subaltern classes and provide them with the conditions to participate actively and equally in democratic life (972). Gramsci poses the problem and directs it to the Italian School of Elitism as follows:

> In forming leaders, the premise is fundamental: do you want there to always be ruled and rulers or do you want to create the conditions in which the necessity of the existence of this division disappears? That is, do you start from the premise of the perpetual division of the human race, or do you believe that it is only a historical fact, responding to certain conditions? (Gramsci 1975b [1931–1932], 1752)

Although he agrees with the irreducibility of the existence of rulers and ruled, Gramsci (1975b [1933]) argues that it is requires finding the most effective way to prepare leaders to "pursue the interests of the ruled and therefore…have their consent" (1771). "The origins of this fact are a problem apart", he explains,

> which will have to be studied in its own right (at least it can and must be studied how to attenuate and make the fact disappear by changing certain conditions that can be identified as operative in this sense), but the fact remains that there are leaders and the directed, rulers and the governed. Given this fact it will be necessary to see how one can direct in the most effective way (given certain ends) and how therefore to prepare the leaders in the best way (and in this more precisely consists the first section of political science and art), and how on the other hand one knows the lines of least resistance or rationality in order to have the obedience of the directed or governed (Gramsci 1975b [1933], 1752).

Gramsci's (1975a [1931–1932]) theory of a party capable of overcoming class divisions between ruler and ruled through the former's struggle for consensus stems directly from what he calls "the most realistic and concrete" "meaning of democracy" which, he continues, can "be derived from the concept of hegemony" (1056).[3] He formulates his realistic definition of democracy from a historical materialist perspective, in terms of a passage to a classless society characterized both by the "social mobility" of subordinate classes to a higher class and by the political inclusiveness or "openness" of elites to renewal by the incorporation of individuals from the ruled groups (Finocchiaro 1999, 115). As he explains, "there is democracy between the leading group the groups that are led to the extent that (the development of the economy and thus) the legislation (that expresses this development) favors the (molecular) transition from the led groups to the leading group" (Gramsci 1975a [1931–1932], 1056).

According to Gramsci (1971 [1931–1932]), the condition for the existence of democracy in a modern representative system is "permanently active consent" or the participation of all individuals in the formulation of concrete programs and decision-making processes, including elections (193). Democracy, in Gramsci's conception, requires organizational structures that

remain open to popular participation, and which prevent the bureaucratic entrenchment of wealthy political elites in positions of leadership. The need for open organizational structures to ensure equal freedom rather than eternalize traditional differences (i.e. the oligarchic tendency) leads Gramsci to define democracy as the right of all members of society to participate, not only formally, but in terms of satisfying the material conditions necessary for equal participation to be effective (i.e. the "economic question"). "But the democratic tendency", he writes in Notebook 15 §4,

> can only mean that not merely an unskilled laborer becomes skilled, but that every 'citizen' can become a 'governor', and that society places him, even if only 'abstractly', in the general conditions necessary for becoming one. Political democracy tends to make governors and governed coincide (in the sense of government with the consent of the governed), by ensuring to every governed person the free learning of the general capacities and technical preparation necessary for this end. (Gramsci 1975b [1932], 1547–48)

Far from a utopian or idealist conception of democracy as it ought to be, Gramsci advances a realistic conception of democracy as it is, which is consistent with the viewpoint needed to both defend representative democratic institutions, properly assess their shortcomings, and conceive the functions parties should perform in order to realize democracy's ideal of equal freedom in practice. In this way, Gramsci's political thought shares important, if unexpected, affinities with the realistic approaches of his contemporaries, Kelsen and Schumpeter, as well as with the approaches of many contemporary scholars associated with the recent "party turn" in democratic theory (Przeworski 2026; Urbinati 2026; Wolkenstein 2019b; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020). However, given that his goal is to abolish class hierarchies, he offers a distinctive realistic approach to the party.

Nonetheless, Gramsci's realist approach is relevant to the concern, shared by many democratic theorists, that representative democracy must be safeguarded against the creeping authoritarianism of party leaders who make arbitrary claims to ultimate authority by presenting

themselves as the sole embodiments of the People-as-a-whole (Urbinati 2013). While his aspiration is not one of imposed uniformity or homogeneity, Gramsci insists that the political party must be more than a group that recognizes its partiality and avoids speaking for the whole (Rosenblum 2008) but instead should serve as the vehicle for the development of a national-popular will.

As a historical materialist, Gramsci thinks that the substantive-ideological outcomes produced through party politics cannot not be separated from democratic procedural politics such as elections and parliamentary decision-making. The democratic or popular authority of any party, he argues, derives from its capacity to address the socioeconomic and political problems facing society as a whole. The modern Prince is best understood as an institutional response to the division between ruling and subaltern classes, not by eliminating political leadership, electoral representation, or political competition – hence the constitutional limits on political power – but by establishing a new hegemonic form of political leadership grounded in the active and direct consent of the common people. This popular-democratic form of leadership secures its authority not through coercion or passive consent, but through the organization of active, responsible, and (more or less) direct participatory consent that takes the form of class alliances and a process of moral and intellectual reform. On this basis, Gramsci envisions the modern Prince as a *collective intellectual* tasked with establishing an ever-increasing reciprocal pedagogical relationship between centralized party leadership and the rational democratic agency of subaltern citizens.

More specifically, Gramsci insists that party leaders should aim to secure their own hegemony not by imposing consensus onto the people from outside their struggles, but by obtaining the active and direct consensus of its common citizenry from through the establishment

of links with various social groups and the private associations in civil society. This Gramscian criterion for distinguishing progressive-democratic from regressive-authoritarian forms of hegemonic political leadership remains especially relevant in the present moment, when democracy is challenged by crises of political representation and accountability, creeping authoritarian demagoguery, and the corruption of electoral-representative institutions by self-aggrandizing political elites.

Despite formulating his theory of leadership in response to the specific problems confronting Italian parliamentary democracy in his own time, Gramsci continues to offer a compelling framework for reconnecting the party to the people in ways that enhance citizens' capacities for self-government. In his view, the party, especially its intellectual members, does not dictate political activity from above, but "directs" it by making the working masses more conscious of both the necessity of participating in political struggle and the means available for pursuing their common goal of liberty from economic and political domination.

This dissertation therefore advances a democratic reading of Gramsci's modern Prince. In doing so, it contributes to the extensive scholarly debate over whether Gramsci's theory of the party should be interpreted as an elitist-authoritarian model in which professional revolutionaries direct the masses from above at the expense of working class demands for self-autonomy, a totalitarian project aimed at simply at taking over the state and establishing one-party rule, or instead as a radical democratic conception of the party committed to popular participation and the liberation of all from class domination.[4] As this dissertation aims to show, Gramsci's theory of the modern Prince contains a distinctive vision of party democracy that merits renewed attention within contemporary democratic theory. His proposal for building a new mass-class party, I contend, is especially valuable to reintroduce into debates on democratic institutional

reform as a response to popular disillusionment with elected representative institutions and the growing appeal of populist authoritarianism, which exploits popular dissatisfaction with the current system by persuading citizens to relinquish their political agency to a single powerful leader.

In his own historical context, Gramsci envisioned and helped build such a revolutionary party, the Communist Party of Italy (henceforth PCd'I), not as an ideologically neutral democratic procedure, but as a mass-class political organization committed to advancing the substantive agenda of the Italian working class. For Gramsci, however, working-class leadership does not mean advancing the narrow sectarian or corporate interests of industrial workers alone, but rather the capacity to lead broader society by constructing a popular will in which working-class aims become cohesive with the interests and aspirations of the general population. In this respect, Gramsci's conception of the revolutionary party resonates with the ethical ideal of partisanship advanced by contemporary democratic theorists: not as the pursuit of narrow sectoral interests, but as a principled commitment to advancing a group's universal conception of the good (White and Ypi 2016).

However, his ethical conception of partisanship differs because it entails not only a commitment to generalizable principles, but also to a concrete vision of a new social and political order. Revolutionary partisanship, in his view, involves constructing a national-popular collective will by incorporating the concrete demands and aspirations of other social groups into the party's political project. In Gramsci's own context, this meant that the PCd'I and its Northern industrial working-class base had to persuade the Southern peasantry that the struggle for working-class emancipation from class domination embodied their interests in national development as well, while simultaneously incorporating the peasantry's specific demands into

the party's revolutionary project in order to secure sufficient popular consent for overcoming capitalism and radically transforming Italian society.

I argue that this quintessentially Gramscian conception of the revolutionary party as a mass, class-based organization aimed at building consent in civil society around a new conception of the world remains especially significant today, both as a popular-empowering alternative to the limits of proceduralist models and as a non-populist response to oligarchic domination and the persistent failure of representative governments to address citizens' substantive democratic concerns arising from growing socioeconomic and political inequality. While the modern Prince has often been misinterpreted either as a blueprint for one-party rule or as a proto-populist leader that merely speaks for the people, I contend that Gramsci's theory of the party contains strong democratic commitments to equal liberty as self-government and to a conception of the citizen as capable of exercising political agency and critical reasoning independently from the Party. His conception of the modern Prince, as a collective leader tasked with raising the political consciousness of subordinated classes and developing their capacities for intellectual, moral and political autonomy, offers an alternative response to the crisis of party democracy and representation than those currently offered in democratic theory.

If the present democratic crisis stems from the growing disconnection between ordinary citizens and their institutions of collective self-representation, then Gramsci's modern Prince, which takes the side of the subaltern citizenry in its struggle to become a self-ruling collective subject, offers a model of the party worthy of serious reconsideration for democratic politics today. Political parties remain the principal organizations through which the people can constitute themselves as a collective political agent, without which democracy is not alive.

Yet this collective democratic subject cannot be reduced to an atomized passive electorate, nor as a unified homogeneous people without differences. Rather, as Gramsci argues, the People as a national-popular collective will comes into being organically through a political party whose leadership forms on the basis of the equal participation of those directly affected by it. The modern Prince represents such a popular-collective form of party leadership. Its primary function, Gramsci contends, is to stimulate individual political action and "weld together with a single aim" a "multiplicity of collective wills" on "the basis of an equal and common conception of the world" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 349). It is this Gramscian conception of the political party that I aim to recover and defend for representative politics today.

Method and Aims of the Project

The question of whether Gramsci's idea of the modern Prince, as a mass party committed to a working-class political agenda, can serve as a vehicle for democratic renewal should not be consigned to the past. To discard it from contemporary debates entirely would mean abandoning an original and historically significant contribution to Italian political theory and politics: one that not only shaped the democratic principles and practices of the now-dissolved Italian Communist Party (henceforth PCI) but also played a decisive role in the development of Italian party democracy itself. Through "Gramsci's genome", the PCI operated (more or less successfully) as a mass party and collective intellectual that integrated millions of people into political life and instilled in them a conviction that their own partisan action could meaningfully transform society.[5]

Nevertheless, to simply apply the Gramscian model of the party to the present, rather than treat it as a problem to be critically re-examined and discussed, risks falling into the methodological error of what, in Italian political thought, is called *continuismo assoluto*

(absolute continuism). Absolute continuism names the error of assuming historical continuity where important historical transformations have occurred. This error involves abstracting an historical political form, such as the model of a mass-working class party and uncritically applying it as a ready-made solution to current problems as if social, political and institutional conditions have not fundamentally changed. Such an ahistorical approach overlooks the need to innovate Gramsci's party, both a theoretical framework and concrete institutional prescription, in ways that can respond to changed conditions, embrace new approaches, and meet present societal demands. His party model should not be treated as a blueprint that can simply be transplanted unchanged into a present liberal democratic context. Instead, it requires critical reassessment of his organizational and ethical prescriptions in relation to contemporary historical conditions. In other words, discerning Gramsci's relevance for democratic politics today involves an analysis of both the unexpected parallels and the significant differences between our present political moment and the historical context in which he originally formulated his idea of the party and its concrete program of political action.

The aim of this project is, therefore, not to simply defend or apply Gramsci's modern Prince to contemporary circumstances, but to critically update it in a way that critically intervenes and contributes to efforts in revitalizing party democracy. It does so by offering the first reconstruction of Gramsci as a theorist of party democracy, which remains a largely overlooked and unresolved puzzle in his political thought within the existing literature. What distinguishes Gramsci from other political thinkers in historical and contemporary democratic theory is his commitment to building a political party capable of overcoming the undemocratic division between the traditional ruling classes and the *subaltern classes* (those who are under the rule of others rather than ruling themselves). I situate Gramsci in critical dialogue with other

political thinkers who have likewise grappled with the division between 'Party' and 'the People' as a central problem of democratic politics, but who ultimately conclude, on supposed "realist" grounds, that a permanent hierarchical separation between them is necessary or inevitable.

The guiding question at the heart of this dissertation, then, is: how can Gramsci's theory of the Modern Prince help us rethink the relationship between the party, leaders, and the citizenry as a whole in ways that enable the effective exercise of popular sovereignty under conditions of inequality, deepening political disagreement and conflict, and widespread civic disempowerment? To answer this question, I adopt a method of critical reconstruction that combines a historically contextualized reading of Gramsci's political writings with a comparative assessment of other historical and contemporary approaches to party democracy. In other words, I read Gramsci as responding to the concrete political problems of his time: the crisis of the parliamentary regime, the spontaneous revolt of the masses, the rise of fascist party dictatorship, the limits of liberal parliamentarism, and the organizational problem of proletarian self-government.

At the same time, my aim is not to offer a competing genealogy of Gramsci's intellectual history alone, but to offer an evaluation of how Gramsci's insights can still inform viable responses to the challenges facing contemporary democracies: the crisis of representative government, the rise of spontaneous and direct forms of political participation, widespread distrust in parties, the rise of populist authoritarianism, and the absence of organized forms of popular power. Comparison is therefore central to my method: I clarify the distinctiveness of Gramsci's approach to party democracy by placing him in dialogue with political theorists, past and present, who sought to confront similar political problems.

This critical reconstructive approach is especially well suited to the study of Gramsci, who innovated the Marxist theory of proletarian party by adopting, in his own words, a "dialectical and dialogical standpoint" in relation to the major political traditions of his time – traditions that continue to influence contemporary debates on the present and future of party democracy (Gramsci 1994 [1930], 369). Among the many traditions with which Gramsci critically engaged, and which are relevant to current discussions, are the tradition of political realism commenced by Machiavelli (whom Gramsci credits with discovering the "representative regime"), the classical Marxism of Marx, Lenin, and Luxemburg, and the classical elitist theories of Mosca, Michels, and Pareto.

As will be shown, Gramsci's Marxist interpretation of Machiavelli in the *Prison Notebooks* offers an especially relevant contribution to contemporary debates on democratic representation and leadership. Unlike recent plebeian-populist interpretations by John McCormick (2011) and Camila Vergara (2020b), Gramsci does not portray Machiavelli's Prince as a figure who simply acts on behalf of the common people against the elites. Instead, he reimagines the Prince as a revolutionary partisan who urges the popular classes to actively participate in the formation of a new political order. This reading informs Gramsci's democratic reformulation of the Marxist theory of the revolutionary party—not as a vanguard that imposes political consciousness from above, but as a collective organizer that enables the subaltern classes to recognize and develop their own capacity for self-rule. It is this democratic dimension of the modern Prince, as an intellectual and political leadership aimed at constructing a new hegemony, that later inspired post-Marxist theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe. Yet their populist appropriation of the modern Prince departs significantly from Gramsci's original class-

based conception and has fueled ongoing debates about the risks of constructing 'the people as a whole' as a discursive subject in populist theories of party representation.

Gramsci's critical engagement with Mosca, Michels, and Pareto also shaped his understanding of the tension between political leadership and the self-government of the popular classes and his views on the proper relation between the elite/mass distinction at the heart of modern democratic theory. The Italian school of elite theory, which argued that all societies are ultimately ruled by organized minorities, defined the meaning of "political science" in early twentieth-century Italy and influenced how many interpreted the crisis of liberal parliamentarism. Its reach extended across ideological lines, shaping not only Gramsci's socialist theory but also liberal thinkers such as Piero Gobetti and, later, Norberto Bobbio. Yet rather than accept the permanence of minority rule, and its anti-democratic or democratic-elitist implications, Gramsci proposed a progressive alternative theory of the dialectal and co-participatory relationship between elites and masses in the party.

Beyond Italy, the legacy of democratic elitism also informed the work of Schumpeter and Kelsen, who developed competing accounts of the democratic function of parties during the same interwar crisis that shaped Gramsci's political thinking. Drawing "realistic democratic" insights from elite theory, Schumpeter and Kelsen articulated two paradigms of party democracy that remain foundational today. Schumpeter's minimalist definition of democracy as method of competitive leadership selection continues to predominate in American political science (Przeworski 2018; Shapiro 2026). But his theory has recently been reframed as a "dare" to challenge elites to acknowledge the limits of exclusively relying on electoral institutions and become more substantively accountable (Piano 2025). However, Gramsci, who recognized the political competence of all in governing and being governed – including the popular classes

traditionally excluded from political power – presents a more substantive theory of political leadership than Schumpeter's democratic version of elitism which reserved political competence and leadership to a narrow aristocratic or oligarchic group. Kelsen's proceduralist defense of parliamentary democracy, meanwhile, has experienced a revival in contemporary democratic theory as a resource for protecting party pluralism from monopolistic claims of representation, where one party becomes the whole (Baume and Ragazzoni 2026). But Gramsci challenges democratic theorists to consider the whole party in terms of a popular participatory institution that determines its notion of the common good by expanding beyond the narrow interests of a single class or group.

Even if Gramsci has never been brought into conversation with Kelsen and Schumpeter, they share an intellectual history due to the shared influence that the Italian School of Elitism had on the development of their political thought. Through this shared intellectual history, Gramsci's theory of the Modern Prince emerges not as an external or outdated alternative, but as a critical intervention within the very political-intellectual traditions that continue to shape contemporary democratic thought. By attending closely to the historical context in which Gramsci developed his theory – the overlapping crises of liberal parliamentarism, the revolutionary class struggle of the proletariat, and the rise of fascist monoparty rule – we can better grasp both the important differences and the striking parallels between his time and our own.

One key distinction is that in Gramsci's moment, representative government was party-centered but not yet consolidated as a "party democracy". This historical fact underlies Gramsci's proposal for a "new" mass party, which is a model of political organization that many democratic theorists today regard as outdated and largely dysfunctional according to the empirical record (Wolkenstein 2019, 62). Today, by contrast, we face a crisis of representative democracy marked

by the decline of the mass party form and the rise of populism as its substitute (Urbinati 2019b). Nevertheless, I argue that a historically situated and critically updated reading of Gramsci's modern Prince provides the foundation for democratically renewing the mass party beyond the limits of both traditional procedural and populist models of party representation, leadership, and organization.

The present work, therefore, is much more than a study and defense of Gramsci's party. It is a critical discussion of democracy and the party form as a solution to the problem of realizing its foundational principle of self-government. In the remainder of this introduction, I present an account of Gramsci's theory of party democracy, unearthing overlooked resources for addressing today's crisis and revitalizing the party as a vehicle for enabling popular self-rule. Through a re-reading of both his early journalism and prison writings, especially his most famous and completed essay on Machiavelli, "the Modern Prince", I challenge prevailing anti-democratic interpretations and reinterpret his theory of political party as a class-specific and mass-participatory party organization through which ordinary citizens can exercise collective political agency more coherently, directly, and substantively. My reconstruction also brings to the fore Gramsci's original diagnosis of the crisis of parties as a crisis of democratic representation under conditions of inequality and widespread citizen detachment from politics, offering a valuable alternative to contemporary formal-procedural and substantive-materialist frameworks of analysis. I conclude with a chapter-by-chapter overview of the dissertation, which further underscores the critical insights Gramsci offers to ongoing debates on the present and future of party democracy.

Reading the Modern Prince Anew

Gramsci is considered to be one of the early twentieth century's most important theorists of the political party (Panitch and Albo 2018; Anderson 2016; Thomas 2009; Femia 1981). Among his most influential and contested contributions is his concept of "hegemony" as the basis of a legitimate form of party leadership that establishes a new political order by securing active consent while minimizing the necessity of coercion (Anderson 2020; Fontana 1993; Kalyvas 2000). Gramsci refers to his new Prince as a "modern Prince" to convey the idea that the hegemonic leadership once embodied in an individual ruler is now to be vested in the political party of the working class. He saw the working class as the leading historical protagonist of Italy's most important societal struggles because it was the first class motivated not merely by economic gain, but by the universalistic aim of political autonomy, and therefore capable of prefiguring, even before winning power, a new society without class domination.

Gramsci's idea of the modern Prince once served as a central reference point in discussions over the organization and strategy of the revolutionary party, particularly in relation to the PCI's place within postwar Italian democracy (Liguori 2021; Femia 1981; Anderson 2020; Davidson 1974; Magri 1970; Merrington 1968), but also in debates in Anglophone political theory that emerged during the crisis of Marxism (Hall 1986; Forgacs 1989; Laclau and Mouffe 1998; Martin 1997). Amid these debates, Gramsci's theory of the party became the most controversial aspect of his political thought, generating deep disagreement over its compatibility with democracy (Vacca 1999; Riley 2011; Morera 1990a; Femia 1981). In particular, accusations of "party-centrism", such as criticisms that Gramsci privileged the party over more direct democratic forms, such as workers' councils, meant that nothing close to a general consensus has emerged around Gramsci as a useful resource for democratic politics. The unfortunate

consequence has been a vast literature that gives the impression that Gramsci was a dogmatic theorist of party totalitarianism, who, in the Prison Notebooks, casts the modern Prince as the sole interpreter of social reality and bearer of political truth, despite his explicit commitment, prior to and especially after his imprisonment, to mass involvement in the formation of the PCd'I's policies (Femia 1981, 152).

More recently, however, Gramsci's modern Prince has experienced something of a renaissance, albeit marginal, in democratic political theory. For (White and Ypi 2010), Gramsci's conceptualization of the party as a modern Prince aimed at constructing a collective will towards universal ideals of freedom and equal offers an instructive model for cultivating "a democratic ethos of collective political agency", that is indispensable for recovering the party's role in contemporary democracies (White and Ypi 2010). In the field of Gramsci studies, the modern Prince has been reinvigorated as a model for a new emancipatory and democratic practice of political organization that can reclaim popular sovereignty from contemporary forces of exclusion and domination (Sortiris 2021; Thomas 2020). Contemporary democratic interpretations of Gramsci's theory of the party also center on a reassessment of the figure of the modern Prince as an original contribution to the tradition of "democratic readings" of Machiavelli's *The Prince* (Thomas 2017a). This recent scholarship on the relevance of Gramsci for contemporary democratic politics has coincided, in interesting but unnoticed ways, with major developments in contemporary democratic theory, such as new democratic interpretations of Machiavelli's theory of leadership spearheaded by radical plebeian republicans (McCormick 2025; 2011) and the rise of party-centered approaches to popular sovereignty (much like that of Gramsci's own approach) that aim to move beyond the limits of direct spontaneous forms of political agency such as mass protests and social movements (Wolkenstein 2020; Urbinati 2006).

Despite renewed interest in Gramsci and the growing recognition of his popular democratic commitments, his theory of party democracy – that is, his account of why democracy depends upon parties and partisanship to enable popular rule – remains an unexplored dimension of his political thought as a whole. One reason for this neglect is the widespread view that Gramsci lacked a democratic theory altogether. Urbinati (1998), for instance, argues that Gramsci "cannot be inserted within the tradition of democratic thinkers because he did not develop a political theory of democracy, nor was he engaged in the construction of a theory of the democratic state more generally" (168). The implication is that Gramsci lacks a conception of the demos as a political subject that both governs and is governed in turn. But Gramsci does articulate a theory of democratic self-government, primarily through a party-centered account of how popular sovereignty can be exercised under the conditions of modern mass society. He develops this argument in terms of the reciprocal relationship between party leaders and "the people-nation", which, he contends, can form a new "historical bloc": a temporal alliance that binds together multiple autonomous social groups around a common project.

Gramsci never elaborated his theory of party democracy as systematically as some of his contemporaries, such as Kelsen (2013 [1929]), who argued unambiguously that "modern democracy virtually rests on political parties, whose importance grows the more the democratic principle is realized in practice" (38). Nevertheless, Gramsci's Marxist conception of the party as an institution that mediates between civil society and the state in ways that reduces coercion and domination while increasing consensual (ethical and rational) relations between leader and led places Gramsci firmly in the tradition of party democracy. Gramsci's commitment to party democracy, which, as a practical idea and cornerstone of democracy in general, was inscribed in the Marxist tradition since Marx and Engels defined the Communist League as an

"organization…thoroughly democratic, with elective and removable authorities" (Engels 1970 [1885], 195; Molinyeux 2009), means that he can be evaluated alongside liberals like Kelsen and his friend Piero Gobetti who regarded the party as performing a necessary liberating function. Indeed, he opposed the pessimists of his time who equated party organization with oligarchy and who thought the principle of self-government through parties was a mere chimera (Michels 2016 [1911]). Against Michels' iron law of oligarchy, that any large-scale political party or organization will inevitably be ruled by a small self-perpetuating elite at its center, Gramsci formulates his theory of a democratic party structure based on constant interaction and discussion between leaders and led.

> If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation. Only then can there take place an exchange of individual elements between the rulers and ruled, leaders and led, and can the shared life be realized which alone is a social force with the creation of the 'historical bloc'. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 418)

Another reason for the neglect of Gramsci's theory of party democracy is the prevalence of anti-democratic interpretations of the Modern Prince. Much like Machiavelli's Prince, Gramsci's *moderno principe* – his coded way of referring to the PCd'I while writing under fascist censorship during his imprisonment – is often misinterpreted as a guide for a revolutionary vanguard to instrumentalize mass support in order to seize state power and consolidate its own continuous rule over society. Yet, just as McCormick (2025) argues with respect to Machiavelli's Prince, such anti-democratic interpretations obscure the popular-democratic commitments at the center of Gramsci's modern Prince as a theory of political leadership concerned not with elite self-aggrandizement, but with how common citizens can better rule themselves.

Gramsci was among the first modern political theorists to emphasize the popular-democratic dimensions of Machiavelli's political thought, particularly the insight that effective political leadership requires continuously taking into account the real needs and opinions of the people in both present and future political decisions (Femia 1981, 134; Fontana 1993). According to Gramsci, the significance of Machiavelli for the Italian popular classes' struggle against class domination lay in his attempt to identify the form of political leadership necessary for a successful revolution after two failed attempts: the *Risorgimento*, which Gramsci diagnosed as an unfinished or "passive revolution" for failing to involve the active masses, and the socialist revolution.

Machiavelli's *Prince* on Gramsci's reading, is not a cynical manual for the tactics of a self-interested tyrant, but a blueprint showing how a political leader or, under modern social conditions, a political party, can create a national-popular collective will for the founding a new state. From this democratic reading, Gramsci develops an original theory of the revolutionary political party as the organizational form necessary for achieving this end. However, unlike contemporary plebeian-populist interpretations, which place emphasis on ongoing class conflict between elites and the people, Gramsci's conceptualization of the modern Prince preserves the dialectic of force and consent central to Machiavelli's realist theory of effective political leadership. The modern Prince is not reducible to a populist leader who merely champions the common people's struggle for liberty, but instead represents a collective mediating body, a political party, tasked with cultivating solidarity between a leading class and the subaltern popular classes in order to found a new socio-political order based on active and equal participation.

The anti-democratic interpretations of Gramsci's modern Prince tend to stem less from the Machiavellian dimensions of his thought than from his commitment to the tenets of classical Marxism. Like Karl Marx, Gramsci envisioned a future classless society beyond the supremacy of one class over the other and hence the promotion of inequality. He described this more-or-less distant future as a "regulated society", meaning "a complex and well-articulated civil society, in which the individual can govern himself without his self-government thereby entering into conflict with political society – but rather becoming its normal continuation, its organic complement" (Gramsci 1971 [1931–1932], 268). Many democratic theorists regard such aspirations for organic national unity with deep suspicion, counterposing the Marxist vision of a classless society to representative democracy as a form of government that accommodates society's irreducible pluralism by regulating conflicts of interest and values through electoral competition rather than abolishing political divisions (Przeworski 2010; Saffon and Urbinati 2025; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020). From this perspective, appeals to "the People" as a unified, harmonious whole are often criticized as utopian and potentially dangerous. For Rosenblum (2008) and Urbinati (2019a; 2019b), for instance, any party aspiring to such unity necessarily excludes groups with competing interests, identities, or values, thereby threatening to replace democracy as a multi-party system of regulated rivalry and with a totalizing monoparty regime in which one part wants to assert itself as the only true whole.

However, totalitarian interpretations of Gramsci's Modern Prince overlook the extent to which his realist conception of democracy presupposes a field of open and pluralistic political struggle among differing groups pursuing competing aims and rival visions of the state. For Gramsci, parties are an unavoidable feature of sociopolitical life because they are the representative institutions of each autonomous social class, hence of the conflicting interests and

worldviews in society. As Gramsci (1971 [1931]) argues, “the importance and significance” of political parties “in the modern world” lie in their function as a “historical laboratory” for the “elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world” (335). In other words, parties are the principal sites in which rival political programs and worldviews are experimentally developed, organized, and contested. This suggests that, for Gramsci, a democratic regime depends upon ongoing partisan conflict over which worldview should prevail among a multiplicity of competing conceptions, rather than the suppression of political pluralism characteristic of an authoritarian monoparty regime.

At the same time, there are serious limits to Gramsci’s theory of the party when viewed from the standpoint of *electoral democracy*. For one thing, Gramsci leaves crucially underdeveloped the question of how multi-party competition would persist once a hegemonic party comes to power. Although he does not advocate abolishing opposition parties or elections, he regarded elections alone as insufficient for ensuring the circulation of leadership from below. Nor did he regard parliamentary institutions as sufficient, or even the primary site for, determining the ruling political will of society. That task, for Gramsci, belongs principally to the hegemonic party itself, understood as the most effective vehicle for developing and politically expressing the national-popular collective will. Without a clearer institutional account of how opposition parties or parliamentary procedures might constrain the hegemonic party, important questions remain unresolved within Gramsci’s theory regarding what alternative mechanism, independently from the modern Prince, would ensure policy revision and electoral partisan alternation once public opinion changes.

Nevertheless, Gramsci’s political thought contains important resources for resisting monopartyism. He rejects the idea of a perfect identification between rulers and ruled within a

collective organism as a mere "phantasm of the intellect, a fetish" (Gramsci 1975b [1933], 1770), given the irreducible power relations that exist between them, while also regarding *compromise* as a necessary condition for ensuring that leaders govern in the interests of the ruled. As he writes:

> Thus it is incongruous that the concrete posing of the problem of hegemony should be interpreted as a fact subordinating the group seeking hegemony. Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind. (Gramsci 1971 [1931], 161)

Moreover, Gramsci vehemently rejects the suppression of free discussion, disagreement, and alternative viewpoints in pursuit of supposedly "scientific" governing policies, which single-party rule requires, by definition, and which characterized the Soviet regime as a dictatorship of party leaders that suppressed alternative channels for politically expressing popular will (Miliband 1970, 87). Rather than conceiving the party as a closed and infallible organization, Gramsci (1971 [1933]) argues:

> "In scientific discussion, since it is assumed that the purpose of discussion is the pursuit of truth and the progress of science, the person who shows himself most 'advanced' is the one who takes up the point of view that his adversary may well be expressing a need which should be incorporated" (344).

The formation of a unified national-popular collective will, Gramsci emphasizes throughout his political writings, can only emerge through a prolonged and conflictual process involving multiple groups participating in common political struggle. Although he regards the formation of a rational collective consensus as the party's principal aim, this consensus is never presumed in advance and cannot arise through the suppression of political disagreement or pluralism. In this respect, Gramsci's theory shares more affinities than is often recognized with Schumpeterian and Kelsenian accounts of party democracy, both of which reject the notion of a fully unified popular will, since he too is concerned with the democratic practices and

institutions that make leadership selection, compromise, and the peaceful regulation of political conflict possible.

Recovering the pluralistic and popular-democratic dimensions of Gramsci's Modern Prince is especially important today, as contemporary democracies are increasingly threatened by authoritarian-leaning populist leaders (e.g. Trump, Orbán, Meloni, Netanyahu, Kaczyński, Erdoğan) who claim to embody the unified will of "the people" while portraying themselves and their parties as the sole legitimate representatives of the nation in order to delegitimize their political opponents and undermine the equal right to contest for political power. In response to this threat, many contemporary democratic theorists have emphasized the indispensability of parties and partisanship for sustaining a healthy pluralist democracy. Against classical conceptions of democracy that assumed an underlying harmony of interests and treated parties as mere factions, contemporary normative theorists argue that parties must instead be recognized as equally legitimate parts of the political whole, but never as the whole itself, if democratic pluralism and equal political rights are to be preserved.

As Muirhead and Rosenblum (2020) put it, partisanship itself "enacts a commitment to pluralism" by "recognizing the legitimacy of opposition, complying with the rules of regulated rivalry, and accepting the partiality of partisan claims" (104). Thus, for much of contemporary party theory, a defense of partisanship is fundamentally a defense of plural democracy against anti-partyism:

> The guiding idea behind this defense of party is that if we accept pluralism, we cannot reject parties, and that the acceptance – indeed, valuation – of pluralism entails political parties. There can never be one sole set of interests, or one authoritative interpretation of the common good. (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020, 100)

Throughout modern democratic thought, parties have been recognized for being in constant tension with the ideal of a people unified around the common good. Jean-Jacques

Rousseau and Edmund Burke represent two opposed approaches to this tension. Rousseau (1997 [1762]) famously argued that all partial associations are obstacles to the formation of a genuine "general will" and advocated for direct-democracy, thereby capturing classical democratic theory's skepticism toward parties as mere factions (White and Ypi 2016, 42–44). In contrast, Burke (1998 [1770]) famously distinguished parties from factions and defended them for the realization of the public good, defining the party as "a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed" (271). Contemporary party theorists largely follow Burke in arguing that pluralism entails parties because there can never be a single authoritative interpretation of the common good (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020). Burke's conception aligns with the liberal-procedural model of party democracy, according to which parties present committed partisan visions of the common good and accept free and fair elections as the legitimate means for determining which vision should prevail and be translated into public policy (Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2017). This liberal model stands in contrast to a Rousseauian model of direct democracy which bypasses the need for intermediary bodies such as representatives, political leaders, or parties.

Where does Gramsci stand between Rousseau's skepticism toward parties and Burke's defense of parties, and how does he address the inequalities of power introduced by political representation and the inherently divisive character of partisan politics? As will become clear, Gramsci is best understood as a historical defender of parties and partisanship as indispensable vehicles for uniting people around the formation and implementation of the common good. As he argues, "the principle once posed that there are leaders and led, rulers and ruled, it is true that parties have up till now been the most effective way of developing leaders and leadership" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 147).

Yet Gramsci's emphasis on the indispensability of party rule does not amount to a resignation to *partitocrazia* (rule by parties) or to an authoritarian theory of leadership that subordinates liberty to party diktat by demanding passive submission to party discipline and worldview. For Gramsci, party leadership and partisan discipline should rest not upon "a passive and supine acceptance of orders, or the mechanical carrying out of an assignment", but upon "the conscious and lucid assimilation of the directive to be accomplished" (Gramsci 1975b [132–1935], 1706). Unlike the passive follower of a party, Gramsci's emancipatory conception of partisanship requires the self-conscious political activity of ordinary citizens whose participation in representative institutions enables them to actualize their freedom – that is, to "be a legislator even if he accepts directives from others" by understanding the purpose of those directives, helping others understand them, and applying them within their own "specific zones of living" (Gramsci 1971 [1931], 266).

From his early journalism through the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci developed this emancipatory conception of partisanship as the means through which subordinate groups overcome political passivity and arbitrary representative government by generating their own accountable form of leadership. In a 1917 article published in the journal *La Citta Futura*, he urges Italians to "take sides" and be "partisan" in order to overcome the widespread indifference sustaining elite domination (Gramsci 1982 [1917], 13). Subsequently, in his more mature writings in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci's argument culminates in the modern Prince as a vehicle through which diverse social groups can unite under proletarian leadership to contest class domination and establish a new equilibrium.

The centrality of party democracy to Gramsci's thought becomes especially clear when examining his writings on the crisis of hegemony confronting representative democratic

institutions of his time. In response to the collapse of parliamentary democracy in interwar Italy, Gramsci developed a distinctive analysis of the crisis facing political parties and democratic representation under capitalism. As early as 1921, he identified the growing detachment of political parties from their social bases as a constitutional crisis, insisting that "politically, the masses do not exist if they are not organized within political parties" (Gramsci 2000 [1921], 121).

According to Gramsci's analysis, the failure of traditional parties and parliamentary government to address socio-economic and political inequality and respond to the needs of disaffected popular classes signaled a deeper "decomposition of democratic society" and intensified the struggle between ruling and ruled. "Through this process of disarticulation", he writes, "a more profound and intimate process of breakdown of democratic society is revealed. This leads to a definitive alignment of conflicting classes, for preservation or for conquest of power over the state and productive apparatus" (Gramsci 2000 [1921], 121). Subsequently, while in prison, Gramsci elaborates his analysis of the crisis in Notebook 13 §23, where he conceptualizes this intensifying gap between citizens and their party representatives as "a crisis ruling class hegemony". "These conflicts between the represented and the representatives", he writes,

> which take place on the terrain of the parties (party organizations in the narrow sense, the electoral-parliamentary field, newspaper organization), have repercussions throughout the state organism... How do these situations of conflict arise? The content is the crisis of the hegemony of the ruling class, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in one of its major political initiatives (such as war) for which it had requested or obtained through coercion the consent of the great masses, or because the huge masses (especially the peasantry and petit-bourgeois intellectuals) have shifted suddenly from political passivity to some kind of activism, putting forward demands that, taken as a whole, even though disjointed, constitute a revolution. A 'crisis of authority' is spoken of, and this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the state. (Gramsci 2021 [1933], 168)

This crisis of ruling class hegemony emerges when ruling groups can no longer secure consent from subordinate classes and increasingly rely upon coercion to maintain their authority. However, in this context, subordinate groups withdraw support from traditional parties, ideologies, and representative institutions without yet forming a coherent alternative political project. Gramsci therefore interprets the crisis of hegemony and the breakdown in the relationship between parties and their social bases not only institutional failure but a deeper crisis of democratic representation itself.

Although significant attention has been devoted to Gramsci's theory and analysis of hegemonic crisis (Anderson 2020; 2023; Antonini 2020), far less attention has been paid to his use of this framework to diagnose, and respond to, the failure of representative institutions to secure equal political freedom under capitalist conditions. However, this aspect of his political thought is especially relevant today as contemporary party theorists increasingly confront the shortcomings of contemporary systems of representative democracies (McCormick 2011; Vergara 2020b). Gramsci links the decline of the party's representative function and the subsequent crisis of hegemony to pervasive socio-economic, political, and cultural inequalities that separate social classes from their representative institutions. Even if he formulated this analysis a century ago, his interpretation of the crisis of Italy's party system anticipates contemporary diagnoses in both empirical political science and normative democratic theory which views the decline of party democracy as a crisis of representation (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020, 98).

Contemporary scholars generally interpret the party-based crisis of representation in two ways. The first formal-proceduralist view emphasizes the erosion of democratic norms, procedures, and representative linkages within established parties. The second substantive-

materialist view emphasizes parties' growing failure to respond to the concrete interests, needs, and identities of ordinary citizens. While these diagnoses are not mutually exclusive, since both identify institutional failure and elite unaccountability at the center of the democratic crisis, they differ in their explanation of its causes and the concrete solutions for party reform they propose.

Contemporary proceduralist diagnoses typically locate the crisis in the declining legitimacy, internal democracy, and representative capacity of political parties. Although parties remain the central institutions of democratic governance, citizens increasingly perceive them as detached from society and absorbed into the state apparatus. Mair (2013) famously describes this condition as "ruling the void", observing that parties across Europe "have reduced their presence in the wider society and have become part of the state. They have become agencies that govern...rather than represent" (3). As parties become more centralized, professionalized, and bureaucratic, they increasingly prioritize political survival over responsiveness to citizens' values and preferences (Wolkenstein 2020; Ragazzoni 2019). The result is widespread political disillusionment, expressed through declining party membership, falling voter turnout, distrust in representative institutions, and rising anti-party sentiment that fuels support for authoritarian populism. In response, proceduralist theorists, especially Kelsenian proceduralists, advocate intra-party democratic reforms aimed at rebuilding stronger linkages between party elites and ordinary citizens through more inclusive participation and institutional protections for equal political influence (Wolkenstein 2020, 16; Wolkenstein 2016).

In contrast, from a substantive-materialist standpoint, plebeian republican and radical democratic theorists diagnosis the crisis primarily in terms of deepening socio-economic inequality and the increasing domination of representative institutions by political and economic elites. Here, the central problem is not merely the procedural dysfunction of parties, but that their

failure to respond to the substantive interests and demands of ordinary citizens severely depoliticizes and encroaches upon the liberty of the common citizenry (McCormick 2011, vii). The crisis of representation thus is interpreted as a systemic process of oligarchization within the contemporary representative democracies, in which the establishment of political parties increasingly serves the wealthy few rather than the many (McCormick 2011; Vergara 2020b). From the diagnosis that representative institutions like parties, parliaments, and elections are fundamentally oligarchic and insufficiently majoritarian, plebeian democrats advocate new anti-oligarchic institutions capable of empowering the disaffected many to constrain unresponsive elites and representatives (McCormick 2006; 2011; Vergara 2020b).

Gramsci offers a distinct framework for analyzing the crisis of party systems that serves as a useful alternative to either a strictly formalist-proceduralist or substantive-materialist analytical lens. Gramsci's diagnosis captures important elements of both formal-proceduralist and substantive-materialist approaches while identifying a deeper democratic problem. For him, the crisis is not simply that parties fail to adequately represents citizens interests, but that they cease functioning as organizations through which ordinary citizens can represent themselves politically – that is, articulate and advance their own interests and worldview autonomously within the representative system. This distinction is subtle but crucial because it links the democratic decline of parties to their failure to operate as organs of *collective self-representation*.

In Gramsci's conception, collective self-representation is not equivalent to ideals of *direct representation* in the populist sense, where a unified social group directly authorizes a single party or leader to act exclusively on its behalf. Rather, his conception of collective self-representation stems from Karl Marx's classical conception of the proletarian party, in which the party does not advance interests separate from those of the working class as a whole, but instead

organizes, educates, and leads it in the proletariat's struggle for self-emancipation (Marx and Engels 1978 [1848], 483; Draper 1971; Molinyeux 1978). Gramsci formulates the problem of collective self-representation most clearly in his discussion of an "organic crisis" in the structure of political parties, in which social groups become detached from their traditional parties (their organization, representatives, and leaders) because they no longer recognize them as expressions of their own political demands and aspirations. As he writes,

> At a certain point in their historical lives, social groups become detached from their traditional parties. In other words, the traditional parties in their particular organizational form, with the particular men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognized by their class, or a fraction of it, as its expression. (Gramsci 2021 [1932–1933], 168)

In such circumstances, parties increasingly impose the views of their leadership from above, alienating the very groups they claim to represent.

Gramsci uses the term "organic crises" to refer to revolutionary situations. As Riley (2011) explains, organic crises have two characteristics in Gramsci's conception. First, they expose the underlying class structure of the state which, in ordinarily remains obscured during periods of normal (i.e. stable) politics. Second, the resolution of an organic crisis depends not only on the principal classes of capitalist society – the proletariat and the bourgeoisie/owners of the means of production – but also on the mobilization of social classes outside of this core class antagonism, including sectors such as the rural bourgeoisie, which Gramsci regarded as especially significant (Riley 2011).

Gramsci's explanation of this crisis of representation in these situations differs sharply from contemporary diagnoses that interpret the crisis of parties as simply a decline of their formal procedural functions of state administration. Indeed, among Gramsci's most enduring insights is that class domination within electoral-representative democracies depends not only on the capacity of elites to exercise coercive state power but also on the ruling class's ability to

secure consent through its privileged influence over the cultural institutions in civil society. In other words, domination persists within representative systems not only through material inequality and state power, but because a small ruling group exercises disproportionate control over the institutional channels that disseminate ideas legitimating its dominance and authority, thereby generating widespread consent to class rule. As he explains,

> The 'normal exercise' of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority. (Gramsci 1975b [1932–1934], 1638)

Representative institutions help stabilize the ideological dominance of the ruling economic class when they fail to incorporate alternative viewpoints and political projects emerging from subordinate groups. The problem, then, is not only that ordinary citizens' interests are poorly represented, but that they are systematically prevented from developing the intellectual capacities necessary for autonomous collective self-government.

Gramsci account of the consensual basis of class domination offers a more nuanced view of the crisis of representation than diagnoses that are one-sided, either focused on the behaviors of party elites (Przeworski 2005; Shapiro 2016) or on the spontaneous activity of the popular sectors. Gramsci's central question is not only why the ruling class dominates, but why subaltern classes give spontaneous consent to class rule. That is, he sets out to explain why people often support policies (spontaneously or passively) that undermine their economic, political, and cultural autonomy. His political analysis therefore begins from the problem of citizens' political agency, aiming to understand the ways in which people systematically misunderstand their social and political reality and, on that basis, endorse parties and policies that benefit only a privileged few.

For this reason, Gramsci does not reject representative democracy or the system of political parties as inherently oligarchic. On the contrary, he identifies the mass party as the principal arena through which subordinate groups can contest the consensual basis of class domination and construct a new political consensus grounded in their equal participation. Like contemporary proceduralists, he recognizes the importance of widening democratic participation within parties and representative institutions. Yet he also insists that formal procedural reforms alone cannot overcome the asymmetries of resources, political knowledge, and ideological influence through which ruling groups reproduce their dominance. Parties must therefore do more than expand participation procedurally: they must articulate a substantively new political program capable of organizing common material interests into a coherent national-popular project.

In this respect, Gramsci also departs from contemporary plebeian populism. Whereas plebeian democrats seek to empower "the many" primarily through anti-oligarchic institutions capable of constraining elites, Gramsci argues that democratic renewal requires constructing a mass political party through which disaffected groups can collectively formulate and advance a shared political agenda. The task of the modern Prince is therefore not merely to make representatives more responsive to popular demands, but to organize a new hegemonic project capable of transforming the relationship between rulers and ruled within the representative system itself.

Despite Gramsci's clear commitment to party democracy, he formulated his theory of the Modern Prince and its political strategy within a historical and institutional context markedly different from that of twenty-first century representative democracies. In particular, his claim that the working class must serve as the principal protagonist and leading force in the party's

construction of a new political order reflects social and political conditions that cannot be straightforwardly transferred to the present. What, then, remains politically relevant and worth recovering in Gramsci's conception of the Modern Prince as a working-class party for confronting today's crisis of party democracy? I argue that its enduring insight lies less in the primacy he assigns to the proletariat than in his broader claim that effective popular self-rule requires a party that is both rooted in a determinate social base and capable of mediating among a multiplicity of autonomous groups within civil society in order to construct broader solutions to shared social problems.

Gramsci's justification for why a new mass-based working-class party is necessary under conditions of inequality and representative crisis can be summarized as follows: If the People are to transform from a fragmented, subaltern mass into a collective ruling subject, they require a party form that does not merely represent their general interests in a neutral or abstract manner, but instead begins from the concrete interests, values, and political aspirations of ordinary citizens themselves. Under capitalist conditions, however, the people do not exist as a unified political subject. Competitive and unequal social relations fragment them into immediate and particularistic interests, ensuring that any socially rooted party will initially reflect the partial aims of a specific class.

Gramsci therefore argued that a revolutionary party rooted in the proletariat's struggle for self-emancipation – the class whose struggle for liberty assumes a universal character because of its objective interest in overcoming relations of class domination – was historically necessary for counteracting this capitalist fragmentation and organizing a new collective political will. He nevertheless insisted that a party's connection to any particular social class, whether the proletariat or otherwise, does not by itself guarantee its emancipatory or democratic character. A

party fulfills this function only insofar as it mediates between the specific objectives of its social base and the broader concerns of society as a whole. Only through such collective mediation can it transcend the corporate and sectarian limitations of its class origins and cultivate a radically new substantive and ethical popular will.

Read in this light, Gramsci's theory of the Modern Prince continues to offer strong reasons for renewing a mass class-based party capable of confronting popular disillusionment, elite capture of representative institutions, and deepening political and economic inequality. To substantiate this argument, the chapters that follow place Gramsci's theory of the Modern Prince, understood as the organizer of a national-popular will, in critical dialogue with the two dominant contemporary models of party democracy.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter Two critically examines the proceduralist defense of party democracy. It stages, for the first time, a critical debate between Gramsci's historical-materialist approach to the party–people divide and the procedural democratic theories of Kelsen and Schumpeter, both of whom implicitly – though not explicitly – rejected the modern Prince form of the party as a dangerous democratic fiction. Although Gramsci, Kelsen, and Schumpeter developed distinct institutional responses to the early twentieth-century crisis of parliamentarism in Europe, I show that they converge around a realist approach to how democracy can mediate the relationship between elites and the masses in modern complex societies structured by the division of labor between leaders and led. Their shared realist orientation stems in part from the influence of the Italian school of elite theory and a common attempt to grapple with the crisis of political representation produced by the leader-led division in the age of mass politics.

Despite these shared premises, however, unlike Gramsci, Schumpeter's "descriptive" theory of competitive leadership and Kelsen's "formalist" defense of parliamentarism ultimately seek to regulate rather than overcome the division between elites and masses through electoral procedures that render ordinary citizens politically passive. In different ways, Schumpeter and Kelsen reduce political agency either to the selection of competing elites through elections or to the indirect representation of partial interests through parliamentary compromise. By contrast, Gramsci rejects any reduction of citizens' participation to the passive selection of elites or the mere representation of group interests. Instead, he conceives the modern Prince as a mass party tasked with developing citizens' capacities for self-government through their integration into a collective process of moral and intellectual leadership and the formation of a new ethical-political and material popular will.

Building on this contrast, the chapter turns to the contemporary revival of Schumpeterian minimalist and Kelsenian proceduralist theories of party democracy. I begin with a closer examination of Schumpeter's theory of competitive leadership alongside contemporary instrumentalist defenses of parties developed by Przeworski and Shapiro. While these theorists defend parties as necessary mechanisms for channeling social conflict into peaceful partisan alternation and for restraining domination through institutionalized party opposition, I argue that minimalist realist approaches presuppose a hierarchical division between competent party elites and a passive electorate that ultimately weakens the party's collective mediating function. Parties, in the minimalist account, become mere instruments for regulating elite competition rather than institutions capable of cultivating democratic agency and rational political judgment among the citizenry themselves. In contrast, I defend Gramsci's conception of the party as a "collective intellectual" that is responsible for cultivating civically active, responsible, and

publicly-minded partisans capable of renewing political leadership from below and holding elites accountable through their ongoing participation and political education during and beyond elections.

I then turn to Kelsen's theory of parliamentarism, which he defends as the institution best capable of maximizing equal freedom by processing social conflict and determining the will of the majority through compromise among multiple competing parties within a legal framework of procedural neutrality and formal political equality. Although Kelsen and contemporary Kelsenians provide one of the strongest democratic defenses of party pluralism against authoritarian monoparty rule and populist majoritarianism, I argue that formal proceduralism ultimately restricts most citizens' political agency to indirect participation within representative institutions, leaving substantive agenda formation largely in the hands of political representatives competing in parliament rather than ordinary partisans themselves.

By contrast, Gramsci's Modern Prince seeks to integrate a multiplicity of social groups with conflicting interests, values, and worldviews into the formation of a new ethical-political collective will through the principle of equal and direct participation in party life. In this way, Gramsci both avoids the dangerous fiction of an organically unified people feared by Kelsen and moves beyond the substantive limits of formal proceduralism while preserving the shared democratic aim of realizing equal political freedom through political parties.

Both minimalist and Kelsenian proceduralists offer compelling defenses of the party's role in enabling electoral democracy, facilitating compromise, and protecting a pluralist political community. However, they remain insufficient for addressing the contemporary crisis of party democracy because they cannot adequately respond to citizens' growing demands for substantive influence over their representative institutions and political life more broadly. Overcoming the

present crisis requires a party framework that addresses citizens' dissatisfaction with parties not only as procedures for free and fair decision-making, but also as institutions increasingly unable to provide meaningful opportunities for collective self-rule and political participation beyond formal democratic procedures. As I show, Gramsci's realist historical materialist thought provides the foundations for such a flexible party framework attuned to both procedural and substantive issues in representing the divided citizenry.

Chapter Three critically evaluates left populist approaches to party democracy and their proposal for a "People's Prince" as a solution to the contemporary crisis of representation. I examine two distinct versions of the People's Prince stemming from the two most influential strands of contemporary left populist theory: agonistic populism, as articulated in the post-Marxist discourse theories of Laclau and Mouffe, and plebeian populism, as contained in the plebeian-republican theories of McCormick and Vergara. Both left populist approaches diagnose the crisis of party democracy as the result of the oligarchization of representative institutions, arguing that political parties no longer represent ordinary citizens but instead serve entrenched political and economic elites. In response, they propose a virtuous anti-elitist leader – a people's Prince inspired by Machiavelli – tasked with restoring power to the people by championing the side of the subordinate many against the dominating few. I argue, however, that this model of party leadership ultimately reproduces the hierarchical division between leaders and led at the core of the crisis of party democracy because it makes citizens' collective political agency dependent upon an external leader rather than upon a political party capable of enabling citizens across different class positions and social identities to participate as equals in a common struggle for liberty.

I identify two myths at the core of the left populist People's Prince: first, that the populist leader will relinquish the extraordinary political power accumulated in the name of the people once elected to office; and second, that the people become self-governing once a leader successfully embodies and represents their interests and worldview. Against these assumptions, I defend Gramsci's Modern Prince as a more internally democratic and participatory alternative. Unlike the populist People's Prince, Gramsci's modern Prince is not an individual leader entrusted with waging a frontal struggle against elites in the people's name, but a mass political party acting as a collective leader that seeks to involve the subaltern popular classes themselves as protagonists of a common struggle for liberty.

I first contrast left populism's neo-Machiavellian conception of partisanship with Gramsci's ethical-political conception rooted in a broader tradition of Italian revolutionary thought. Whereas both strands of left populism define ethical partisanship primarily as taking the side of the many against elites, Gramsci understands partisanship as an active civic responsibility to take sides in political conflict and participate in the collective pursuit of the common good. I show how this ethical conception of partisanship informs his revolutionary realist theory of the mass party as a collective leader capable of transforming passive citizens into active political agents and protagonists of history.

On the basis of this distinction between Gramsci's ethical conception of partisanship and the neo-Machiavellian partisan realism of left populism, I critically examine agonistic and plebeian populist approaches in turn. In particular, I assess their partisan strategies of radical democratic politics and highlight the tensions within their respective accounts of anti-oligarchic leadership as a means for actualizing popular sovereignty under contemporary conditions of inequality and domination. I first examine Laclau and Mouffe's agonistic theory of left populism

and its post-Marxist strategy for countering neoliberal hegemony through the construction of a popular political alliance among heterogeneous groups and struggles. Reworking Gramsci's theory of the hegemonic party in post-Marxist populist terms, Laclau and Mouffe reconceive the Modern Prince as a symbolic form of collective political identification capable of unifying diverse demands against neoliberal elites. I argue, however, that by abstracting the hegemonic party from class struggle, this discursive model of populist unity assigns a disproportionate role to intellectual and political elites in articulating the identity of "the people" as a unified political subject, rather than enabling citizens themselves to define the content of their common political identity through an internally democratic and participatory mass party rooted in the experiences and struggles of the subordinate classes.

I then turn to the plebeian-republican populism of McCormick and Vergara, which places class conflict between the wealthy few and the plebeian majority back in the center of contemporary democratic politics and seeks to institutionalize popular power against oligarchic domination. While the plebeian populist approach comes closer to Gramsci's concern with class struggle, I argue that its binary conception of politics and understanding of the people-as-plebs as a singular material category neglect the broader organizational and pedagogical role that Gramsci assigns to the mass party in constructing a durable national-popular collective will across diverse social groups. In this section, I take up McCormick's interpretation of Machiavelli's Prince as a normative standard for anti-oligarchic democratic leadership and highlight the innovations of Gramsci's transformation of the Prince from an individual leader into a collective leader, the revolutionary party. I argue that Gramsci's model of party-centered class leadership is more suitable for contemporary representative democracies because it better addresses the complexity of modern societies, avoids the dangers of personalistic tyrannical rule, and balances centralized

leadership from above with active popular participation from below through an open-ended party organization rooted in civil society.

By contrasting Gramsci's modern Prince with left populist models of anti-oligarchic leadership, I show how Gramsci offers a more viable alternative for restoring the party's role in connecting society to the state and facilitating popular sovereignty under contemporary conditions. Rather than entrusting democratic representation to a singular figure acting on behalf of the people, Gramsci proposes a mass party organization in which political leadership emerges from within subordinate classes while remaining accountable to them through ongoing participation and reciprocal political education. This Gramscian model, I contend, better addresses the roots of the contemporary crisis of party democracy not by excluding elites from power or subordinating representative institutions to spontaneous popular will, but by transforming parties and representative institutions into sites of active participation and mutual political education through which citizens can collectively shape national political life and confront the conditions of inequality and unfreedom affecting society as a whole.

The concluding chapter returns to the central problem of the contemporary crisis of party democracy by reflecting on both the historical specificity and enduring relevance of Gramsci's early twentieth-century proposal for a new mass party. Among the competing institutional proposals, Gramsci's new mass party, I contend, offers the strongest institutional defense against the dual threats of oligarchy and authoritarianism in contemporary democracies. The concrete institutional implications of Gramsci's party as modern Prince, however, and the question of how such a mass form of political organization might be reconstructed under contemporary conditions, remain open questions for future research.

I therefore conclude this dissertation with a brief reflection on the implications of recovering the Gramscian mass party today, as both a vehicle for institutionalizing popular power and guiding democratic party reform. To do so, I revisit the PCI's institutional embodiment of the Gramscian party model in the immediate postwar period and explain why it initially succeeded as a mass party capable of politically educating millions of working-class people and drawing them into political life. I then consider how aspects of this success might be recovered under the conditions of contemporary liberal representative democracy. In this way, the conclusion provides a set of forward-looking considerations on how Gramsci's political theory and political legacy can still inform ongoing debates on party reform and the enduring tension between political representation and collective self-government at the core of contemporary democratic theory and practice.

CHAPTER 2

Regulating the Party-People Divide: The Substantive Limits of Proceduralism

> The degree of democracy within a party is a function of the consensus it achieves: in other words, its ability to express the general will of its individual members…Without a correct line…[e]very tendency of critical debate will tend to produce factionalism…every centralizing move will result in bureaucratic degeneration. In either case, effective political life is limited to a leading élite, while the mass of members is restricted to tasks of execution or arbitration in disputes which remain external to their own preoccupations and understanding.
>
> – Lucio Magri, "Problems of the Marxist Theory of the Revolutionary Party"

Amid the party turn in contemporary political theory, the most influential defenses of political parties have been advanced from a procedural conception of democracy, drawing on the original arguments of Kelsen (1929) and Schumpeter (1942). Although Kelsen and Schumpeter are classical theorists of procedural democracy that were "united by their realistic approach to the study of democratic politics", they developed distinct defenses of political parties (Przeworski 2026; Saffon and Urbinati 2025). Schumpeter (2010 [1942]) accepted parties as a necessary evil: an inevitably elitist institution yet justified by its role in enabling the democratic method of electoral selection (Saffon and Urbinati 2025, 389). Kelsen (2013 [1929]), by contrast, offered a normative justification for the key role parties play in securing democracy's core value of equal political freedom under conditions of pluralism and disagreement (Urbinati 2013; Saffon and Urbinati 2025).

This original divergence between Schumpeter and Kelsen underlies the two main proceduralist defenses of party democracy that predominate in contemporary political theory. Minimalist realist accounts defend parties on instrumental grounds, emphasizing their role in structuring electoral competition between elites and enabling regular partisan alternation in

office (Shapiro 2016; Przeworski 2018; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). Kelsenian proceduralist accounts, by contrast, defend the intrinsic democratic value of parties as procedures that maximize individual freedom by giving citizens equal opportunities to participate, directly or indirectly, in the formation of majority political decisions (Baume and Ragazzoni 2025; Saffon and Urbinati 2025; Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2017; Wolkenstein 2026; Saffon and Urbinati 2013; Urbinati 2014).

Despite these differences, minimalists and Kelsenians converge on a central claim of procedural democracy: that political parties should not be valued for the quality of their substantive outcomes or for their capacity to realize the common will of the People, but for their role in enabling democracy as a procedure of collective decision-making. Both strands therefore reject theories that strongly link the Party to the realization of popular sovereignty. Drawing on Kelsen's and Schumpeter's shared rejection of substantive democratic theories of political representation, contemporary minimalists and Kelsenians advance explicitly realist arguments against claims that any single party can embody or deliver the common good. Such claims of unified popular representation are said to deny pluralism, obscure the power relations inherent in representation, and mischaracterize what parties can realistically achieve in large, complex political systems, where citizens cannot rule directly and where political decision-making necessarily involves a division of labor between representatives and the represented (Urbinati 2013; Wolkenstein 2020, 27). Proceduralists therefore conclude that parties should be valued as mechanisms for channeling social and political conflict into electoral competition and parliamentary decision-making, rather than as vehicles for realizing a unified popular will (Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2017, 189).

However, this proceduralist defense of party democracy has developed without sustained critical engagement with Gramsci's conception of the party as a Modern Prince. Despite formulating his theory of the party in response to the same early twentieth-century crisis of parliamentary democracy as Kelsen and Schumpeter, Gramsci has never been brought into systematic dialogue with the canons of procedural democracy. This general neglect is significant because Gramsci offers one of the most compelling challenges to both the normative and instrumental justifications of political parties advanced within procedural democratic theory.

From a historical-materialist standpoint, Gramsci defended the party not solely for its role within formal procedural democracy, but for its capacity to organize citizens, divided along class and ethical-political lines, around the formation and realization of a substantive program of the common good. Unlike prevailing proceduralist accounts, which rejects, as an anti-democratic fiction of ideology, any claim that a single party can represent people as a whole, Gramsci (1971 [1933–1934], 133) proposed the Modern Prince as the optimal institution through which the development and exercise of what he called the national-popular collective will becomes possible under modern conditions of division and pluralism. In his political writings, he articulated a substantive democratic function of the party that neither presupposes a homogeneous people (as in abstract theories), denies the possibility of popular rule (as in minimalist theories), nor confines the construction of the popular will to the procedure of parliamentary decision-making (as in Kelsenian theories).

The purpose of this chapter is to bring Gramsci's historical-materialist political thought into critical dialogue, for the first time, with Schumpeterian and Kelsenian proceduralist conceptions of party democracy. It does so through a systematic comparison of Gramsci's theory of the Modern Prince, Schumpeter's theory of competitive leadership, and Kelsen's defense of

the parliamentary form of democracy, which represent three distinct proposals for the party's role in realizing democracy under modern conditions of social and political division. For Schumpeter and contemporary minimalist realists, political parties are agents in a competitive struggle for votes among elites, whose democratic value is strictly instrumental, lying in their capacity to enable the electoral selection and replacement of leaders. For Kelsen, parties are indispensable components of parliamentary democracy, providing a lawful framework through which a plurality of conflicting groups can be represented and a majority formed, thereby formally securing citizens' equal freedom. In both accounts, parties are justified primarily by the procedural functions they perform within representative democracy, rather than by any role they might play in organizing a divided people into a singular collective political agent united around the common good.

In Gramsci's historical-materialist account, by contrast, the party functions as a vehicle for enabling popular partisan agency across social, cultural, and political divisions. The party – rather than elections or parliament alone – is the principal organizational site through which multiple parts of society can participate in the formation and implementation of common political goals themselves. In this way, Gramsci attributes to the party a vital role in securing equal freedom by ensuring each citizen exercises influence within the party organization itself. This role is not exhausted by the party's procedural functions in electoral selection or parliamentary compromise but refers to its ability to facilitate a popular sovereignty more substantively and directly. By theorizing the party as the principal site for the exercise of popular democratic agency, I argue, Gramsci offers a more robust account of the role parties can and should play in democracy than prevailing minimalist and Kelsenian proceduralist theories. I further argue that, in articulating a substantive democratic function of the party, he offers a more

promising response to the contemporary crisis of party democracy and to citizens' growing alienation from representative institutions. By defining the democratic value of parties not only in terms of the outcomes they produce, but also in terms of how they empower citizens in the direct consensual formation of common goals, Gramsci's political theory provides citizens with a normative standard for assessing parties' adequacy in representing their interests and their views, from which to hold party leaders accountable for their role in democracy's legitimacy crisis and the failure to deliver on the public good.

To substantiate this argument, the chapter proceeds in three parts. The first part brings Gramsci into critical dialogue with minimalist and Kelsenian defenses of party democracy. It provides a general overview of how each understands and justifies the democratic value of political parties and identifies their limits of their respective realistic approaches in addressing the division between citizens and their representatives. The second part undertakes a closer examination of Schumpeter's theory of competitive leadership and the minimalist realist defense of parties it continues to inform. It shows how Gramsci's account challenges the reduction of party democracy to elite selection and the rigid dichotomy between politically competent elites and a passive electorate by theorizing the party's role in organizing competition for societal consensus, rather than merely for votes. The third part critically interrogates Kelsen's defense of parliamentary democracy as the institutional form best suited to securing equal political freedom under conditions of pluralism and disagreement. It highlights their surprising convergences, most notably, their shared view of the party's collective mediating role in securing political equality. However, I argue that Gramsci's theory of the modern Prince nevertheless goes beyond the limits of parliamentary compromise in ensuring citizens' equal participation in the formation and revision of a common ethical, political, and material will.

In sum, this critical comparison between Gramsci, Kelsen, and Schumpeter shows how the Modern Prince represents a distinctive and relevant contribution to contemporary debates on the indispensable role of parties in democracy, capable of addressing the substantive limits of proceduralist accounts while avoiding the pitfalls of monopolistic forms of political representation.

Proceduralist Defenses of Party Democracy: Then and Now

The Return to Kelsen and Schumpeter: Against Classical and Substantive Democratic Theories of Representation

The contemporary return to Kelsen's and Schumpeter's procedural democratic thought as guides for rethinking the role of parties in democracy has been driven largely by growing citizen alienation from representative institutions and by the rise of parties and leaders who threaten democratic rules and procedures through fictitious monopolistic claims of popular representation. Confronting the interlocking challenges of declining public trust in parties and the rise of authoritarian populists who threaten the basic institutions of representative democracy by claiming exclusive legitimacy as the 'true' representatives of the People (Urbinati 2019a; 2019b; Rosenblum 2008), contemporary minimalist and Kelsenian theorists advance strong arguments against any political party that claims to represent the People as a unified whole. Instead, they contend that parties should be valued for procedural rather than substantive outcome-based reasons. In this context, Schumpeter's procedural redefinition of democracy as a competitive method for selecting leaders and Kelsen's normative procedural defense of parties as freedom-securing procedures have become central reference points for contemporary efforts to defend party democracy against today's monopolistic and anti-party forces (Saffon and Urbinati

2025; Baume and Ragazzoni 2025; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018; Przeworski 2026; Urbinati 2013; Rosenblum 2008).

Schumpeter and Kelsen continue to exert significant influence over contemporary thinking about parties because both offer realistic, procedural-based justifications for why parties are indispensable to the function and continuation of democratic government. Rather than appealing to classical democratic ideals of popular sovereignty, they both grounded their defenses of party democracy in the realist view that modern democracy necessarily entails a division of labor between a fragmented mass of ordinary citizens and their political representatives or leaders (Kelsen 2013 [1929]), 38; Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 281; Przeworski 2026). Underlying both accounts is the strong realist claim that no unified will of the people exists under modern conditions, together with a rejection of any identification between political leaders and the People, which both regard as a dangerous political fiction that actually obscures the relations of power underlying political representation (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 569; Kelsen 2013 [1929], 40; Urbinati 2013). Writing across several decades in response to recurring crises of representative democracy, both thinkers rejected the classical democratic vision of a unified ruling People as empirically unrealistic and redefined democracy instead as a set of procedures for making political decisions in large, socially complex political systems.

In sum, the recovery of Kelsen's and Schumpeter's proceduralism in response to the contemporary crisis of party democracy can be understood as an effort to return to a more realistic approach to political parties and their role in democratic systems. Part of this realistic approach is to better confront monopolistic threats to the pluralistic structure and logic of party democracy. Despite this shared realist approach, minimalist realists and Kelsenian proceduralists

advance two distinct theories of procedural democracy, yielding sharply divergent views of the democratic role of parties.

In *The Essence and Value of Democracy* (1929), Kelsen advances a normative theory of procedural democracy grounded in democracy's core value of equal freedom, and conceives political parties as enablers of political rights that give voice to claims and aggregate interests – a theory of party democracy later developed by authors such as Schattschneider (2009 [1942]) and Bobbio (1987). By contrast, Schumpeter (2010 [1942) advances a strictly descriptive procedural theory of democracy as a method for selecting leaders, yielding a minimalist view of parties as strategic self-interested agents within the competitive struggle to win and retain power in office (Shapiro 2016; Przeworski 2018; Saffon and Urbinati 2025).

These differences notwithstanding, many democratic theorists regard procedural democracy as the most normatively compelling and realistic framework for confronting the crisis of party democracy (Saffon and Urbinati 2025; Saffon and Urbinati 2013; Chambers 2023). In the present climate of democratic crisis, procedural democracy provides a compelling analytical and normative framework insofar as it defends party-based democracy on realistic grounds, rather than idealized conceptions of popular rule (Przeworski 2026). More precisely, contemporary democratic theorists value Kelsen's and Schumpeter's shared understanding of democracy as an electoral–representative system. In an elective representative system, citizens do not govern directly, but they remain democratic agents through the mechanisms – most importantly elections – that enable them to select and remove those in charge of making decisions (Przeworski 2026; Urbinati 2013, 10).

From a proceduralist standpoint, both Kelsenian and minimalist theorists argue that the democratic value of political parties lies not in the substantive content of their programs or the

quality of the outcomes they produce, but in their capacity to regulate political conflict through relatively free and fair procedures of majority decision-making (Urbinati 2013; Przeworski 2018; Przeworski 2010; Bobbio 1989, 116). Safeguarding procedures that allow competing visions of the common good to contest one another in free electoral competition therefore takes priority over whether those procedures – or the party that prevails – produces substantively just outcomes that benefit the whole of society. On this procedural view, the defining feature of democracy is the freedom to disagree over what the common good is, rather than the achievement of consensus around a shared conception of the common good.

As Saffon and Urbinati (2025) point out, this freedom to disagree is what distinguishes procedural conception of democracy from populist democracy. The latter regards consensus as democracy's highest value and regards parties as obstacles since they institutionalize pluralism and inequalities between representatives and the represented (Errejón and Mouffe 2016; Laclau 2005). Procedural democracy also differs from epistemic theories of democracy (Lafont 2010), which grounds democracy as a process in which rational consensus can be achieved. From an epistemic standpoint, proceduralist democracy lacks an objective standard for judging whether democratic decisions are correct (Estlund 2008; Saffon and Urbinati 2025). Therefore, epistemic theorists propose evaluating democracy primarily by whether they produce better outcomes, rather than solely by the fairness of the procedures through which those outcomes are reached (Lafont 2020, 10). Proceduralists object to such procedure-independent standards by pointing to the persistent fact of deep disagreement among citizens about what justice and the common good entail, as well as the absence of any legitimate external authority capable of resolving these disagreements.

For proceduralists, political parties are indispensable to democracy because they regulate inevitable social and political conflicts in ways that safeguard democracy as a method of collective decision-making (Przeworski 2010; Saffon and Urbinati 2025). Within the proceduralist tradition, however, minimalist and Kelsenian defenses of parties diverge sharply. A minimalist procedural defense does not regard democratic procedures as intrinsically valuable, for example, because they ensure fairness in competition or realize equal freedom. Rather, minimalists appeal strictly to the instrumental value of procedures in channeling potentially violent conflict into stable and nonviolent forms of democratic competition. Parties are justified insofar as they help secure desirable outcomes such as social peace and political stability (Przeworski 2018), or insofar as institutionalized party competition constrains domination by self-interested elites (Shapiro 2016). Kelsenian proceduralists, by contrast, maintain that democratic procedures possess intrinsic value, independent of their outcomes or performance. Drawing on Kelsen's defense of parliamentary democracy, they argue that procedures matter because they instantiate a formal legal order in which citizens are recognized as political equals, each possessing the capacity to influence political decisions. As Saffon and Urbinati (2013) put it,

> Every individual's equal participation in fair and competitive elections for selecting political representatives and thereby contributing to the production of decisions via majority rule [is] the best way of respecting equal liberty in a context of pluralism and dissent (442).

Contemporary proceduralist defenses of party democracy thus develop along two distinct lines. Building on Schumpeter's theory of competitive leadership, minimalist realists defend parties on strictly instrumental grounds. Minimalists emphasize parties' role in sustaining democracy as a method of competitive electoral turnover, either by highlighting their capacity to process potentially violent conflict peacefully (Przeworski 2018) or by stressing how

institutionalized competition between parties constrains domination by power-seeking elites (Shapiro 2016). Kelsenian proceduralists, by contrast, following Kelsen's defense of the parliamentary form of democracy, advance an intrinsic-procedural account of parties as voluntary associations of "like-minded individuals" that secure individual freedom (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 38; Saffon and Urbinati 2025). On this view, parties are essential to democracy because they enable ordinary citizens to participate – albeit indirectly – in the formation of majority decisions, thereby maximizing formal equal freedom under conditions of pluralism and mass politics (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 48; Urbinati 2013, 10). Thus, for Kelsenians, the only way to approximate democracy's ideal of freedom as self-government, we need to adopt a parliamentary system centered on party democracy and the principle of majority rule. Schumpeterians, on the other hand, do not think such a system of self-government is possible – the best we can expect from democracy is that the ruling elites of the day can be replaced over time.

Despite important differences between intrinsic and instrumental proceduralism (Chambers 2023), minimalists and Kelsenians converge on a core realist claim: in a pluralistic society, no single party can realistically or legitimately represent the People as a unified ruling subject. Accordingly, proceduralists do not evaluate parties by the substantive content of their programs or by their proximity to a "real" popular will, but by their adherence to democracy's rules and procedures. From this realist standpoint, aspirations to partisan popular unity are democratically dangerous because they inevitably involve arbitrary claims to ultimate political authority by party leaders, derived from some principle of absolute political truth. Such claims to represent the true will of the people, proceduralists argue, "disfigure democracy" as a pluralistic system of electoral representation (Urbinati 2014). Democracy's defining feature is, rather, the "regulated rivalry" between competing partisan interpretations of the common good, all of which

are treated as a priori equally legitimate (Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020; Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2021; Urbinati 2019a). What constitutes democracy, for proceduralists, is not widespread agreement on substantive sociopolitical ends, but adherence to democratic procedures for deciding among conflicting interests and views.

As Bobbio (1997) argues, procedural democracy conceives politics as a public arena in which conflicts between interests and ideologies are represented through parties. Regular competition for power between parties, rather than any shared conception of the common good, is democracy's unifying mechanism. For Kelsen (2010 [1929]), the unity of the people is an ideological construct with no sociological existence: it is not a body of actual persons, but "a system of individual human acts regulated by the state legal order" (36). Since the people exist only as a juridical entity, it requires laws and procedures to determine how it can act and govern itself (Urbinati 2013; Saffon and Urbinati 2013, 451).

Schumpeter's contribution to this proceduralist vision of politics lies in his descriptive account of democracy as a method of elite competition for power: democracy contains no normative standard other than the fact of competitive electoral rivalry itself. It is minimalist realists who later supply the minimal normative standard: democracy is valuable insofar as it replaces violent conflict with votes by making electoral party competition the central mechanism for the peaceful resolution of political conflict (Przeworski 1999; Bobbio 1984, 93; Ragazzoni 2020). In the absence of a unified popular will, there can be no objective standard of political truth; democratic authority must therefore remain provisional and subject to revision through electoral procedures.

Against the backdrop, Gramsci's theory of the party as modern Prince emerges as a critical yet largely overlooked challenge to the proceduralist defense of party democracy. For

Gramsci, the party aims to obtain societal consensus around a substantive national agenda, and its authority derives from its capacity to represent the real interests of those who consent to it. His definition of the modern Prince as "the organizer and active, operative expression" of the "national-popular collective will" (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 133) therefore appears to exemplify precisely the kind of party proceduralists regard as democratically dangerous. From a proceduralist standpoint, such a claim to embody the people as a unified subject necessarily means subordinating a plurality of interests and viewpoints to a single partisan force. An anti-liberal and anti-democratic reading of Gramsci's modern Prince, while common in the secondary literature (Walzer 2002; Lichtheim 1964; Hughes 1974; Pellicani 1981; Mondolfo 1963; Buzzi 1973; Garosci 1954; Salvadori 1977; 2007), is nevertheless misleading for several reasons (Femia 1981; Finocchiaro 1999; Morera 1990a; Golding 1992; Coutinho 2000).

First, it overlooks the central role Gramsci assigns to equal participation and free debate in the party's process of forming the national-popular will (Morera 1990a; Femia 1981; Coutinho 2000). The legitimacy of a group to govern over society, in Gramsci's account, is grounded in the principle of autonomy actualized through free and equal participation in the political process. As he writes, "the individual can govern himself without his self-governing coming into conflict with political society – but rather becoming its normal continuation, its organic complement" (Gramsci 1971 [1931-32], 268; Coutinho 2012). The objective criterion of political consensus is thus a function of the historically effective participation of members in the party, rather than merely an agreement with a leader's claims to political truth.

Second, interpreting the modern Prince as advancing an absolutist claim overlooks the realism of Gramsci's historical materialist thought (Morera 1990b). For Gramsci, claims to possess a "scientific" understanding of society's problems cannot be assessed independently of

the material conditions that shape how citizens themselves perceive these problems and their possible solutions. Paraphrasing Marx's *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Gramsci (1971 [1933-34]) insists that "no society sets itself tasks for whose accomplishment the necessary and sufficient conditions do not either already exist or are not at least beginning to emerge and develop" (177). This position allows Gramsci to avoid both the political absolutism associated with autocratic rule and the philosophical relativism that underwrites Kelsen's proceduralist democracy (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 103).

As Morera (1990a) argues, Gramsci defends a philosophical realist position (a correspondence theory of truth) rather than a consensus theory according to which all truth is relative to a historically determined class or political group. From this realist epistemological standpoint, Gramsci would also reject the Kelsenian argument that all political beliefs are equally valid because they are equally fallible, and hence that democracy requires adopting a "critical-relativistic disposition" (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 103). Instead, for Gramsci, a position or worldview is "truer" insofar as it offers a more adequate framework for understanding social reality. This does not mean that alternative worldviews are a priori inferior, but it does mean that some positions are in fact better than others, and that the party advancing the more adequate solution to society's problems ought to prevail. Additionally, such a realist position remains compatible with a pluralistic democratic system that enables all political beliefs and opinions to be freely expressed and equally considered, since testing the adequacy of competing worldviews in practice is itself a vital part of determining which party should govern.

That Gramsci understood multiparty democracy as the mechanism through which an the national-popular will of society is formed and actualized is confirmed by his statement that:

> One should stress the importance and significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world, because

> essentially what they do is to work out the ethics and the politics corresponding to these conceptions and act as it were as their historical "laboratory"…For this reason, one can say that parties are [the] crucibles where the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process, takes place. (Gramsci 1971[1933-34], 335)

A party or worldview succeeds, in Gramsci's account, not because it claims absolute truth, but because it proves more capable of addressing people's real interests and grievances. Furthermore, Gramsci's realist historical-materialist position leads him to reject any presupposition of a total unity of the People or a perfect identification between leaders and led. Instead, he develops a conception of democracy that aligns more closely with the "realist" or "elitist" tradition associated with Schumpeter and Kelsen. Far from endorsing an idealist view of popular sovereignty, Gramsci (1975a [1930–1932]) explicitly rejects as "illiberal" any form of government "in which civil society is conflated with political society, whether despotic or democratic (that is, those in which an oligarchic minority claims to be the whole of society, or those in which the undifferentiated people claim and believe themselves truly to be the State)" (734). Against both views, he advances a realistic conception of democracy as a "regulated society", "in which the historical unity of civil society and political society is understood dialectically (in a real, not merely conceptual dialectic)" (Gramsci, 1975a [1930–1932], 734). In his conception, the representative system of government is based on the consent of the governed, but in which consent "does not end at the moment of voting…but is presumed to be permanently active" (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 193). His conception of democracy is therefore closer to the realistic approach of Kelsen and Schumpeter than it is to the abstract theories of democracy that the canons of procedural democratic thought criticized.

In developing this realist conception of democracy, Gramsci accepts what Finocchiaro (1999) terms "the fundamental principle of elitism" (143), derived from Mosca's political thought: the recognition that modern democratic government necessarily involves a distinction

between rulers and ruled, but in which the elites remain open to renewal from elements from below. When Gramsci (1971 [1933–1934] uses the term "elite", he is often simply describing those selected few representatives with "the power of decision over the course of national life" (193). He does not use "elite" in the pejorative oligarchic sense. In his vision of a representative system, the decision-making power of elites is dependent on their ability to secure majority consent, and thus wealth and political power only go so far in determining ruler and ruled.

Democracy, in Gramsci's Moschian-inflected view, is therefore not the rule of an undifferentiated people, but a mediated relationship in which members of the subordinate classes have a real possibility of rising to positions of leadership. Representative institutions, accordingly, are not merely instruments for the reproduction of a closed ruling group, à la Mosca's theory of the 'political class', nor do they serve to select rulers based on some perceived natural superiority, as in fascist ideology. Rather, in Gramsci's (1971 [1933–1934]) view, representative institutions function as the means for changing the relation between elites and the populace, such that selection takes the form of continuously contesting and renewing leadership from below (189).

Like Schumpeterian and Kelsenian proceduralists, then, Gramsci affirms the need for a representative system that mediates the competition for power between conflicting social forces with differing interests, ideologies, and political positions. Rather, his divergence from proceduralism lies in insisting that representative democracy is based on a party capable of maintaining a strong linkage and ongoing interaction with civil society. By grounding popular rule in citizens' permanent exercise of consent (and hence their dissent), Gramsci advances a compelling challenge to the core assumptions of minimalist and Kelsenian defenses of party democracy.

The Linkage Between Representative and Represented in Gramsci's Historical Materialist Thought: A Challenge to Schumpeter and Kelsen's Procedural Approach

As a historical materialist, Gramsci theorizes the function of the political party not only in procedural terms, but also as a substantive vehicle for the formation of national-popular collective will. A party exercises legitimate leadership, in his account, only insofar as it remains continuously linked to the social groups it seeks to lead and justifies its authority by formulating effective solutions to their shared problems. As Golding (1992) argues, for Gramsci "what is at stake in creating a democracy [is] making sure that the political system itself reflect[s] an ongoing, that is to say, fluid 'organic unity' between the intellectuals and the people-nation, between leaders and led, theory and practice, and so forth" (77). The party exercises leadership over society by expanding a popular will such that the values and aims of the leading social group (i.e. the proletariat) comes to align with those of society as a whole. Yet, as Cunningham (2006) points out, this convergence, or "organic cohesion" in Gramsci's terms, can either be democratic or undemocratic: "It is democratic to the extent that a collective will on a societal scale (an "historic bloc") is a product of ongoing interaction between leaders and led" (570).

Gramsci's account of party leadership challenges proceduralist theories that assess the democratic value of representative institutions independently of their substantive political effects. Procedures can function and be regarded as legitimate, his theory suggests, only insofar as citizens experience them as responsive to their concrete interests, grievances, and worldviews. A party's capacity to address national problems provides the conditions for its political authority. As Gramsci (1971 [1933=34]) writes, "A party will have greater or less significance and weight precisely to the extent to which its particular activity has been more or less decisive in

determining a country's history" (151). It follows that, in order for a party to be accepted as nationally representative, citizens must already have participated, in some meaningful way, in shaping a common understanding of societal problems and their possible solutions.

Like the proceduralists, then, Gramsci rejects the idea of a unified popular will existing prior to political organization. Society is pluralistic and deeply divided – particularly, though not exclusively, along class lines – and there is neither a natural homogeneity among citizens nor a spontaneous consensus among them regarding questions of freedom, equality, or the common good. He departs from proceduralism, however, in insisting that it is both possible and desirable to construct a unified popular will democratically through a strong and reciprocal linkage between party and society. While he does not assume the existence of the People as a unified ruling subject, he nevertheless thinks it is realistic that society can approach popular rule – it is a practical ideal that can be actualized in the more or less distant future through the dynamic mediating function of the party.

The distinctiveness of Gramsci's realistic position on the relationship between the party and the people becomes clearer when it is situated alongside the realistic approaches of Kelsen and Schumpeter. Although all three thinkers developed their political writings in the same historical period, they arrived at different assessments of the role that parties can and should play within democratic systems. While the differing views of Kelsen and Schumpeter have been widely examined (Saffon and Urbinati 2025; Przeworski 2026; Przeworski 2010), Gramsci's arguments have rarely been analyzed in relation to procedural democratic theory. Existing scholarship provides only a partial basis for such a comparison, primarily through studies of Gramsci's critical connection to the Italian elite school and the tradition of democratic elitism

(Finocchiaro 1999), which also influenced the formation of Kelsen's and Schumpeter's political thought (Urbinati 2013; Piano 2025).

The absence of a direct comparison between them is unsurprising. Neither Kelsen nor Schumpeter appears to have been familiar with Gramsci's work, and Gramsci never refers to them in the thousands of pages of his prison notebooks. Moreover, Kelsen and Schumpeter were not widely read in Italy during Gramsci's lifetime. Meanwhile, Gramsci remained unknown in Europe, even among most Italians (Liguori 2012, 31), when Kelsen wrote his main work on parties, *The Essence and Value of Democracy* (1929), and when Schumpeter wrote *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942). Nevertheless, all three thinkers were intellectually formed within the same historical political context, shaped by the crisis of parliamentarism and the rise of monoparty dictatorship in interwar Europe. Their respective political writings were also influenced, albeit in different ways, by the classical theory of elites elaborated by Pareto, Mosca, and Michels in the 19th and early 20th century, which had established the dominant framework of political science in Italy and Europe for the empirical study of the relation between 'the elites' and 'the popular classes' (Bobbio 1969, 6).

It was according to these classical authors of elite theory that, in all political systems, even democratic ones, it is never 'the people' who actually rule but always the elites – whether economic, political, social, technological, religious. As a strictly descriptive claim, elitist theory is not in itself anti-democratic. It simply affirms that in every form of government there exists a minority group that governs – a political class – and a larger majority that is governed. In other words, the theory simply describes the fact that in large and complex societies, political rule is necessarily characterized by a division of political labor between leaders and led, which makes direct popular self-rule impracticable and requires representative institutions.

Where the theory of elites becomes anti-democratic is when the division between governors and governed, and the political inequality it entails, is naturalized as an immutable law of social and political life. The more conservative elite theorists, particularly Michels and Pareto, considered the hierarchy between ruling elites and the masses as a natural and unchangeable law of politics because of the nature of human beings. In direct opposition to the Italian school of Elitism, Gramsci (1971 [1933]) rejected the idea that the division between leaders and led is a permanent feature of politics and instead sought to understand it as a historical, therefore changeable law according to certain social and political conditions (144).

Kelsen and Schumpeter, on the other hand, took a position more favorable to the naturalization thesis than Gramsci's by considering the division of labor between elites and masses as an unchangeable law of politics to be managed procedurally rather than overcome. Instead of seeking to transform this hierarchical relationship, they aimed to make it compatible with democracy by regulating the division through democratic procedures, above all, the competitive method for selecting elites in Schumpeter's case and parliamentary democracy in Kelsen's. The elitist principle within Kelsen's procedural democratic thought is clearly visible in his theory of the political party.

> Since the "People", as the foundation for the democratic idea, is a ruling, and not a ruled, People, another restriction must be admitted from a realistic viewpoint. Among those who in fact exercise their political rights by participating in government, one would have to differentiate between the mindless masses who follow the lead of others and those few who – in accordance with the idea of democracy – decisively influence the governmental process based on independent judgment. Following this line of investigation, we encounter one of real democracy's most important elements: the political party, which brings like-minded individuals together in order to secure them actual influence in shaping public affairs. (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 38)

Like Kelsen and Schumpeter, Gramsci also accepted the core analytical principle of democratic elitism that modern political systems are necessarily structured by a division of political labor between leader and led. As he explicitly states:

> It really must be stressed that it is precisely the first elements, the most elementary things, which are the first to be forgotten. However, if they are repeated innumerable times, they become the pillars of politics and of any collective action whatsoever. The first element is that there really do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led. The entire science and art of politics are based on this primordial, and irreducible fact (given certain general conditions). (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 144)

From this realistic starting point, Gramsci recognizes that modern democratic politics must take a representative form and that leadership is both necessary and desirable for democracy to function. He therefore concludes, similar to Kelsen, that the political party is modern democracy's most important socio-political institution for effectively "developing leaders and leadership" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 146).

Yet Gramsci draws a fundamentally different conception of the party's democratic function from this realist starting point. For both Schumpeter and Kelsen, the democratic role of parties consists primarily in limiting elite rule by subjecting party leaders to electoral and parliamentary procedures. In this account, parties preserve a division of political labor between the relatively small group selected to be in charge of making decisions and the mass of citizens whose political influence is limited to voting. For Schumpeter, the party is an instrument for organizing the elites' competition for votes, whereas for Kelsen it serves as a voluntary association for channeling like-minded individuals into a parliamentary body of elected representatives.

Gramsci, by contrast, assigns parties a far more transformative role in democracy. Parties are indispensable organizations for facilitating the transition from "the active man in the mass" to a collective political subject capable of effective, historically rational, political action (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 333). For him, "the most realistic and concrete definition of democracy" is not merely the regulation of the "eternal" ruler-ruled divide through electoral procedures, but a system that promotes the social and political equality of subordinate groups so that hierarchical

divisions can be gradually overcome (Gramsci 1975 [1931–1932], 1056). By this, he means that the democratic legal and social order should be structured in such a way that provides ordinary citizens with effective procedures to participate meaningfully in politics (Femia 1981, 182).

From this substantive conception of democracy, the party is not merely an instrument of elite selection, nor a vehicle for parliamentary compromises, but rather the principal institution through which subordinate social groups acquire collective political agency and learn to govern themselves. Gramsci thus identifies the party's distinctive function as the moral, intellectual, and political formation of a social group into a self-governing force. This transformative democratic function, however, can be realized only insofar as the party maintains a close connection to civil society, integrating its social base into the organization, rather than confining itself to its purely formal legislative and administrative functions. As he writes:

> The political party, for all groups, is precisely the mechanism which carries out in civil society the same function as the State carries out, more synthetically and over a larger scale, in political society…which is that of elaborating its own component parts – those elements of a social group which has been born and developed as an 'economic' group – and of turning them into qualified political intellectuals, leaders [*dirigenti*], and organizers of all the activities and functions inherent in the organic development of an integral society, both civil and political. Indeed it can be said that within its field the political party accomplishes its function more completely and organically than the State does within its admittedly far larger field. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 15)

Gramsci's theory of the party's relationship to the people contrasts most sharply with Schumpeter's minimalist theory of democracy. For Schumpeter, the division between party leaders and the people is not only permanent but necessary for democracy to function as a method for selecting elites through the competitive struggle for the vote. As Schumpeter (2010 [1942]) argues, "in all normal cases [electoral] initiative lies with the candidate who makes a bid for the office of member of parliament" while "voters confine themselves to accepting this bid in preference to others or refusing to accept it" (280). Even this limited form of popular political agency, essentially reduced to the passive and periodic acceptance of competing candidates, he

continues, “is further restricted by the existence of parties”, which are simply “groups whose members agree to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power” (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 280). Unlike for Gramsci, who understands parties as institutions for developing the political-intellectual capacities and self-governing potential of subordinate groups, for Schumpeter their primary function is to regulate and shape mass electoral behavior in the service of elite competition for office. As he starkly puts it:

> Party and machine politicians are simply the response to the fact that the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede, and they constitute an attempt to regulate political competition exactly similar to the corresponding practices of a trade association. The psycho-technics of party management and party advertising, slogans and marching tunes, are not accessories. They are of the essence of politics. So is the political boss. (Schumpeter, 2010 [1942], 281)

Kelsen offers a stronger normative, or formal-democratic, justification for political parties than Schumpeter by grounding their role in democracy’s core value of equal political freedom (Saffon and Urbinati 2025). Rather than viewing parties primarily as instruments for regulating elite competition, Kelsen argues that they are indispensable to democracy because they provide the organizational conditions through which ordinary citizens can realize their formal equality. Formal equality, on his account, consists in “universal, and therefore equal, freedom”, which in turn requires “universal, and therefore equal, participation in government” (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 97). Isolated individuals, Kelsen observes, lack real political freedom because they lack any meaningful capacity to influence decision-making in the legislative and executive spheres of the state. Only by integrating themselves into collective associations – above all, political parties – can citizens exercise their equal right to participate in government.

Parties thus organize like-minded individuals around shared political goals and transform conflicting social forces – what Kelsen calls “communities of interest” – into collective political forces. These organized group interests are then channeled into parliament, where elected

representatives debate and negotiate and where the majority will can be produced through compromise among them (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 49). He summarizes this parliamentarian vision of party democracy as follows:

> Democracy is only feasible if, in order to influence the will of society, individuals integrate themselves into associations based on their various political goals. Collective bodies, which unite the common interests of their individual members as political parties, must come to mediate between the individual and the state. Only self-deception or hypocrisy could lead one to suppose that democracy is possible without political parties. A democratic state is necessarily and unavoidably a multi-party state. (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 39)

In Kelsen's parliamentary model, parties secure political freedom by guaranteeing all citizens equal access to procedures of political representation. Kelsen's account nevertheless rests on the acceptance of a permanent division of political labor between leaders and ordinary citizens. Popular participation is necessarily indirect: citizens exercise political influence primarily by joining parties, voting, and delegating authority upward, while substantive judgment and decision-making remain concentrated in the hands of elected representatives and party elites. As he emphasizes, democracy cannot eliminate leadership but can only regulate it:

> Leadership has no place in an ideal democracy…Yet the democratic freedom ideal… cannot be realized even approximately; social reality is rule and leadership. The only question here can be how that rule is structured and how the leader is chosen…democracy is characterized not by the fact that the ruling will is the will of the People, but rather that…the largest possible number…participates in government. (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 38–39)

Equal political freedom is therefore realized, in Kelsen's parliamentary framework, through citizens' indirect influence over collective decisions rather than through direct participation in their formulation. He does not seek to transform the relationship between leaders and led, but to render it fair, open, and legally regulated through multiparty competition and parliamentary procedures.

This stands in clear contrast to Gramsci's theory, in which the will of the People emerges from a party that solves society's socioeconomic and ethical-political problems by securing the active and direct participation of all those social groups directly affected by them. For Gramsci, any political organization that seeks to avoid turning into an oligarchic structure disconnected from its base must remain grounded in the active and direct consent of its members. The modern Prince, in his theory, names the optimal institutional site for the realization of democratic freedom, insofar as it provides a political form through which the social order can be shaped not by a narrow circle of elites possessing or competing for political power, but through mass participation in the formation of the Party's program. Even if the modern Prince did not fully realize this collective democratic leadership function in practice, as reflected in the historical experience of the PCI (Magri 2011), Gramsci's distinctive contribution to a democratic theory of the party lies in his conceptualization of the dialectical relationship between "the party and the active participation of its social base" (Merrington 1968, 122). This internal popular democratic structure enables the party to set into motion a prefigurative revolutionary struggle defined by its mass social base, thus foreshadowing the shape of society after the revolution (Magri 1970).

A political party, in his account, should not become an independent power standing above society, with its own interests and priorities. It should instead remain a method through which social groups organize themselves, coordinate their interests, and articulate their common political aims. The party exists to serve these social groups, not to govern in their place. When the party fulfills this role, it helps prevent political power from becoming rigid and entrenched. Continuous participation from its social base keeps leaders accountable and flexible to changing social needs, interests, and views, rather than bureaucratic and detached from social life.

In this way, Gramsci's theory challenges the proceduralist claim that a unified popular will cannot be democratically constructed through a single party without suppressing pluralism or undermining free and regular political competition among groups with differing interests and views. Since proceduralist theorists regard any strong linkage between a single party and the people as a dangerous fiction of political representation, they confine popular participation to indirect, passive, and formalized modes of political influence, above all voting. As Kelsen (2013 [1929]) himself concedes:

> Given the size and manifold responsibilities of the modern state…direct democracy no longer represents a feasible political form. Rather, modern democracy must be indirect; it must be a parliamentary democracy, in which the ruling will of society is created by a majority of those who are elected by the majority of persons possessing political rights. As a result, political rights – and therefore freedom – are essentially reduced to the right to vote. (41–42)

In both Kelsen's and Schumpeter's accounts, the party–citizen relationship is thus reduced to a permanent procedurally regulated hierarchy. In the Schumpeterian minimalist model, citizens participate primarily by selecting among programs formulated by political elites. In the Kelsenian parliamentary model, they participate by delegating political judgment upward to representatives who deliberate and decide on their behalf. By contrast, the modern Prince offers a more robust conception of the party's democratic role. Rather than limiting parties to organizing elite competition or channeling interests into parliamentary compromise, Gramsci conceives the party as the central institution for integrating society's conflicting social forces into an ongoing process of collective political decision-making. Gramsci's theory therefore challenges proceduralist models at their core by insisting that democracy depends not only on how decisions are made, but on whether representative institutions increasingly enable ordinary people to participate directly in the formation of the collective will that governs them. The

remaining sections of this chapter explore the implications of Gramsci's challenge to Schumpeterian minimalism and Kelsenian proceduralism.

Schumpeter's Theory of Competitive Leadership

Redefining the Party as an Instrument of Elite Competition and Selection

In *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), Schumpeter advances a minimalist procedural conception of democracy that explicitly rejects the idea of the political party as a vehicle of popular self-rule or a mechanism for realizing the common good. His proceduralism is descriptive in the precise sense that it ascribes no intrinsic normative value either to democratic procedures or to the outcomes they produce. His descriptive proceduralism is realist in that he denies the existence of a Common will of the People that leaders can detect and implement under modern social and political conditions. Schumpeter's stated aim is to offer an "empirically accurate" account of how political decisions are actually made in large-scale industrialized mass democracies, rather than to articulate a normatively superior model of democracy (Saffon and Urbinati 2013). Unlike Kelsen (2013 [1929], 93), who defends democracy as a value-relative method for selecting leaders, or Gramsci, who grounds the party's legitimacy in its capacity to solve the problems of national life, Schumpeter insists that his "alternative theory of democracy" as a method of competitive leadership selection is "much truer to life" and to "the facts" of the democratic process (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 269).

Starting from this descriptive standpoint, Schumpeter argues that democracy should not be defined by the values it serves, but by the method used for selecting the political class in charge of making decisions. His alternative theory of democracy does not begin, as Kelsen's does, with a rejection of Rousseau's ideal of direct self-government. Rather, it proceeds from a

criticism of classical eighteenth-century theories of representative democracy that linked elections to popular sovereignty by defining the democratic method as "an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will" (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 251).

Schumpeter rejects each element of this classical conception of representative democracy.[6] He denies, first, that citizens are capable of forming a unified and rational common will. He challenges, second, the claim that elections transmit such a coherent general will into public policy. He rejects, finally, the idea that the real function of representatives is to implement decisions that have already been formed by the electorate (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 251–254). For Schumpeter (2010 [1942]), the belief that citizens would "agree, in principle at least" that "there is also a Common Will of the people (= will of all reasonable individuals)…exactly coterminous with the common good or interest or welfare or happiness" is a fiction unsupported by social reality (252). Modern societies are characterized not by rational consensus among the citizenry but disagreement over what the common good entails. As he argues:

> There is, first, no such thing as a uniquely determined common good that all people could agree on or be made to agree on by the force of rational argument. This is due not primarily to the fact that some people may want things other than the common good but to the much more fundamental fact that to different individuals and groups the common good is bound to mean different things (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 253).

This observation leads Schumpeter to reject the classical view of representative democracy, according to which the electorate selects leaders charged with carrying out rational coherent general will formed by them. From here, Schumpeter (2010 [1942]) proposes to "reverse the roles of these two elements" by "making the electorate's role secondary to the selection of the leaders who actually do the deciding" (269). This reversal – from the people forming a general will themselves and selecting leaders on that basis, to leaders deciding and

people choosing between them – is the essential core of Schumpeter's (2010 [1942]) famous redefinition of democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (269).

For Schumpeter, what defines the method of elite selection as democratic is not the people's act of voting itself but rather the competitive character of the elites' struggle for leadership. As he insists, "democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms 'people' and 'rule'. Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them" (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 282). Yet, he immediately adds,

> Since [the electorate's] choice may itself be exercised in entirely undemocratic ways, we have had to narrow our definition by adding a further criterion identifying the democratic method, viz., free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 282).

Despite Schumpeter's own claim to have offered only a descriptive theory of democracy, a minimal normative requirement enters his account once he argues that democracy requires the free competition between elites. He is no longer merely describing how the process works, but rather he is arguing that some forms of elite rule count as democratic, to the extent that positions of leadership remain open to contestation by other elites.

Within this minimalist procedural framework, Schumpeter redefines the political party entirely in terms of its instrumental function in the competitive struggle for leadership. Parties serve as the organizational instruments through which elites coordinate their bids for power and through which citizens select among rival teams of potential rulers. Their very existence, Schumpeter argues, undermines the classical democratic ideal of a unified common will for representatives to implement. The persistence of partisan competition itself testifies, in his view,

to the absence of any rationally unified popular will capable of guiding the political decision-making of elites.

On this basis, Schumpeter (2010 [1942]) rejects Burke's classical definition of a political party as "a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed" (568). For Schumpeter, this definition is not merely inaccurate but "dangerous because it is so tempting". It is tempting precisely because it offers a morally appealing but unrealistic image of party politics, in which parties appear as principled associations oriented toward achieving the common good. This image obscures their actual function as instruments through which organized political groups seek to acquire and retain power. By portraying parties as the genuine expression of a shared commitment to the national interest, Burke's definition masks the strategic logic of the competitive struggle for political power, which is driven primarily by elites' pursuit of office rather than by the self-governing activity of citizens. It thereby encourages citizens to mistake organized power struggles for authentic attempts by party elites to represent the will of the people.

Although political parties do articulate "a stock of principles", Schumpeter (2010 [1942]) insists that their function primarily as instruments for attracting voters within the competitive struggle for leadership, much as "the brands of goods a department store sells are characteristic of it and important for its success" (569). If parties were genuinely defined by shared commitments to the public good, it would be impossible for "different parties to adopt exactly or almost exactly the same program. Yet this happens as everyone knows" (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 569). The ease with which parties revise their platforms or converge upon similar positions exposes the illusion of defining them by their principles or by citizens' conscious

commitments and expressed choices. It points instead to the need to define parties in terms of their practical function within electoral competition. A political party, Schumpeter concludes, is therefore "a group whose members propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power" (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 569).

Schumpeter's redefinition of the political party ultimately denies its mediating role in enabling popular participation and, in doing so, forecloses the possibility that electoral outcomes meaningfully express popular sovereignty. In his account, parties do not facilitate democracy. Rather, they "constitute attempts" by political elites – through what he describes as the "psycho-technics of party management and party advertising" – to "regulat[e] political competition exactly similar to the corresponding practices of a trade association" (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 281). By reducing the political party to an instrument of elite competition for votes, Schumpeter's democratic theory leaves no meaningful role for parties as institutions through which citizens can form a rational collective political will prior to their participation in the selection of leaders. Thus, even if Schumpeter did not explicitly oppose Gramsci's theory of the modern Prince, his alternative conception of democracy denies the very possibility of the Italian Marxist's empirical-historical definition of the political party as:

> a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form…the first cell [in history] in which there come together germs of a collective will tending to become universal. (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 129)

Schumpeter denies such a conception of the party because his redefinition of representative democracy rests on the argument that, as a natural fact of politics, citizens are incapable of forming a rational and coherent collective will through political participation. His theory of party democracy therefore presupposes a rigid hierarchical dichotomy between competitive elites charged with making decisions and a passive electorate whose role is reduced

to the incompetent acceptance or rejection of candidates making bids for office. This rigid dichotomy between competitive elites and a passive electorate is precisely what Gramsci's theory of the political party as a collective intellectual and mediator of the national-popular will proposes to overcome.

In Gramsci's account, it is not merely party leaders who decide while the electorate simply consents to the direction imposed by this or that group of party elites. Rather, citizens actively express their views through their everyday forms of participation, while party elites "wor[k] out and ma[ke] coherent the principles and the problems raised by the masses in their practical activity" (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 330). In this way, Gramsci offers a democratic solution to the elite–mass dichotomy preserved in Schumpeter's procedural democratic thought by redefining the party beyond the reproduction of intellectual elitism – that is, as an organization that facilitates the formation of a rational popular will through the reciprocal pedagogical relation between intellectuals and the people (Merrington 1968; Davidson 1974; Morera 1990a; Femia 1981, 185; Mills 1990; Magri 1970; Karabel 1976).

Beyond the Dichotomy Between Competent Elites and the Passive Electorate: The Party as a Collective Intellectual

Despite recent efforts to dissociate Schumpeter from the tradition of democratic elitism (Piano 2025), his theory of the political party reproduces a rigid hierarchy between the elites, who devise political programs, and the masses, whose participation is confined to selecting the political class in charge. The acceptance of an elite-mass hierarchy as a defining characteristic of real democracy, which originated with the Italian Elite School, was widespread across the ideological spectrum in the early 20th century. In the Italian context, elitist theory underwent a

democratic reformulation by liberal and anti-fascist thinkers such as Piero Gobetti and Guido Dorso, and Filippo Burzio into a concrete political program, a scientific theory, or both, respectively (Bobbio 1969, 238). As Bobbio (1969) observes, for Gobetti, Dorso, and Burzio, elite theory did not necessarily contradict democracy or liberalism:

> In Gobetti, the contrast is between an old elite, which has by now exhausted its historical function, and a new elite, which ought to renew Italian political life; between a real elite, anchored to the ruling classes, and an ideal elite allied with the popular classes in motion. In this opposition we see, first of all, the grafting of elite theory onto a democratic conception of political life. It is always restricted groups that direct politics: the difference between a conservative and a democratic politics does not lie in the presence or absence of minorities in government, but in the different formation and inspiration of this restricted group. A democratic politics is politics elaborated by minorities that express progressive demands and ideals, and that lead the popular classes toward an awareness of their rights and their historical mission. In Burzio, by contrast, what emerges is less a contrast between old and new elites than a contrast between a monistic conception of elites and a pluralistic one, which regards as optimal a society in which different elites exist and struggle among themselves. In this context, one should speak more properly of a grafting of elite theory onto a liberal conception of political life, understood as a society in which the best conditions are established for open antagonism among rival groups. (238)

Gramsci was among the few communist intellectuals of his time to incorporate élite theory into a democratic conception of the political party. What emerges from his theory of the new elite is a vision of the political party that enables a scientific discussion between the intellectual strata of society and the popular classes as a prelude to concerted and cohesive collective action. For Gramsci, the party, as a collective intellectual, does not merely raise the self-consciousness of the masses from above, but rather engages them in a process of developing a more coherent, realistic conception of the world (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 334; Morera 1990a, 24; Mills 1990).

While classical elitism rests on a dichotomy between a select cadre – which claims to know what the people "really" want by virtue of its superior intellectual position – and a mass whose desires are fulfilled on its behalf, Gramsci argues for a theory-practice nexus that rejects

this separation. He contends that there cannot be a rift between what the people actually desire, as expressed through their actions, and what their leaders believe they should want. Although he acknowledges that "there must be a criticism of common sense" he insists that the intellectual strata of the party must:

> base itself initially on common sense in order to demonstrate 'everyone' is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity. (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 330-331)

The party cannot fulfill its function of representing the self-awareness of the masses without general participation in party activities that develop the initiative and independence of the party membership as a whole.

Schumpeter, by contrast, maintains a strict separation between elites and masses by rejecting the "myth" of a rational, active, and informed democratic citizenry as necessary for the realization of democracy. He argues that this ideal lacks both operational and empirical content in large, complex societies. His alternate theory of democracy therefore begins from the assumption that ordinary citizens de facto lack the capacity to form a rational collective will through their own self-organization – a collective will that elected representatives can then identify and implement on their behalf. The origins of this assumption stems from Michels, for whom the iron law of oligarchy is an iron law precisely because of what he calls "the formal and real incompetence of the mass" and the cultural superiority of professional leaders (Michels 2016 [1911], 107).

In *Political Parties* (1911), Michels propounded his iron law of oligarchy thesis according to which any large-scale political party or organization will inevitably be ruled by a small self-perpetuating elite at its center. As he famously puts it: "It is organization that leads to the domination of the elected over the electors…who says organization says oligarchy" (Michels

2016 [1911], 365). For Michels (2016 [1911]), the necessity of rule by an economic, political, intellectual class is a natural and immutable law of politics because there exists a "mechanical and technical impossibility of direct government by the masses" (63). In his view, the masses are incapable of running their own organizations or democratically controlling their leaders. Moreover, for Michels, this mass incompetence, and hence their dependency on their leaders, is innate and general, rather than a hierarchy corresponding to unequal social and political conditions that mechanisms of mass participation or education can overcome. "The incompetence of the masses", Michels (2016 [1911]) argues unambiguously,

> is almost universal throughout the domains of political life, and this constitutes the most solid foundation of the power of leaders. The incompetence furnishes the leaders with a practical and to some extent a moral justification. Since the rank and file are incapable of looking after their own interests, it is necessary that they should have experts to attend to their affairs (111–112).

Michels' iron law must be understood as an anti-democratic theory because it denies the fundamental principle of citizens' political competence and hence their equal participation. Schumpeter adopts a position that is favorable to Michels' iron law of oligarchy, but he attempts to make the elite-mass hierarchy compatible with electoral democracy. For Schumpeter, the solution to the citizenry's inability to form a rational general will is not the political party as a site of popular political agency, but to reduce the electorate's primary function to the selection of the political class in charge. Consequently, party leadership remains separate from the independent thought and action of ordinary citizens, who do not take an active or direct role in the formulation or implementation of the rules and social policies under which he or she lives. As he starkly puts it,

> [The electorate's] choice – ideologically glorified into the Call from the People – does not flow from its initiative but is being shaped, and the shaping of it is an essential part of the democratic process. Voters do not decide issues. But neither do they pick their members of parliament from the eligible population with a perfectly open mind" (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], 280).

The recent reinterpretation of Schumpeter as a "democratic theorist of elitism" rather than an "elite theorist of democracy" (Piano 2025) becomes more difficult to sustain when considered Gramsci's proposed response to the intellectual hierarchy between elites and the masses. Gramsci challenges Michels' iron law thesis of a natural division between intellectuals and non-intellectuals as itself myth. He does so by asserting that even the hierarchy and specialization required in modern industrial societies does not prove that the masses are incapable of rational independent thought and action. As he argues,

> It is essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing just because it is the specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists…It must first be shown that all men are 'philosophers', by defining the limits and characteristics of the 'spontaneous philosophy' which is proper to everybody. This philosophy is contained in: (1) language itself, which is the totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; (2) 'common sense' and 'good sense'; and (3) the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of 'folklore'. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 417)

By establishing that everyone is a philosopher, "since even the slightest manifestation of intellectual activity in language contains a specific conception of the world", Gramsci (1971 [1933], 417) dismantles the assumption that ordinary citizens are incompetent or incapable of rational political thought and action. The problem is not lack of intellectual capacity, but the tendency to accept "a worldview mechanically imposed by the external environment" rather than to "work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 417). For Gramsci (1971 [1933]), only through participation in shaping the rules under which one lives can the ordinary citizen "take an active part in the creation of the history of the world" and "be one's own guide", thereby "refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality" (417–418).

Gramsci does not, however, endorse an ideal theory of democracy. He insists that while "all men are intellectuals", "not all men have in society the function of intellectuals". The

distinction between intellectuals and non-intellectuals refers only to social function rather than to any a priori notions about human intellectual capacities. As he explains:

> Although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non-intellectuals do not exist…There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded […]. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 9)

Even outside their professional activity, he continues, all individuals "participate in a particular conception of the world, have a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contribute to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 9). The capacity to "bring about new modes of thought" is thus a fact of universal human agency rather than an epistemic privilege reserved for a professional elite.

In this way, Gramsci preserves the insight of realist democratic theory that modern politics requires organization, leadership, and specialization, without denying the epistemological and political equality of ordinary citizens. He thereby challenges the elitist assumptions that structure Schumpeter's procedural conception of democracy. For Schumpeter, citizens do not formulate their own goals through their active participation, instead, their preferences are shaped by party elites who control programmatic formulation and decision-making. Thus, parties do not serve as sites for forming collective political judgements. Rather, he reduced their role to the concerted action of leaders in the struggle for power, separated from the masses who Schumpeter (2010 [1942]) describes, with clear elitist implications, as "incapable of action other than a stampede" (281).

Much of contemporary realist democratic theory maintains Schumpeter's rejection of the classic model of the democratic citizen as unrealistic. The more anti-democratic realists today argue that calls for popular participation are dangerous because they invite the participation of an allegedly ignorant and irrational public, which could undermine the stability of the representative democratic system (Achen and Bartels 2016). Gramsci, by contrast, is part of a realist tradition of

Italian political thought, from Machiavelli to more revolutionary liberal thinkers like Gobetti, that views citizens' active participation in politics as serving an emancipatory and civic educative function. For Gramsci, the party helps fulfill this function by enabling citizens to develop their political competencies and responsible action through their participation in policy formation and implementation. Democracy for Gramsci is more than a system for selecting elites, it is a system of collective self-governance. In this system, he writes:

> The people's consent does not end at the moment of voting, quite the contrary. That consent is presumed to be permanently active; so much so that those who give it may be considered as 'functionaries' of the State, and elections as a means of voluntary enrolment of State functionaries of a certain type – a means which in a certain sense may be related to the idea of self-government…Since elections are held on the basis not of vague, generic programs, but of programs of immediate, concrete work, anyone who gives his consent commits himself to do something more than the simple, juridical citizen towards their realization – i.e. to be a vanguard of active and responsible work (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 266–267)

The reduction of the ordinary citizen to a passive voter of agendas formulated by elites is reproduced in minimalist realist theories of party democracy, inherited from Schumpeter. In the minimalist realist framework, the party-citizen relation is reduced to a model in which parties strategically act in their own interests while citizens lack effective mechanisms to control them and where their participation lies outside of the realm of party politics, confined to electoral selection. The minimalist realist perspective, as I discuss next, overlooks the critical function that Gramsci assigned to the party when he defined it as a collective intellectual: that is, its mediating role in cultivating the collective political judgement of the citizenry through their ongoing participation.

Minimalist Realist Instrumentalism: Peaceful Turnover and Elite Accountability Without Popular Partisan Agency?

Building on Schumpeter's theory of competitive leadership, minimalist realists such as Przeworski (2018) and Shapiro (2016) advance instrumental procedural defenses of the party. They locate the party's democratic value in its capacity to sustain electoral competitiveness and ensure the regular alternation of elites in office. Both thinkers regard substantive conceptions of parties as vehicles for the common good as unrealistic. Instead, minimalist realists ground their defense in a view of politics as an enduring power struggle among competing forces seeking to pursue their own interests (Przeworski 2018, 185) and secure a temporary monopoly over the legitimate use of force (Shapiro 2016, 31). From this perspective, parties are not intrinsically valuable because they realize equal political freedom or collective self-government, but because they enable democracy to continue functioning as a competitive method for selecting and replacing political leaders.

Although Przeworski and Shapiro both endorse Schumpeter's minimalist definition of democracy, they advance different instrumental defenses of democracy and justifications for political parties (Chambers 2023). For Przeworski (2018), parties are instrumentally valuable because they help secure peaceful electoral turnover. When parties compete regularly, electoral outcomes become uncertain so that even today's losers can reasonably expect to win in the future. This expectation incentivizes elites to accept electoral results and continue pursuing their interests within democratic institutions rather than resorting to violence. Shapiro (2016), by contrast, argues that parties are instrumentally valuable not only because they facilitate peaceful turnover, but because they constrain domination. In his Schumpeterian account, the presence of a strong opposition between two elite-disciplined parties ensures that those in power are continuously monitored and challenged by credible alternatives. Institutionalized loyal opposition ensures elite accountability by tying their pursuit of office to majority interests and

effective policy implementation, thereby generating "good" responsive government and curbing minority domination (Shapiro 2016, 78; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).

Despite their instrumental justifications of parties – peace for Przeworski and non-domination for Shapiro – both converge on a central claim. Neither assigns a decisive role to the active participation of ordinary citizens in securing peaceful turnover or elite accountability. Within their minimalist realist frameworks, these democratic goods rest solely on elite competition and electoral incentives, rather than on parties enabling citizens to shape national policy beyond the act of periodic voting.

Gramsci offers a fundamentally different account of the party's democratic function under conditions of competitive power struggle. While he also regards the party as instrumentally valuable for securing a stable democratic order and ensuring leaders' accountability to the electorate, he places citizens' active and direct participation at the center of achieving these goals. For Gramsci, the party's capacity to translate citizens' real interests, views, and grievances into intelligible and nationally representative political programs is fundamental to a healthy democracy, since the legitimacy and stability of representative institutions depend on leaders' continued capacity to organize and renew popular consent. On this view, leaders cannot simply win office and then govern autonomously, they have to keep convincing people that they should be in power because they can do a better job than their rivals at satisfying their needs and solving society's problems.

From this Gramscian perspective, Przeworski's and Shapiro's accounts are limited in their capacity to address the contemporary crisis of party democracy. By reducing party democracy to elite competition for votes, minimalist realists overlook the party's mediating role in organizing citizens' political experiences and enabling them to recognize electoral outcomes as meaningful

expressions of their own political participation. As a result, they leave under-theorized how parties and partisan participation can itself generate trust in elections as mechanisms for choosing and replacing governments over time. It is precisely this missing mediating function of the party that Gramsci's theory of hegemonic struggle brings into view.

In his account, parties perform a hegemonic function by translating social conflicts into coherent and nationally articulated political agendas and by actively incorporating citizens into their formation. This process enables citizens to exercise informed consent and dissent and to evaluate political leadership on the basis of its responsiveness to collective societal needs. When citizens can recognize their concerns and aspirations in partisan programs, they are more likely to regard electoral procedures as meaningful expressions of their own collective political judgment and action, regardless of particular electoral outcomes. This substantive trust, in turn, makes it harder for elites to abuse their power, manipulate institutional rules, or refuse to leave office after an election. As Gramsci's theory suggests, the struggle for hegemony in civil society, more than the vote alone, constrains party leaders more effectively than formal electoral rules and incentives, since it makes their continuing authority depend not merely on strategies for winning office, but on repeatedly securing the consent of an informed and politically active majority more successfully than their competitors.

a. Przeworski's Electoralism: Securing Peace and Democratic Stability Through Partisan Turnover

Przeworski argues that, in a world structured by power struggles between competing political forces, democracy functions when the governing party can be removed from office without violence or destroying the system itself. Accordingly, he defines democracy not as a system

which maximizes freedom but as a method that secures peaceful alternation through competitive elections. Like Schumpeter, Przeworski regards the search for rational consensus as largely futile in pluralistic societies marked by enduring conflicts of interest and value. Competitive elections cannot be expected to generate a government responsive to citizens' preferences. At most, they "provide an instruction to governments to minimize dissatisfaction with how we are governed" (Przeworski 2018, 8).

This is a strictly procedural view, since the value of competitive elections is independent of the substantive quality of the outcomes they produce. As he sharply puts it, "dissatisfaction with the results of elections is not the same as dissatisfaction with elections as a mechanism of collective decision-making" (Przeworski 2018, 13). For Przeworski (2018, 8), the procedural value of competitive elections, and what is "by itself sufficient to cherish them", lies in their capacity to peacefully process the conflicts over power that inevitably arise in society. His normative position contrasts sharply with Kelsenian intrinsic proceduralism, which grounds the value of multiparty competition in its role in enabling citizens' equal participation in a fair procedure for selecting political representatives (Saffon and Urbinati 2013). It also differs from Shapiro's (2016) Schumpeterian non-domination account, which values competitive elections for institutionalizing the struggle for political power in a way that constrains minority domination by making it strategically necessary for elites to serve the interests of the majority.

Przeworski's (1999) instrumental defense of parties follows directly from this minimalist definition of democracy as "the only system in which citizens can get rid of governments without bloodshed" (23). In this framework, the value of parties lies solely on their ability to peacefully process conflicts through competitive elections. The competition between parties for votes is instrumentally valuable to this end not because it yields national policies that command

widespread agreement, but because it generates uncertainty in the electoral outcomes. This *ex-ante* electoral uncertainty ensures that no group is permanently excluded from the chance to acquire political power, and no winner is permanently entrenched but can be replaced (Przeworski 2018, 23).

In Przeworski's model, the arena of conflicting partisan forces remains peaceful only when all competitors calculate that the benefits of adhering to electoral rules and accepting electoral outcomes outweigh the costs of resorting to violence. In his view, democracy is in "equilibrium" when losers accept defeat and wait for future opportunities to compete for power, while winners accept the possibility of future loss without attempting to manipulate the rules. Democratic stability is therefore achieved when both sides have stronger incentives to comply with electoral procedures than to challenge them through force, producing what Przeworski describes as a democratic equilibrium (Przeworski 1991; 2005). Democracy becomes a self-enforcing system when the expected benefits of competing within democracy's rules remains greater than the benefits of going to war, leading all major political actors to conclude that they prefer democracy to the feasible alternatives (Przeworski 2005, 39; Przeworski 1991).

Przeworski's minimalist realism leads him to a narrow and strictly strategic conception of the political party as an instrument through which self-interested elites pursue and maintain power in office. This view is grounded in his empirically informed skepticism toward standard democratic theories that depict elections as arenas in which parties present coherent alternatives and politically equal citizens select governments on the basis of informed judgment. Przeworski rejects the classical view that elections reliably generate the representation of majority interests (Przeworski 2018, 75, 138; Shapiro 2016; Dahl 1971). Moreover, his empirical work, specifically on socialist electoralism, led him to reject the plausibility of a party that forges a

conception of the national interest across conflicting classes and groups, as Gramsci envisioned (Sprague and Przeworski 1986). In his account, parties do not aim to unite different social groups around a common idea of what is good for the country, since elites are mainly motivated by the pursuit of electoral victory. The concessions made to citizens are therefore better understood as strategic choices made by elected officials or office-seekers to secure majority support, rather than expressions of a deeper commitment to advancing the economic and political aims of their social base.

This minimalist conception of party strategy stands in sharp contrast to Gramsci's thicker account of the party's ethical-political function. For Gramsci, parties operate as collective mediators that build alliances and translate deep social conflicts into claims capable of being recognized as universal. This party function enables citizens to become better judges of whether their representatives are leading society in a common political direction. Election results, or "the counting of votes", Gramsci (1971 [1933]) writes, are "the final, ceremonial test" of a longer struggle for hegemony, "in which it is precisely those who devote their best energies to the State and the nation (when such they are) who carry the greatest weight" (193). However, what determines the weight of an elector candidate is not their ability to win votes but rather than the public perception of their responsiveness to the interests of the nation. As he continues, "If this hypothetical group of worthy men, notwithstanding the boundless material power which they possess, do not have the consent of the majority, they must be judged either as inept, or as not representative of 'national' interests – which cannot help being decisive in inflecting the national will in one direction rather than in another" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 193).

Przeworski does not think elections function as a mechanism through which citizens judge government's responsiveness to their preferences. Such a view is unrealistic, he argues, because

party elites possess their own interests, values, and information, much of which remains inaccessible to ordinary citizens. Although leaders are constrained by the need to secure majority support, this constraint does not reliably translate into substantive responsiveness once they are in office. As he argues, "Politicians may be willing to do anything to be (re-)elected, but they may seek private gain from holding public office or they may have some well-meaning objectives that nevertheless differ from those of citizens" (Przeworski 2018, 70).

Within Przeworski's minimalist realist framework, political parties are reduced to self-interested agents whose behavior is shaped by the strategic incentives of electoral competition rather than the views, interests, and political activity of their social bases. In his view, it is sufficient to value parties as mere instruments for winning power, as their regular participation in elections provides a stable system for peacefully processing social conflicts and power struggles (Przeworski 2018, 23). The underlying intuition is that threats to democracy primarily emerge from political elites rather than a dissatisfied citizenry. Democracies are most fragile when leaders calculate that abandoning electoral procedures is more strategically advantageous, either because losing elections would impose intolerable material or political losses or because winning promises high payoffs (Przeworski 2015).

The regular participation of conflicting partisan forces in elections reduces the use or threat of force by incentivizing elites to pursue their interests through legal channels (Maravall and Przeworski 2003; Sprague and Przeworski 1986). Parties obey electoral results because of a logic of strategic reciprocity: incumbents and losers alike are willing to yield power because they anticipate future opportunities to compete for office. This democratic equilibrium holds only if all successive incumbents believe the current opposition would reciprocate by stepping down in turn upon a future defeat. Consequently, incumbents expose themselves to the risk of loss and

vacate office with the confidence that their opponents would behave the same way as rulers (Przeworski 2015).

The problem with Przeworski's account is not his emphasis on partisan alternation as an effective mechanism for securing democratic stability and civic peace. As he rightly points out, peaceful partisan turnover through elections marks a significant, even if minimal, democratic advancement, since elites have historically been more likely to follow the rules and avoid abusing their power when doing so aligns with their interests (Przeworski 2015; Przeworski 2018, 166). Rather, the difficulty arises from his argument that elite compliance with electoral competition is the only mechanism for democracy's survival. This view overlooks the mediating role of political parties in translating social conflicts into intelligible collective programs that citizens can understand, trust, and hold their leaders accountable as itself a necessary condition of democratic stability. Indeed, the incapacity of parties to adequately represent citizens' demands is a primary factor of democracy's legitimacy crisis (Saffon and Urbinati 2025; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017; Ignazi 2017; Mair 2013; Biezen and Saward 2008), and why democratic theorists have proposed alternative mechanisms of citizens' agency to constrain parties and elections (Landemore 2020; Mansbridge 2019; Guerrero 2021; Ferejohn 1986).

A minimalist model restricts party democracy to elite selection and peaceful alternation, neglecting the role of parties in helping citizens make sense of their grievances and channel them into universal aims that citizens can recognize as their own. This is precisely the mediating function of the party that Gramsci's theory of hegemonic struggle places at the center of democratic politics: their ability to organize popular consent by translating social conflicts into a more coherent nationally representative agenda. For example, he argued that the Communist

Party would only achieve hegemony if it could convince those social classes demanding national unification and rural development that working-class emancipation from capitalist domination embodied and advanced their own interests, values, and vision of society. However, in his view, there was no guarantee that the organized Italian working class, then a political minority, would be recognized as the leading representative of the most important issues of Italian society at the time, namely, the unfinished campaign for national unification since the *Risorgimento* (Cunningham 2006). Instead, Gramsci understood Italian politics strategically, as a contest for hegemony between the working class and Italian capitalism that would be decided by whichever side proved more capable of constructing a collective will that could present its particular interests as the driving force of broader national development.

Gramsci's historical analysis of the relationship between political representation and the multiplicity of conflicting forces in society is closer to Przeworski's (2010) minimalist realist view than has hitherto been acknowledged. Both view political parties as the primary political agents for structuring and channeling deep social conflicts into a form of relatively peaceful political competition. Both recognize that, in a representative system, the need to win a majority compels party elites to broaden their appeal beyond a particular class in the pursuit of political rule (Sprague and Przeworski 1986). Both also acknowledges that, in the absence of sufficient popular support, imposing a particular form of organization upon society without building consent would lead to instability or catastrophe (Gramsci 1971[1933-34], 235; Antonini 2020; Femia 1981, 51; Przeworski 1991; Sprague and Przeworski 1986).

However, whereas Przeworski emphasizes how conflicts of interest and worldviews require electoral mechanisms to constrain the strategic decisions of party elites, Gramsci thinks this diverse conflictual terrain presupposes the party's 'ethico-political' or 'peaceful-consensual'

function. In Gramsci's view, societies are divided by conflicts that are not only class-related but also culture, linguistic, and centered around competing worldviews. These divisions do not automatically translate into clear political choices. Parties therefore play a crucial role in channeling these conflicts into coherent political programs – that is, rival ways of interpreting social problems and proposing solutions. Democratic competition, on this Gramscian account, is not only about who gets the most votes, but about which party succeeds in presenting its vision as reasonable, legitimate, and broadly acceptable to society. Parties thus channel social divisions into democratic competition by turning diffuse grievances and conflicts into structured political alternatives that citizens can meaningfully choose between.

For Gramsci, then, parties are much more than office-seeking organizations, as Przeworski's minimalist model maintains. Rather, parties are the central institutions through which rival social groups develop themselves politically and compete to secure widespread consent for the socioeconomic and moral order they seek to establish (Femia 1981, 37; Buci-Glucksmann 1982; Morera 1990b). As Buci-Glucksmann (1982) argues "Hegemony is not force…it is not imposed: it is conquered through a specific and intellectual and moral dimension" (120). Parties are the vehicles through which citizens coalesce in response to the socio-political order and either justify its preservation or its transformation. As Morera (1990b) puts it, "Hegemony, then, is not spontaneous, but 'organized consensus' which signifies a determined system of moral, economic, and political life – a conception of national life (166).

A central claim of Gramsci's theory of hegemony identifies the absence of deep societal consensus as the source of regime instability. Where such consent is lacking, political rule becomes inherently unstable and incredibly depends on violence and coercion as its principal mechanism of social regulation and control. For Gramsci, the optimal condition for a ruling

group – and the factor that ultimately establishes democratic equilibrium between ruling and subordinate groups – is one in which it governs with the consent of subordinate classes by presenting its particular interests as having a "universal" character (Gramsci 1971[1933], 182).

Whereas for Przeworski, partisan alternation in office is the core mechanism for achieving a democratic equilibrium, for Gramsci, it is the political party's ability to continuously mediate between state and society. The decisive factor of democratic stability is responsiveness, not elite turnover. Without this state-society linkage, he argues, "conflicts between the represented and the representatives…on the terrain of the parties (party organizations in the narrow sense, the electoral-parliamentary field…have repercussions throughout the state organism" and precipitate a "crisis of authority" (Gramsci 1971[1932-34], 210). For Gramsci, the viability and stability of a political order are strengthened the more a party obtains consent without resorting to force, specifically by making concessions and coordinating its interests with those over whom it exercises hegemony.

Moreover, Gramsci argues that the struggle to win hegemonic leadership in civil society must precede the political struggle to win power in office. As he puts it, "a social group can and indeed must already exercise leadership [hegemony] before winning governmental power", as this moral and intellectual authority is the "principal condition for the winning of such power". Even after the group "becomes dominant" and "holds [this power] firmly in its grasp" its political survival depends on its ability to "continue to 'lead' as well" – maintaining the social consent that prevents the political order from decaying into a fragile system of mere coercion (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 57-58).

Since, for Gramsci, maintaining governing power depends more on securing societal consent than on coercion or "direct domination" through control over the state's military, economic, and

juridical power, political competition cannot be reduced to a struggle for monopoly control over "the apparatus of state coercive power" (Gramsci 1971[1933], 12). Rather, it is structured by parties' competing national policy visions and their efforts to persuade citizens that the socio-political order they advance constitutes a legitimate expression of the collective will. The struggle for hegemony secures civil peace by replacing the threat of force with consensual methods, such as rational-intellectual persuasion and the formation of broad class alliances, as the main means through which a particular party or group obtains consensus and prestige over their rivals. Put simply, a party's ability to win the argument among most people, that its vision is the way society should be run, is more decisive than its ability to make people obey through repression alone.

As Femia (1981) points out, societal consensus in Gramsci's thought is most durable when it is "deep" (42). That is, social consensus acquires its stabilizing function when it takes the form not of passive acceptance to a particular order but of active commitment grounded in the deeply held belief that the superior position of the ruling group is legitimate. This active commitment is, partly, a "psychological state" that involves an "acceptance" of the "vital aspects" the socio-political order (Femia 1981, 37). At the same time, consensus is not simply ideological in the narrow sense of attachment to abstract doctrines or moral principles, nor does Gramsci hold that ethical–cultural factors determine political outcomes in the last instance, as Bobbio has (1979) suggested. Rather, he argues that,

> the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 12)

Hegemony, for Gramsci, depends on a party's capacity to address citizens' concrete socioeconomic concerns. Yet such prestige does not reproduce itself automatically. Those who

consent must be genuinely convinced that the dominant group advances a sociopolitical order that justly considers their interests. As Gramsci (1971 [1933]) puts it,

> the fact of hegemony undoubtedly presupposes that account be taken of the interests of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised…[and] that the leading group make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind…for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity. (161)

Since hegemony depends on a party's capacity to address both ethical-political and socioeconomic problems, the continuation of political power rests on the leading group's ability to respond to a wide range of issues emerging within civil society. Many of these issues are related, though not always directly to the class structure, such as the development of culture and education (Morera 1990b, 167). Paraphrasing Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* (1844), he argues that "it is on the level of ideologies that men become conscious of conflicts in the world of the economy" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 164). By this, he means that citizens' spontaneous consent or dissent initially registers at the level of their material interests but only acquires ethical-political meaning through political organization and moral-intellectual elaboration.

For Gramsci (1971 [1933]), the political party is the central institution capable of mediating between the "the popular element" which "feels but does not always know or understand" and the "intellectual element" which "knows but does not always understand and in particular does not feel" (418). He suggests that real representation is only possible when a party bridges this gap by grounding its specialized knowledge in the lived experience through a "sentimental connection" with the people: As he argues, the "error of the intellectual" lies in the belief that leadership can function while remaining:

> distinct and separate from the people-nation, that is, without feeling the elementary passions of the people, understanding them and therefore explaining and justifying them in the particular historical situation and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world, scientifically and coherently elaborated – i.e. Knowledge. One cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this

> sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 418)

Through this "organic" linkage between leaders and led, citizens come to understand their grievances in ways that transcend narrow and immediate "economic-corporate" interests, transforming them into more universal political claims. This process of intellectual mediation fosters reciprocal development: elites become more attentive to the public's substantive concerns, while citizens gain a clearer grasp of how their struggles connect to a coherent political project. As a result, political authority is grounded in active consent rather than mere compliance, reducing arbitrariness and limiting the risk of domination by privileged minorities. It is precisely this process of intellectual mediation as a mechanism for constraining elites that is absent from minimalist realist accounts which focus exclusively on the mechanism of competitive alternation (Przeworski 2010; Shapiro 2016, 64).

Gramsci did not fully elaborate the systemic implications of his political theory, as he placed greater emphasis on the mediating role of intellectuals and civil society than on elections as mechanisms of political change. Nevertheless, his competitive vision of parties as central agents in the struggle for hegemony can be shown to function as a relatively peaceful and stable form of democratic competition that enables citizens to make meaningful and socially responsive electoral choices. In this account, the competition between parties is structured by the respective capacities of political leaders to respond to the preferences, demands, and inequalities generated by the cultural, educational, socio-economic and political organization of society. In order to do so, leaders must demonstrate, through concrete compromises and concessions, that the order they advance is not merely advantageous to their own narrow group interest. The success of political parties at winning the hegemonic struggle therefore depends on being better than the competition

at convincing the citizenry that the socio-political order it stands for constitutes an acceptable and legitimate expression of the national-popular collective will.

For realists, since Machiavelli, effective political rule is sufficiently achieved when only elites are able to create the appearance of embodying the collective will better than its competitors. But for Gramsci, any hegemonic agent that portrays itself as representing the national will must actually possess the interests and values of that will. As Gramsci (1971 [1933]) writes, although "the State is seen as the organ of one particular group, destined to create favorable conditions for the latter's maximum expansion", the development of that group must be "conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the 'national' energies" (182). This expansion requires that "the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups", such that political ruling takes the form of "a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 182).

Gramsci thus makes responsive partisan governance, rather than competitive elections, the core mechanism of achieving democratic equilibrium. This marks a fundamental difference between his account and the way Przeworski and minimalist realists, since Schumpeter, understand institutionalized party competition as a mechanism of stabilizing democracy. For Przeworski and minimalists more generally, the party's ongoing responsiveness to the views and interests of its social base is not a decisive factor in achieving democratic equilibrium. Electoral replacement functions as the primary causal mechanism of democracy's survival and continuation, namely by institutionalizing uncertainty and lowering the stakes of elections, so that no party can permanently maintain its dominance over society. This is where Shapiro

departs from Przeworski's focus on peaceful turnover and comes a bit closer to – though stopping short of – the Gramscian model.

Shapiro emphasizes how the competitive struggle for the people's vote can incentivize elites to remain accountable to majority interests. Here, Gramsci's theory of hegemonic struggle converges partially with Shapiro's account. Both Gramsci and Shapiro agree that party elites cannot govern effectively or stably if they ignore the wider public. In different ways, each sees public opinion and majority interests as placing real limits on what parties and politicians can do before and after an election. However, they differ fundamentally on the source of this elite discipline. While Shapiro emphasizes the procedural electoral rules and incentives generated by institutionalized opposition to keep elites in check, Gramsci grounds elite accountability in the citizenry's active and informed participation. For Gramsci, the argument must be won through constant mediation in civil society, whereas for Shapiro, the threat of replacement at the ballot box by a competitive, well-organized loyal opposition party is the primary causal mechanism for avoiding minority domination.

b. Shapiro's Two-Party Elite Model: Constraining Domination Through Majoritarian Competition for the Vote

Shapiro's minimalist realist vision of party democracy begins with Schumpeter's analogy between political parties and firms and a rejection of the conventional view of representation as a principal-agent relationship. In that conventional model, the voter is the principal and the legislator is the agent who makes decisions on the voters' behalf. For Shapiro, this view is misguided because it assumes leaders act out of a sense of delegated duty, while ignoring the actual incentives generated by political competition that ultimately drive politicians and parties'

responsiveness to voters. Just as firms respond to consumers because the incentive to increase profits compels them to outperform the competition, political parties and politicians are incentivized to respond to voters' preferences because their success at winning votes and seats depends on supplying what voters want better than their rivals. As Shapiro (2016) puts it, parties "are interested in their own success, but the way to achieve it is to be more responsive to voters than is the opponent. This is what ties their disciplining of one another to serving the interests of voters" (82).

Like Przeworski, Shapiro views parties as primarily motivated by the self-interested pursuit of power in office. He adds, however, that competitive elections channel this self-interest in a moderating direction, encouraging parties to adopt policies that appeal to the median voter and can plausibly be viewed as serving the public interest. Moreover, unlike Przeworski, Shapiro's goal is not the minimization of violence, but the realization of the normative ideal of non-domination. From Shapiro's realist perspective, non-domination is not grounded in the principle of equal political freedom or in the ideal of popular self-rule. Rather, it draws on a realist tradition – stretching from Machiavelli through Gramsci to contemporary neo-republican theory – that begins from the premise that politics inevitably involves struggles for power and domination, and that no social group willingly accepts being dominated.

On this realist view, individuals rationally seek leaders, strategies, and institutional arrangements that enable them to resist arbitrary power and limit their domination. Non-domination is therefore a negative ideal in Shapiro's minimalist framework: the most we can hope to do in a world of competing interests and struggles for power is to put up effective procedural constraints on domination. As a minimalist realist, he does not think democracy's purpose is not to eliminate the impulse to rule, but to create a system that ensures a constant,

legitimate opposition. Institutionalized opposition, in his view, is sufficient to prevent any single group's aspiration for monopoly power since it ensures governments of the day can be regularly replaced through competitive elections.

Shapiro argues that Schumpeter's vision of competitive electoral democracy provides the most effective model for safeguarding democracy from domination. Competitive elections mutually discipline party elites by tying their pursuit of political power to their ability to represent and deliver on the majority electorate's interests more effectively than their opponents. Democracy minimizes domination when institutionalized opposition is structured so that elites are incentives to offer platforms that appeal to the median voter rather than to narrow intense minority interests (Shapiro 2016; 2017; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018) translate this Schumpeterian competitive-electoral logic into a specific institutional proposal, arguing that a majority rule two-party system is normatively superior to multi-party proportional systems because it minimizes minority domination more effectively.

In a system where two parties with strong elite leadership compete for the people's vote, appealing to narrow interest groups carries significant risks, since a better-organized opponent can prevail by making a more credible claim to represent the majority. As Rosenbluth and Shapiro argue (2018), "focusing on good public policy leads us to advocate for electoral rules that produce two disciplined political parties…capable of competing for broad public support on deliverable and responsible party platforms" (4). The British Westminster system, they propose, comes closest to approximating the Schumpeterian ideal because political power is concentrated in a single chamber where a majority party governs temporarily (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018, 5). Meanwhile, a "loyal opposition" party functions as a government-in-waiting by monitoring

and criticizing the incumbent's legislative program on the public's behalf (Shapiro 2016; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018, 34).

Crucially, Shapiro's competitive two-party model requires that political parties are elite-controlled. He argues that, for parties to compete over broad policy goals, they must maintain strong internal hierarchies that exclude the membership base from candidate selection or policy agenda formation (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). As Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018) starkly put it, "Healthy democracy depends on parties being strong as well as being big. Otherwise, they compete in the wrong ways among the wrong groups over the wrong things" (13). By design, the Westminster model restricts the role of popular participation to the periodic exercise of the vote. Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018, 21) contend that efforts to expand grassroots influence in the party, through primaries, membership ballots, local caucuses, and referendums, actually obstruct effective party leadership and the institutional link between mutual elite discipline and voter accountability, creating only the illusion of popular control. Consequently, the party's role is reduced to presenting rival programs formulated entirely by elites, while voters merely decide between them. The aim of the party is not to educate citizens on how its policy goals relate to their specific interests or collective aspirations, but simply to persuade them that one elite-formulated argument is superior to the other.

The central issue with Shapiro's competitive two-party model is that it rests on a rigid division between competitive elites and a largely passive electorate. Following Gramsci's insights, this division is itself a major source of democratic crisis and the declining function and legitimacy of political parties. When citizens are excluded from meaningful participation in the formation of political programs, they are less likely to recognize public policies as expressions of their own collective will. Over time, this weakens trust in parties and fuels the perception that

political decisions are imposed from above rather than generated through the cultivation of active consent. In this way, the very structure of competition for the majority designed to discipline elites and prevent domination risks reproducing the conditions of popular alienation, distrust, and disaffection that underlie the contemporary crisis of party democracy.

Gramsci agrees with Shapiro on a critical point: politics is a never-ending competition between rival political forces seeking to win majority support. For Gramsci, there is no final consensus and no moment at which society becomes unified around a single vision of the state. Rather, he argues that in every state "there is a struggle between two hegemonies, always" (Gramsci 1975 [1931–1932], 1084). Like Shapiro, then, Gramsci views majority rule as a provisional and contingent achievement, dependent on a party's capacity to better justify to the electorate the superiority of its position relative to its rival. However, unlike Shapiro, Gramsci argues that securing a majority depends less on the formal competition between elites for the vote and more on directly addressing the interests and concerns of civil society through active popular participation in the party.

Where Gramsci departs from Shapiro is on the core mechanism through which elites are held accountable to the majority and thus how minority domination is constrained. For Shapiro, domination is checked by institutionalized opposition in the form of formally recognized "loyal" opposition parties. In this view, governing elites enjoy a power monopoly but are perpetually constrained by other elites seeking to replace them (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). For Gramsci, by contrast, formal competition between elites is insufficient to minimize domination unless it is subjected to continuous popular control – what he calls "government with permanently organized consent" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 175). As he argued in his reflections on post-Risorgimento Italian parliamentary politics, where a clear separation existed between the state and a "shapeless

and chaotic" civil society, it became possible for the state to dominate it through the arbitrary force of elites (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 214).

From a Gramscian standpoint, political parties are constrained not only by rival elites but, more fundamentally, by their dependence on consent in civil society – the level where hegemony is won and where policy programs must be continuously justified scientifically. Gramsci's conception of the party-state assigns parties a more robust educative leadership role in society than that envisioned in Shapiro's Westminster two-party model. Strong and effective party leadership, on Gramsci's account, presupposes not a passive electorate and elites competing over broad policies defined by them, but an increasingly informed and politically engaged citizenry. The party fulfills this role by maintaining a close relationship with its social base, enabling a reciprocal process of mediation between the "popular element", which experiences social realities immediately and affectively, and the "intellectual element", which systematizes, interprets, and gives political direction to those experiences (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 418). In this capacity, the party does not merely reflect elite-defined policy goals but actively works to transform the fragmented and often "contradictory consciousness" of the citizenry into a more coherent "good sense" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 328; Karabel 1976).

When this dialectical relationship between the leaders and the led is severed, Gramsci warns of two pathological extremes that threatens the stability and legitimacy of the regime. On the one hand, when the citizenry loses confidence in the dominant group and lacks a party capable of providing intellectual guidance or effective institutional channels, popular grievances give way to "blind passion", partisanship turns to "sectarianism" and mass political energies are readily captured by demagogic forces (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 418) On the other hand, when parties remain "distinct and separate from the people-nation", unable to feel the elementary

passions of the people" or to "justify them within the historical situation", political expertise may be technically correct yet it remains historically ineffective because it remains detached from what voters actually want (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 418).

In the absence of this intellectual–popular nexus, moral and intellectual leadership inevitably gives way to intellectual command imposed from above, accompanied by a crisis of authority from below. Even where parliamentary institutions and electoral procedures continue to formally function, the erosion of organic mediation between party and society threatens to hollow out party democracy and reintroduce precisely the forms of arbitrary domination that Shapiro's competitive model seeks to avert. By contrast, when citizens are actively integrated into the internal life of the party, the party's national program ceases to appear as an external imposition but a more elaborated articulation of the people's own collective interests and aspirations.

In the context of the contemporary crisis of party democracy, minimalist realism's emphasis on electoral rules and procedures as sufficient constraints on party behavior appears increasingly limited. Mounting empirical evidence points to declining public trust in elections across advanced industrial democracies. As Beizen and Saward (2008) observe, the paradox of the current crisis lies in the fact that "the widespread perception that parties are procedurally necessary for the effective functioning of democracy does not translate into their being widely supported or respected" (21). Parties are often publicly perceived as both indispensable and deeply corrupt.

Moreover, while parties and party leaders function as "democracy's gatekeepers" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 23), they are also frequently the primary agents causing the erosion of democratic norms and procedures. As many scholars observe, contemporary democratic

backsliding rarely takes the form of violent coups, but rather proceeds through coercive tactics like electoral aggrandizement, strategic electoral manipulation and harassment (Bermeo 2016) that undermine the peaceful and regular transfer of power. Elections alone, seem to be insufficient mechanisms for ensuring healthy competition between parties and party leaders on the one hand, and for fostering good historically-rational reasons for the public to trust parties on the other.

Although strong and responsible party leadership remains necessary for a healthy democracy, as Shapiro and Rosenbluth rightly argue, Gramsci's insight that a stable social and political order depends on the party's capacity to secure the active consent of the citizenry offers a way to address the current contradiction between the necessity of parties and their representative inadequacy. Party scholars and theorists have long emphasized the intermediary function of parties as essential for mediating conflict and fostering public trust in parties as democratic institutions (Wolkenstein 2020; Urbinati 2025; Urbinati 2019b; Sartori 1976; Kirchheimer 1967). Contemporary Kelsenians, following Kelsen's original defense of parties in playing a key role in ensuring equal political freedom, similarly highlight this mediating role as central to revitalizing the party's normative function in advanced democracies (Saffon and Urbinati 2025). However, whereas Kelsenians confine political parties to their procedural role of mediating conflict and securing voluntary participation, Gramsci argues that long-term citizen trust in party-based democracy depends on the party's capacity to address real social problems that hinder citizens' effective political participation.

Kelsen's Defense of Parliamentary Democracy

Approximating Popular Rule: Gramsci and Kelsen in Dialogue

Kelsen and Gramsci formulated their respective theories of party democracy in response to the early twentieth century crisis of parliamentarism and the consequent rise of anti-partyism and monoparty dictatorship. Despite their sharply divergent ideological convictions – Kelsen was a left-leaning liberal who resolutely defended parliamentarism and opposed socialism, and Gramsci was a Marxist critic of parliamentarism and co-founder of the first Communist Party of Italy who was committed to the so-called 'democratic road to socialism' – both thinkers arrived, strikingly, at the same conclusion of the vital role of parties in democracy. This stance was particularly significant given the prevailing intellectual and popular support for anti-partyism at the time, exemplified above all by Carl Schmitt and the ideologues of Italian Fascism, who denounced parties as undermining the unity and sovereignty of the State. Against these currents, both Kelsen and Gramsci began their respective defense of the party and of partisanship by addressing the basic question of how, in conditions of deep social and political division and conflict, popular sovereignty can be realized if "the People" does not exist as a unified ruling group.

A common theme in the political writings of both Kelsen and Gramsci is the rejection of any a priori homogenized conception of the People, and the argument, instead, that the popular will comes into being only through the mediating work of political parties. From this common ground, however, Kelsen and Gramsci advance two institutional proposals that appear, at first glance, fundamentally opposed. Kelsen defends the parliamentary form of democracy – the multiparty state – as the most appropriate means of approximating the ideal of popular rule by making 'the will of society' the product of a compromise between rival parties formed within the boundaries of the legislative assembly. Gramsci, by contrast, defends the modern Prince – the New Mass Party – as the best institution for realizing 'the national-popular will' in conditions of

conflictual pluralism by making it a product of party mediation in civil society, outside the parliamentary arena. These contrasting institutional proposals articulate two distinct theories of how parties should mediate political conflict in ways that can achieve democracy's core value of equal political freedom. As the following analysis shows, however, these positions are less antithetical than they might initially appear and can instead be read as offering mutually complementary accounts of the party's democratic functions under conditions of conflict, pluralism, and social inequality.

The core debate between Kelsen and Gramsci concerns whether the People can be constructed as a socio-political unity by a single party in the context of modern societies, which are characterized by conflicts of interest at the level of material interests, private associations, and worldviews. That both Kelsen and Gramsci saw the party as a necessary feature of real democracy because of this conflictual pluralism is not the issue. Indeed, both thinkers acknowledge pluralism as a sociological fact. Kelsen's (2013 [1929], 40) crystal clear statement that "conflicts of interest are an experiential and, here, unavoidable fact" is as empirically grounded and non-idealist as Gramsci's (1971 [1933]) observation that "it always happens that individuals belong to more than one private association, and often to associations which are objectively in contradiction to one another" (265). Rather, it is their disagreement on the question of how, if at all, the People can really be united given its irreducible plurality that shapes their distinct theories of the political party's necessity in real democracies. For both, the party plays a necessary role in translating the democratic ideal of freedom into a practical reality, understood as equal participation in government. But they differ on how the party should perform this function and what institutional form this 'real democracy' should take.

In Kelsen (1929) begins to theorize the necessity of parties and defend parliamentarism precisely by rejecting the socio-political unity of the People (Baum and Ragazzoni 2025). He insists instead that the unity of the people can only really exist as an artificial juridical entity, defined as the set of individuals to whom the legal order is supposed to apply (Urbinati 2013). In Kelsen's view, the People is devoid of any substantive content: it is not determined by common material interests nor a national history but rather constitutes the formal totality of individuals subject to the law.

Kelsen's strictly formal-procedural definition of partisanship follows directly from his rejection of any substantive socio-political unity of the People. Since popular unity can only exist as a juridical construct, he defines political parties as "voluntary associations of like-minded individuals" and defends partisanship as a necessary feature of real democracies on this basis. If the People has no common will but is a collection of conflicting values and interests, the "division of the People into political parties" is the only legitimate way to organizationally express this plurality (Kelsen [1929], 45). For Kelsen, parties are by definition partial associations: "communities of interest" that give institutional expression to the multiplicity of conflicting views and interests in modern society and enable individuals to define their political affiliations through the mechanism of freely chosen membership. As he argues:

> The division of the People into political parties is an unavoidable development in all democracies. In fact, since the 'People' does not actually exist as a viable political force prior to its organization into parties, it is more accurate to state that the development of democracy permits the integration of isolated individuals into political parties and, hence, first unleashes social forces that can be reasonably referred to as the 'People'. (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 40)

On this basis, Kelsen counterposes partisanship to any group that claims to embody the real common interest. Such claims, he argues, confuses the ideal of popular rule with social and political reality:

> At best, depicting the state as a tool for the common interests of a unified community confuses the ought with the is, the ideal with reality…the ideal notion of a common interest, which stands above and apart from group interests and, hence, 'above partisanship' [*überparteilich*], proves to be a metaphysical – or, better, meta-political – illusion. (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 40)

Since, for Kelsen, no real common interest can exist beyond the formal unity established by law, any attempt by a single political party to construct an organic unity among society's conflicting parts is an expression of anti-partisanship: a mask for monoparty dictatorship. In his view, such "meta-political illusions" of organic organization of the People are a threat to the political self-determination of a free people, which can only be realized through the formal democratic mechanisms of the multiparty state – i.e., parliamentarism. As he continues:

> This illusory idea of a solidarity of interests among all of society's parts – free from religious, ethnic, economic, and other differences – is commonly expressed in terms of an 'organic' or 'organically' arranged community, which is then contrasted with the so-called multiparty state and with mechanical democracy. (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 40)

Even if Kelsen directed this critical analysis most explicitly at the left-wing (Bolshevism) and right-wing (Carl Schmitt and Heinrich Triepel) anti-parliamentarians of his era (Baum and Ragazzoni 2025), his theorization of multiparty democracy more generally rejects the very kind of new mass party that Gramsci sought to establish in order to forge an organic unity between the working class and the general population in Italy. As he warns, any party that seeks to secure the predominance of a single social group by presenting its particular interests as the organic interest of society as a whole amount to an attempt at a single party dictatorship, undermining the existence of a multiparty democracy:

> Consciously or not, a position, which opposes the formation of parties and so ultimately democracy itself, aids political forces that aim to achieve the sole domination of a single group's interest. To the extent that this interest is unwilling to tolerate opposition, it seeks to disguise itself ideologically as the 'organic,' 'true,' or 'apparent' interest of all. In a democratic multiparty state, however, where the will of society emerges from competing parties, there is no need for the fiction of an 'organic' common will. (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 40)

However, Kelsen's defense of parties rests on a false binary between multiparty democracy and the mass party as a vehicle for building substantive solidarity among the people. This binary is predicated on a reductive mechanical view of the party as strictly a voluntary association of individual wills, and of the People as only a juridical unity without any common interests or goals around which a party could unite them. By hollowing out the People into a formal legal category and denying its potential for a common will, Kelsen forecloses the possibility that a party might construct a genuinely bottom-up solidarity across society's conflicting groups. As a result, his framework can interpret the Gramscian party only as a 'meta-political illusion', failing to recognize a model in which the party builds organic popular unity not by suppressing opposition but by overcoming material subordination and social fragmentation. In this alternative conception, political participation becomes an historically concrete and effective practice rather than merely a political right exercised through parliamentary representation and the vote.

Even though he was isolated from the debates that gave rise to Kelsen's defense of parliamentary democracy in 1929, Gramsci's theorization of the new mass party during his imprisonment from 1926–1937 contains an implicit critique of and alternative to Kelsen's parliamentarism, though not an outright rejection of it. This alternative centers on Gramsci's distinctive conception of how the socio-political unity of the People comes into being, which he argues occurs through social and political struggle rather than in its absence. For Gramsci, the People is neither a merely formal-juridical entity created by citizens' submission to the law, as in Kelsen's theory, nor a mythological homogeneous unity as in fascist ideology. Instead, he conceives of the People as a developing historical entity whose 'oneness' is not fixed a priori but

is progressively actualized through the practical and organizational activity of individuals and groups with differing interests and aims.

For Gramsci (1975b [1932–1934]), the basis of this popular unity cannot be found in "abstract, fixed, and immutable 'human nature'" which he argues "does not exist" (1599). Rather, he defines human nature as "the ensemble of historically determined social relations" (Gramsci 1975b [1932-34], 1599). From this historicist conception of the People, he argues:

> The oneness of mankind does not lie in the 'biological' nature of man; the human differences which count in history are not biological ones…Not even the faculty of 'reasoning' or the 'mind' has created oneness, nor can it be recognized as a unifying fact, because it is only a formal categorial concept. It is not 'thinking' but what one really thinks which unifies or differentiates men. (Gramsci 1975a [1930–1932], 884)

Gramsci suggests that grounding popular unity in the content of thought – what people actually think – prevents the erasure of differences through abstract appeals to unity. In his conception, popular unity emerges from conflict between individuals and groups with concretely divergent views that can nevertheless be coherently organized. He bases this possibility on the 'fact' that, despite their differences, people share a common history from which there is rational grounds for their potential unity. As he further argues:

> That human nature is the complex of social relations is the most satisfactory answer, because it includes the idea of becoming: the human being becomes, and continually changes as social relations change, and because it denies the existence of 'man in general'. Indeed, social relations are expressed through different groups of people who presuppose one another, whose unity is dialectical rather than formal…One may also say that the nature of man is 'history'…if history is given the precise meaning of 'becoming' within a *concordia discors* that does not begin from oneness but contains within itself the reasons for a possible oneness. (Gramsci 1975a [1930-1932], 885)

Thus, for Gramsci, an organic common will is not a fictional unity that stands above the multiplicity of conflicting elements in society, but rather a concrete unity forged within the everyday discords of social and political life. This *concordia discors*, or discordant harmony, implies that the People are never perfectly unified, as in the Schmittian vision of democracy, nor

is their social, cultural, and political unity coercively imposed from above, as in fascism's corporate state. Instead, for Gramsci, the People is unified through a continuous process establishing an equilibrium between opposing forces – a general or "national-popular" will forged through political action within an open, pluralistic field of persistent struggle among differing and often antagonistic groups. Because this 'oneness' is an ongoing historical achievement rather than a fixed condition, Gramsci (1975b [1932–1934]) concludes that politics and "political science must be conceived in its concrete content (and also in its logical formulation) as a developing organism" (1599).

Gramsci's conception of the political party as a vehicle for organically developing the Popular Will stands in sharp contrast to Kelsen's proceduralist vision. There is no deep solidarity of interests and values among empirical citizens, in the Kelsenian proceduralism. As Invernizzi-Accetti and Oskian (2022) put it, "The popular will is - defined – in a necessarily fallible and approximate - way – through the process of political representation established by legally instituted procedures" (5). Since Kelsen rejects organic popular unity as a fiction, he maintains that the will of the People can only be approximated through the mechanism of compromise between partisan interests forged in Parliament. Political parties themselves are not vehicles for forging the popular will, they are merely a mechanism of voluntary association through which a group of individuals who share the same interest or opinion integrate themselves to secure political influence (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 38). The primary function of political parties, for Kelsen, is to aggregate these individual preferences so as to enable ordinary citizens to influence political decisions indirectly through their representation in parliament. The common will is thus realized procedurally, through multiparty competition and compromise capable of satisfying at least a majority of those represented.

For Gramsci, by contrast, the People is not merely a formal legal category but a living, sociological reality which must be understood in "an historicist fashion" by "placing 'the will'" at the basis of its political activity. However, he adds, "this will must be a rational, not an arbitrary will, which is realized in so far as it corresponds to objective historical necessities" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 439). Since political unity must therefore correspond to historically grounded social needs and material conditions, it cannot be reduced to the mere ideological convictions of a few leaders. As Gramsci argues,

> It is evident that this kind of mass creation cannot just happen 'arbitrarily', around any ideology, simply because of the formally constructive will of a personality or a group which puts it forward solely on the basis of its own fanatical philosophical convictions. Mass adhesion or non-adhesion to an ideology is the real critical test of the rationality and historicity of modes of thinking. Any arbitrary constructions are pretty rapidly eliminated by historical competition, even if sometimes, through a combination of immediately favourable circumstances, they manage to enjoy popularity of a kind; whereas constructions which respond to the demands of a complex organic period of history always impose themselves and prevail in the end, even though they may pass through several intermediary phases during which they manage to affirm themselves only in more or less bizarre and heterogeneous combinations. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 341)

On this basis, Gramsci posits the mass party as the primary mechanism through which such rational popular will can be concretely formed under conditions of pluralism and conflict. Precisely because of its rational-organizational function, the party is not reducible to a voluntary association representing pre-existing group interests. Instead, the party is better understood as a vehicle through which a fragmented multitude is transformed into a new collective will, whose members become conscious of the historical significance of their political participation and of their equal role in influencing political decisions.

The party's drive for national unity is not, however, inherently autocratic. Its democratic character depends on whether it succeeds in "ensur[ing] that [its] members…find in that party all the satisfactions that they formerly found in a multiplicity of organizations" (Gramsci 1971 [1930–1932], 265). Gramsci accordingly distinguishes between a progressive-democratic mass

party, as exemplified by the PCd'I, which acts as the "bearer of a new culture", and a "regressive and reactionary" mass party, exemplified by Mussolini's National Fascist Party, which seeks "to destroy all other organizations or to incorporate them into a system of which the party is the sole regulator" in order to prevent any alternative collective force from becoming the ruling group in turn (Gramsci 1971 [1930–1932], 265). This distinction challenges Kelsen's false binary between multiparty democracy and a mass party that pursues a project of general solidarity among society's conflicting parts.

Since, in Kelsen's account, the idea of a unified people as the sociological basis of democracy is a metaphysical abstraction, he rejects the possibility of a party capable of organizing the people around a new ethical-political and material collective will. Instead, he defends parliamentarism and compromise among competing partisan interests as the sole mechanism for channeling social conflict peacefully and forming a majority will, while preserving the formal equality of minority groups. It is precisely at this point that the Gramscian mass party appears as a more robust approximation of the "real" will of the People under conditions of conflictual pluralism and inequality, insofar as it seeks to involve the broadest possible sectors of society in the direct and participatory formation of a new collective will.

Conflict, Pluralism, and Equal Political Freedom: The Party's Mediating Function Reconsidered

Gramsci's core conception of a hegemonic party, capable not only of governing in its own interest but of leading society as a whole, has often been regarded as antithetical to a parliamentary and pluralist democracy that tolerates disagreement and preserves the freedom of diverse social groups (Bobbio 1977; 1976a; 1976b; Salvadori 1977; 2007; Galli della Loggia

1977; Buzzi 1973; Garosci 1954). However, like Marx before him, Gramsci does not assume, as classical utopian theories of representative government did, that society is characterized by a natural harmony of interests that can simply be identified and implemented by party leaders, as if political truth were context-transcendent and commanded universal agreement. Such an assumption, as both Schumpeterian and Kelsenian proceduralists rightly argue, risks transforming legitimate political authority into a form of doctrinal imposition that denies citizens with divergent interests and views the freedom to dissent and rule in turn.

Instead, Gramsci conceives the political party as an institution that builds, rather than simply imposes, consensus under conditions of deep social and political division. This hegemonic process culminates in the constitution of a "new historical bloc suited to the specific historical moment. Thus, the Gramscian party is not simply a ruling group that imposes the will of some in turn, as in Schumpeter's model, or an electoral majority constructed through multi-partisan compromise, as in Kelsen's. Rather, it is a governing partisan will generated through an alliance, most importantly between the minority and majority groups, that enables it to exercise leadership over society with minimal reliance on coercion.

In this respect, Gramsci shares more with classical theories of representative government than with Kelsen's and Schumpeter's procedural accounts in viewing one of the central roles of representative institutions as the search for political truth. However, he insists that the rational basis of collective decisions cannot simply be discovered within the social order, which is based on a division of labor and is, accordingly, rife with conflicting interests and values. Rather, for Gramsci (1975b [1933]), a collective political organism exists only insofar as all of the members of movement actively and directly participate in the formation of the program they are expected to follow and implement, even if this process "creates an appearance of tumult and

disintegration" (1771). He illustrates this participatory dialectic process of conflict and consensus through the analogies of a living organism and an orchestra in rehearsal, emphasizing that coordinated collective political action arises from conflictual participation rather than passive conformity, that is, "only after multiplicity has been unified through the friction of individual atoms" (Gramsci 1975 [1933], 1771). This dialectical unity of conflict and consent lies at the core of Gramsci's understanding of the modern Prince as the institutional form through which a national-popular collective will is constructed and through which democracy as collective self-government becomes a practical reality.

Kelsen, by contrast, is one of the first theorists to systematically oppose the consensual function of the party as antithetical to democracy's core principle of equal freedom, arguing that it obfuscates important conflicts of values and interests and therefore risks imposing unanimity on unwilling subjects. Instead, Kelsen (2013 [1929], 48–49) defends parliamentarism by defining it as "government by a collegial organ elected by the people based on universal, equal suffrage" and insisting that "the will of the State generated by the Parliament is not the will of the people". Thus, Kelsen's defense of parliamentarism is formulated in sharp contradistinction to the Gramscian hegemonic party, which aims to rule in a way that makes everyone better off. As he argues: "if the will of society is not to be the expression of the interests of one group alone, that will must be the result of a compromise between opposing interests. The division of the People into political parties, in truth, establishes the organizational preconditions for the achievement of such compromises and the possibility of steering the will of society in a moderate direction" (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 40).

Despite the apparent antithesis between Kelsenian parliamentarism and Gramsci's conception of the hegemonic party (Bobbio 1977; 1976a; 1976b), both Kelsen and Gramsci

theorize the party's mediating function as a means of enabling a productive relationship between conflict, pluralism, and equal freedom. Their core disagreement lies not in whether parties should process conflict in freedom-preserving ways, but in where this mediation primarily occurs, through which democratic procedures, and toward what ends. For Kelsen, social conflict is mediated through partisan compromise within parliament. For Gramsci, by contrast, it is mediated through hegemonic organization within a mass party embedded in civil society.

As this analysis shows, contrary to recurrent accusations of party totalitarianism, Gramsci's mass party is a political form through which social conflicts are mediated peacefully in ways that generate a legal, social, and political order that secures equal freedom while remaining compatible with parliamentary democracy. Through this democratic reading, it is possible to move beyond the assumption, resonant in Kelsenian proceduralism, that a party seeking to overcome class divisions by constructing popular political unity must necessarily do so in an authoritarian, rather than democratic, manner (Kelsen 1929, 84). Instead, Kelsen's parliamentarism and Gramsci's hegemonic party can be understood as two distinct, yet mutually compatible, freedom-preserving and freedom-enabling mechanisms for processing conflict in ways that balance majority rule with minority rights and democratic pluralism. Viewed in this light, the adequacy of their respective proposals can be better evaluated for contemporary debates on the normative, institutional, and social functions of political parties in democracy.

The Kelsenian party and Gramscian party represent two distinct solutions to democracy's persistent puzzle of how representative institutions can preserve equal freedom in conflictual societies where not everyone can rule at once. As Przeworski formulates this problem, if no government can represent everyone, how can everyone nevertheless be represented? "The question", he points out, "concerns the mechanisms that can generate outcomes that would be

tolerated by all the relevant conflicting political forces" (Przeworski 2010, 7050). For proceduralists from Kelsen to Schumpeter and Bobbio, the answer lies either in partisan compromise between majority and minority (Kelsen), partisan alternation in office (Schumpeter), or a combination of both (Bobbio). If no single government can embody the will of all, then parties must either bargain with the opposition or take turns governing and imposing the will of some.

In Kelsen's view, the party's mediation function culminates in the formation of compromises via a dynamic process of multi-party competition (Wolkenstein 2026). Political parties channel conflicting social forces "into a common riverbed in the popular assembly or parliament", like "subterranean springs feeding a river" (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 38). In this parliamentary model, parties, at their best, do not pursue the common good but rather seek to balance their interests with opposing parties through negotiation within a regulated framework of majority-rule procedure. A compromise, in Kelsen's account, is not the expression of collective truth forged between two opposing sides, but rather a pragmatic agreement between conflicting parties that allows cooperation and conflict to continue. As he puts it, "compromise means favoring that which binds over that which divides those who are to be brought together. Every exchange and every contract represent a compromise" (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 70).

For Kelsen (2013 [1929], 104), the central merit of deciding the will of society through parliamentary compromise lies in preserving the possibility that today's minority can become tomorrow's majority. The basic idea is that, if no political position can be regarded as definitively wrong because no group can claim a monopoly on truth, then the coercive order – the laws and policies that govern the behavior of people in society – remains permanently open to revision and reversal. Parliamentary compromise serves this function because laws and

policies are the result of temporary agreements between opposing forces, rather than a particular group's claim to absolute truth. Urbinati (2013) summarizes the freedom-preserving logic of Kelsen's parliamentarism as follows. Since Kelsen "does not claim to 'embody' the people as a whole, or approximate some context-transcending idea of 'truth', but only to produce a series of 'compromises' that reflect the underlying views and interests of the people represented in it, the great advantage of parliamentarism is that it can always revise previous decisions, as soon as these underlying views and interests change" (Urbinati 2013, 12). Even if this means parliament will not always produce the 'best' outcomes, epistemically or substantively, its democratic value lies in its being a procedure through which decisions can be corrected, "since the recognition of its own fallibility is inscribed within the defense of the majority principle itself" (Urbinati 2013, 12).

This, in Kelsen's view, is the central purpose of democracy: not the embodiment of the people in a single party, the discovery of political truth, or the realization of a substantive common good, but the protection of formal freedom to express disagreement and to contest prevailing outcomes. In this way, parliament preserves democracy's promise to "allow all individuals who differ in social position and worldview to give themselves laws that treat them as equals in legal and moral dignity" (Urbinati 2013, 12). The compromise between opposing parties within a parliamentary system – structured by proportional representation and governed by majority rule – is for Kelsenian proceduralists, the best mechanism through which this freedom to be wrong, to dissent from the majority view and rule in turn, is secured (Saffon and Urbinati 2013). Political conflict is made productive with equal freedom by being translated into free and fair procedures that produce negotiable and reversible policy outcomes. As Bickerton

and Invernizzi-Accetti (2017) accordingly observe, Kelsen's parliamentary model conceives party democracy as a system in which

> the specific conception of the common good that ought to prevail and therefore be translated into public policy is simultaneously constructed and identified through the democratic procedures of parliamentary deliberation and electoral competition (189).

However, despite the merits of Kelsen's parliamentarism as a mechanism for the continual revision of political decisions, his claim that democracy requires the ruling will to arise exclusively from multi-party compromise – lest it result in the dictatorship of one group's arbitrary claim to absolute truth – is a reductive account of the party's normative and political function. This reduction rests on a rigid dichotomy in Kelsen's political thought between two practices that are, in fact, compatible in democratic politics: (1) recognizing the basic equality of consideration due to one's adversary as both an equal person and rights-bearing citizen with differing needs, values, and political attitudes, and (2) generating mutual political understanding, or a provisional collective judgment about the common good, through a process of peaceful social and political conflict within and through the party. By considering these practices as mutually exclusive, Kelsen restricts the democratic function of the party, as an institution, and partisanship as a practice.

This rigid dichotomy is explicit throughout his writings. For example, we read from Kelsen that recognizing one's adversary as an equal citizen with legitimate interests and views, on the one hand, and searching for "earthly truths" about what social policy ought to be implemented for the benefit of the whole, on the other, are fundamentally opposed orientations. The former expresses what he calls a "critical-relativistic" worldview linked to a democratic disposition, whereas the latter reflects a "metaphysical-absolutistic worldview" linked to autocracy (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 103). Thus, he argues majority rule is the only way to maximize the number of individuals who are free:

> He who only relies on earthly truth and only allows human knowledge to direct social policy can justify the coercion, which the realization of that policy inevitably requires, in no other way than with the assent of at least the majority of those who are supposed to benefit from the coercive order. Furthermore, because the minority is not absolutely wrong, the coercive order must be constructed in such a way that the minority will not be rendered entirely without rights and itself can become the majority at any time. This is the actual meaning behind the political system we call democracy. Its opposition to absolutism is only possible, because it constitutes the expression of a political relativism. (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 104)

The implications of this institutionalized political relativism unfold at three levels. At the level of the partisan, the individual political actor is expected to adopt the view that "only relative truths are accessible to human cognition", and hence that "every truth and every value – just as the human individual who finds them – must be prepared to abdicate its position and make room for others" (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 103). In other words, the partisan can either engage in compromise, acknowledging the fallibility of his or her own views and the equal legitimacy of opposing positions, or act dogmatically by refusing to understand the other's point of view. At the level of the party, the organization can either work toward "a compromise between opposing interests, to produce a resultant of the various conflicting social forces" (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 70), which in practice often amounts to concessions made by the dominant group(s) to the subordinate group(s), or it can produce its own ideological and corporatist vision of the state.

Finally, at the systemic level, multi-party democracy can facilitate a bargaining process that "allows every political conviction the opportunity to express itself and to compete openly for the affections of the populace" (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 103), or it can degenerate into a mono-party dictatorship. Democracy, therefore, can sustain an open pluralistic field of contestation among competing groups, but it cannot simultaneously authorize a substantive "higher" collective truth reached across society's divisions. As he insists:

> This process [of compromise] guarantees that the various interests of the groups represented in parliament are given a voice, that they are able to manifest themselves as such in a public proceeding. If the specifically dialectical process within parliament has a

> deeper meaning, then surely it is that the opposition of the thesis and antithesis of political interests somehow results in a synthesis. Here, however, this can only refer to a compromise, and not – as those who confuse parliamentarism's reality with its ideology allege – a "higher" absolute truth or an absolute value standing above group interests. (Kelsen 1929, 70)

For Kelsen, therefore, political conflict may culminate only in compromise that maximizes the best interests of opposing parties, not in the formation of a provisional collective political truth on what is best for all. It is this strict separation between compromise and collective political understanding that ultimately limits the democratic potential he attributes to the party as a vehicle for enabling equal freedom.

In Gramsci's political thought, by contrast, there is no dichotomy between recognizing one's adversary as an equal and seeking substantive political truth. Using the analogy of scientific inquiry to illustrate how this conflictual dynamic works in politics, Gramsci argues that the pursuit of truth does not presuppose the authoritarian exclusion of opposing viewpoints but rather their critical engagement and political incorporation. As he writes:

> In scientific discussion, since it is assumed that the purpose of discussion is the pursuit of truth and the progress of science, the person who shows himself most 'advanced' is the one who takes up the point of view that his adversary may well be expressing a need which should be incorporated, if only as a subordinate aspect, in his own construction. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 344)

In practice, recognizing one's adversary as an equal citizen with legitimate interests and views means "to understand and to evaluate realistically one's adversary's position and his reasons", which "means precisely to be liberated from the prison of ideologies in the bad sense of the word, that of blind ideological fanaticism" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 344). It entails that the partisan "tak[es] up a point of view that is 'critical', which for the purpose of scientific research", Gramsci argues, "is the only fertile one" (1971 [1933], 344).

Gramsci's conception of a critical-realist standpoint challenges Kelsen's assumption that democratic politics requires a "critical-relativistic" worldview, while substantive truth-claims

necessarily reflect a "metaphysical-absolutistic" disposition linked to autocracy. In doing so, he overcomes the dichotomy between acknowledging one's own fallibility and pursuing epistemically correct social policies for the benefit of society as a whole. For Gramsci, recognizing the legitimacy of opposing positions does not necessarily require a relativistic position, but is rather the condition under which collective political understanding, and more adequate and inclusive social policies, can emerge.

Conflict becomes epistemically productive when political actors test their own assumptions by confronting their rivals' interpretations of social reality. Through this process, a party can either integrate opposing perspectives by addressing the real problems they express, or demonstrate, in a clear and decisive manner, that their diagnoses of social problems rest on misinterpretations of social reality, arising from ideological attachments rather than scientific inquiry and discussion. As Gramsci puts it,

> A new science proves its efficacy and vitality when it demonstrates that it is capable of confronting the great champions of the tendencies opposed to it and when it either resolves by its own means the vital questions which they have posed or demonstrates, in peremptory fashion, that these questions are false problems. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 433)

According to Gramsci's critical-realist view, then, conflicts of interest and worldviews are not simply pathological, since they can also help clarify which political projects address real issues of common concern. In his vision, political conflict is not reduced to a conflict of group interests that culminates in a compromise between opposing parties, but becomes a terrain of collective learning, in which political actors revise their views, learn from opponents, and forge new solidarities and common purposes where none previously existed. In this way, the party's normative function moves beyond compromises between opposing group interests, toward generating new collective judgments about the common good which underlie social reform and the formation of new laws that themselves are open to contestation.

a. The Limits of Kelsenian Compromise

Gramsci's theory of the party poses a critical challenge to Kelsen's defense of parliamentary compromise as the primary mechanism for securing equal freedom. In recent years, Kelsen's conception of compromise has become a focal point of debate among contemporary theorists of party democracy (Ragazzoni 2017; Przeworski 2010; White and Ypi 2016). Within this literature, Ragazzoni (2017) identifies several key critiques that question the adequacy of Kelsen's idea of compromise for theorizing the democratic role of political parties in representative democracy. Ragazzoni (2017) identifies a tension between parties as "procedurally vital to modern democracy" and "the normative distinctiveness of partisanship as a specific kind of political commitment", stemming from Kelsen's claim that "the determination of the content of law" occurs either through the dictatorship of a single group or through compromise among several groups in the legislature (98).

For Przeworski (2010), Kelsen's idea of compromise as a mechanism for peacefully processing conflicts places excessive emphasis on the institutional behavior of party leaders in parliament, and therefore under-theorizes why governing majorities would ever change if different parties pursue similar compromise-based policies while in office. White and Ypi (2016) criticize Kelsen for reducing compromise primarily to a conflict of interests rather than grounding it in principled political commitments, which limits both the forms of compromise parties can pursue and the broader ethical function of parties in democracy. Gramsci's political theory not only addresses the limitations of Kelsen's account of compromise but also exposes additional shortcomings that remain salient in contemporary debates on party democracy. Since his work touches on the concerns raised by other theorists, I examine each issue in turn.

First, Gramsci helps overcome the sharp dichotomy in Kelsen's theory between legal and political representation. For Kelsen, legal representation is meant to "guarantee that parties and their elected officials mirror the will of the electors in parliament" (Ragazzoni 2017, 100). Yet, as Ragazzoni points out, this conception rests on confining the political influence of parties almost exclusively to their legislative function. As a result, he argues, Kelsen overlooks the democratic potential of parties as vehicles for organizing long-term, principled political projects, rather than merely aggregating contingent interests.

A further issue stems from Kelsen's defense of parliamentarism and from the indirect nature of this form of party government. This view is expressed most clearly in his assertion that "the will of the state is not directly produced by the People itself, but by a parliament chosen by the People" (Kelsen 2013 [1929], 49). Kelsen's assertion ultimately obscures the fact that important legislative work takes place not only within the collegial body elected by the people but also within the party itself, where citizens can participate directly in determining the content of law. Gramsci overcomes this limitation by arguing that the most significant legislative work occurs within the mass party, where an historic bloc can be formed. By expanding the direct participation of ordinary citizens in party government, Gramsci reduces reliance on indirect legal representation based on elected officials merely mirroring their electoral base and instead emphasizes the active role of citizens in politically influencing and guiding the legislative action of parties.

Gramsci's theory of the historical bloc surpasses Kelsen's parliamentary compromise by locating democratic will-formation not in elite bargaining, but in the mass party's capacity to build consent across social, cultural, and ethical divisions. As Morera (2014) explains, the historical bloc is best understood as "a concrete historical form of social, political, and economic

coordination", that is, "a project of integration led by a social group – typically an alliance of classes – with an economic plan…over a given territory…across time" (89). In the Italian context, this political project extended well beyond socioeconomic coordination to encompass what Gramsci called ethical-civil questions: regional and territorial differentiation, linguistic fragmentation, educational inequality, and the transformation of hierarchical gender relations (Morera 1990b; Green 2021; Ives 2004; Mayo 2015).

Gramsci identified the emergence of a "new feminine personality" as "the most important ethico-civil question tied to the sexual question", insisting that patriarchy and women's cultural subordination could not be overcome solely through party decree or legislative reform (Gramsci 1975 [1934], 2151). Rather, women's emancipation required that women achieve independence *vis-à-vis* men by autonomously developing 'a new conception of themselves' – a process that presupposed their autonomous participation in the party. Reflecting on patriotic feminism during the Risorgimento, he writes: "The participation of women in the national cause is an almost new fact in Italy…[and] one of the signs best suited to demonstrate that we have reached civil maturity and full consciousness of ourselves as a nation" (Gramsci 1975a [1930–1932], 903). It is precisely this effort to incorporate all sectors of the nation and address the full range of socioeconomic and ethical-civil forms of unfreedom within the party organization that distinguishes Gramsci's conception of a national-popular political project. As he concludes, "every innovative historical movement is mature only insofar as not only the elderly but also the young, adults, and women participate in it" (Gramsci 1975a [1930–1932], 903).

In Gramsci's conception, then, a historical bloc is not simply the representation of all social sectors, but a collective will that unifies a discordant multiplicity of groups and enables a social group, or a system of class alliances, to lead society as a whole without recourse to

coercion (Fontana 2006; Morera 1990b). As Morera (1990b) points out, the historical bloc is a temporal construction: it unfolds over time as a long-term project of social and political integration, rather than as plain bargaining or the pursuit of compromises over particular interests. Gramsci's argument that the formation of a historical bloc constitutes the legitimate basis of party rule is therefore relevant to both Przeworski's (2006) and White and Ypi's (2016) critiques of Kelsenian compromise.

Gramsci's concept of the historical bloc addresses Przeworski's (2006) concern that parliamentary compromise is an insufficient mechanism for majority change. Rather than locating political differentiation in parliamentary negotiation, Gramsci situates it in the partisan formation of a historical bloc within civil society. Majority change, on this account, does not hinge on the institutional behavior and bargaining strategies of party elites within parliament, but on the reorganization of consent within society. When a party can no longer sustain an historical bloc, its capacity to lead diminishes, and space opens for an alternative project to emerge.

As Ragazzoni (2017) argues, Przeworski's critique of Kelsen's account of compromise ultimately centers on its excessive focus on the institutional behavior of party leaders, such that "representative government now means the government of parties in the parliament" and "the outcomes are to a large extent independent of results of elections" (Przeworski 2010, 7051). Gramsci deepens this criticism by arguing that the parliamentary system of government not only reduces the agency of voters to the passive approval of decisions negotiated by party leaders, but also tends toward oligarchization, insofar as much of the real decision-making and electoral outcomes is shaped by economically powerful actors. The parliamentary system of government, he argues, should be criticized on the grounds "that the historical rationality of numerical consensus is systematically falsified by the influence of wealth" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 193).

Gramsci's critical point is that majority outcomes generated within parliamentary systems often reflect existing relations of political and economic power rather than the equal influence of citizens "in determining the political course of the State", as Kelsen postulates. As he explains,

> The fact is that it is not true, in any sense, that numbers decide everything, nor that the opinions of all electors are of 'exactly' equal weight. Numbers…are simply an instrumental value…And what is measured is precisely the effectiveness, and the expansive and persuasive capacity, of the opinions of a few individuals, the active minorities, the elites, the avant-gardes, etc. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 192)

Parliamentary decisions do not often register the aggregation of equally weighted preferences but rather institutionalize asymmetries in political influence between party leaders and ordinary voters. Even if formal political equality is preserved, material inequalities shape which views and interests acquire greater political weight, enabling some social groups to exert more influence over outcomes than others.

This diagnosis relates directly to White and Ypi's (2016, 153) critique of Kelsen's reduction of partisan compromise to the bargaining of group interests and his assumption that political conflicts can be fairly negotiated in freedom-preserving ways simply by giving interests parliamentary representation. For White and Ypi, this is insufficient because it ignores important differences between interests, such as their varying relevance and the unequal power positions of the actors who advance them. Moreover, they argue that Kelsen's framework lacks mechanisms of public justification. Since interests are not systematically connected to shared ethical principles or assessed through a process of public deliberation, compromises are not filtered through standards of generality and reciprocity. As a result, outcomes may result in the domination of one group rather than the maximization of equal freedom.

For White and Ypi (2016), partisan compromise must therefore be embedded in processes of public justification. Only when interests are articulated in relation to publicly defensible principles can compromise differ from mere power-based bargaining (White and Ypi

2016, 153). Following White and Ypi's suggestion, Gramsci offers a potentially more adequate theory of the party's normative function than Kelsen by proposing a mass political form that links social classes to ethical-political principles that transcend narrow group interests. Accordingly, Gramsci posits the mass party as the political form through which class conflicts can be peacefully mediated and gradually resolved.

This transformative role of the mass party becomes clearer in Gramsci's account of the successive moments in the development of a class's collective political consciousness. He distinguishes, first, an economic-corporative moment, in which individuals recognize only the unity of their professional group, but not yet that of the class as a whole: "a tradesman feels obliged to stand by another tradesman…but does not yet feel solidarity with the manufacturer" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 181). A second moment follows, in which "consciousness of the solidarity of interests among all the members of the social grouping is attained", though still within the economic sphere. At this stage, Gramsci observes, "the problem of the State is posed – but only in terms of winning politico-juridical equality with the ruling groups", through participation in legislation and administration within existing structures. Kelsen's conception of the party largely remains confined to this second moment.

By contrast, Gramsci's mass party operates at a third stage, in which "one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests…can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too" (1971 [1933], 181). This constitutes what Gramsci calls "the most purely political phase", marking "the decisive passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures". As he continues:

> it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies become 'party', come into confrontation and conflict, until only one of them, or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail, to gain the upper hand, to propagate itself throughout society-bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and

> moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a "universal" plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 181–182)

The result of this process is not the balancing of competing interests, but the ethical mediation of social conflicts, in which a leading group must be able to make concessions to subordinate minority groups so that they are transformed into potential allies rather than mere enemies. From a Kelsenian standpoint, however, Gramsci's conception of a class becoming hegemonic through the party raises important concerns. Against this conception, Kelsen argues that the only alternative to multi-party democracy is corporatist groups. This premise is shared by the broader proceduralist tradition. From Kelsen (2013 [1929]) and Schumpeter (2010 [1942]) to Bobbio (1987), all proceduralist theorists agree that no single leader and no collective body represent the will of all people. They therefore maintain that political parties are vehicles for distinct and competing interests, which are largely, though not exclusively, economic interests.

If no party can legitimately claim to articulate a general will, then a party aimed at overcoming class divisions through a mass party risks becoming a form of dictatorship – a social order characterized by the 'hegemony' of one part (or class) of society – that violates the pluralism of a constitutional multi-party regime (Ragazzoni 2022). Yet while Kelsen is right to insist that no single party should present itself as the sole institutional expression of the will of all, it is a further and more controversial step to conclude that the will of the society should be solely the product of a collegial parliamentary body, and that a mass party aiming to overcome class contradictions is equivalent to party dictatorship.

b. The Hegemonic Party in a Pluralist Democratic Context

The tension between class-based hegemonic organization and democratic pluralism, implicit in Kelsen's defense of parliamentarism, has been nowhere more intensively discussed than in scholarship and political controversies surrounding Gramsci's conception of the modern Prince

as both a working-class and an Italian party (Liguori 2012). Few scholars would dispute that the core of Gramsci's political theory is his attempt to build a mass political party capable of establishing the hegemony of the proletariat (Femia 1981, 165). Both before and during his imprisonment, he devoted himself to designing a political organization able to forge consensus around a socialist project within an Italian political landscape divided by class conflict, regional, religious, educational, and linguistic cleavages. He regarded the Italian working class, and its struggle for emancipation from capitalist domination, as the unifying element capable of articulating a common political project across these divisions.

However, accusations of anti-pluralism and claims that Gramsci's theory of the modern Prince ultimately advances an authoritarian or even totalitarian conception of party rule have been widespread across political contexts and theoretical traditions. In the Anglophone literature on Gramsci, such accusations of anti-pluralism range from liberal thinkers (Lichtheim 1964; Hughes 1974; Walzer 2002) to radical democratic post-Marxists (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Golding 1992). Lichtheim (1964, 368), for example, contends that Gramsci "went on to develop a doctrine more totalitarian than that of his gaolers" suggesting that his theory ultimately exceeds even the authoritarianism of Stalin's party. H. Stuart Hughes (1974, 101) similarly wrote that hegemony is merely a "euphemism…a totalitarian thought…clothed in liberal guise". For his post-Marxist critics, by contrast, Gramsci's "Gordian knot" – and the reason his theory allegedly fails to generate a genuinely pluralistic political project – lies in his claim that only classes can exercise hegemony. Thus, despite its democratic foundation in contingent and active consensus (Golding 1992), his theory fails to accommodate the political agency of non-class groups within his conception of the party.

In the Italian political and intellectual context, interpretations of Gramsci's modern Prince as a model of party totalitarianism, equivalent to Stalin's actual monoparty regime, were widespread across scholarly and political debates and spanned the ideological spectrum (Femia 1981), ranging from conservative critics (Garosci 1954; Buzzi 1973) to radical left and socialist opponents of Gramsci, the "head" (i.e. intellectual leader) of the PCI (Mondolfo 1963). This interpretation found one of its most forceful formulations in A. R. Buzzi's 1973 essay *La teoria politica di Gramsci*. Buzzi argued that Gramsci's conception of hegemony, which purported to reconcile liberty and authority through the unification of social forces within the party, would inevitably become "a weapon in the hands of the party-State, which desires to 'mould' the masses to an ideology" (Buzzi 1973, 352).

For Buzzi, the core problem lay in Gramsci's claim that the working class would naturally assume the role of a universal political subject whose interests and worldview represented the needs of society as a whole. "Since the subordinate social class is the carrier of universal truth", he argued, "its hegemony, visible in the party-State, will thus always be incontestable, thereby justifying authoritarianism and totalitarianism" (Buzzi 1973, 352). Thus, he concluded, "in a conflict between authority and liberty, it is always authority, the party, that decides" (Buzzi 1973, 353). However, Gramsci did not think the working class would automatically become the leading force in Italy without persuading other subordinate classes, namely the peasantry, of the universality of its claims. Buzzi's interpretation, therefore, ultimately rested on a reductive view of hegemony as uniformity imposed by coercion rather than the outcome of a dialectical process of intellectual participation in the struggle for consensus.

The debate over the compatibility between Gramsci's hegemonic party and democracy resurfaced with particular force and urgency in Italy in the mid-to-late 1970s. In this context, Bobbio, whom Ragazzoni (2022) aptly calls "the Italian Kelsen", emerged as the leading intellectual voice in the "pluralism debate", which centered on whether the Communist Party, as shaped by Gramsci's thought, could coexist with a pluralist democratic state. Up to that point, Bobbio (1976c) had defended the importance of a dialogue between Marxism and liberal-democratic theory and had argued that the PCI should be recognized as a legitimate participant in Italy's debate on democracy and the state (Liguori 2012, 192). After the June 1976 elections, however, which made Communist participation in government a real possibility, his arguments took on a different and more politically consequential character as multiple political and intellectual forces converged to prevent the PCI's entry into government (Liguori 2012, 192). The details of the 1970s pluralism debate with Bobbio and the PCI have been most carefully reconstructed by Liguori (2012) in his in-depth study of Gramsci's political reception in Italy and merit closer examination here.

The debate was set in motion by a speech Bobbio delivered to the socialist journal *Mondoperaio* in July 1976, in which he argued that socialist and communist political cultures were fundamentally incompatible. He contrasted a "lay conception of history" with what he described as Marxism's "totalizing conception", claiming that in the latter "there is no room…for the new Prince to whom Gramsci attributed the work of transforming society" (Bobbio 1977, 247; Liguori 2012, 192). In subsequent articles published in La Stampa in September 1976, Bobbio sharpened this argument by identifying what he saw as a core contradiction between the PCI's professed commitment to pluralism and the allegedly non-pluralist character of its

Gramscian heritage. In an interview with La Repubblica, he formulated the objection in precise terms:

> Gramsci speaks of a class having hegemony through the party that represents it…he compares the party to the 'Prince', considering it to be a historical protagonist with a mission of unifying, of eliminating all contrary elements. Now, how could a prince, who is by definition singular, allow multiplicity?…If we claim that pluralism is necessary in this moment and in this society, we also have to renounce the concept of a hegemonic party. (Bobbio 1976)

Bobbio's intervention against Gramsci's modern Prince thus translated long-standing concerns of democratic proceduralism – originating in Kelsen's defense of parliamentarism – into the concrete political situation of Italy's new constitutional multiparty democracy. Like Kelsen, Bobbio maintained that the development of Italian democracy required the institutionalization of political plurality in a way that precluded any single party from claiming to embody the will of society as a whole. On this basis, he interpreted the core feature of Gramsci's hegemonic party as a monolithic structure opposed to the continuation of conflicts and differences in society.

As Liguori (2012) points out, in order to sustain to this interpretation, Bobbio had to portray the political culture of the PCI of the 1970s as essentially continuous with the orthodox Leninism of the interwar PCd'I on the one hand and depict Gramsci as little more than an imitator of Leninism on the other (193). This reading, however, minimized Gramsci's originality as a theorist of civil society who opened a path toward democratic theory of the revolutionary party that pursues a peaceful and democratic acquisition and maintenance of power through consent rather than violence or coercion, even if he did not adequately elaborate a democratic theory of the state (Togliatti 1979; Tamburrano 1963; Vacca 1999; Femia 1981; Femia 1979).

Since the initial publication of the Prison Notebooks (1948–1951), the tendency to read Gramsci as merely an orthodox Leninist was thoroughly contested from within the Italian

communist tradition itself by both leading and dissident members of the PCI (Togliatti 1979; Ingrao 1976; Magri 1970; Rossanda 1970; Pintor 1969).[7] This interpretation was also challenged by major Gramsci scholars closely connected to the PCI, including the biographer Paolo Spriano and the philologist responsible for the critical compilation of Gramsci's texts, Valentino Gerratana (Liguori 2012). This reading was first challenged by Togliatti, who assumed the leadership of the party after Gramsci's imprisonment and death, and who sought to elaborate the PCI's strategy for political action according to the democratic principles of the constitution as well as Gramsci's novel "war of position" strategy of building consensus in civil society (Chiarotto 2011). At the same time, Togliatti was the first to explicitly accept the multiparty republican democracy embodied in the Italian Constitution of 1948, thereby affirming, in practice, the compatibility between a pluralist political order and the party's exercise of hegemony.

It was Pietro Ingrao (1976), then President of the Chamber of Deputies, who responded directly to Bobbio by arguing that the pluralism emphasized by the PCI was grounded in Article 3 of the Italian Constitution (Liguori 2019, 192), in whose drafting the party had been a key participant during the foundation of the *prima repubblica* in 1948. Ingrao's core claim was that the Gramscian party was compatible with both the formal and substantive dimensions of equality enshrined in Article 3, upholding the principle of legal equality affirmed in the first paragraph while advance the second paragraph's mandate to remove barriers to the effective participation of materially subordinated groups:

> All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the country. (Constitution of the Italian Republic 1948 art. 3)

The historic pluralism debate between Bobbio and Ingrao shows that the central issue in Italian democracy was not a simple opposition between, on the one hand, the preservation of a multiparty system that "maximizes freedom because it chooses decisions that satisfy the opinion of the greater number of participants" (Saffon and Urbinati 2013, 459), and, on the other hand, the threat of a hegemonic party committed to a dogmatic and unitary conception of political life hostile to conflict and pluralism. Rather, the debate revealed a deeper disagreement between two competing approaches to how pluralism should be protected and institutionalized, with direct relevance for current debates on the crisis of party democracy.

From the Kelsenian proceduralist perspective, party pluralism serves primarily to safeguard minority rights through proportional representation within a framework of regulated political competition. In this model, parties fulfill a freedom-preserving function by representing distinct interests in parliament and by respecting the rules of free and fair electoral rivalry. Thus, Urbinati (2014) defends democratic proceduralism as

> in the service of equal liberty since it presumes and claims the equal right and opportunity citizens have to participate in the formation of the majority view with their individual votes and their opinions; it is what qualifies democracy as a form of government whose citizens obey the laws they contribute in making, directly or indirectly. (19)

By contrast, in the Gramscian conception of the mass party, pluralism is understood in more substantive terms. The primary function of the party is conceived as in terms of freedom-enabling institutions aimed at constructing a social order without the material barriers that impede on the equal and autonomous participation of subordinate groups in political life. As Ingrao's reference to Article 3 suggests, pluralism should be understood not merely as a procedural guarantee, but as a condition of substantive democratic equality. His intervention in the pluralism debate thus points to the deeper democratic promise of the Gramscian party, while at the same time revealing an internal tension within Kelsenian proceduralism itself: if equal

liberty requires equal effective participation, then parliamentarism alone may be insufficient to realize proceduralism's own normative commitments.

What is at stake in the comparison between Gramsci and Kelsen, therefore, is not a choice between two incompatible political institutions, the modern Prince and the parliamentary system, but between two distinct visions of the party's role in mediating conflict and disagreement within representative democracy. The central question that follows is which approach is better suited to preserve and expand equal freedom under contemporary conditions of inequality, conflict, and popular disaffection, and which theory of the party provides a more adequate basis for revitalizing its normative and political functions today.

Beyond Parliamentarism, Toward a New Ethical-Political and Material Collective Will: Gramscian Lessons from the Italian Case

Kelsen's procedural defense of parliamentarism and Gramsci's theory of the modern Prince represent two contrasting institutional responses to the crisis of party democracy. Their respective analyses of the shortcomings and possibilities of representative institutions in the interwar period encapsulate a critical moment in the history of twentieth-century democratic theory and practice. As such, both offer insights into some of the most pressing challenges facing party democracies today. At their core, however, Kelsen and Gramsci diverge on how the people ought to be politically organized and how popular rule can and should be generated through parties within a representative system. The difference between a Kelsenian and a Gramscian approach to the crisis ultimately hinges on whether democracy is secured through formal procedures of multiparty competition and parliamentary compromise, or through the party's

ability to stimulate participation and organize citizens from below and outside of parliament, as the principal vehicle for their effective influence within the legislative assembly.

The starting point for a Kelsenian procedural defense of parties in democracy is not how a divided people can be organized into a single collective political agent, but how parties can remain democratically legitimate once the aspiration of a unified popular will has been set aside. If no party can legitimately claim to represent the People as a whole, on what grounds can parties still be defended as democratic institutions? Kelsenian proceduralism answers by locating the democratic value of parties not in the substantive content of the programs they advance, but in their role in channeling political conflict into free and fair procedures of parliamentary deliberation and electoral competition (Saffon and Urbinati 2025; Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2017). Once the idea that the people can act as a single collective political will is abandoned, party democracy is no longer measured by the degree of citizens' participation in shaping a national program or defining the common good, but by the extent to which competing partisan forces can fairly and regularly compete for the authority to implement their respective interpretations of the common good.

Thus, in the Kelsenian procedural view, parties are democratic insofar as they function as neutral procedures: they recognize their own partiality, compete fairly in elections, engage in parliamentary deliberation and negotiation, and respect majority rule within a constitutional framework of regulated rivalry. Party democracy thus becomes a system in which ongoing partisan competition is acknowledged as a constitutional necessity and rendered politically productive rather than destructive. As Rosenblum (2008) argues, "the discipline consists of conceding each party's status as just one part in a permanently pluralist politics, and with it,

acknowledging the provisional nature of being the governing party, [and] the charade of pretending to represent the whole" (124).

It follows that, for Kelsenian proceduralists, the crisis of party democracy does not primarily consist in the failure of representative institutions to form a popular will or to enable citizens' more direct participation in defining the common good. Rather, it lies in the erosion of the laws and procedures that regulate party rivalry. Party democracy enters into crisis when free and fair elections, parliamentary deliberation and compromise, and reciprocal recognition among rival parties deteriorate – chiefly, when mono-party and anti-party political actors seek to monopolize representation by delegitimizing opposition and claiming to somehow speak in the name of the People as a unanimous whole (Urbinati 2019a; Rosenblum 2008, 43).

Accordingly, in line with Kelsen's original defense of parliamentarism, contemporary Kelsenians locate the remedy to the crisis of party democracy not in organizing substantive popular unity from below, but in maintaining and reforming parties as neutral, open-ended procedures. Such procedural reforms include strengthening intra-party democratic processes that provide citizens formal deliberative participatory venues for giving their input (Wolkenstein 2016; 2020; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017), alongside legal protections for electoral fairness, minority rights, and parliamentary negotiation that sustain regular competition among irreducibly conflicting yet equally legitimate partisan associations. It is the maintenance of these parliamentary procedures, rather than the realization of any substantive democratic outcome, that safeguards pluralist party democracy against monopolistic forces of political representation seeking to become "the party to end all parties" (Rosenblum 2008, 36; Urbinati 2019a; Ragazzoni 2019).

In contrast, Gramsci's defense of the party in democracy begins not from the permanence of division and the need for procedural regulation, but from the problem of how a divided people might be organized into an historically effective popular force. From this Gramscian starting point, party democracy is measured not by the fairness and regularity of party rivalry in parliament, but by the extent to which the political party succeeds in enabling the broadest possible number of citizens to participate in the organization and defining its vision of the common good. For Gramsci, the crisis of democracy arises not from the breakdown of parliamentary procedures, but from the failure of those procedures to integrate ordinary citizens into political life. Even if parliament functions correctly, democracy can still fail if it does not give ordinary citizens real ways to become participants whose interests and goals actually guide political outcomes. The central question, therefore, is not how to secure competition among rival parties, but how the representative system can be transformed to generate a national-popular collective will.

Gramsci posed this question in his essay the modern Prince, where he examined the failure of the Italian parliamentary system to provide the subaltern classes with a vital form of collective political agency:

> When can the conditions for the arousing and development of a national-popular collective will be said to exist? Here an historical (economic) analysis must be made of the social structure of the given country together with a 'dramatic' representation of the attempts made throughout the centuries to arouse this will and the reasons for the successive failure. (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 130)

For Gramsci, these "successive failures" revealed the limits of a form of parliamentarism that remained detached from workers and peasants, failing to provide them with an effective mode of representation through which they could influence the direction of national life.

Moreover, Gramsci examined the procedural dimension of this crisis. He observed that, in Italy, Parliament failed to perform its basic technical-procedural function of ensuring the effectiveness

of government. For Gramsci, in a functioning representative system, elected representatives are meant to supervise the state bureaucracy, ensuring its power remains politically accountable and responsive rather than rigid and detached from the citizenry.

> The point is to establish whether the representative and party system, instead of being a suitable mechanism for choosing elected functionaries to integrate and balance the appointed civil servants and prevent them from becoming ossified, has become a hindrance and a mechanism which operates in the reverse direction. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 254)

Gramsci warned that without strong supervision from Parliament, civil servants were able to entrench their position in office without serving the public. At the same time, writing in response to the rise of both fascist and Stalinist forms of mono-party totalitarianism, Gramsci rejected the view that the failure of Parliamentarism justified abandoning the electoral-representative system in favor of concentrating power in the hands of the state bureaucracy. As he argued:

> For even allowing (as it must be allowed) that parliamentarianism has become inefficient and even harmful, it is not necessary to conclude that the bureaucratic system must be rehabilitated and praised. It has to be considered whether parliamentarianism and representative system are synonymous, and whether a different solution is not possible – both for parliamentarianism and for the bureaucratic system-with a new type of representative system. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 254)

The solution to parliamentary failure, Gramsci thought, was not the replacement of the representative system with state centralization, but its renewal in ways that would make the system more accountable to the public. This renewal required the creation of new representative institutions capable of providing the fragmented and spontaneous masses with more effective means of popular control. In this context, Gramsci posited the new mass party as the necessary vehicle for connecting the Italian people to the state, transforming them from passive objects of rule into a ruling collective political subject capable of participating in government.

According to Gramsci's historical analysis, what was missing in Italy was a political party comparable to the Jacobins of the French Revolution. As he observed,

> An effective Jacobin force was always missing, and could not be constituted; and it was precisely such a Jacobin force which in other nations awakened and organized the national-popular collective will, and founded the modern States. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 131).

Such a party, he argued, would have been capable of translating the spontaneous actions of the Italian urban and rural popular classes into an effective political form through which their revolutionary ideals of equality, liberty, and justice could be unified and actualized. For Gramsci, the Jacobins were a real mass party because they represented not only the needs and demands of their particular social group but also incorporated the demands of other subordinate groups in France into their program.

> The Jacobins, consequently, were the only party of the revolution in progress, in as much as they not only represented the immediate needs and aspirations of the actual physical individuals who constituted the French bourgeoisie, but they also represented the revolutionary movement as a whole, as an integral historical development. For they represented future needs as well, and, once again, not only the needs of those particular physical individuals, but also of all the national groups which had to be assimilated to the existing fundamental group. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 78)

In his view, the Jacobins played an essential role in realizing democracy because they were partisans who incorporated the needs of other subaltern groups into its pursuit of the common good, rather than an association of like-minded individuals that accepts its status as only a part of the whole, advancing its own interpretation of the common good, as in the Kelsenian view. However, anticipating Kelsenian concerns, Gramsci argued that the Jacobins did not claim to represent the whole on the basis of abstract principles of perfect equality or unanimity. They were not anti-partyists prefiguring a model of democracy without mediation, conflict, or party pluralism, as Keslenian proceduralists caution against (Urbinati 2019a; Rosenblum 2008; Ragazzoni 2019). Rather, in his view, their success in advancing a unifying

project stemmed from the fact that the revolutionary ideals they promoted were actually shared by the popular masses themselves, whose autonomous participation in the party was based on their commitment to realizing those ideals. As he argued:

> It is necessary to insist, against a[n] anti-historical school of thought, that the Jacobins were realists of the Machiavelli stamp and not abstract dreamers. They were convinced of the absolute truth of their slogans about equality, fraternity and liberty, and, what is more important, the great popular masses whom the Jacobins stirred up and drew into the struggle were also convinced of their truth. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 78)

Within the context of post-Risorgimento Italy, Gramsci viewed the Turinese communist movement, whose demands went beyond mere material gain to include equal political autonomy and democratic control over the factory, as the appropriate (realistic) collective subject for founding Italy's first democratic republic. For Gramsci, the working class carried the potential to advance a realistic program capable of identifying the interests and requirements common to diverse national forces, thereby creating the conditions necessary for revolution.

Overall, Gramsci's analysis of the social and structural bases of the crisis of representation, and of the persistent absence of an effective mass party, identifies a central tension in the historical development of Italian democracy that remains relevant to contemporary debates (Ragazzoni 2019; Urbinati 2019a; Rosenblum 2008). For Gramsci, the problem lay not simply in defective parliamentary procedures, but in the failure to generate a political party capable of constructing substantive popular unity across deep social, cultural, and political divisions, and of stabilizing representative democracy through a durable linkage with civil society. His theory of the modern Prince can thus be read as an attempt to supply this missing institutional mediation between a fragmented society and a well-functioning multi-party system.

In contexts marked by economic inequality, cultural differentiation, and political conflict, social groups do not spontaneously form a unified political voice. The modern Prince, in both its original conception and institutional design, is intended to serve as the organizational form

through which “a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world” (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 349; Magri 2011, 416). However, rather than ruling in the name of a single class (the proletariat) or a homogenous people, the modern Prince seeks to build durable consent among distinct autonomous social groups. In this way, its primary function is to serve as a bridge between divided civil society and a democracy governed by a pluralistic collective sovereign, rather than by a dominant economic group or a disorganized multitude disguised as unanimity.

Gramsci hypothesized that, in the absence of a party functioning as a modern Prince, political life oscillates between two unsatisfactory poles: anti-partyism, in which citizens lose trust in parties and turn to movements or leaders promising direct, unmediated rule in the name of “the people”, and a hollow parliamentarism dominated by weak parties detached from everyday social struggles. Gramsci’s diagnosis remains incisive and relevant for current debates amid ineffective parliamentary systems, rising anti-partyism, and populist transformations of party democracy. As Urbinati (2019a) and Ragazzoni (2019) have shown in their own historical analyses, anti-partyism has been a structural feature of Italian democracy, repeatedly undermining the logic and structure of a pluralist party democracy. Yet, a Kelsenian procedural approach that focuses exclusively on reforming parliamentary mechanisms is insufficient to overcome this enduring tension between anti-partyism and ineffective parliamentarism. Without a party capable of addressing the material and social conditions that constrain citizens’ effective participation, procedural reforms alone cannot stabilize democratic representation or facilitate popular political agency.

The “contemporary renaissance” of Kelsen’s defense of parliamentarism (Baum and Ragazzoni 2025; Chambers 2023, 57) reflects a compelling normative concern with preserving

pluralist democracy under conditions of political conflict, popular disaffection, and present-day authoritarian and populist assaults on party democracy (Urbinati 2019a; 2019b; Ragazzoni 2019 Rosenblum 2008). At its core, Kelsen's theory defends democracy as a system of equal participation in free and fair procedures, grounded in a commitment to pluralism and to the peaceful regulation of political conflict. His insight that political parties are indispensable to democracy because they enable citizens to exercise equal political freedom through multiparty competition remains central to contemporary efforts to restore the procedural value of partisanship in an era of elite capture, anti-party sentiment, and widespread alienation from representative institutions.

However, Gramsci's alternative account of a class-based mass party brings into focus the limits of a Kelsenian procedural defense of party democracy today. Kelsenian proceduralism succeeds in protecting formal political equality by guaranteeing equal rights of participation, fair competition, and legal safeguards against domination. Yet it does not aim to transform the underlying social and economic conditions that shape citizens' capacity to participate effectively in political life. Its primary concern is to secure equal access to democratic procedures by conceiving parties as voluntary associations through which individuals may compete on formally equal terms.

This approach assumes that formal inclusion is sufficient for disempowered citizens to value democratic institutions as legitimate arenas for resolving collective conflicts and forming majority decisions. As Urbinati (2014) puts it, "Procedures are legitimately democratic because they deliver what they are made for: to protect the freedom of its members to produce 'wrong' decisions" (98). In this Kelsenian view, parties sufficiently secure equal freedom through equal opportunities for participation in free and fair procedures, but they need not address the social

and material inequalities that impede equal participation. As a result, procedural equality alone often fails to generate the forms of collective political agency, state-society linkage, and civic trust in representation that Kelsenians aim to secure, and on which the stability of representative democracy depends.

Gramsci challenges Kelsenian proceduralism separation by insisting that democratic procedures cannot be evaluated apart from their historical and material effects. As he argued, following Machiavelli's Prince:

> the popular masses…in reality forget the means employed to reach an end if that end is historically progressive – that is, if it resolves the essential problems of the epoch and establishes an order in which people can move, act, and work peacefully. (Gramsci 1975b [1932–1934], 1618)

Whether or not one agrees with Gramsci's claim that the content of political decisions should be weighed more heavily than the procedures through they are made, it is nonetheless important to retain his core insight that the democratic function of parties cannot be assessed apart from the enduring inequalities of wealth and political influence that continue to plague advanced democracies today.

It is the missing substantive democratic function of partisanship that Gramsci's theory of the modern Prince emerges not as an antithesis to democratic proceduralism but as a critical complementary to it. Despite his important disagreements with Kelsen, both share a commitment to viewing the party as an indispensable mediating institution in democracy. This shared foundation makes it possible to read their theories as mutually complementary resources for defending party democracy today.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the two most influential proceduralist defenses of party democracy in contemporary debates by placing them in critical dialogue with Gramsci's

historical materialist theory of the party. Its central aim has been to clarify both the deep divergences and the surprising points of convergence between the Gramscian, Kelsenian proceduralist, and Schumpeterian minimalist traditions, and to evaluate the adequacy of their competing accounts of the party's vital role and function in democracy in light of the contemporary crisis.

By bringing Gramsci into dialogue with Kelsen and Schumpeter for the first time, this chapter not only contributes to current debates but also offers a new analytical framework for evaluating Gramsci's modern Prince, engaging with a set of arguments, concepts, and institutional proposals that have received little systematic attention in the existing scholarship on his thought. In doing so, the chapter has also challenged the limits of proceduralist approaches, while revealing the constructive possibilities of Gramsci's intervention for rethinking party democracy today. In particular, the chapter suggests that the future of party democracy can be secured not only by procedural democratic safeguards alone, but also by a party capable of organizing and expressing a new popular will under current social and political conditions. The next chapter continues this line of investigation by engaging with the second predominant perspective in the current debate on party democracy: left populism.

CHAPTER 3

Left Populism and the Myth of the People's Prince

> Virtue will take up arms against fury; and the battle will be brief, for the ancient valor is not yet dead in Italian hearts
>
> – Petrarch, *Italia mia*

> Politics has to be a matter of building meaning, an idea, a project for society, and it has to involve the people's participation, for the electorate can only be oriented by way of real engagement, a debate, a selection of the people who will represent you on the basis of the experiences that they have developed on the ground.
>
> – Luciana Castellina, "The Broken Bones of Democracy"

Left populism represents a distinct and increasingly influential perspective in contemporary debates on the role of parties, party leaders, and partisanship in democracy. Like Gramsci, left populists defend the party's role on substantive grounds: its task is not merely to regulate electoral competition or facilitate parliamentary representation, but to ensure that elected representatives respond to popular demands (Vergara 2020b; McCormick 2011; Mouffe 2018; Laclau 2005). In this way, left populists depart from minimalist and Kelsenian proceduralist theories which justify parties primarily in terms of their role in safeguarding the formal institutions of representative electoral democracy. According to left populists, these representative electoral institutions, including the system of party democracy itself, have become the very means through which political and economic elites enrich themselves at the expense of the liberty and equality of ordinary citizens (McCormick 2011, vii; Vergara 2020b, 2; Mouffe 2018, 40–54).

Left populists share with Gramsci a commitment to empowering exploited and disempowered citizens to hold political elites and representative institutions to account. However, they begin from a neo-Machiavellian realist view of politics that treats the division

between the elites and common citizens as permanent, bringing them into closer alignment with proceduralist approaches than with Gramsci's Marxist effort to overcome that class division. Like minimalist and Kelsenian proceduralists, left populists reject the possibility of a single political party that can represent or realize the common good, on the grounds that society is irreducibly divided and that conflicts over the meaning of the common good are unavoidable (Mouffe 2018, 3). In particular, they conceive society as divided into two camps, "the oligarchy" and "the people" (the *grande* and the *popolo*) and understand politics as a field of endless power struggle between them (Mouffe 2018, 3; McCormick 2011, 23).

Moreover, left populists view this "timeless antagonism" between the many and the few as conducive to equal liberty and popular empowerment and draw on Machiavelli's republican thought on the production of freedom through the institutionalization of this class conflict (McCormick 2011, 23; Vergara 2020b, 130–131; Spitz 2017). Accordingly, unlike Gramsci, who rejects any notion of an eternal division between rulers and ruled and conceives the party as a mediating institution tasked with overcoming the class conflict between elites and common citizens, left populists do not assign such a role to the party as a necessary condition of popular sovereignty. Instead, they locate the possibility of popular government in the figure of a popular leader – a Machiavellian Prince – who takes the side of the many against the elites and exercises power in their name.

This chapter critically evaluates left populism's response to the crisis of party democracy by bringing Gramsci to bear on its conception of the People's Prince. My aim is to highlight the paradoxical nature of such a figure of populist leadership for contemporary democracy and to challenge left populism's reliance on an anti-elitist approach to securing citizens' equal freedom. I argue that Gramsci's theory of the Modern Prince, as a blueprint for the construction of a new

mass party, provides a critical alternative to left populism by reminding us that, under contemporary conditions of mass politics and oligarchic domination, popular empowerment requires collective partisan organization rather than an individual leader that wields power on the people's behalf. The chapter examines two distinct versions of the People's Prince emerging from the most influential strands of left populism in contemporary democratic theory: agonistic and plebeian populism.

I begin with the agonistic model of the People's Prince, which emerges from the discursive conception of populism developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. This model provides the most influential theoretical articulation of left populism's attempt to reconstruct the party as a vehicle of popular empowerment under contemporary conditions. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) advance a post-Marxist reinterpretation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, recasting it not as the expansion of class-based political leadership into a universal emancipatory project, but as the discursive articulation of heterogeneous demands into a unified political subject called "the people" (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018; Thomas 2013; Chrysis 2024). Within this post-Marxist framework, the hegemonic party is conceived as the site in which the collective will of the people is discursively constructed. This discursive process of identity-formation occurs through the narrative of an antagonistic frontier against the elites (Laclau 2005, 97; Mouffe 2018, 40), which functions as the sole source of equivalence among otherwise disparate demands. Central to this process of unification is the people's strong affective attachment to a charismatic leader (Errejón and Mouffe 2016), who articulates their demands and champions their struggle against the dominating elites, including, the traditional party structures themselves.

The second model of the People's Prince arises from within a plebeian conception of populism as elaborated by radical neo-republican theorists such as John McCormick and Camila

Vergara. Emerging from within the Roman republican tradition, the plebeian populist Prince draws on a reinterpretation of Machiavelli as an anti-oligarchic partisan of the plebeian class and a champion of their conflict against the nobility. Against the Cambridge School interpretation of Machiavelli, which downplays the centrality of class conflict in his political thought, and in contrast to the discursive approach of agonistic populism which do not conceive popular struggle in class terms, plebeian populism views the institutionalization of class conflict between the common poor and the wealthy elites as a means for securing liberty and countering oligarchic domination. Here, "the people" is defined not as a discursive unification of heterogeneous demands but as a singular material category comprising the impoverished majority: what Vergara (2020a) calls "the people-as-plebs". From this plebeian populist standpoint, Machiavelli's Prince appears as a virtuous popular leader who establishes the institutions necessary for securing the freedom and material empowerment of the common poor – against oligarchic domination, with the aim of returning power to the people themselves (McCormick 2025; Vergara 2020b).

Both the agonistic and plebeian models of the People's Prince can be read as distinct approaches to party democracy insofar as they seek to reconcile party leadership with democracy's principle of popular rule. However, unlike Gramsci, they do not develop an institutional account of the mass party. Despite their differences, agonistic and plebeian populists diagnose the crisis of party-based democracy as the result of the oligarchization of representative government. On this view, representative democracy is in crisis not because parties fail to uphold free and fair elections (as minimalist theories maintain), nor because they fail to compromise with political opponents (as Kelsenian proceduralists argue), but because parties themselves have become oligarchic: they no longer respond to the demands of ordinary citizens and instead serve

the interests of economically and politically powerful elites (Vergara 2020b, 8; 2020a, 1–4; McCormick 2011, vii–ix; Mouffe 2018).

In response to the crisis of party democracy, both agonistic and plebeian populists advance a radical partisan strategy aimed at returning power to the people by repoliticizing the conflict between the subordinate many and the ruling few. This radical partisan strategy centers on mobilizing a dissatisfied populace around a singular leader who articulates and unifies popular demands while confronting dominant elites within the framework of electoral representative democracy. In this view, popular rule is realized when such a leader attains office and governs on the people's behalf by implementing a program that claims to embody their collective will. Yet this solution reproduces the very division between leaders and led that lies at the heart of the crisis of party democracy. By entrusting the formulation and execution of the popular program to a single leader, left populism forecloses the possibility of a democratic party structure that facilitates the formation and implementation of a collective agenda through the equal participation of its constituent parts.

Against this left populist strategy, Gramsci advances a revolutionary conception of partisanship grounded in the active and creative participation of the citizenry themselves. In his Notes on Machiavelli, Politics and the Modern State, written in a fascist jail in 1933 and building on themes already present in his earlier journalistic writings, Gramsci formulated a theory and strategy of the revolutionary party that implicitly critiques and offers an alternative to left populism's paradoxical figure of a People's Prince. "The modern prince, the myth-prince", he wrote,

> cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 129)

Gramsci's conception of the modern Prince is inseparable from his proposal for a new type of mass political party, no longer a Leninist cadre organization but an organization of broad-based participation of the popular classes (*classi poplari*). Gramsci's new mass party gave rise to a distinct revolutionary partisan tradition in Italy that later shaped the postwar identity and strategy of the PCI under Palmiro Togliatti's leadership (Castellina 2022). As a mass party that educated millions of people, drew them into political life, and, as Lucio Magri (2011, 381) recalls, "infused them with confidence that their collective action could change the world", the PCI made a significant contribution to the renewal and consolidation of Italian democracy after fascism. Gramsci's legacy thus charted a path between Leninist orthodoxy and classical social democracy, even if, as many have noted (Magri 2011; Femia 1981), key aspects of his innovations were often downplayed within the PCI. As this chapter shows, the Gramscian conception of revolutionary partisanship offers yet another distinctive path beyond contemporary left approaches and its ideal of a people's Prince.

The following critically compares Gramsci's conception of revolutionary partisanship with the radical realist view of partisanship advanced by both strands of left populism. I argue that left populism's understanding of "being a partisan", narrowly defined as taking the side of the many against the elites, yields a paradoxical model of democratic leadership in which popular empowerment is necessarily pursued not through the citizenry's active commitment to the common good but through the top-down intervention of a singular leader. In the left populist conception, the Prince appears as a pro-democratic figure who aligns with the people and leads their struggle against elite domination. Yet this model rests on a double myth: first, that a fragmented and subordinated populace can achieve collective self-determination once it is represented by a popular leader (democracy for the people rather than by the people); and

second, that such a leader, once in office, will faithfully embody the popular will and relinquish ultimate authority to ordinary citizens.

The following sections bring these myths into sharper focus and show how Gramsci's Modern Prince overcomes the hierarchical division between leader and people that left populism reproduces. Section one contrasts the meaning of partisanship in left populism with Gramsci's revolutionary conception, defending the latter as a more empowering way of channeling political conflict into popular-democratic governance. Section two turns to Laclau and Mouffe's discursive theory of agonistic populism and highlights the main democratic limitations of a post-Marxist revision of the Gramscian hegemonic party. Section three brings Gramsci to bear on neo-republican plebeian populism, emphasizing his distinctive commitments to social equality, liberty, and popular empowerment, which he derives from a divergent revolutionary partisan reading of Machiavelli – one that is "popular-democratic" yet decisively not populist. I conclude with a brief reflection on the contemporary relevance of Gramsci's model of the new mass party as an alternative to left populist models of the movement-party and the plebeian council and their anti-elitist approach, which seek to subordinate representative government to spontaneous popular action. I argue that Gramsci's emphasis on popular participation and his strategy of building class alliances provides a more adequate basis for institutionalizing popular power and guiding party reform in response to the contemporary crisis of party democracy.

Being Partisan: Taking Sides and Taking Part in a Universal Cause

Partisanship as a Civic Duty to the Common Good: Gramsci's Participatory Alternative to Left Populism

Partisanship, the act of taking sides in a conflict, is a central component of both Gramsci's political theory and contemporary theories of left populism. Yet what "being partisan" means for a Gramscian and a left populist differs significantly. Both Gramsci and left populists theorize partisanship within a realist framework that presumes the inevitability of political conflicts. For both, being partisan involves the act of aligning with a certain group or cause against an adversary, as opposed to standing above, or remaining neutral in, political conflicts. But the ethical-political function Gramsci assigns to partisanship and its core action of taking sides diverges sharply from that of left populism. In left populism, the ethical function of partisanship is defined by siding with the people against the elites. To be a good partisan is to align with the subordinate many in their struggle against the powerful few and to stake one's political commitments around those less powerful in the binary opposition between dominant and dominated groups. For Gramsci, by contrast, the ethical function of partisanship is not reducible to siding with the many against the ruling few but consists in assuming active responsibility for the good of the political community as a whole.

In his 1917 article "The Indifferent", Gramsci defines partisanship not as a pathology within the republic but as a civic duty to the common good. As he writes, "I believe, like Friedrich Hebbel… that 'to live means to be a partisan'…Whoever truly lives cannot but be a citizen, and take sides" (Gramsci 1982 [1917], 13). For Gramsci, partisanship denotes a practical activity equivalent to being a citizen: it is a sense of civic responsibility that one must take a position and choose a side in conflicts that pertain to the public interest. In a polity where individuals pursue different aims and where only a few, rather than all, live under conditions that allow them to exercise their liberty and political action, ordinary citizens cannot remain neutral in public matters or exist as detached observers, as if they were mere "strangers to the city"

(Gramsci 1982 [1917], 13). But, as Gramsci suggests in this article, to be a good partisan citizen and "to take sides" is not simply to choose a camp or to oppose those who are more powerful. Rather, in his view, taking sides means doing one's part – that is, participating responsibly in the pursuit of the public good. In this ethical-political conception, partisanship is irreducible to the pursuit of narrow sectarian interests. Instead, it denotes a strong sense of civic responsibility, as opposed to indifference, that consists in the willingness to participate and contribute to the good of the polity as a whole. This civic responsibility, Gramsci argues, follows directly from being a member of a political community.

As Urbinati (2019d) has noted, in medieval Italian city-states the terms "to take a side" and "to participate" were closely intertwined, as reflected in the verb *prendiparte*, which indicated a culture in which politics referred to the art of dealing with conflicts rooted not merely in individual differences but in distinct social identities (97). Writing in the context of the post–World War I crisis, when many Italians experienced systemic depoliticization and material deprivation, Gramsci draws an equivalence between the verb *parteggiare* (to take sides) and citizenship, to denote the simultaneous duty of ordinary citizens to organize themselves and to take part in a common struggle for universal freedom.

For Gramsci, being a partisan is not about advancing one's own freedom or interests in isolation, but about taking responsibility for the expansion of freedom for the whole community, where people can live together in peace and with their economic needs met. This is why he understands partisanship as an ethical-political commitment that combines an individual responsibility to others and to the common good with political actions such as organizing, taking sides, and participating. In "Discipline and Freedom" (1917), Gramsci further sharpens his civic conception of partisanship. Citizens who take sides – that is, who associate themselves with a

political movement – assume their share of responsibility for events that are prepared and then carried out by a collective, while at the same time becoming "the direct authors of these very events" (Gramsci 1982 [1917], 16). In this way, they render themselves autonomous and free by disciplining their own spontaneous will. For Gramsci, to discipline oneself means contributing to the elaboration of a political party's line by taking part in its internal discussions and then accepting its program, thereby integrating one's individual spontaneity within a collective framework. Moreover, this key theme in his early thought of partisanship and hence political association as an act of liberating and fulfilling oneself traverses and welds together his youthful writings and his prison notebooks. "Critical self-understanding", he writes in Notebook 11 §12,

> takes place through a struggle of political "hegemonies", of opposing directions, first in the field of ethics and then of politics, in order to arrive at a higher elaboration of one's own conception of reality. The awareness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is, political consciousness) is the first stage toward a further and progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice are finally unified. (Gramsci 1975b, 1385)

Since the value of freedom is, for Gramsci, not only a formal political right but a right (based on collective well-being and social equality) to fulfill oneself as a person, one's partisanship must also address economic inequality and class domination. Thus, Gramsci ascribes to partisanship, and to political action more generally, a universal emancipatory function: through their participation in political struggle, citizens come to recognize that the defense of their own liberty requires the transformation of the social conditions of class subjugation that prevent people, especially exploited and disempowered citizens, from becoming a fully free person and participating as equals in political life. In this way, Gramsci's notion of being a good partisan is tied to the process by which citizens become active and responsible agents in shaping a more just and democratic social order.

The central difference between Gramsci's conception of partisanship and that of left populism lies in how each understands the ethical function of taking sides in a democracy. For

left populism, taking sides is primarily a matter of choosing the correct camp: democracy is secured when the side of the people prevails, that is, when "the many" defeat and exclude oligarchic elites from power (Mouffe 2018, 79; McCormick 2011; Vergara 2020b; see Chambers 2023, 17). For Gramsci, by contrast, the problem of partisanship is not simply which side one takes, but whether one takes a side at all. What is at stake is not the correctness of one's position within a given conflict, but citizens' sense of indifference toward the public good and their refusal to act. Thus, in "Indifferenti" (1917), Gramsci argues that the greatest threat to democratic life is not only that a select few, who are formally authorized by the people, wield excessive power over the many, but that the many remain indifferent. Widespread passivity, he warns, leaves decision-making in the hands of an oligarchic minority and deprives ordinary citizens of the capacity to govern themselves.

Gramsci therefore counterposes ethical partisanship to indifference, understood as an anti-political form of inaction that undermines the defense of freedom against oligarchic domination. Indifference constitutes both a moral and civic failure because it entails withdrawal from the responsibilities of collective political and economic life. As he starkly puts it, "Indifference is apathy, parasitism, cowardice; it is not life… Indifference is the dead weight of history. It is the lead ball for the innovator". For Gramsci, the political problems of Italy since the Risorgimento cannot be explained solely by the persistence of coercive authority but must also be attributed to a system that values passivity instead of political action. "Indifference operates powerfully in history", he observes. "It operates passively, but it operates…it is the thing that disrupts the programme, that upsets the best laid plans; it is the brute matter that rises up against intelligence and smothers it" (Gramsci 1982 [1917], 13–14).

According to Gramsci, the cycle of undesirable outcomes in Italian political life – including persistent inequality and periodic eruptions of rebellion – originates less in the will to dominate on the part of ruling elites than in the widespread abstention of the general citizenry from political participation. To join a movement, he argues, is to "assume a share of responsibility for the events that are being prepared and to become a direct agent in bringing those events about" (Gramsci [1982] 1917, 16). When this responsibility is abdicated by the many, unfreedom persists not only through the dominance of a coercive authority but through apathy and the passive acceptance of an unequal order. Gramsci (1982 [1917]) expresses this claim most forcefully in a lengthy polemical reflection on the negative consequences of the people's indifference:

> The events that occur, the evil that befalls us all, the possible good that a heroic act (of universal value) can generate, are not due to the initiative of the few who are active, but to the indifference, the absenteeism of the many. The things that occur do not occur because some people exercise their will, but because the mass of men abdicates its own will and lets things be, allowing for knots to form that it will take a sword to unfasten, for laws to be passed that it will take a revolt to abrogate, for men to rise to power that it will take a mutiny to overthrow. The fate that appears to dominate history is nothing but the deceptive appearance of this indifference, of this absenteeism. (13)

The conclusion Gramsci draws from his diagnosis of the masses' passivity is not that elites ought to rule, as elitist republican thinkers of his time maintained. Rather, his argument reveals a strong commitment to the ideal of popular democracy: when the majority abstains from political participation, responsibility for liberation and changing the political order falls to a relatively small minority of actors, while ruling groups dominate public affairs without effective democratic oversight. As he laments,

> Events mature in the shadows: a few hands, unchecked by any control, weave the fabric of collective life, and the masses remain unaware because they do not concern themselves with it. The destiny of an era is shaped according to the narrow visions, immediate aims, ambitions, and personal passions of small active groups, while the mass of people remains unaware because it does not care. (Gramsci 1982 [1917], 14)

Thus, for Gramsci, merely siding with the many against the few cannot constitute the ethical basis of partisanship, since the many themselves often remain apathetic and abstain from their civic obligation. The fundamental division in society that concerns him most, therefore, is not simply between the elites and the common people, but between those who participate in bringing about the common good of the republic and those who remain indifferent, passive spectators who withdraw from responsibility both for political decision-making and for its outcomes. He describes this opposition as follows:

> And the [indifferent] becomes irritated, would like to escape the consequences, and for it to be clear that they did not will it, that they are not responsible…but none or very few ask themselves: if I too had done my duty, if I had tried to assert my will, my counsel, would what happened have happened? None or very few feel guilt for their indifference…for not having given their arm and their activity to those groups of citizens who, precisely to prevent that particular evil, were struggling and had set themselves the task of bringing about that particular good. (Gramsci 1982 [1917], 14)

Seen from this perspective, Gramsci assigns to partisanship a broader national-democratic function than left populism, which risks privileging a passive populace by elevating its opposition to the ruling few above the civic duty to contribute to the common good of the republic. While, for Gramsci, being partisan entails siding with a particular group within society, this group cannot be reduced to the disempowered many defined in opposition to the dominant few, as in left populism. Rather, he sides with active citizens, who are often a minority, but who overcome the powerful force of indifference by joining a cause, thereby becoming free, independent, and responsible participants in political decision-making.

In this respect, Gramsci belongs to a long Italian tradition of revolutionary thinkers from Machiavelli to Gobetti, the liberal revolutionary, who understands partisan conflict and political action as having an emancipatory function (Urbinati 2000, 35). For these Italian thinkers, partisanship serves as a counter to popular apathy in societies averse to conflict and is closely linked to civic education as the source of moral and political autonomy and democratic renewal.

In terms similar to Gramsci's, Gobetti spares no criticism of those who refuse to take a stand and shy away from conflict: "No one who is indifferent can be moral. To be honest is to have ideas and believe in them and make them one's own center and purpose. Apathy is the negation of humanity, the abasement of self" (Gobetti 2000 [1919], 103).

Like Gobetti, Gramsci understood partisanship not as a disruption of social cohesion but as a vehicle for the formation of a democratic citizenry, since it is through participation in conflict that individuals learn to relate to one another, to political movements, and to their adversaries, and become more conscious of their equal rights and duties as citizens. Even if, in Italy at the time, this active and politically conscious group constituted only a numerical minority, it represented, for Gramsci, the civic element capable of promoting self-government among the passive populace for the achievement of popular sovereignty. As he declared:

> I am a partisan, I live, I feel within the virile consciences of my side already pulsing the activity of the future city that my side is building. And in it the social chain does not weigh upon a few…but is the intelligent work of the citizens. In it there is no one who stands at the window watching while the few sacrifice themselves, exhaust themselves in sacrifice; and the one who stands at the window, lying in wait, wishing to take advantage of the little good that the activity of the few produces, vents his disappointment by reviling the one who sacrificed himself, the one who exhausted himself because he did not succeed in his aim. (Gramsci 1982 [1917], 14)

Gramsci's 1917 article is the only text in which he offers a precise definition of what it means, for him, to be a partisan. His broader revolutionary conception of partisanship, however, needs to be situated within the crises of the interwar period in Italy and his attempt to transform this moment into an opportunity for constructing a new popular collective subject through the modern Prince. From a left populist standpoint, however, his 1917 article directed almost exclusively at the inaction of the common people, rather than the conduct of economic and political elites, may appear controversial, even elitist, and certainly unexpected from a socialist revolutionary theorist of class struggle. Indeed, some democratic theorists have taken Gramsci's

suggestion that the common people often lack the cultural and political preconditions of self-rule as evidence of an endorsement of elite rule (Walzer 2002).

However, Gramsci was far from endorsing the elitist republican view that the common people are incapable of self-government. His thesis is more nuanced and more firmly committed to a popular-participatory conception of democracy than his critics have often acknowledged. What he argues, rather, is that the people cannot be presumed to exist as a self-governing agent. This formation of collective political agency requires individuals to assume civic responsibility by joining a cause, staying informed, and partaking in political struggle. Read in this light, Gramsci's concept of partisanship retains enduring relevance as a critique of the left populist view, which equates democracy with siding with the many in their conflict with the elites as the sole legitimate source of democratic authority.

Neo-Machiavellian Partisan Realism: The Struggle for Popular Power and Liberty against Oligarchic Domination

A core difference between Gramsci and left populist theories lies in their distinct understandings of the role of partisan conflict in securing democracy as a form of popular sovereignty designed to prevent oligarchic domination. In agonistic populist accounts, conflict against elites is valued primarily for its capacity to destabilize and disarticulate dominant hegemonic discourses and to sustain an open, plural field of public contestation among competing political projects (Mouffe 2013). Mouffe theorizes the emancipatory potential of such struggle within a post-Marxist framework of "radical and plural" agonistic democracy, in which democratic freedom is realized insofar as competition remains open and allows multiple demands to confront one another as equally legitimate adversaries (agonists rather than enemies)

in democratic debate (Mouffe 2005). On this view, democracy remains an agonistic pluralist field of hegemonic struggle, where a collective subject – the people – is continuously deconstructed, constructed and mobilized against dominant forces of hegemony of the time (Mouffe 2018, 10; Mouffe 2000).

Plebeian populists similarly affirm the productive role of conflict in securing equal liberty, but advocate institutional forms modeled on the class division between the people and wealthy elites. McCormick (2011), for example, proposes the creation of "class-specific, popularly empowering, and elite-constraining institutions" (9) designed to raise the class consciousness of ordinary citizens and enable effective oversight, including the exclusion, of wealthy elites from government. In this framework, the value of plebeian conflict with elites is grounded in a neo-republican conception of liberty as non-domination, according to which democracy requires that the many retain the capacity to check the power of the few.

Drawing on Machiavelli's claim that conflict between the *grandi* and the *popolo* generates laws favorable to liberty, plebeian populists argue for the institutionalization of this class conflict as a means of restoring power to the people and limiting the influence of wealthy groups within representative government (Vergara 2020b, 128; 2020a). Accordingly, recent proposals for a plebeian republican structure – such as Vergara's (2020b) Plebeian Council or McCormick's (2011) and Hamilton's (2016) Tribunate of the Plebs, selected by lot from non-wealthy citizens to exercise power over elected representatives – are presented as correctives to the power imbalance between society's two unequal parts and the best constitutional order for containing the threat of plutocracy within contemporary representative democracies.

There are important similarities between Gramsci's socialist democratic project and the radical democratic projects pursued by agonistic and plebeian populists. For example, Gramsci

shares with agonistic populists the aim of constructing a radically inclusive and pluralist collective subject of democracy, as well as the need for a new type of party capable of establishing the people as a hegemonic force. Yet agonistic populism's post-Marxist framework departs from Gramsci by rejecting his commitment to the Marxist tenet that class struggle, and the specific leadership role played by the working class, are central to guiding society's emancipation from the hegemony of the dominant wealthy class in advanced capitalist societies.

In this respect, Gramsci's political thought is closer to plebeian populists than the "neo-Gramscian" agonists, who likewise emphasize the centrality of class conflict in generating a freer and more balanced political order capable of preventing the political and economic inequality and containing ruling class domination. Like plebeian republicans, Gramsci endorses class-specific institutional mechanisms for constraining the excessive influence of wealth and securing elite accountability to the public interest (McCormick 2006). His political theory also rests on a necessary relation between material and political equality, without reducing politics to economics. This overlaps with the plebeian materialist strand of constitutional thought developed by Vergara (2020a, 120), which sees the institutionalization of popular power as a condition of emancipation. Finally, Gramsci, like plebeian republicans, stresses the importance of creating new mechanisms for popular participation beyond voting in competitive elections, in contrast to elitist-proceduralist strands of neo-republicanism (Pettit 2012) and economic models of democracy such as Schumpeter's (McCormick 2006; Vergara 2020b, 43).

Despite their shared roots in Marxist class politics, Gramsci's approach diverges significantly from both agonistic and plebeian populism. These differences are most pronounced in their respective "Machiavellian realist" conceptions of partisanship and of the party as a popular-empowering institution. Unlike agonistic and plebeian populists, who reject the

possibility of a universal common good in a world structured by relations of conflict and power-struggle, Gramsci grounds partisan politics in a commitment to political equality and in the collective responsibility of advancing the common good. On this basis, he rejects the permanence of class conflict between the people and the elites and instead seeks to build a party that overcomes this division through their co-creation of a national-popular collective will.

As Chambers (2023) argues, agonistic democracy and plebeian neo-republicanism represent two radical variants of "partisan realism", united by the view that democracy depends on identifying the forces of domination and excluding the wealthy and powerful few from power (82–83). Agonists and plebeian neo-republicans are partisans insofar as they seek the political victory of the many over the few, and realists in the precise sense that they understand democratic politics as inherently conflictual, asymmetrical, and structured by struggles for power. On this left populist view, the point of democracy is to secure the rule of the many by organizing popular power and strategically intervening in the competitive struggle for power within a specific political moment, or "conjuncture" (Mouffe 2018, 10).

Unlike Kelsenian proceduralist defenses, which place formal equal freedom at the center of democracy's value, agonistic and plebeian populists begin from a critical diagnosis of underlying power relations that undermine both the distribution of power and the material and political equality of ordinary citizens. This realist stance, which has been called "critical realism" (Bagg 2024a), focuses on identifying the forces of domination within a given socio-political order that disrupt an egalitarian balance of power between groups and developing means to protect public power from elite capture (Bagg 2024b). Beginning not from the ideal of collective self-rule but from a diagnosis of the existing distribution of power, critical realists define democracy in strict partisan terms as an "ongoing process of partisan opposition to whichever

groups pose the greatest threats at a given time" (Bagg 2024a, 7). In left populist accounts more specifically, the mobilization of citizens against these forces of elite domination becomes the primary source of political commonality, as shared grievances toward an order experienced as unjust generate collective motivations for resistance (Mouffe 2018; Vergara 2020a; McCormick 2024), but often at the expense of obscuring other important differences and conflicts among heterogeneous and antagonistic groups.

Despite their shared populist defense of democracy as the mobilization of the people against oligarchic domination, agonistic and plebeian partisan realism differ in important ways. Most significant for our comparison with Gramsci is their divergent understanding of the role of class conflict in radical democratic politics. Agonistic populists, unlike plebeians, do not regard class struggle as a central or historically relevant mode of political conflict for mobilizing and empowering marginalized citizens in contemporary democracies. Instead, they conceive the people as a discursive construct composed of a multiplicity of unsatisfied demands but without any pre-existing social unity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 2005; for a critique, see Vergara 2020a).

According to Mouffe (2018), contemporary "neoliberal capitalism" has generated "new forms of subordination" that exist "outside the productive process" and give rise to demands that "no longer correspond to social sectors defined in sociological terms and by their location in the social structure" (6). As struggles over environmental protection, sexism, racism, and other forms of domination have become increasingly central, the political frontier of populism, she argues, must be constructed so as to articulate a chain of equivalences among a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands into a new collective will. In this respect, agonistic populism partially echoes Gramsci's insight that, in order to secure hegemony, political leadership must construct a

popular collective will irreducible to the narrow economic interests of a single class. Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe extensively appropriate Gramsci's non-class reductionist concept of the "national-popular" in their left populist project of building a hegemonic movement-based leadership (Acha 2019; Sortiris 2019; Jones 2020; McNally 2019; Martin 2019). However, their post-Marxism detaches Gramsci's theory of national-popular will formation from its grounding in class politics and from his democratic strategy of building a system of alliances among social classes as integral to the popular struggle for emancipation from class domination.

Even though plebeian populists place class struggle back at the center of radical democratic politics, their emphasis on institutionalizing the division between elites and the people marks a significant divergence from Gramsci's account of class-based party leadership, which is guided instead by the quest to organize a balance of social forces and achieve a dynamic equilibrium (McNally 2008). For Gramsci, class leadership serves as the basis for constructing alliances capable of generating a new national-popular will. By contrast, plebeian populist approaches seek to reform democratic institutions on the assumption that class divisions are a permanent feature of politics that must be institutionalized rather than abolished if representative democratic systems are to effectively curb oligarchy and protect popular power.

The difference between Gramsci's revolutionary partisan approach and that of agonistic or plebeian left populism hinges on a divergent appropriation of Machiavelli's political realism. In *The Prince*, he famously asks whether it is better to be loved or feared, and his answer is that a ruler should be both feared and loved if given the choice, since "it is much more secure to be feared than loved, when one cannot have both" (Machiavelli 1976 [1532], 65). Gramsci likewise analyzes politics in terms of the dichotomy of force and consent. According to Gramsci (1971,

170), the party as modern Prince must adopt a dual perspective that combines force and consent, as captured in Machiavelli's image of the centaur, half animal and half human.

Gramsci presents these paired moments – force and consent, authority and hegemony, agitation and propaganda, violence and civilization, the individual and the universal – as simultaneously in tension and mutually interdependent, but he always places greater emphasis on the second moment in each pairing. He draws the notion of a princely leader or party that adopts a "dual perspective in political action and in national life" directly from Machiavelli precisely to describe the reciprocal relation between conflict and equal freedom, where the aim of the class struggle between the popular masses and the ruling classes is not the continuation of class contradictions but the creation of a dynamic equilibrium among society's unequal and opposing groups (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 170). In this way, his reading of Machiavelli's political thought differs sharply from left populist interpretations that emphasize the permanence of class conflict and locate the solution to oligarchic domination in its institutionalization, rather than its overcoming.

As Fontana (2017, 328) points out, Machiavelli distinguishes in the *Discourses* between two forms of class conflict between the nobility and the people: one productive and reciprocal, constitutive of republican liberty as non-domination, and the other destructive, leading to factionalism and political decay. The vitality of the Roman republic depended on regulated conflict between the few and the many, while its decline followed from the degeneration of that conflict into private and fragmented struggles. Contemporary left populist theories draw heavily on Machiavelli's insight on the productive role of conflict in securing liberty for the many. However, unlike Gramsci, they place greater emphasis on the moment of forceful opposition in seizing power from the elites. Whether in plebeian accounts that seek to institutionalize class

division, or in agonistic accounts of politics as a permanent field of hegemonic struggle between "the people" and the dominant power bloc, these approaches treat the continual identification of an external adversary as essential to the exercise of popular power. Gramsci, by contrast, draws a different lesson from Machiavelli's realism. While he does not advocate the elimination of political conflicts, he nevertheless thinks that conflict alone is insufficient for the formation of a national-popular will in modern societies.

Although Gramsci was aware of Machiavelli's view that the identification of an external enemy can serve a new prince, he did not regard the presence of such an enemy as essential for consolidating hegemonic rule, nor did he consider mobilizing opposition around a common enemy normatively superior to forging active consensus among social classes around the common good. Indeed, he expresses reservations about the effectiveness of a form of hegemonic leadership secured through opposition alone and instead regards consensual practices such as compromise as a more productive strategy for organizing a popular will.

For Gramsci, the predominance of consensus over force is especially significant in the context of the modern state, where the expansion of civil society and the proliferation of institutions such as political parties, trade unions, schools, and cultural associations render social power more differentiated than in earlier medieval states. In modern conditions, he argues, it is more effective in the long term to construct a collective will "directed toward goals which are rational and concrete" than to rely on a primarily defensive, oppositional strategy (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 130). As he explains:

> An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies – i.e. to change the political direction of certain forces which have to be absorbed if a new, homogeneous politico-economic historical bloc, without internal contradictions, is to be successfully formed. And, since two 'similar' forces can only be welded into a new organism either through a series of compromises or by force of arms, either by binding them to each other as allies or by

> forcibly subordinating one to the other, the question is whether one has the necessary force, and whether it is 'productive' to use it. If the union of two forces is necessary in order to defeat a third…the only concrete possibility is compromise. (Gramsci 1971, 168)

For Gramsci, class struggle is not only a means of opposing domination but also a condition of political innovation, insofar as it enables the reconfiguration of relations among social groups that are initially opposed or even hostile. In his revolutionary conception, class struggle is understood as the motor of emancipatory transformation based on the opposition between exploiting and exploited classes. Thus, it cannot be exhausted by the defeat of elites or the establishment of the rule of the many but rather requires a transformative strategy such as the organization of class alliances into a new popular collective will. Such a notion of the emancipatory function of class struggle rejects a conception of political conflict as a fixed binary between two opposing camps in society and instead presupposes a more complex and dynamic field of social relations than that assumed by populist frameworks.

In contrast, left populist approaches adopt a neo-Machiavellian realism centered on the permanence of conflict and power struggle between ruling elites and subordinate citizens. In doing so, they reduce democratic politics to a binary opposition between the powerful and the powerless and render the national political community vulnerable to exploitation, while narrowing emancipatory class struggle to the mere achievement of political power, rather than as only an aspect of the broader struggle for equal freedom. Left populism's binary conception of social conflict between the few and many also informs their theory of what form of political leadership is necessary to secure liberty.

Since politics is a binary conflict between the dominating few and the dominated many, the realization of popular liberty is seen to require a single leader who openly favors the former and possesses powers to unify and direct them against their common adversary. In this view, the leader need not share the social position of the subordinate classes but must instead function as a

political agent capable of articulating their demands and organizing them into a collective force. Accordingly, in both post-Marxist and radical-republican populist readings, Machiavelli's Prince is recast as a virtuous leader who embodies the constituent power of the people and serves as the effective political agent through which this collective power struggles against oligarchic domination (Negri 1992; Mouffe 2018, 10; McCormick 2011, 26–31; McCormick 2025; Vergara 2020a, 266).

Gramsci, by contrast, develops what has been described as a "revolutionary realist" reinterpretation of Machiavelli's Prince and theory of political leadership (Johnston et al. 2017, 36). In the Prison Notebooks, Gramsci transforms Machiavelli's new Prince from an individual ruler into a collective political actor, the revolutionary party, whose task is to organize the masses as actively consenting protagonists of an emancipatory project in response to the specific political problems confronting Italy at the time. For Gramsci, Machiavelli represents Italy's "precocious Jacobin", that is, a creative politician who recognized that the formation of a national-popular collective will, and the founding of a new state, require the active participation of the masses. In the modern world, however, this constituent popular power must assume the political form of a party capable of "organizing and expressing" that transformative collective will on a national scale. As he writes:

> It has already been said that the protagonist of the new Prince could not in the modern epoch be an individual hero, but only the political party… that determinate party which has the aim of founding a new type of State" (and which was rationally and historically created for that end). (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 147)

Gramsci's emphasis on effective leadership as a moment of popular self-organization marks a fundamental break with left populist versions of Machiavelli's new Prince. In his revolutionary realist interpretation, the problem of democratic leadership is relocated from the figure of the individual prince, who claims to embody the power of the people, to a political

party grounded in the active and equal participation of citizens in the pursuit of collective goods. Effective leadership, in this Gramscian vision, is not opposed to popular participation but functions as its enabling condition. A political party organized around equal participation is therefore oriented toward enhancing popular accountability, rather than simply diminishing the power of elected officials, as in the contradictory logic of populism's anti-elitist leadership. In such populist frameworks, a single figure is tasked with realizing democratic ends on behalf of the people, namely, by circumventing the procedural means of democratic government by the people.

In this respect, Gramsci avoids what Richard Bellamy (2018) identifies as the paradox of the "democratic Prince" within neo-Machiavellian realist and instrumentalist accounts of politics. These approaches emphasize the role of political leaders as strategic actors operating within a realist understanding of power, whose virtue lies in the capacity to manipulate circumstances, exploit peoples' weaknesses, and seize political opportunities through force where it is necessary for obtaining power. From this neo-Machiavellian realist perspective, Bellamy (2018) argues, the effective exercise of leadership, stemming from Machiavelli's insight that, for a political analyst to be useful to those who practice politics, they must explore how political regimes really operate, may paradoxically justify the subversion of democratic means in the pursuit of democratic ends.

Gramsci, too, was well aware that Machiavelli's realism could "serve reactionaries and democrats alike, just as skillful swordplay serves both honest men and brigands" (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 135). This claim was associated with the "anti-Machiavellian" view prevalent in Italy's intellectual milieu at the time, originating in Benedetto Croce's interpretation of the Machiavelli's political realism (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 133–136). Gramsci's reading stands

in contrast both to the anti-Machiavellians who rejected political realism on moralistic grounds, and to the subsequent instrumentalist appropriations of the Prince characteristic of the neo-Machiavellian tradition, from elite theory to the contemporary post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe and the radical democratic strand of republicanism. Indeed, Gramsci advances a more genuine interpretation of Machiavelli's political realism that proves more democratic because of the decisive weight he assigns to popular opinion and to the transformative role of political education grounded in equal participation within the party (Femia 1981). In doing so, his Machiavellianism helps overcome the apparent contradiction between effective leadership and the democratic practice of participatory self-government.

Gramsci (1971 [1933]) interprets Machiavelli not only as "the scientist of politics, relevant in every period" but as the "active politician" who "revealed something", but whose revelation aims to educate "those who are not in the know", that is, those who do not acquire political know-how as a result of their socio-economic position within the existing educational system (140). Yet, Gramsci does not infer from the masses' subordinate status, like some egalitarian theorists, that the people should be left without effective intellectual leadership (Femia 1995). Nor does he think, like elitist vanguard-models, that political education can proceed in the absence of the insights and input of subordinate classes (Morera 1990a; Mills 1990). Rather, he finds in Machiavelli's realism a democratic resolution to the division between intellectual elites and the masses. As he argues,

> It seems clear that Machiavelli wished to persuade these forces of the necessity of having a leader who knew what he wanted and how to obtain it, and of accepting him with enthusiasm even if his actions might conflict or appear to conflict with the generalized ideology of the time. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 136)

Gramsci (1971 [1933]) reinterprets Machiavelli's democratic intention within the context of the revolutionary circumstance in contemporary Italy, in order to recover a theory of political

leadership that is "especially useful to the side which is 'not in the know', since that is where the historically progressive force is to be found" (136). Unlike Machiavelli, however, Gramsci is concerned not with individual leaders but with the leadership of social groups. In the modern world, the democratic leader can no longer be conceived as an individual protagonist but must take the form of a collective organism, namely a political party. In his revolutionary realist conception, the party, or "the active politician", is a "creator" and an "initiator", yet it "does not create from nothing", that is, from a disorganized multitude (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 172; Fontana 1993). Nor does the active politician "move in the turbid void of his own desires and dreams"; rather, he "bases himself on effective reality". But what, Gramsci asks, "is this effective reality? Is it something static and immobile, or is it not rather a relation of forces in continuous motion and shift of equilibrium?" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 172).

For Gramsci, effective action consists in "apply[ing] one's will to the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist and are operative", that is, in "basing oneself on the particular force which one believes to be progressive and strengthening it to help it to victory". Only in this sense, he argues, can the active politician be said to "mov[e] on the terrain of effective reality", such that "what ought to be" is not abstract or utopian, but "concrete" (Gramsci 1971, 172). Applied to the party, this means that effective democratic leadership requires the construction of a collective will out of existing social forces, rather than its imposition from above. The "materials" of this construction must be found within the people's own culture – local languages, popular literature – and within their institutions, such as workers' councils, social clubs, and other forms of collective organization. In this way, the party does not create unity *ex nihilo* but organizes and elevates the dispersed elements of popular life into a

coherent political project that already articulates the transformation of existing relations of power.

Agonistic and plebeian populists likewise adopt Machiavelli's realist framework to grasp what he calls the "effectual truth" of politics and existing power relations, taking human societies as they are rather than as they ought to be as the guide for action. However, they do not, as Gramsci does, theorize the solution to the enduring problem of political and social inequality in terms of building a political party grounded in citizens' active and equal participation. Instead, left populist strategies center on the paradoxical leadership of a People's Prince that operates largely external to popular participation. But these risks reproducing a familiar problem of radical partisan organization, namely the tendency to empower others, such as progressive party leaders, intellectuals, or activists, to act on behalf of the people rather than serving the role of a guide through which the people define and carry out their own common goals.

Gramsci sought to overcome such a paradoxical form of democratic leadership by reconceptualizing the Marxist party from an organized cadre of revolutionaries into a collective mass party that fuses popular participation from below with political knowledge or "direction" from above (Magri 1970). In doing so, he opened a path beyond a party form that reproduces the problem of leaders standing outside the class struggle while instrumentalizing the democratic demands of subordinate classes for the pursuit of state power (Magri 1970; Rossanda 1970). The revolutionary party he envisioned was not an elite vanguard in which mass demands have an extrinsic relation to the party's revolutionary perspective, remaining only partially conscious and thus susceptible to instrumentalization by it. Rather, Gramsci defines the party as

> a party of the masses who, through their own efforts, are striving to liberate themselves autonomously from political and industrial servitude through the organization of political economy, and not a party which makes use of the masses for its own heroic attempts to imitate the French Jacobins. (Gramsci 1994 [1920], 309)

Since leaders and led are, in this framework, organically linked, the decisive moment of the revolutionary process – the party's conquest of power – is freed from any cynical Machiavellian connotations, becoming instead a transformative moment whose content has already been defined by the people themselves. As the remaining sections of this chapter show, in turn, agonistic and plebeian populist ideas of the people's Prince fall short of this popular-participatory conception of the party opened up by Gramsci.

Agonistic Populism: Hegemonic Leadership without Working Class Struggle

Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory of Populism: A Post-Gramscian Political Strategy?

Laclau and Mouffe's proposal for a left populist project is best understood as a post-Gramscian strategy for moments of hegemonic crisis, in which the established order, including the institutions of representative democracy, lose their ability to command popular consent, and a new form of hegemonic leadership emerge to resolve the crisis. Left populism draws its core strategy directly from Gramsci's emphasis on building durable alliances beyond the proletariat, but it rearticulates his project in a "post-class" electoral context that follows the empirical decline of strong class-based political associations and the erosion of mass parties of the left and right (Mudde 2010).

Despite its aim to construct a form of leadership capable of representing the people as a genuinely pluralistic collective subject, irreducible to any particular social class's interests, the demagogic risks of Laclau and Mouffe's left populism remain unresolved (Urbinati 2014, 154-157). These demagogic risks, as I argue, stem from its attempt to construct a form of hegemonic leadership without a class basis, thereby de-linking it from Gramsci's project of building a party grounded in social equality as a necessary condition for political equality. Within Laclau and

Mouffe's left populist framework, Gramsci's strategy of building social alliances becomes instead a process of establishing chains of semiotic difference and equivalence that depend extensively on the rhetoric of a popular leader, which shares more characteristics of a demagogue rather than with a leader that is responsive to real democratic demands.

As Urbinati (2014) has argued, the central problem with left populism is that its reduction of politics to a polarized opposition between the people and the elites is incompatible with the requirements of an inclusive and pluralist democracy. Nevertheless, Laclau and Mouffe ground their version of left populism in an "agonistic" conception of democracy, which Mouffe (1993; 2000; 2014) defines as a radically pluralist field of permanent, open-ended contestation among multiple groups struggling to become hegemonic, each of which recognize one another's equal right to compete for power. The basis of Mouffe's agonistic democracy is a theory of the indeterminacy and indecision of all social orders, and the radically inclusive principle that no single group's worldview can or should become fixed and dominate over the whole but should instead remain open to public contestation and hence replacement.

Within this radical plural democratic framework, agonistic populism centers on an ongoing struggle for hegemony between the people, who is defined in radical pluralist terms as an "ensemble of equivalential demands", and the forces of domination within a given conjuncture, defined as the powerful few who exercise control over the institutions that produce meaning, values and the ideological predominance of a particular group (Laclau 2005, 171; Mouffe 2018, 10). At the core of the agonistic populist agenda is the "radicalization" of existing democracies through the mobilization of a political coalition of disempowered groups. However, this coalition does not share a "common essence", nor does their unity embody what Gramsci calls a "rational good sense". Rather, their unity is contingent and held together solely through

their shared opposition to those who dominate, namely, the power bloc or establishment of elites who control the state (Errejón and Mouffe 2016).

Moreover, the process of unifying heterogeneous demands into a collective will, according to Laclau and Mouffe, requires a powerful political agent: a charismatic leader who appeals to "the people" as a new collective subject of change and who champions their counter-hegemonic struggle against ideologically dominant elites, whose power rests on a worldview that has come to be accepted as common sense and solely legitimate (Mouffe 2018, 70; Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 108). For Mouffe (2014), the hegemonic practices of dominant elites constrain the ideal of an agonistic democracy, and thus the task of radical democratic politics is to stage a counter-hegemonic struggle in which a pluralistic people disarticulate what, in a given moment, is accepted as the natural order and replace it with a new common sense. Without this counter-hegemonic struggle, the reigning ideology moulds desires, values and discourses in a way that stabilizes an inegalitarian order.

To counter what it understands primarily as ideological-cultural supremacy, rather than socioeconomic domination and inequality, agonistic populism advances a strategy centered on the discursive construction of a popular alliance of disempowered groups subordinated by the established hegemonic system. But the identity and objectives of this popular alliance are not grounded in determinate social relations or shared material demands. Rather, they are constituted through the practice of political articulation itself, namely through a narrative that draws an "antagonistic frontier" dividing society into two binary camps: us versus them (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2014). According to Mouffe (2014), the us/them distinction is unavoidable and constitutive of politics, but because it is discursively constructed, she maintains that it remains compatible with pluralism and democratic contestation among politically equal adversaries.

This strictly discursive articulation of the people requires the production of what Laclau (2005) calls an "empty signifier", which is equivalent to a political term (i.e. equality, freedom, justice) without any fixed or specific meaning so that it can stand in for a wide range of identities and different demands. As a set of indeterminate demands, the empty signifier displaces the need for any social class-basis of popular unity and becomes the principal mechanism the people are mobilized against a common antagonist, who is cast as the sole obstacle to the realization of popular sovereignty and social justice.

There is a clear tension within agonistic populism between its principle that democratic politics should remain open to multiple groups and its reliance on a mechanism that unifies the people by abstracting them from their real determinate social differences and equivalences. Laclau and Mouffe want a radical plural democracy where many groups coexist as equals, but their populist method creates unity by collapsing citizens' real differences into a simplified and potentially totalizing "people" held together solely through their shared hostility toward a common enemy.

These peculiar features of agonistic populism were first developed by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), where they sought to elaborate a "post-Marxist" doctrine of radical democracy by extracting a non-class reductionist theory of politics from Gramsci's thought. In this influential work, Laclau and Mouffe depart from the traditional socialist project centered on universal class struggle and instead advance a post-structuralist discourse theory of social and political change. Rejecting the Marxist view that the totality of social relations is determined by class, they argue instead that it is constituted through discursive practices in order to advance a conception of politics without any fixed common foundation, but rather as a radically open and contingent struggle to construct and contest hegemonic formations.

Directed at the perceived inadequacies of traditional Marxist and social democratic parties, Laclau and Mouffe assert that the Left should abandon the search for a single revolutionary class, such as the proletariat, and instead pursue a project of radical and plural democracy in which diverse social movements (feminist, anti-racist, environmental, among others) form contingent hegemonic alliances to challenge existing power structures. In subsequent jointly and individually authored texts, they developed this post-Marxist theory of radical democracy into a populist conception of politics. Populism, for Laclau and Mouffe, is politics because it constitutes "the people" as a political totality without abandoning a view of society as permanently divided and asymmetrically structured by the competition for power between the many and the few.

In Mouffe's most recent formulation, agonistic populism is both a theory of politics and a practical party strategy, and it has been operationalized by parties such as Spain's Podemos (Errejón and Mouffe 2016; see Kim 2024; Rico Motos and Del Palacio Martín 2025). Thus, agonistic populism stands apart from other theories of the party and party-based leadership insofar as its theoretical assumptions correspond directly to existing, real-world political practice. As a political theory, agonistic populism draws on multiple intellectual sources, including Carl Schmitt's claim that politics is an arena of conflict between friends and enemies, and Machiavelli's political realism, specifically his asserts that politics is a domain of power struggle where moral principles have little relevance (Mouffe 2018, 65). Despite these diverse, and at times contradictory intellectual sources, agonistic populism relies most heavily on what Mouffe describes as a "heterodox" appropriation of Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 39).

From Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe retain two central insights. First, starting from the premise that politics involves a dimension of antagonism that cannot be fully eliminated, they appropriate his emphasis on the need for forms of consensus and his argument that the construction of a new hegemony requires the articulation of a multiplicity of social groups into a collective will. Second, they draw on his account of ruling-class hegemony, particularly the stress he places on the ideological dimension of elite domination, as a form of power maintained not only through control of the coercive state apparatus or the economy, but through the control over institutions in civil society where meanings, values, and common sense are established.

However, Laclau and Mouffe introduce significant modifications to Gramsci's theory of hegemony by reinterpreting it within a post-structuralist theory of discourse. In doing so, they displace class struggle as the central axis of political conflict and replace it with what Mouffe calls "agonistic pluralism" (Mouffe 1999), according to which the common good does not exist as a substantive basis for active participation in a political community, as it does for Gramsci, but instead functions as a "horizon" around which collective political identities are constructed and mobilized (Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 41). Accordingly, agonistic populism conceives the democratic arena as a site of perpetual hegemonic struggle over the disarticulation and rearticulation of the collective will of the people. In this post-Marxist, neo-Gramscian account, there is no stable or substantive consensus among citizens. Rather, democracy is understood instead as a continuous contest among competing agonistic forces over how "the people" are defined.

Unlike Gramsci, the people as a hegemonic collective will is not constituted through determinate social relations and class alliances, but through the power of discursive practices. Laclau describes this discursive process of collective-will formation:

> If I refer to a set of social grievances, to widespread injustice, and attribute its source to the "oligarchy", for instance…I am constituting the "people" by finding the common identity of a set of social claims in their opposition to - oligarchy…This is why an equivalential chain has to be expressed through the cathexis of a singular element: because we are dealing not with a conceptual operation of finding a common feature underlying all social grievances, but with a performative operation constituting the chain as such. (Laclau 2005, 97)

In Laclau's account, hegemony is secured by a political agent capable of constructing unity among otherwise heterogeneous subjects by foregrounding what they share in common – above all, their opposition to a common enemy – despite their divergent interests and identities. This marks a decisive departure from Gramsci, who does not regard shared opposition to an adversary as sufficient basis for unifying a multiplicity of diverse groups with conflicting interests and demands.

From a Gramscian perspective, Laclau and Mouffe's hegemonic strategy is problematic for democracy because it concentrates the power of discursive articulation in the figure of a popular leader, who is treated as uniquely capable of unifying and mobilizing the people. In doing so, it displaces the active participation of citizens in defining their own antagonisms and common aims, while assigning a disproportionate role to a charismatic leader as the symbolic locus of political unity. Moreover, their claim that heterogeneous demands can be unified only through the identification of a common external enemy brings their account closer to Machiavelli's conception of politics than to Gramsci's.

For Gramsci, the consolidation of hegemonic rule depends not on the image of an antagonist, but on the active and responsible participation of citizens in political life. While Laclau and Mouffe retain Gramsci's insight that the empowerment of subordinate classes and groups requires the consensual political formations like alliances, their populist framework places greater weight on the moment of force, insofar as democratic agency of the people requires a populist leader capable of seizing political power in their name. As a result, even if the

aim of the populist leader is to restore power to the people/many, this model of hegemonic leadership falls short of Gramsci's conception of the political party as an intermediary institution capable of enabling a more equal distribution of power among citizens to influence politics and determine public policies.

Mouffe elaborates this radical partisan strategy in her book *For a Left Populism* (2018), where she defends a left-wing populist party not as a vehicle for a determinate ideological program, but as a discursive strategy for mobilizing the people around a project of agonistic democracy in the battle against right-wing populism and neoliberal hegemony. As she puts it, "This book is meant to be a political intervention and it openly acknowledges its partisan nature" (Mouffe 2018, 9). At the core of this left populist project is her concept of agonistic democracy, grounded in a commitment to radical pluralism and anti-essentialism. For Mouffe, the democratic political arena is a conflictual but regulated space in which citizens advance competing political projects while recognizing one another not as "enemies", but as "agonists", that is, adversaries with an equally legitimate right to contest for power. On this anti-essentialist view, the value of agonistic plural struggle lies in its recognition of multiple forms of domination without privileging any single social group, as well as in its capacity to re-politicize struggles for equality and justice against ruling elites.

In the current conjuncture, Mouffe argues that the conditions for agonistic democracy are both constrained and enabled by the crisis of neoliberal hegemony. A proliferation of unsatisfied demands, combined with the failure of traditional parties, has destabilized the prevailing ideological order and opened space for the construction of a new collective political subject capable of reconfiguring a social order widely experienced as unjust (Mouffe 2018). This dynamic also helps explain the electoral success of right-wing populism, which mobilizes similar

grievances through exclusionary and nationalist appeals, and underscores the need to counter it with a left-wing populism capable of "mobilizing common affects in defense of equality and social justice" (Mouffe 2018, 6).

In keeping with her post-Marxist approach, Mouffe diagnoses our current conjuncture as a "populist moment", in which the central axis of political conflict is no longer between dominant and subordinate classes, but between competing constructions of "the people": right-wing populist parties, which articulate the people in nativist, xenophobic, and exclusionary terms, and left-wing populism, which seeks to construct a more inclusive, egalitarian, and democratic collective subject. However, as she warns,

> This [populist] return of the political may open the way for authoritarian solutions…but it can also lead to the re-affirmation and extension of democratic values. Everything will depend on which political forces will succeed in hegemonizing the current democratic demands and the kind of populism that emerges victorious from the struggle. (Mouffe 2018, 6)

Thus, while Mouffe presents populism as providing the necessary political frontier for responding to the crisis of neoliberal hegemony and the decline of representative democracy, she explicitly defends left-wing populism and seeks to secure its victory in this hegemonic struggle in order "to recover and deepen the ideals of equality and popular sovereignty that are constitutive of a democratic politics" (Mouffe 2018, 10). Put differently, while she conceives agonistic democracy as a radically open and plural arena of contestation, her project ultimately aims at the triumph of a particular – left – articulation of the people.

For Mouffe, then, the party's appeal to the people functions not as an expression of substantive unity based on citizens' common interests but is rather a strategic instrument for gaining advantage in a competitive struggle for political power. Populism, she argues, following Laclau's (2005) definition, "is not an ideology and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content", but rather a "discursive strategy" that "asserts society is always divided

and discursively constructed through hegemonic practices" (10). More specifically, it operates through the articulation of a narrative that constructs a "political frontier dividing society into two camps and calls for the mobilization of 'the underdog' against 'those in power'" (Mouffe 2018, 10).

Mouffe's conception of "the political" immediately raises the question of what, substantively, distinguishes left-wing from right-wing populism as competing discursive strategies against elites, and why citizens should support the former over the latter. Her answer is that right-wing populism is characterized by an authoritarian relation of political representation that constrains meaningful participation, whereas left-wing populism is structured along the opposition between those below (the dominated, dispossessed, disempowered many) and those above (the dominating, powerful few), and aims to empower the former against the latter. Left populism, as opposed to right populism, therefore, is understood as having a "progressive character" through its commitment to equality, in line with Bobbio's well-known basic criterion of "the left" (Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 143).

Despite these democratic commitments, Laclau and Mouffe's left populist project has been subject to extensive criticism in contemporary democratic theory (Saffon and Urbinati 2025; Vergara 2020a; Arato and Cohen 2021; Urbinati 2014; Wolkenstein 2016; Müller 2016). Many critics focus on their conception of populism as a discursive process of identity formation that constructs a hegemonic, unifying narrative of "the people", arguing that it risks anti-pluralism by erasing meaningful differences and "mak[ing] the people a crowd with one voice, leader, or opinion" (Urbinati 2014, 143). In current debates on the crisis of party democracy, proceduralist theorists further contend that the left-populist movement-party model undermines the pluralist logic of competitive party systems by privileging a single hegemonic articulation of

the people and relying on charismatic leadership and spontaneous mobilization that "revolt against intermediary bodies" such as parties in favor of direct representation between leader and led (Urbinati 2015; Urbinati 2025). As Vergara (2020a) adds, defending a materialist plebeian conception of populism, the "discursive turn" in populist theory initiated by Laclau in the 1980s has enabled liberal and anti-populist interpretations of populism as inherently anti-pluralist and potentially proto-totalitarian by detaching the process of popular identity formation from both their ideology and material conditions.

Similar criticisms arise within Gramsci studies, where the problem is located in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist (mis)appropriation of Gramsci's historical-materialist conception of politics. As Thomas (2017b) points out, post-Marxism replaces Gramsci's conception of hegemony as a historically concrete political mechanism with a formal, discursive concept centered on the construction of chains of equivalence and a political subject. Conceived in these formal terms, however, hegemony no longer operates as the process of unifying diverse social forces under determinate conditions, that is, of creating a programme through the active organization of existing relations in order to make a particular collective political will prevail. Instead, hegemony becomes a totalizing logic of equivalence, in which popular identity is produced by a subject abstracting from the real rather than through a practice rooted in historically situated social relations. Politics is thus reduced to a clash among competing "subject positions", each claiming a privileged representation of the authentic consciousness of the people, but whose claims reflect their own constructed standpoint rather than the very creative democratic process of diverse groups coming together to form historically specific common goals.

Within both the field of contemporary democratic theory and Gramsci studies, the main concern with Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory of populism stems from its abstraction of the people from its social grounding, which risks producing a totalizing popular identity. By defining "the people" as a discursive construction rather than a socially grounded collective, it becomes possible for any actor to claim to represent "the people" as a whole. In practice, this often means that political leaders selectively mobilize certain groups or grievances and present them as the voice of the entire community. This *pars pro toto logic*, in which a part stands in for the whole, has led critics to argue that populism is an inherently anti-democratic phenomenon, as it enables leaders to pursue their own advantage by claiming exclusive symbolic representation of the people.

Laclau and Mouffe's first step toward theorizing populism as a potentially totalitarian form of politics was taken when they reinterpreted Gramsci in anti-essentialist terms by detaching his concept of the "national-popular" from the material and ideological conditions that originally grounded it. Laclau (1984) began developing this anti-essentialist theory of identity formation in response to the so-called "crisis of Marxism", arguing that traditional class-based party structures had become too rigid in advanced industrial societies amid the rise of new social movements. These social movements, he maintained, were too diverse and irreducible to a single revolutionary class, giving rise instead to a multiplicity of struggles and a conception of the people as a plural political subject. However, detached from its social grounding, "the people" becomes a contingent discursive construct, making the articulation of demands indeterminate and open to appropriation by different political actors pursuing different, even anti-democratic, ends. As Ellen Meiksins Wood (1998) argues, "for all its anti-universalism", post-Marxism's concept of radical democracy is "far more abstractly universalistic, and far less sensitive to social and

historical specificity, than the 'essentialist' Marxist conception of socialism it was meant to replace" (51).

In *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau further develops his anti-essentialist post-Marxist theory of democracy by defining populism as a mechanism through which a leader retroactively unifies the people under an empty signifier, enabling a collective will to form without any pre-existing social unity. As Perry Anderson (2023, 85) observes, Laclau effectively displaces Gramsci's conception of hegemony with populism as the more powerful unifying element. Disparate democratic demands are not integrated through shared social relations but are instead an inherently contingent association that, "in isolation, could equally well be woven into an anti-democratic discourse" (Anderson 2023, 85). What holds this popular unity together is not an active commitment to the common good, but a common set of symbols and an affective attachment to a leader. The result is a "discursive idealism" that severs citizens' ideas and demands from their socioeconomic roots, that can, in principle, be appropriated by any political agent for any political project.

This move from socially grounded to discursively constructed unity has significant implications for the party as the institutional form through which the popular will is organized and expressed. As I demonstrate next, Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist reformulation of Gramsci's hegemonic party as the agent which constructs popular identity out of a plurality of demands without any class basis ultimately defeats itself, since it undermines the party's function as a vehicle for the democratic self-expression of the people. If the people are no longer conceived as the result of their equal participation in defining common substantive goals, but instead as an effect of discursive construction, a disproportionate political role must necessarily be assigned to privileged intellectual elite, whose articulatory practices become the primary

source of coherence for an otherwise fragmented citizenry. Examining the decisively elitist implications of the post-Marxist, or more precisely post-Gramscian conception of populist party leadership is especially relevant as a contribution to current debates on populist forms of political representation and mobilization as a "solution" or a "threat" to the crisis of democratic institutions.

The Elitist Implications of Post-Marxism's New Hegemonic Party

Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist reformulation of Gramsci's hegemonic party aims to develop a theory of radical democratic politics that breaks with what they call Marxism's class essentialism. In their view, Gramsci's political thought contains the seeds of a non-economistic and non-essentialist account of collective political identity formation but ultimately remains limited by a residual commitment to "class" as the privileged agent of hegemony (Mouffe 2018; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 69; Golding 1992). Against Gramsci's Marxism, they advance an anti-essentialist account in which social identities are contingent and relational, constituted through discursive practices rather than grounded in an objective position within the relations of production.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) justify this post-Marxist approach to radical democratic politics by reference to the historical transformation of advanced capitalist societies. The proliferation of "new social movements" since the 1960s has, in their view, displaced class struggle as the central axis of political conflict (Mouffe 2018; Laclau 1984). As they observe, these social movements articulate demands that are not reducible to material interests and class position and therefore cannot be simply subsumed under a project of working-class emancipation. Traditional Marxist and social-democratic parties, they argue, failed to adequately

respond to this pluralization of the social order: at best, they were reductively class-centered, subordinating other forms of domination to the primacy of class; at worst, they were class-essentialist, denying political agency to non-class actors by asserting the a priori leadership of the industrial proletariat. In place of these rigid class-based party structures, Laclau and Mouffe propose a conception of the hegemonic party in which multiple, heterogeneous demands are articulated into a general popular alliance without the need to privilege any social group as the source of unity.

In this respect, their post-Marxist project can be read as both a rejection and an extension of Gramsci's theory of the Modern Prince. While they detach hegemony from any necessary relation to class, recasting the party as the site of discursive articulation rather than the organization of class alliances, they extend Gramsci's insight that hegemonic leadership must incorporate a plurality of social forces. For Laclau and Mouffe, if the hegemonic party is to lead society as a whole, it must be fully detached from any essential social foundation in order to reflect the contingent and plural character of democratic politics. Thus, as Laclau (1984) argues, "Gramsci's great limitation" is that, in his theory, "only the fundamental classes of society can be hegemonic subjects" (42).

However, this post-Marxist critique of Gramsci rests on a misreading. Gramsci himself insists that any project of social and political transformation must extend beyond the narrow interests of the working class, incorporating a plurality of social groups into a broader hegemonic formation. Such a project requires these groups to participate on equal terms in defining both their respective roles and the general principles of the collective will. Laclau and Mouffe thus attribute to Gramsci a form of class essentialism that his theory explicitly rejects. They attribute to him what they call a "naturalist fallacy" in which hegemony, as the potential for leadership

over society, stems only from a fundamental economic class. From this, they read the Prison Notebooks as containing a tension between a residual Marxist essentialism and an emerging non-essentialist political discourse. Golding formulates this post-Marxist critique in the following terms:

> In relying on a notion of the social order as a totality, dialectical or otherwise, Gramsci becomes caught in a kind of Gordian knot from which he is unable to escape… [he] wants to pose the working class as, ipso facto, the bearer of this radical totality… not simply on the basis of strategic or practical political grounds, but in terms of a precise analytical necessity. (Golding 1992, xvii)

This interpretation overlooks Gramsci's main point. When he attributes hegemony to a fundamental economic class, he does not suggest that the working class will automatically assume political leadership over the whole of society, nor that it can do so independently of the mass political party. On the contrary, his argument is that the hegemony of the working class can only be the result of an ongoing mediation with a plurality of social agents and their struggles. Gramsci's point, therefore, is not to assign the working class an a priori centrality within the party, but to assert that there always remains a necessary, if indirect, relationship between non-class-based social struggles and the class structure of domination. Since, for Gramsci, these struggles ought to retain their specificity, it follows that each social group requires independent political recognition and articulation within the party.

What Laclau and Mouffe overlook, then, is Gramsci's flexible party strategy: while he maintains the potential for the working class to lead a universal emancipatory project, he reconceives this role as contingent upon its capacity to organize, articulate, and unify a plurality of social forces. In doing so, he preserves the social foundation of the party and of plural democracy in general, rather than displaces it. By contrast, for Laclau and Mouffe, the people have no "essential" socio-political core. Since the party is not tied to a specific social group or material group, but comes into being only as an empty signifier (Mouffe 2018; Laclau 2005), the

task of the party is not to facilitate the participatory formation of the common good, but to prevail in a hegemonic contestation by mobilizing popular support around a set of indeterminate demands through slogans, symbols, and narratives.

From a Gramscian standpoint, Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist model of the hegemonic party imposes two significant constraints on democratic agency. First, by detaching the people from any social foundation, it generates a problem of indeterminate political action. In this model, the people emerge only as the effect of discursive articulation rather than through shared social relations or organized political practices. As a result, popular agency is reduced to a largely passive and formal role: collective political identity is shaped not through intra-party participation or alliance-building, but largely outside these processes. The people are thus limited to endorsing, identifying with, or reacting to political narratives constructed by those who possess the power of discursive articulation – namely, party and movement leaders.

Gramsci anticipated this problem, warning that when intellectuals become detached from the substantive participation of citizens, they acquire a disproportionate political role with clear elitist implications. For Gramsci, the task of intellectual and political leadership is not to impose a worldview from without, but to transform existing forms of "common sense" into critical consciousness. The party does so by "basing itself initially […] on common sense in order to demonstrate that everyone is a philosopher", such that political education consists not in introducing a scientific doctrine from outside, but in "renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 330–1931). When this reciprocal relation between grassroots-level knowledge and intellectual leadership is severed, the intellectuals in the party cease to function as mediators of the people's new conception of the world and instead become the sole agent defining the content and meaning of their political goals.

Second, post-Marxism's emphasis on discursive construction renders the selection of political leadership and the formation of party programs more arbitrary. Since the people come into being not from a party that enables them to determine the content of their common liberty, but as the result of a left-populist narrative of opposition between the many and the elites, there is no real basis for ordinary citizens to determine which articulation of "the people" is more legitimate, or which leader more genuinely represents it, since its unification is not an act of political self-expression. Without opportunities for substantive popular participation, it becomes arbitrary why one leader rather than another can claim to be the more accountable and responsive representative of the people. In this context, whether a progressive, egalitarian construction of the people prevails over an exclusionary, xenophobic one depends largely on the electoral success of competing discursive strategies devised and promoted by party leaders.

Post-Marxism reduces democratic politics to an electoral competition between party leaders who construct rival versions of the people and seek to mobilize support for them. This makes it difficult for citizens to evaluate these competing projects in terms of their capacity to address social problems, as they are judged primarily by their affective appeal or electoral success rather than their substantive political content. Ultimately, in the post-Marxist conception, the popular struggle for equality unfolds on the terrain of electoral democracy, primarily through a populist leader who competes for office on the people's behalf, rather than through a party that enables citizens to participate more substantively and directly in democratic decision-making (Mulvad and Stahl 2019; McCormick 2025). This dynamic weakens the party's capacity to function as a mechanism through which citizens themselves can hold elites accountable to their interests in systems where oligarchic forces dominate the procedures of representative democracy.

In sum, the core premise of post-Marxism is the rejection of any particular social antagonism as the primary basis of political division, and the assertion of the "plurality and indeterminacy of the social" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 152). But it follows from this radical pluralism that it is not the common people themselves who come together and develop a collective consciousness of their material and political inequalities or to organize political action to defend their liberty against those who exercise power over them. Rather, in Laclau and Mouffe's theory, the hegemon is a singular Prince, who is alone endowed with the capacity to produce egalitarian discourses and act as the unifying force of a pluralist democracy. In effect, the post-Marxist model of the party introduces an external form of political agency that projects a radical democratic identity onto a fragmented and indeterminate mass from above, rather than serving as a vehicle through which the people themselves collectively determine their common political identity and the substantive content of their aims.

Gramsci offers a relevant alternative to post-Marxism by rethinking the relation between class, party, and the people as a plural democratic subject. While he recognizes the class-specificity of every party, he points to the collective mediating function of the party as the core mechanism of pluralizing demands beyond the confines of narrow economic interests or a singular material class. As he puts it,

> Although every party is the expression of a social group, and of one social group only, nevertheless in certain given conditions certain parties represent a single social group precisely in so far as they exercise a balancing and arbitrating function between the interests of their group and those of other groups, and succeed in securing the development of the group which they represent with the consent and assistance of the allied groups-if not out and out with that of groups which are definitely hostile. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 243)

Gramsci's non-class reductionist conception of the party shows that a radical and plural democracy, based on the institutional empowerment of multiple social groups, does not require abandoning the party's class-specificity in favor of an indeterminate conception of the people.

On the contrary, as Gramsci warns, without the ability to generate class consciousness among the politically contentious subaltern citizenry, the party cannot organize them into a coherent political force capable of challenging the power imbalances between them and the elites who are passively authorized to exert their rule.

After the Retreat from Class: Gramsci's Enduring Relevance to Radical Democratic Theory

Agonistic populists reject the Marxist conception of the political party as the political expression of a social class on the grounds that it privileges the demands of a particular economic group and constrains the formation of the people as a plural democratic subject. According to Mouffe (2018), the plurality of contemporary struggles against domination, including anti-racism, feminism, the gay movement, and the environmental movement, cannot be formulated in class terms (2). Radicalizing democracy today, she therefore argues, requires a political party capable of "establishing a chain of equivalences articulating the demands of the working class with those of the new movements in order to construct a common will" (Mouffe 2018, 2).

Mouffe's analysis of contemporary politics points to a real historical problem, namely, that traditional left parties have often been unreceptive to the non-class interests and concerns of these autonomous social movements that do not clearly identify with 'the working class'. However, her project rests on a problematic assumption: that participants in these movements – women, racialized minorities, environmental and LGBTQ activists, youth – enter the political arena without material interests or class cleavages of their own, and that their forms of political domination bear no necessary relation to their socioeconomic subordination. As a result, in

Mouffe's framework, the working class is treated, quite reductively, as a monolithic category isolated from these apparently non-class political groupings.

A radical democracy founded on a plural popular subject, however, requires a party capable of analyzing both class and non-class conflicts within a singular and flexible framework. Gramsci's non-class reductionist theory of politics provides such a framework. He is far more attentive than Mouffe to the open character of the historical process and, as a result, better equipped to grasp the productive role of both class and non-class political conflicts in history. For instance, in his discussion of the role of women in Roman history and the specificity of their subaltern status, Gramsci (2021 [1933]) observes that "masculinism [i.e. the ideology of male superiority] can be compared to class domination only in a certain sense and, therefore, has greater importance for the history of customs than for political and social history" (78). While he treats women's struggle for political autonomy as relatively independent from the economic structure, this independence is one of degree rather than a complete absence of causal connection.

Unlike Mouffe, then, Gramsci understands the issue of women's autonomy *vis-à-vis* men (i.e. the Sexual Question) as a mixed or "extra-economic" problem in society (Morera 1990a). This demonstrates the non-class essentialist character of his political theory and his as well as his pluralistic view of the social field. At the same time, Gramsci insists that no historical explanation and no political party can dispense with the stable and long-term determination of the socio-economic structure. In other words, any political party aimed at unifying a network of autonomous and diverse social movements will, at some point, require "privileging", i.e. concentrating on, the demand for emancipation from class domination.

Despite its concentration on 'the working class', Gramsci's strategy of unifying heterogeneous groups into a common will remains more analytically and politically robust than Mouffe's anti-essentialist approach, which ultimately severs this unifying process from class struggle. Although Mouffe insists that her left-populist party does not privilege the demands of new social movements over those of the working class, detaching democratic conflict from class struggle reduces working-class emancipation to one grievance among many, making it difficult to prioritize class-based demands when political and economic conditions require it. The chief political danger Gramsci identifies when parties neglect the emancipatory demands of the working class is the mobilization of mass discontent by a reactionary Caesarist leader, akin to Marx's category of Bonapartism (Antonini 2020). Such demagogic leadership emerges in moments of economic and political crisis, what Gramsci calls an "interregnum" or a situation of social deadlock, in which no class or group can effectively lead or govern.

As Gramsci observes, such situations "become dangerous" because they open the field to a powerful leader who claims to rapidly "resolve" an unstable socio-economic and political order. Yet rather than representing the interests of the popular classes and hence exercising a progressive leadership function, this form of leadership is conservative and regressive: it stabilizes the existing order in a way that reinforces elite domination and undermines the conditions for the people's collective association and equal participation (Gramsci 2021 [1933], 168–69). Reflecting on the failure of liberal and socialist parties and the subsequent rise of fascism following the First World War, Gramsci attributes this outcome to the absence of a progressive party capable of organizing widespread dissatisfaction with the representative system. In its place, he argues, leaders of a demagogic type emerge, "represented by men who are charismatic or seem to be sent by providence" (Gramsci 2021 [1933], 168).

The dynamics of what Gramsci calls a "catastrophic equilibrium", in which a crisis may either prepare the ground for a progressive force capable of unifying a broad coalition under a representative party, or be exploited by a demagogic leader, are evident in contemporary Italian politics. In the 2022 national election, the far-right populist party *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) secured strong support among economically disadvantaged voters (poor, unemployed, low-wage workers) by redirecting socio-economic grievances toward issues of political identity, casting immigrants and LGBTQ activists as the common enemy of the true Italian people. The electoral success of FdI rested less on a coherent socioeconomic program than on the construction of a nationalist discourse of "the people" as a unified and homogeneous subject, circulated through television, social media, and party messaging, and symbolically embodied by its leader, Giorgia Meloni.

Rather than advancing policies aimed at reducing political inequality or improving the welfare of the working-class, Meloni's political strategy centered on constructing a populist antagonistic frontier that opposes a threatened traditional Italian identity to the neoliberal political and economic elites of the European Union. This discursive populist strategy, exemplified by her slogan "I am Giorgia, I'm a woman, I'm a mother… I'm Christian", defines political belonging in terms of traditionalist exclusionary identities and gender roles and a nativist notion of common origin, rather than in the more open-ended historical-material and civic-republican terms characteristic of a Gramscian conception of the national-popular. Despite the fact that Meloni's government has been characterized by a lack of responsiveness to the pressing problems of socioeconomic and political inequality in Italy, her populist strategy has proven effective in sustaining support amid widespread disaffection with party-based democracy.

Meanwhile, both traditional democratic and new left populist parties have struggled to build durable mass constituencies. This reflects their weakening ties to classical working-class institutions (such as unions and councils) due either to the declining establishment of these class-specific institutions or to their perceived irrelevance among party elites and activists. In place of class-based organization, parties such as Italy's Democratic Party have tended to prioritize procedural reforms and implementing mechanisms of intra-party democracy (Sandri and Venturino 2020). Others, such as Spain's Podemos, adopt a "discursive-organizational" approach characteristic of Mouffe's agonistic populism, combining horizontal coordination among movement actors with forms of vertical, charismatic leadership (Kim 2024). As a result, these parties have struggled to generate sustained, organized forms of popular consent rooted in cross-class alliances, particularly in the wake of the rise of right-wing populism and the decline of parties, especially mass-based ones, which have been in a period of crisis since the 1990s (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017; Urbinati 2019b).

In this context, Gramsci's strategy of constructing a mass party that links working-class demands to broader popular struggles offers a more effective alternative to agonistic populism's reliance on anti-elitist discourse. By grounding popular political unity in social alliances, such a party can counter right-wing xenophobic constructions of "the people" while addressing post-Marxist concerns about the anti-pluralist implications of class essentialism. For Gramsci, the class basis of the mass party is a historical-materialist rather than an ontological principle. The centrality of the working class derives not from any inherent political superiority, but from its condition of subalternity, which generates an awareness of the need for collective action beyond immediate interests. This "revolutionary consciousness", to use Gramsci's terms, presupposes a political strategy centered on a system of alliances that respects the autonomy of diverse social

groups, rather than reducing politics to a struggle against a "class enemy" or a vaguely defined establishment of elites.

From Gramsci's standpoint, the progressive character of a hegemonic party is not measured by its ability to exclude elites from power, but by its capacity to address both socio-economic and ethico-political problems, thereby organizing the people in ways that enable multiple forms of emancipation beyond class domination. Such a historical-materialist approach to the party is especially relevant in the current crisis of representative democracy, where institutional breakdowns often reflect the failure of elected officials to respond to demands rooted in both material inequality and political exclusion.

After a long period marked by the hegemony of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism within radical democratic theory, which Meiksins Wood (1986) describes as "the retreat from class struggle", the plebeian conception of populism advanced by neo-republicans marks a significant turning point. While radical plebeian theorists understand their populist project as part of the post-Marxist tradition, they seek to re-center class conflict in radical democratic politics and to create new class-specific institutional reforms aimed at increasing the welfare and politically empowering the materially subordinate sectors of society (Vergara 2020a). But this recent return to class struggle, within both radical republican and radical democratic thought, draws primarily on Machiavelli, with much less attention paid to Gramsci and the political-intellectual legacy of his modern Prince.

Against the backdrop of plebeian populism's growing influence and the waning hegemony of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist discourse theory of populism, the question of how Gramsci's Modern Prince, defined as simultaneously a party of the working-class and a national party, can inform contemporary democratic theory merits renewed attention. In

particular, the enduring relevance of Gramsci's distinctive reading of Machiavelli as a revolutionary partisan of his time, and of the Prince as a model of progressive (mass-popular) and class-based political leadership, calls for closer re-examination.

Although largely overlooked in current debates, Gramsci's interpretation of the Florentine Secretary as a revolutionary partisan represents a significant innovation within the broader scholarship on Machiavelli.[8] Existing literature on the relation between the two Italian thinkers has rightly emphasized Gramsci's democratic reading of Machiavelli (Thomas 2017a; Fontana 1993; Femia 1981). As Fontana (1993) argues, Machiavelli appears in Gramsci's notebooks as the figure of "democratic philosopher" who adopts a dual perspective of force and consent in order to balance the unequal power relations between leaders and led. Much of this scholarship has focused on three aspects of Gramsci's Machiavelli: the popular-democratic or "consensual" dimension of Machiavelli's thought, his scientific (realist) approach to the study of politics as a sphere of human action autonomous from morality, and especially religion, and the importance of Gramsci's prison reading of *The Prince* for his theory of the political party (Femia 1981, 134; Thomas 2020; Cunninham 2006).

The distinctiveness of Gramsci's revolutionary partisan reading of Machiavelli lies in its grounding in a Marxist analysis of class struggle and its commitment to overcoming the class contradictions of Italian society. Revisiting this interpretation is especially important in light of contemporary populist appropriations of Machiavelli. Rather than treating him as a populist democrat who simply sides with the people against the elites, Gramsci (1971 [1933], 132) locates the "germ of his conception of national revolution" in Machiavelli's effort to incorporate active subaltern classes into the foundation of a new state. While he was among the first to foreground the centrality of class struggle in Machiavelli's political thought and a commitment to social

equality, his revolutionary partisan interpretation departs from recent anti-elitist readings (Piano 2025; McCormick 2024).

Contemporary neo-republican (McCormick 2011; Vergara 2020a; 2020b) and revisionist accounts (Piano 2025) reconstruct Machiavelli as a champion of an anti-elitist realist tradition marked by a pessimism toward elites and the parliamentary regime, understood as naturally tending toward domination, self-interest, and corruption, and by a corresponding distrust of parliamentarism as prone to capture by plutocratic wealth. On this reading, even the so-called "modern Machiavellians", such as Michels, Mosca, and Pareto, are reinterpreted as critics of elitism whose main concern was "containing plutocracy in the age of mass politics" and expanding popular participation (Piano 2025). Machiavelli is thus read as siding with the people's desire not to be oppressed and as championing their conflict with elites, so that popular political activity takes the form of continuous resistance to domination.

According to Gramsci, by contrast, Machiavelli is not simply an anti-elitist and proponent of popular resistance, but as a creative thinker concerned with the kind of effective political leadership necessary for drawing the active and "productive" classes into political life.

> Machiavelli is a man wholly of his period; his political science represents the philosophy of the time, which tended to the organization of absolute national monarchies-the political form which permitted and facilitated a further development of bourgeois productive forces. In Machiavelli one may discover in embryonic form both the separation of powers and parliamentarianism (the representative regime). His 'ferocity' is turned against the residues of the feudal world, not against the progressive classes. The Prince is to put an end to feudal anarchy; and that is what Valentino [i.e. Cesare Borgia] does in Romagna, basing himself on the support of the productive classes, merchants and peasants. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 140–141)

Here, Gramsci takes Machiavelli's claim that the people are the best foundation of a prince's power and specifies the characteristics the 'modern' Prince must acquire to make popular empowerment possible under conditions of oligarchic rule. The task of the modern Prince in

overcoming oligarchy, like that of his own revolutionary party, is not merely to mobilize opposition against the elites but to unite the people into an active, ruling political subject, since,

> All [Italian] history from 1815 onwards shows the efforts of the traditional classes to prevent the formation of a collective will of this kind, and to maintain 'economic-corporate' power in an international system of passive equilibrium. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 132)

From this democratic reading of Machiavelli, Gramsci draws a definition of national revolution as the process by which subordinate classes acquire the capacity for self-government through the guidance of a democratically-inspired elite that is attentive and responsive to the people's needs and aspirations. It follows that the Prince is not an authoritarian figure who imposes order from above, but a form of leadership whose own power depends on a reciprocal relation with the people, organizing and giving direction to their participation from below. As the next section shows, this interpretation of the Prince as a political party that facilitates collective political action challenges plebeian populist readings that center the virtuous individual leader as the key protagonist of popular empowerment.

Plebeian Populism and the Paradoxes of Anti-Oligarchic Leadership

Class Conflict Between the Many and the Few: A False Binary

At the core of the plebeian conception of populism lies the class conflict between the wealthy few and the many who are poor. It derives this theme of conflict between the few and the many not from the tradition of working-class politics, but from early Roman republican thought and history. In this sense, plebeian populism belongs to a tradition that Gramsci extensively studied and that influenced his own political thought. However, unlike Gramsci who sought to build a socialist order based on the abolition of class hierarchies in society, plebeian populism advances a theory of democracy based on the rule of the poor (Mulieri 2024). Against

the liberal conception of democracy as a set of procedures, in which a select elite, authorized by the people, exercise ruling power, plebeian populism begins from a view of democracy as the rule of the many over the few.

In this way, plebeian populism prefigures an anti-oligarchic plebeian republic, and advocates for institutionalizing popular power through mechanisms that hold elites accountable and responsive and enable the direct participation of ordinary citizens (Vergara 2020b; McCormick 2011). As a political movement, plebeian populism emerges in response to the unmet problems of political and economic inequality, the increasing impoverishment of the many, and the corruption of representative democracy by plutocratic elites (Vergara 2020a; McCormick 2024, 301). As a mode of political action, it centers on a powerful populist leader who is directly elected by the common poor to resolve the crisis of socio-economic inequality stemming from oligarchization of representative democracy, by enacting policies and reforms that address the oppression of the popular sectors and improve their material welfare (Vergara 2020a).

Plebeian neo-republican theorists like McCormick and Vergara are therefore "populists" by necessity, since they view the populist division between the few and the many as permanent, and understand politics as a way of dealing with that division to ensure equal liberty and popular government. According to the tradition of plebeian neo-republicanism, the main role of democratic institutions is to enable the common poor to curb the power of the wealthy few (McCormick 2006). Since there is no such thing as the common good across divided classes, populism's defining feature – the permanent division of society into two antagonistic camps, the people versus the elites – becomes the primary ideological mechanism of mobilizing the

impoverished majority and realizing a form of popular government against powerful forces of wealth and political influence.

Like agonistic populism, plebeian populism constructs an antagonistic frontier centered on the mobilization of the disaffected masses and the direct election of a popular leader, often conceived as a kind of "commissarial dictator", whose capacity to secure equal liberty depends on his or her success in the competitive struggle for power (Vergara 2020a). However, unlike agonistic populism, "the many" in the plebeian conception of populism is defined from a materialist constitutional standpoint as a material rather than discursive collective subject: the majority who are dispossessed, who are unified by their common experience of socio-economic subordination and desire to resist plutocracy. Once in office, the plebeian populist party or leader, elected by the dispossessed majority to address a socio-economic crisis, may either lead a crisis government by concentrating power, expanding its control over the legal structures regulating patterns of accumulation and dispossession, and enacting egalitarian reforms (Vergara 2020a), or it may establish institutions that compel governing elites to act in favor of the material and political empowerment of the many (McCormick 2024, 301).

Plebeian populism is therefore partisan by its very nature, insofar as it conceives the core conflict of democratic politics as a class struggle in which one must take sides, the choice being between the plebeian class and the wealthy class in society (Chambers 2023, 86). In this framework, class struggle is understood as a binary conflict between two large, albeit asymmetric, opposing economic groups: the rich and powerful few and the majority of citizens comprising the poor. The plebeian populist conception of class struggle therefore differs fundamentally from Gramsci's revolutionary conception. For Gramsci, class struggle unfolds

within a wider and more pluralistic social field. Accordingly, the common will of the people is irreducible to the will of a dispossessed majority, as in the plebeian populist conception.

In Gramsci's view, defining the people as a strictly material category would be too limiting because it corresponds only to an "elementary" stage in the development of collective political consciousness, in which solidarity is confined to immediate economic interests such that individuals recognize the unity of their own economic group but not that of a "wider social group" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 181). Even where a single class achieves a more developed awareness, this extends only to "the solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class – but still in the purely economic field" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 181). In both cases, collective consciousness remains particularistic and does not yet reach a universal conception of equality.

Plebeian populists are skeptical of the very idea of universal political equality because they view the division of society into two antagonistic classes as a permanent fact. This commitment to a fixed class division between the common poor and the wealthy ruling few sets plebeian populism from Gramsci and the Marxist tradition of working-class self-emancipation, along with its corresponding theory of the revolutionary party as the mechanism for making a classless society a real possibility (Magri 1970; Draper 1971; Johnstone 1967; Rossanda 1970). Within this Marxist tradition, the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie contains the potential to generate a collective subject of a national-liberating revolution, or what Marxists describe as a universal emancipatory class. According to Marx, the proletariat is the first class whose victory would result not in a new form of class society, but in the abolition of all classes.

This view is based on the necessarily collective or universal character of the proletarian struggle (White and Ypi 2016, 61). The individual worker has no property in the means of

production, and therefore, he or she cannot obtain it as an individual. To capture the means of production the working class must do it collectively, through social ownership. Thus, the proletariat represents the possibility of universal emancipation from class domination because it contains within its own practical activity the real possibility of a classless society: as a class without property or exploitative powers of its own to defend, it cannot realize its interests without collective organization and the abolition of the conditions of exploitation. Its struggle against a particular ruling class is therefore not simply the pursuit of particularistic economic interests, but a universal cause of equal (collective) freedom. Gramsci develops Marx's theory of revolutionary class struggle into a theory and concrete program for the political party. The task of the revolutionary party is to facilitate the proletariat's qualitative transformation: in order to become universal, Gramsci argues, the working class must move beyond posing its interests and conflicts on a corporative level, thereby surpassing the capitalistic economic categories of existing society and constituting a new social order, not only economically and politically but also intellectually and morally (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 181).

For plebeian populists, by contrast, "the people-as-plebs" do not constitute a universal emancipatory class capable of expressing a national-popular collective will but are instead understood as a class-specific subject comprising a majority that is united by a shared, though not universal, struggle for liberty against the oligarchs. As a result, the plebeian class does not express within its own practical activity the abolition of class rule as such, but rather the defense and advancement of its specific class interests. The plebeian's struggle to resist plutocracy, preserve its independence, and secure relative socio-economic equality, does not require its members to form a collective organization or to adopt partisan commitments expressive of universal concerns. Rather, the plebeian requires only a partial organization to achieve its

specific interests, since these are expressive of a particular category of agents whose interests cannot, by definition, be shared by their opponents, but only by those who likewise seek to resist their material inequality and oppression. This partial plebeian organization takes shape under the representation of a populist leader, understood as the champion of the people-as-plebs, whose role is to mobilize and empower the popular sectors against domination by the ruling elite (Vergara 2020a; McCormick 2011, 51).

In Vergara's (2020a) plebeian populist conception, the people as a ruling subject emerges from the "ontological social divide" between the *grandi* and the *popolo* and their two constitutive, battling humors: the desire to oppress and the desire to resist oppression, respectively. On this view, "the people-as-plebs" is understood as a partiality, but not one that wants to become the whole, i.e. the only legitimate part. Rather, as she puts it the plebeian is "a part that wants to assert itself as a legitimate part that now is effectively excluded from power" (Vergara 2020b, 11). According to Vergara, the plebeian conception of the people avoids both the democratic myth of the people-as-a-whole and the risk of totalitarian forms of politics, since it does not operate on a principle of homogeneity or exclusion, but on egalitarian principles of inclusion and popular empowerment. As she argues, the people-as-plebs is rooted in class-based politics aimed at emancipating and empowering the popular sectors and must therefore be distinguished from ethnic-based conceptions of the people that seek to protect or reestablish the dominance of a particular national or ethnic group (Vergara 2020c).

However, Vergara's account rests on a conflation between the "people-as-one", understood in ethnic or xenophobic nationalist terms, and the "people-as-a-whole", understood in the Gramscian sense as a national-popular collective subject. While the former operates through exclusion and the assertion of a totalitizing identity as the only "true" people, the latter is

composed of multiple class and non-class groups unified through their equal participation. By rejecting the idea of the people-as-a-whole as a dangerous myth, Vergara forecloses this Gramscian alternative as well as his institutional solution: a political party that articulates universal concerns by organizing a plural collective will beyond class interests. In doing so, her plebeian populist account limits democratic politics to institutional reforms aimed at constraining elites and responding to the partial material interests of the plebeian class, rather than enabling the construction of institutions capable of sustaining a broader, national-popular project.

Beyond the Partisan of the Plebs: Gramsci's Party of the Subaltern Classes

In Vergara's (2020a) plebeian populist conception, the party leader represents "a partisan of the people-as-plebs", whose rhetoric and actions are aimed at empowering the popular sectors within the basic structure of liberal representative government (214). The plebeian populist people are those who share a class identity of second-rate citizenship, marked by exclusion from political and socio-economic power (Vergara 2020c). Plebeian populism is therefore enabled by a crisis of representative democracy (Arditi 2007), which takes the form of a party or leader that seeks to "disrupt the oligarchic electoral field dominated by traditional parties, and disturb ordinary political business by performing the equality of the common people, denouncing oligarchic domination, and advocating to immediately increase the welfare of the people through redistribution of property, universal benefits, and decentralization of power" (Vergara 2020c, 92).

Within this plebeian populist framework, the partisan of the plebs appears as "a revolutionary reformer elected to resolve the crisis of socio-economic inequality" and "the domination produced by the non-responsiveness of elected representatives to the demands of the

popular sectors" (Vergara 2020a, 211). Vergara argues that this partisan figure should be understood as a type of commissarial dictator, which refers to the Roman republican idea of a temporary, legally authorized ruler given extraordinary powers to solve a problem during a crisis and then step down once order has been restored. Crucially, this delegated dictator, while concentrating and wielding extraordinary power, does not aim to fundamentally change the constitutional order, but rather to "restore normal times and government as soon as the crisis that demanded them has been properly dealt with" (Vergara 2020a, 216). In our contemporary context, this populist authority would be electorally authorized by a plebeian majority, who mandate the leader to act decisively on behalf of their needs, placing restraints on oligarchic domination within the framework of liberal democracy.

Vergara's conception of the partisan of the plebs is underpinned by a skepticism toward the core institutions of representative democracy, including political parties, as effective means for overcoming socio-economic and political inequality. At the same time, her account valorizes the people who recognize their plebeian condition. Yet precisely because this condition is defined by their exclusion from political and socio-economic power, the exercise of political leadership cannot be attributed to the people themselves but instead requires the intervention of a single leader who acts on their behalf. This logic ultimately grounds the necessity of a dictatorial form of leadership elected to address the immediate needs and welfare of the plebeian majority. As she argues:

> in a republic in which political leadership still has legitimacy, a new prince à la Machiavelli could campaign on the need to institutionalize popular power to realize the promise of democracy and keep government in check, become elected to the highest place of power, and establish, by decree, autonomous plebeian institutions through which the many can assemble to pass judgment on ruling elites. (Vergara 2020b, 266)

The plebeian partisan, as an agent of revolutionary reform, is therefore not, as in Gramsci's revolutionary theory, a political party of the self-organized popular masses. Rather, it

is a form of political leadership based on a vertical, plebiscitary relation between the populist and the common people. This marks the core distinction between the partisan of the plebs and the Gramscian notion of a party of the subaltern classes. Whereas the former responds to immediate demands and exercises power on behalf of the people, the latter constitutes a form of collective political organization through which the popular classes themselves participate in their own institutional creation.

Gramsci develops his conception of a subaltern political party through a complex analysis of both "the history of the dominant classes" and "the history of subaltern social groups" in Rome, drawing in part on the experience of the plebeians and their institutions. In his reflections on medieval Siena, Bologna, and Florence, he emphasizes the historical importance of the plebeian in giving rise the people's own independent form of assembly, especially the creation of the Tribune of the Plebs, through which they were able to "create their own magistracies and make decisions on their own authority" (Gramsci 2021 [1930], 67). According to Gramsci, however, under modern representative conditions the institutionalization of popular power cannot take the form of an alliance between a single class and a prince but requires a broader coalition of classes organized through a political party.

Gramsci's conception of the subaltern political party is therefore grounded in a conception of the people as a plural collective subject, not reducible to a single class-identity. The category of the *classi subalterni* or "subaltern groupings" (*raggruppamenti subalterni*, Notebook 4, §38 [October 1930]) is used by Gramsci to refer to all those who lack political autonomy vis-à-vis the dominant group, while capturing both the plurality and class basis of marginalized groups across history. The subaltern, therefore, is not a singular or homogeneous group, such as the plebeian or even the industrial proletariat, but a configuration of multiple,

overlapping social groups. As Marcus Green points out, this is why Gramsci consistently refers to the "subaltern" in the plural (Green 2021, 36).

Across all 33 Prison Notebooks, Gramsci includes within the category of the subaltern a wide range of marginalized groups and relations, such as the industrial proletariat, the plebeians, the common people, slaves, the proto-proletariat of the medieval communes, the peasantry, women, youth, and religious, regional, racial, and linguistic minorities (e.g. his native Sardinians) (Green 2021; Gramsci 2021 [1930], 67). Each subaltern group, he argues, originates from customs, laws, and institutions that are distinct from those of the dominant order, and therefore possesses a degree of moral and political autonomy, including its own independent, and hence novel, conception of the world. Taken together, the classi subalterni cannot be reduced to a simply "dominated" or powerless mass, but designate "the various strata of the population" whose autonomous organization is constrained, fragmented, and unevenly developed relative to the "traditional ruling class", which is able to "change men and programs and resume control […] with greater alacrity than the subaltern classes are capable of" due to its "large body of trained personnel" (Gramsci 2021 [1930], 169).

In contrast to approaches in Subaltern Studies that reduce the subaltern to a powerless subject, the Gramscian conception of subalternity refers to a plurality of marginalized groups existing at different levels of political organization and, but whose unity constitutes the potential for political leadership and self-governance (Thomas 2018; Green 2002). In Notebook 3, he writes:

> The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. In the historical activity of these groups there is, undoubtedly, a tendency toward unification, albeit in provisional stages; but this tendency is continually interrupted by the initiative of dominant groups and, therefore, can be demonstrated only if a historical cycle completes its course and culminates in success. Subaltern groups are always subject to the initiatives of the dominant groups even when they rebel and rise up; only "permanent" victory

> breaks their subordination, but not immediately. In fact, even when they seem triumphant, subaltern groups are only in an anxious defensive state…Every trace of autonomous initiative by subaltern groups, then, is of inestimable value. (Gramsci 2021 [1930], 65)

Since, for Gramsci, the subaltern possesses the capacity to exercise self-government and become hegemonic, its struggle for independence vis-à-vis the ruling class must move beyond the polarizing binary between dominating elites and the dominated many. Instead of this polarizing division, he insists on the nexus between 'popular' and 'high' culture, and therefore on the reciprocal relation between social classes themselves. As he writes:

> Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to reorganize the cultural hegemony. (Gramsci 1985 [1935], 183)

Moreover, the classi subalterni are not reducible to a single class identity, nor can its demands be confined to the immediacy of socio-economic gain. Rather, in Gramsci's conception, the subaltern classes are a cultural-linguistic plurality that encompasses multiple relations of domination and marginalization, including gender, regionality, age, education level, ethnicity (Crehan 2016). This pluralistic category not only challenges Laclau and Mouffe's charges of Gramsci's "class essentialism" (Ives 2005) but also contributes to the expansion of plebeian populist conceptions of the people as a singular material category defined primarily by their socioeconomic condition. As Liguori (2015) notes, Gramsci's category of the subaltern enriches the traditional Marxist opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat by intertwining it with the structural, cultural, and ideological specificities that condition social position and political subjectivity.

When organized as a coalition, the Gramscian notion of the people as a unity of subaltern classes also enriches the plebeian populist conception of the people as defined by second-class

citizenship rooted in material subordination. It does so by transforming this condition from a fixed oppositional identity into an active unity of multiple subaltern groups whose political organization can come to express the aspiration to political autonomy of the nation as a whole. As such, it provides a more stable foundation for democratic political power than the plebeian populist conception, since it does not rely on a dictator, however popularly elected, to resolve the crisis of socio-economic inequality and the oppression of the popular sectors.

For Gramsci, the development of a new state based on egalitarian social relations can be achieved only through a broad alliance of subaltern social groups capable of winning the struggle for hegemony. Since these groups exist at different levels of political organization, those that are more advanced must assume a role of intellectual and moral leadership, working to construct an alliance and organize a political formation that represents their views, promotes their egalitarian conception of the world, and assert their equal autonomy. Within this process, the political party of the subaltern classes serves as the central organizational form through which this leadership is exercised. It provides intellectual and moral direction while acting as the "embryo" of a new state. In the course of this struggle, the subaltern, organized as a party, operates both within and against existing institutions: some members enter state and governmental structures, while others continue to develop a counter-hegemonic project in civil society. In order for the struggle for hegemony to be successful, the subaltern groups are required to become a governing force before formally taking power, developing the political and intellectual capacities necessary to lead society as a whole. As Gramsci (1971 [1930–1932]) emphasizes, this process of building a new hegemony depends on the mobilization of "infinite masses of people" (238).

The political party of the subaltern classes does not simply pursue legal or egalitarian reforms within the existing state but seeks to become the cultural and political leader of society

by forming a new historical bloc and, ultimately, constituting a new state. Gramsci envisions this state as an "ethical State", capable of transforming existing relations of domination and overcoming the conditions that produce and reproduce subordination.

> [T]he social group that poses the end of the State and its own end as the target to be achieved can create an ethical State – i.e. one which tends to put an end to the internal divisions of the ruled…and to create a technically and morally unitary social organism. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 259)

As Green (2002) asserts, Gramsci is prefiguring a "postsubaltern state", a democratic order that disallows the domination of one group by another.

Unlike Gramsci, plebeian populists do not consider it realistic for democratic institutions to overcome the division between rulers and ruled through a political party that develops the capacities for self-government among popular sectors. Instead, plebeian populists argue that the relation between oligarchs and plebeians can only ever be contained or reversed, namely through a powerful anti-elitist leader. Precisely because ordinary citizens are understood as a materially and politically subordinated group, their political agency requires a leader who acts on their behalf. The populist leader thus becomes a necessity for the people to exercise political power, rather than a facilitator of an organization through which the people represent their own views and assert their autonomy.

This recourse to a single powerful Prince is evident in McCormick's populist interpretation of Machiavelli as a pro-democratic partisan of the plebeians against the nobility class. For McCormick (2025), the core of Machiavelli's theory of democratic leadership is that the goal of any effective ruler is to cede power to the people. On his account, a virtuous Prince enhances his or her reputation by establishing institutional mechanisms through which their own authority becomes obsolete, thereby enabling ordinary citizens to rule more directly and substantively. Without such virtuous anti-elitist leadership, McCormick suggests, the people

remain powerless. However, Machiavelli was far more critical of the capacities of ordinary citizens to govern themselves and therefore advocated for the continuous intervention of elites in political life than McCormick's anti-elitist interpretation admits (Balot and Trochimchuk 2012).

Gramsci's account of the Modern Prince as a form of collective political leadership is more attentive than McCormick's to the reciprocal relation between elite intervention and popular participation in Machiavelli's political thought. It also challenges interpretations that deny that Machiavelli's effort to involve the citizenry stems from a democratic commitment to common liberty as an end in itself. For Gramsci, the ongoing relation between leadership from above and participation from below constitutes a condition of collective freedom. His reading of the Modern Prince as the embodiment of this collective leadership therefore calls into question the assumptions underlying McCormick's interpretation: that a leader will voluntarily relinquish power once in office, and that ordinary citizens will become self-governing simply through the establishment of anti-elitist institutions that render leadership unnecessary over time.

Against this anti-elitist view, Gramsci neither presumes the incapacity of ordinary citizens for self-government nor dispenses with the necessity of leadership. Rather, he insists that elite intervention and popular participation are mutually constitutive of any successful collective political project. As he writes, the transformation of popular common sense into a critical and coherent conception of the world requires that the party "never tire of repeating its own arguments…[since] repetition is the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality", and that it "work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace…This means working to produce elites of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 340).

Intellectual leadership, in this account, is not external to the people but emerges from within them, even as it performs an indispensable function of mass organization and education. Even when this process "culminate[s] in a great individual philosopher", Gramsci insists that such an individual "must be capable of re-living concretely the demands of the massive ideological community…and must succeed in giving formal elaboration to the collective doctrine in the most relevant fashion, and the one most suited to the modes of thought of a collective thinker" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 340). Gramsci thus takes seriously Machiavelli's insight that the spontaneous activity of ordinary citizenry from below must be effectively channeled by an intelligent leadership from above in order to prove beneficial to the republic as a whole.

Gramsci on the Virtues of Collective Leadership: Another Look at McCormick's Reading of Machiavelli's Prince

The first populist interpretation of Machiavelli emerges within the Gramscian tradition itself, in Antonio Negri's (1992) attempt to develop a post-Gramscian version of *il principe nuovo*. In Negri's account, the Prince embodies the constituent power of "the multitude", capable of inaugurating a new ethical order by opening the possibility of revolutionary rupture and radical democracy under conditions of globalized capitalism. Unlike Gramsci's reading, Negri's Prince is populist because it does not conceive "the people" as an alliance of classes organized around a common political end, but as a more diffuse and undifferentiated mass of disempowered groups whose insurgent potential depends on a powerful leader. As a result, it presupposes a particular populist theory of democracy according to which the only legitimate government is that which derives from the spontaneous will of the majority of the people.

What is lost in Negri's populist reinterpretation of the "new" Prince is the specific role of working-class political leadership in Gramsci's thought, as well as the role of the political party, rather than the single leader, as the collective mediating body through which popular self-government is developed under conditions of capitalist domination and directed toward the creation of a new juridical, political, and social order. As Gramsci insists,

> the position of the depressed strata of society [cannot] be improved culturally without a previous economic reform and a change in their position in the social and economic fields. Intellectual and moral reform has to be linked with a programme of economic reform – indeed the programme of economic reform is precisely the concrete form in which every intellectual and moral reform presents itself. (Gramsci, 1971 [1933], 133)

In his conception, legitimate democratic authority rests not on the sheer will of the multitude, but on an ongoing interaction between leaders and led through which a new ethical and socioeconomic programme common to all can be formed.

The displacement of the specificity of working-class leadership in Gramsci's conception of the modern Prince, as a political party capable of involving the masses in an emancipatory project, has been a major problem in his reception within political theory. In part, the displacement of class politics from Gramsci's political thought stems from his expansion of traditional Marxist concepts beyond their economistic limitations. As Anderson observes, the multidimensionality of Gramsci's political thought has enabled his widespread appropriation, but often at the cost of clarity regarding his core political categories. Thus, only a decade ago, Anderson (2016) remarked: "No Italian thinker enjoys a greater fame today than Gramsci. Alike, academic citations and internet references place him above Machiavelli…Amid this avalanche, is any compass possible?" (71).

By far, the most controversial aspect of Gramsci's political thought is his conception of the hegemony of the working-class, and in particular his claim that "class leadership" does not consist in advancing the narrow interests of a single class, but in the capacity of the working

class to lead the broader population by aligning its aims with those of society as a whole. This thesis has led to interpretations of Gramsci either as a precursor to a populist model of leadership, in which the party or leader presents itself as all things to all people, or as a justification for the dictatorship of the proletariat (Liguori 2019). Both readings obscure Gramsci's argument that the realization of popular government depends on a class-specific form of political leadership in modern capitalist societies. It was his view that only a working-class party capable of involving the mass of citizens would be capable of addressing the socioeconomic, political, and ethical divisions that prevented the people from exercising liberty in modern Italy.

Gramsci is not the only canonical Italian thinker whose account of class-based political leadership has been obscured. Over the past two decades, McCormick (2006; 2011; 2025) has sought to recover the centrality of class conflict in Machiavelli's political thought and to draw out its implications for institutional reform under contemporary conditions of economic and political inequality. In contrast to Negri's emphasis on the constituent power of the multitude, McCormick develops a distinctly plebeian populist reading of Machiavelli, in which the Prince exemplifies a radical-democratic leader who establishes class-specific extra-electoral institutions that empower the common people to resist their material and political subordination and prevent wealthy citizens from exerting excessive political influence.

McCormick's plebeian populist interpretation emerges as a critique of two republican readings of Machiavelli: the aristocratic reading, which portrays him as a cynical advisor to princes on how to manipulate the masses for their own self-aggrandizement, and the Cambridge School reading, which casts him as an elitist republican committed to limiting the political power of the common people to the selection of magistrates (McCormick 2011). Against these more

conservative republican interpretations, McCormick reconstructs Machiavelli as a radical democrat aligned with the Florentine people in their struggle for liberty against the nobility, arguing that his thought offers a more robust model of popular empowerment and elite accountability than that found in much contemporary democratic theory and practice. As he argues:

> While Machiavelli's most famous book, The Prince, appears to instruct rulers how they might best manipulate the people…his most important and perhaps most original piece of political advice is something quite different: how common people might control elites. (McCormick 2011, 3)

More recently, McCormick (2025) has turned to Machiavelli's conception of political leadership, identifying in the figure of the Prince a virtuous civic leader that is urgently needed in "our present moment, when democracy is challenged by plutocratic encroachment, creeping authoritarianism, and a crisis of political representation and accountability" (xii). For McCormick, Machiavelli's reflections on "the people's princes" provide a normative standard for civic leadership and its mutually reinforcing relationship with popular government. This Machiavellian standard, he argues, helps expose the deficiencies of populist leaders and outsider parties as a solution to plutocratic and oligarchic corruption in contemporary democracies. Although populists claim accountable authority in situations where elites increasingly wield their power over common citizens, their attempts to impose extraordinary authority over a corrupt representative system often entails constraining citizens' direct participation in forming public policy before it is formally enacted. As McCormick observes, such charismatic leaders may or may not act effectively on behalf of the systemically disempowered common citizenry.

Drawing on Machiavelli's method for judging proper from corrupt forms of leadership, McCormick argues that a true civic leader is defined by the creation of popular-empowering institutions that make citizens' dependency on its extraordinary rule obsolete over time. Yet,

contemporary populist leaders, he observes, routinely fail to meet this standard of virtuous leadership. As he argues, "whether populist leaders ultimately prove to be genuinely public-interested statesmen or simply self-aggrandizing quasi-tyrants, contemporary populist leaders almost invariably do not – as Machiavelli insists all genuine 'people's princes' must do – provide novel legislative, judicial, and electoral institutions through which the people directly participate in ruling themselves" (McCormick 2025, xii).

However, McCormick's empirical observation also points to a deeper limitation in applying Machiavelli's theory of the "people's prince" to contemporary democratic politics. The problem is not simply that leaders are often corrupt, but that the "virtuous leader" model is itself ill-suited to modern party-centered democracies, as it places excessive weight on the initiative of an individual leader – even a virtuous, publicly-interested one – to generate popular self-government. The expectation that a single political leader can create institutions capable of sustaining a popular government free from systemic corruption and self-aggrandizing elites overestimates the transformative capacity of individual leadership while underestimating the political party as an essential collective organizational condition for self-government in contemporary representative democratic systems.

From this perspective, the recurring failure of political leaders to institutionalize popular power exposes a myth at the core of the very notion of a "people's prince" and underscores the enduring relevance of Gramsci's alternative institutional solution. Rather than assigning the task of instituting popular-empowering civic reforms to a singular virtuous leader, Gramsci (1971 [1930]) centers his proposal on the formation of a mass party that channels leadership directly from within the subaltern classes themselves while maintaining continuous contact with them, becoming, as he puts it, "the whalebone in the corset" (340). For Gramsci, it is the collective

mediating function of the party, rather than the initiative of an individual prince, that enables the representation of popular demands and their translation into public policy.

Gramsci's conception of the modern Prince incorporates the insight that McCormick (2025) identifies in Machiavelli's theory of democratic leadership, namely that the relation between leaders and led is "mutually reinforcing" and "indispensable" for the realization of civic liberty (xi). Like Machiavelli, Gramsci does not valorize the arbitrary exercise of popular judgment, nor does he think, like his fellow partisan Bordiga, that the party is an elite that must guard itself against the "spontaneous activity of the masses" (Gramsci 1971 [1930], 198). Rather, his aim in the *Prison Notebooks* is to demonstrate how the function of political leaders at key historical junctures, in conjunction with the direct participation of the masses, can establish the institutional means for the people to gradually become a self-governing force. Gramsci (1971 [1933]) articulates this mutually reinforcing relationship between elites and masses as follows:

> A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organizers and leaders…the existence of a group of people 'specialized' in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas. But the process of creating intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersals and regroupings, in which the loyalty of the masses is often sorely tried. (And one must not forget that at this early stage loyalty and discipline are the ways in which the masses participate and collaborate in the development of the cultural movement as a whole). (334)

Absent from McCormick's account of Machiavelli's theory of democratic leadership is this Gramscian reading of The Prince as a form of collective rather than individual leadership. On Gramsci's (1971 [1933-34]) reading, the Prince is not an individual protagonist but a "collective organism", variously described as a collective intelligentsia and as an "exemplification of the concrete formation and operation of a collective will…as the protagonist of a real and effective historical drama" (130). This interpretation is evident in Gramsci's (1971 [1933-34]), assertion that the Jacobin party "is a 'categorical embodiment' of Machiavelli's

Prince" (130). By contrast, in McCormick's reading, Machiavelli's Prince remains an individual leader that is external to the active citizenry, even though he is thoroughly demonstrated to be a vigorous defender of the common people's liberty.

The difference between these readings is not only interpretive but concerns the very mechanism through which the common people become capable of self-government under plutocratic conditions. In McCormick's account, institutional reform originates from above, through the intervention of an exceptional leader. In Gramsci's account, political reforms are to be constructed from below through the organizational activity of the subaltern classes themselves. In a political party, it is not the leader who creates a politically conscious citizenry, but the active participation of the citizenry that produces a form of collective leadership capable of articulating and advancing their demands. For this reason, Gramsci sharply distinguishes his conception of political leadership from figures such as Giuseppe Mazzini, whose populist Action Party failed to mobilize the peasantry, lacked a solid class base, and made no effort to promote agrarian reform. Without such an active social basis, Gramsci argues, the historical task of the Modern Prince (i.e. PCd'I) could not be achieved. As he argues:

> Any formation of a national-popular collective will is impossible, unless the great mass of peasant farmers bursts simultaneously into political life. That was Machiavelli's intention through the reform of the militia, and it was achieved by the Jacobins in the French Revolution. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 132)

Among Gramsci's most original interpretive insights, informed by his philological training, is that the formation of collective leadership capable of expressing the national-popular will is enacted through the very structure of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. On this reading, the text does not simply describe the qualities of an effective ruler; it stages the process through which a fragmented and disempowered people becomes a collective ruling subject. Gramsci thereby challenges the persistent myth of individual leadership that dominates much of Machiavelli's

contemporary reception, showing instead how *The Prince* functions as a pedagogical mechanism through which a real people develops its capacities for self-government, rather than relying on the authority of an exceptional authority of an external, even if democratically-inspired, leader.

Gramsci observes that *The Prince* initially presents a utopian figure with "no real historical existence", a "pure theoretical abstraction…a symbol of the leader and ideal condottiere". "Throughout the book", he writes, "Machiavelli discusses what the Prince must be like if he is to lead a people to found a new State" and "the argument is developed with rigorous logic", but also "with scientific detachment", therefore maintaining the appearance of a treatise addressed to elites. This appearance, however, is disrupted in Chapter 26, "Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians", where Machiavelli makes what Gramsci calls "a dramatic movement of great effect" by invoking a prince who "really exists" and "presents himself immediately and objectively to the Italian people" (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 126).

Gramsci interprets the concluding chapter as a decisive transformation in the function of the text. At this point, he argues, "Machiavelli merges with the people, becomes the people...[not] some 'generic' people, but the people whom he…has convinced by the preceding argument – the people whose consciousness and whose expression he becomes and feels himself to be, with whom he feels identified". As a result, he continues, "the entire 'logical' argument [of *The Prince*] now appears as nothing other than auto-reflection on the part of the people – an inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness" (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 126-27).

Thus, according to Gramsci, Machiavelli's *The Prince* is not, in fact, addressed to an individual leader, but to the people as its true political subject and source of virtuous, effective, civic leadership. However, unlike populist interpretations, which identify the prince with the people as the embodiment of their constituent power, Gramsci views *The Prince* as a

pedagogical mechanism whose key democratic function is to keep the common people informed, to educate them and guide their political action. As he puts it,

> Machiavelli's Prince could be studied as an historical exemplification of the Sorelian myth – i.e. of a political ideology expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorizing, but rather by a creation of concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will. (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934], 126)

Ultimately, Gramsci's interpretation of *The Prince* converges with McCormick's plebeian reading in recognizing that Machiavelli's democratic commitment lies in creating the institutional conditions through which the common people can exercise political power more directly and substantively. Yet he advances a more popular-empowering account by challenging the view, retained in McCormick's account, that Machiavelli's most (in)famous text on political leadership is addressed to individual leaders and the appropriate relationship they ought to establish with the common citizenry. Instead, Gramsci (1971 [1933–1934]) argues that Machiavelli's intention is not to politically educate those "born into the traditional governing stratum [who] acquire almost automatically the characteristics of the political realist…in which dynastic or patrimonial interests predominate", but the subaltern, non-ruling classes themselves: "those who are not in the know…the revolutionary class of the time, the Italian 'people' or 'nation'" (135). The aim of *The Prince* is therefore not to refine the techniques of rule among those already positioned to govern, but to draw the common people into political life, to educate them in the exercise of power and hence enable them to develop consciousness of their own political independence.

Gramsci formulates this popular-democratic interpretation against two dominant readings of Machiavelli in his time: the "anti-Machiavellians", who reject his realist conception of politics as immoral and recast him in moralized terms as "nothing other than the devil incarnate", and what he calls the "vulgar Machiavellians", such as Ugo Foscolo, who interpret *The Prince* as exposing the tyranny of rulers even as it serves to reinforce elite power (1971 [1933–1934], 134). Against both misreadings, he insists:

> Was not Machiavelli himself a poor Machiavellian, one of those who "are in the know" and foolishly give the game away, whereas vulgar Machiavellianism teaches one to do just the opposite?...Machiavelli himself remarks that what he is writing about is in fact practiced, and has always been practiced, by the greatest men throughout history. So it does not seem that he was writing for those who are already in the know; nor is his style that of disinterested scientific activity…One may therefore suppose that Machiavelli had in mind "those who are not in the know", and that it was they whom he intended to educate politically…It seems clear that Machiavelli wished to persuade these forces of the necessity of having a leader who knew what he wanted and how to obtain it, and of accepting him with enthusiasm even if his actions might conflict or appear to conflict with the generalized ideology of the time. (Gramsci 1971 [1933–1934, 135)

From Gramsci's standpoint, *The Prince* does not presuppose a permanent division between rulers and ruled, but functions as a medium through which the distinction between "those who are in the know" and "those who are not" can eventually be overcome. By contrast, McCormick's plebeian populist interpretation retains this class division and identifies the individual prince as the central agent of popular mobilization, who "makes partisans out of an armed populace". As McCormick (2025) argues, "in fact, one might say it is the central political lesson of *The Prince* when he implores his addressee to arm the people such that 'their arms become your arms…that they become your partisans'" (20). On this reading, the individual prince is the protagonist of the people's struggle for liberty as non-domination. The implication, however, is that under conditions of oligarchic domination the people cannot develop their collective political consciousness, hence their partisan identity, through their own political action, but require an external leader to effect this transformation from above. This need for an

external catalyst to transform the common people into self-ruling subjects introduces a significant constraint on the democratic self-expression of the people.

Gramsci (1971) avoids the needs of an external leader by rejecting the assumption that the division between "rulers and ruled, leaders and led" is an "eternal" and inevitable (i.e. ontological) fact (144). Here, Gramsci is clearly thinking of the modern Machiavellian elite theorists who favored the "iron law of oligarchy" as opposed to his theory of hegemony as an iron law of reciprocity. Gramsci repeatedly warns of the dangers of a "split" or a gap developing between the mass and party leaders (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 331–335). If this connection is not maintained, he argues, political leadership risks ossifying or developing in ways incongruous with the experiences and needs of the people. In such cases, the prince as the vanguard of the people's struggle for freedom degenerates into a Platonic Guardian, dismissing the actual consciousness of the people as devoid of any intellectual content.

To avoid this outcome, Gramsci rejects the fundamental division between leaders and led and shifts the focus from the exemplary authority of an enlightened prince to the active participation of the popular classes as the source of political innovation. In his reading, Machiavelli does not simply instruct leaders on how to secure the allegiance of the people but seeks to enable a people to become leaders themselves. This inevitably entails helping citizens develop the skills to select leaders who serve their interests and who will elaborate their own conception of the world in opposition to the dominant ideology of the ruling class. This conception of popular, though not populist, leadership is explicit when Gramsci argues that,

> Machiavelli's ferocity is turned against the residues of the feudal world, not against the progressive classes", and therefore the Prince must "base himself on the support of the productive classes", including "merchants and peasants", if it is to "put an end to feudal anarchy. (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 141).

Gramsci's emphasis, therefore, is not on a leader who directs passive masses toward predetermined goals, but on the leadership of progressive sectors of the population already overcoming their passivity and becoming an active collective subject. In stark contrast, McCormick (2011) highlights the passage in Chapter 20 in which Machiavelli claims that "a new prince has never disarmed but rather always armed his subjects…for in arming them they all become his partisans" (my emphasis) (21). Yet this reading of a prince that constructs partisan identity from above and which is defined through popular allegiance to him overlooks a crucial point emphasized by Gramsci. In the famous final chapter, he argues, Machiavelli urges a real leader to whom all the previous chapters are addressed, to work toward "mak[ing] Petrarch's words come true", that "virtue will take up arms against fury…since the ancient valor is not yet dead in Italian hearts" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 125n2).

Gramsci's (1971 [1933]) opposition to any elitist model of popular leadership is epitomized in his account of "mass consciousness", which is not "false", but "contradictory", simultaneously containing "prejudices from all past phases of history" and "intuitions of a future philosophy", "principles of a more advanced science" (324–333). Thus within the subaltern classes' "common sense" there will be a nucleus of rational "good sense", "which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent" (Gramsci 1971 [1933], 328). Gramsci's account of popular consciousness is therefore more balanced than that given in most theories of vanguard leadership, for he makes explicit that the intellectual leader is starting from the insights that already exist among the common people. Moreover, the pedagogical process is dialectical (i.e. mutual) rather than unilateral, in which "the Truth" is revealed to the people: "the relationship between teacher and pupil", he argues, "is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher" (Gramsci 1971, 350).

In classical republican theory, the leader stands outside the disempowered population and, in principle, learns nothing from it. In Gramsci's Marxist theory, by contrast, political consciousness arises from cognitions immanent within social life itself, even if its articulation requires intellectual capacities that are developed in another class. In plebeian republican theory, however, the institutionalization of a class conflict between the common people and the wealthy few is treated as both permanent and necessary, and thus it offers no account of how a political party can organize a collective will across heterogeneous social groups. As a result, the central problem of democratic leadership today – how a divided people can be transformed into a plural, collective governing subject – remains underdeveloped at the level of the one institution historically capable of performing this function: the mass political party.

Gramsci's theory of the party and strategy of building consensus through a system of class alliances, provides a crucial alternative to left populism's solution in the figure of an anti-elitist people's prince. Rather than grounding popular empowerment in anti-oligarchic institutions alone, Gramsci conceives it as the outcome of a laborious process of alliance-building among diverse, even antagonistic, social groups. Without a party capable of mediating between leaders and led, democratic politics risks oscillating between reliance on a popular leader from above and the spontaneous activity of the people from below, lacking an institutional form capable of reinforcing their mutual relationship and enabling collective self-rule.

This paradox of democratic leadership – how the people can exercise political power without becoming subordinated to those who claim to represent them – is not unique to contemporary populist leaders and parties but has a longer intellectual history both in radical democratic theory and in Marxist theory. Gramsci's institutional innovation of the Marxist party as a popular participatory organization represents one of the most significant attempts to resolve

this paradox in practice and underscores the enduring relevance of his proposal to build a new mass party for contemporary democracy.

Conclusion

This chapter has evaluated left populism's conception of partisanship and their central figure, the People's Prince, as a proposed solution to oligarchic domination and the crisis of representative democracy. It distinguished between agonistic and plebeian approaches, which, despite their differences regarding the role of class conflict and its relation to equal liberty, converge in theorizing a singular leader that takes the side of the common people and champions their struggle against entrenched elites. In both cases, the Prince of left populism emerges from a crisis of representation, marked by unresponsive parties and the increasing subordination of popular sectors to wealthy and powerful elites. In this respect, both the People's Prince and Gramsci's modern Prince recover Machiavelli's idea of a democratic leader that is aware of the importance of the people for its own political success, responsive to their needs and wishes, and committed to defending the liberty of ordinary citizens against elites who neglect their obligations to the public interest in pursuit of personal gain.

However, agonistic and plebeian populism offer inadequate solutions to that crisis. Agonistic populism responds by mobilizing popular frustrations into a movement-party structured by a vertical representational relation, in which a coalition of disempowered and marginalized groups are unified by a common symbols and affective attachment to a powerful leader who constructs a dichotomous discourse between "the people" and "the elites". But a strictly discursive approach to party organization means that mass movement support becomes the expression of the leader's symbolic construction rather than the result of citizens' active participation in a common political project. The collective will of the people that emerges

remains contingent and indeterminate, which could just as easily be articulated in anti-democratic terms, and which leaves citizens with few institutional means of directly shaping policy before it is formally enacted by the party.

Plebeian populism offers a more viable response to the oligarchic capture of representative government by foregrounding socioeconomic inequality and the class conflict between wealthy elites and a systematically disempowered citizenry. It advocates class-specific institutional reforms designed to empower the people-as-plebs, constrain elite influence, and hold the wealthy accountable. Yet it remains dependent on a powerful leader directly elected by the people to act on their behalf. This recourse to the protagonist role played by an individual Prince reflects a broader skepticism toward party-centered democracy within the plebeian neo-republican tradition and its preference for direct-democratic, anti-oligarchic institutions that privilege ongoing conflict between the few and the many over political intermediation, while valorizing the decision-making authority of the plebeian side.

Vergara's (2020b) proposal for a mixed constitution exemplifies this approach: a representative regime structured around the relationship between the traditional party system and a network of plebeian councils composed of radically inclusive, residence-based local assemblies with elected members. These plebeian councils are endowed with strong oversight powers, including the authority to sanction or remove public officials, thereby subordinating representative government to plebeian control. However, this arrangement risks subordinating parties, and hence their vital function of national representation, to the authority of a local, potentially fragmented and disorganized mass of citizens whose specific demands do not cohere into a national-popular collective will. While plebeian populism is better equipped than its agonistic counterpart to address class inequality, both overlook the necessary mediating function

of parties in democracy and neglect the Gramscian mass party as a solution to oligarchic domination. Left populist theories therefore lack the resources to revitalize a popular-participatory organizational form through which citizens can both hold elites accountable and govern in common.

As this chapter has aimed to show, Gramsci's conception of partisanship as an active commitment to the common good, and its institutionalization in the modern Prince as a new mass party, offers a more robust solution than left populism to oligarchic domination and the deepening inequalities eroding representative democracy. The novelty of his proposal lies in conceiving the political party as an institution that enables the people to rule more directly and substantively by facilitating both the exercise of popular judgment from below and effective democratic leadership from above at decisive historical moments. Rather than reducing partisan politics to a dichotomous struggle between the many and the elites waged by a powerful leader on behalf of disempowered people, the Gramscian mass party channels social and political conflict into a process of alliance-building and collective will formation. In this way, it enables citizens to form and defend the common good without privileging any one social group as the exclusive bearer of political representation or decision-making power.

Seen in this light, the renewal of the Gramscian mass party is not a return to an outmoded party form, but a theoretical and practical resource for rethinking the role of the party in facilitating popular self-governance in contemporary democratic politics. It continues to offer a framework for institutionalizing popular power and guiding party reforms that are, at once, open to popular participation yet educative, pluralistic yet class-specific, and oriented toward achieving democracy's ideal as rule of the many in the interest of all.

CONCLUSION

> In my heart there has formed the idea (unfortunately not felt by too many) that everyone, more or less, has the duty to give their own contribution. This call is so strong, I feel it so profoundly, that after having put all my things in order, I depart content.
>
> – Irma Marchiani, *Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza italiana*

> To know oneself means to be oneself, to be master of oneself… to become an agent of order, but of one's own order, one's own disciplined dedication to an ideal. And one cannot achieve this without knowing others, knowing their history, the succession of efforts they have made to become what they are…And it means learning everything without ever losing sight of the ultimate aim, which is to know oneself better through others, and others through oneself.
>
> – Antonio Gramsci, "Socialism and Culture"

This dissertation has provided the first reconstruction of Antonio Gramsci's early twentieth-century thoughts on party democracy. Its aim, however, has not been simply to revisit Gramsci's conception of the party in isolation. Rather, I have sought to situate him within a wide and diverse field of historical and contemporary perspectives on the role of parties in democratic life. By placing his work in dialogue with the proceduralist views developed by Joseph Schumpeter and Hans Kelsen and their contemporary exponents, as well as with left populist theories emerging from the tradition of neo-Machiavellian partisan realism, this dissertation has sought to re-present Gramsci as an innovative thinker of the relation between the party and popular sovereignty within the history of democratic thought.

From his reinterpretation of Machiavelli as a theorist of revolutionary partisanship to his analysis of the early twentieth-century crisis of Italian parliamentarism, Gramsci's political writings emerge from, and respond directly to, the pressing challenges of his time and ours. These challenges include the capture of electoral representative institutions by plutocratic forces, popular dissatisfaction and political passivity within our current representative systems, and the

rise of authoritarian parties and leaders that restrict citizens' political freedoms in the name of a homogeneous will opposed to party politics.

The development of Gramsci's political thought was shaped by the interlocking problems of oligarchy, authoritarianism, and popular disempowerment in his time, but these concerns have often been overshadowed in the existing literature by debates over his relation to Marxism, obscuring his analysis of political parties as vital institutions of democratic representation. These problems were also central to the work of his contemporaries, including the classical elitists, as well as Schumpeter and Kelsen working within this tradition, each of which has received renewed attention in contemporary debates. Gramsci belongs to the long lineage within political science and political theory concerned with the crisis of representation in the age of mass politics, but he also offers distinctive insights into the innovation of the party as a representative institution that extends beyond it.

Perhaps above all, Gramsci's originality lies in his conception of the party as a "modern" Prince and in its corresponding program of uniting and leading an alliance of social classes. This program was devised as a solution to the specific crisis in Italy's representative democracy, which he diagnosed as insufficiently popular and participatory and constantly threatened by ruling class domination. In response, and while locked away in a fascist prison, he laid down a blueprint for a new collective leader in the form of a mass political party that would involve and guide the participation of ordinary citizens as the main protagonists of an emancipatory project, aimed at overcoming socio-economic and political inequality and strengthening the popular democratic foundations of Italy's multiparty representative system. This form of mass party, which once played a vital role in promoting popular sovereignty among the citizenry within

Italy's divided party democracy, no longer occupies a significant place in discussions within contemporary democratic theory and practice.

This concluding chapter reflects on the specificity and contemporary relevance of Gramsci's proposal for a new mass party, particularly its attempt to address the enduring tension between party leadership and popular self-government that continues to confront contemporary democracies.

The Key Takeaway: Overcome the Division Between Party and Society

The broader aim of my reconstruction of Gramsci's Modern Prince has been to contribute to the study and normative evaluation of political parties as the central institutions of representative democracy. Parties remain the primary means through which citizens organize themselves politically, formulate common goals, and participate in the process of collective decision-making. But they are also the main culprits of some of the most pressing pathologies of democratic life in the twenty-first century. The overarching issue that has framed this dissertation is that the crisis of party democracy in our current political moment stems from a deepening division between leaders and led. This division manifests itself in multiple, mutually reinforcing ways: in the growing distance between political representatives and the social groups they claim to represent; in the increasing unresponsiveness of elected officials to the public interest; and in the erosion of parties' capacity to function as mediators of social conflicts and vehicles for citizens to exercise political freedom.

The widening split between leaders and led, and between party representatives and their social bases, has fueled debate over the place of parties in contemporary democracy over the past fifteen years. However, contemporary democratic theory has largely neglected Gramsci, the

political theorist who sought to overcome this division through the founding of a new mass party, the PCd'I, and who, in the form of prison notes, left behind an extensive body of research into past political crises for his party to draw upon in order to better address the problems of socioeconomic inequality and political liberty in the current moment (Togliatti 1979 [1957]). Even today, and perhaps especially today, this work offers valuable material for political organizing in the present. Gramsci's Modern Prince needs to be understood in relation to the specific conditions of unfreedom and class divisions in Italy in his time, but his proposal for a new mass party should also be evaluated as a socialized and participatory defense against the enduring forces of domination. In this sense, it remains a self-standing resource for rethinking democratic party politics today.

In our present moment of crisis, political parties have increasingly come to function as instruments through which elites compete for and retain power, rather than as vehicles for enabling meaningful participation in public deliberation or for redistributing political influence across society. As a result, parties and politicians fail to sustain the level of socio-economic equality necessary for equal political liberty. Formal rights and procedures of participation coexist with deepening social inequalities in effective political influence within contemporary systems of representative democracy, producing a widening gap between the democratic ideal of self-government and the institutional realities of party-based leadership.

Although the decline of party democracy has been underway since at least the 1990s, and the crisis of representation and accountability is widely recognized as a defining challenge of the twenty-first century, the prevailing party-centered responses within democratic theory remain partial and insufficient. As the preceding chapters have shown, minimalist realist approaches, following Schumpeter, reduce parties to their electoral function as mechanisms for organizing

elite competition and alternation in office. Proceduralist accounts, inspired by Kelsen, emphasize pluralism and compromise, but often abstract the party's mediating function from solving material inequalities that incapacitate the equal participation of ordinary citizens. Meanwhile, left populist approaches seek to restore power to the people, but do so through a partisan strategy that concentrates popular agency in the figure of a virtuous individual leader, while promoting an anti-elite stance toward existing representative democratic institutions. This anti-elitism, though aimed at raising class consciousness among the citizenry against oligarchic power, obscures the interdependent relationship between elite direction and the active participation of the people in generating freedom. It thereby overlooks Gramsci's critical insight that intellectuals, insofar as they are better positioned to articulate popular demands and translate them into a coherent and realistic conception of the world, bear a major responsibility to facilitate, but not to dictate, the formation of public policies.

Despite their major differences, prevailing proceduralist and left populist approaches share a common limitation: they treat the division between leaders and led as an inevitable feature of politics and thereby leave it intact. Whether by reducing citizens' participation to the selection of elites, confining partisan action to the procedure of parliamentary compromise, or transferring popular agency to a charismatic champion of "the many", existing frameworks do not provide the normative or practical resources needed to overcome this unequal division of political labor and the resulting disempowerment of ordinary citizens. Proceduralist and left populist approaches thus struggle to reconcile the role of parties as means through which citizens pursue their personal and collective aims with the democratic principle of popular sovereignty. In each framework, the party is unable to fulfill the democratic function that Gramsci assigns to it:

serving as an institutional means of collective self-representation and transforming passive citizenship into active, responsible, and publicly-interested participation.

Implications for Contemporary Democratic Theory and Practice

Gramsci offers a model of party democracy that is missing and urgently needed today. The unresolved division between party and society that his theory aims to overcome remains closely tied to the dual threats confronting contemporary democratic regimes. On the one hand, the oligarchization of representative democracy has rendered parties increasingly responsive to elite interests rather than to the public interest, with serious consequences for the liberty and material well-being of ordinary citizens. On the other hand, the rise of authoritarian parties, leaders, and anti-establishment movements has intensified the erosion of democratic norms and procedures that enable citizens to participate meaningfully in political decision-making.

Authoritarian threats today appear in varying degrees, ranging from the outright restriction of voting rights and other fundamental liberties, such as the equal opportunity to compete for office and the freedom of the press and speech, to the gradual weakening of the civic associations and public spaces through which citizens express and organize their political demands. Although authoritarian-leaning parties do not typically abolish the formal institution of regular elections or openly advocate replacing them with alternative methods of selecting rulers (Przeworski 2018, 7), they frequently campaign on concentrating power in the executive in the name of "the people" while seeking to weaken institutional protections for political opponents and minority groups, especially women, racial minorities, and immigrants.

Thus, the crisis of twenty-first century party systems is not only a crisis of representation, concerning whether elected officials act accountably and responsibly toward the electorate, but

also a crisis of democracy itself and its core principle of equal political freedom. Democratic backsliding today is often incremental, yet it signals a deeper erosion of democratic practice across diverse social contexts, as politics ceases to function as an open arena in which competing actors recognize one another as equally legitimate participants and express their dissent in pursuit of conflicting aims.

As in the era of fascism, the decomposition of democracy within a society increasingly averse to conflict, pluralism, and the free expression of disagreement, justified in the name of an imposed unanimity, may well give rise to new forms of monoparty dictatorship. In this context, Gramsci's early analysis of the rise of fascism's dictatorship is especially useful not only for understanding how authoritarian forces threaten democracy by undermining the freedom of citizens to organize collectively, but also for clarifying the necessity of political parties in involving citizens in political life as a means of countering such tendencies. As he observed, the suppression of basic freedoms of thought, action, and organization threatens to

> destroy even that minimum to which the democratic system was reduced…the concrete possibility to create an organizational link at the base between the workers [and] the great masses in movement, and with it, the possibility of meeting; of discussing; of giving these meetings and discussions some regularity; of choosing leaders through them; [and] of laying the basis for an elementary organic formation, a league, a cooperative or a party section. (Gramsci 1924, 121)

In democratic systems today, the dual threats of oligarchy and authoritarianism are accompanied by growing popular disillusionment with the very intermediary institutions through which citizens can govern themselves democratically. Historically, political parties emerged to ensure democratic representation and to facilitate a more equal distribution of political influence among the citizenry. The system of representative democracy structures parties as collectives which periodically aim to obtain votes within a given institutional framework, a dynamic that determines both their organizational form and much of their ideology. In this sense, parties

enable a symbiotic relationship between state and society: they translate social conflicts and demands into political forms legible within that framework, such as programs, campaigns, and policy positions. Yet this mediation depends on parties maintaining an active connection to society. Today, we know from empirical evidence that parties are perceived as being detached from their social bases and failing to address citizens' concerns. This gap reveals the central puzzle of party democracy: the tension between the democratic potential of parties as intermediary organs linking society to the state and their dysfunctional practice as unresponsive, elite-dominated structures.

The persistence of this tension has reinvigorated debate on the future of parties in democracy, centering on whether they should be *reformed* (Wolkenstein 2020; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018) or *abandoned* altogether in favor of a "no-party democracy" (Landemore 2020). What this debate makes clear is that the crisis of the *party-form* raises problems that demand both complex analyses and innovative solutions. If parties are widely regarded as divisive, sectarian, unresponsive, and prone to oligarchic or authoritarian tendencies, why should they be reformed rather than replaced? And what justifies their continued centrality within the democratic system over other, potentially more egalitarian institutional modes of political engagement?

Within the proceduralist tradition, scholars advocate procedural party reforms but diverge on the form parties must take for democracy to function. Here, issues of feasibility rather than ideals of popular ruling must take precedence. Fabio Wolkenstein (2020; 2016) has advanced a Kelsenian model of intra-party democratization centered on designing new procedures that enhance citizens' input, such as deliberative assemblies, aimed at strengthening parties' accountability to their social bases. Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018) have called for removing

such decentralized participatory mechanisms and reinforcing elite control within parties structured solely by the rules of competitive elections.

Within radical democratic theory, more radical reform proposals call for subordinating parties to new direct-democratic institutions of popular power, such as anti-oligarchic plebeian councils (Vergara 2020b; McCormick 2011). Still others propose replacing party-based electoral democracy with alternative mechanisms of selecting representatives, such as sortition (Abizadeh 2021; Gastil and Wright 2019; Guerrero 2014; Landemore 2020; Van Reybrouck 2016). For example, Hélène Landemore (2020, 13) defends the need for an open mini-public, "a large, all-purpose, randomly selected assembly" that would eventually replace the traditional structures of representative democracy, such as parliaments, parties, and elections.

These radical democratic proposals diverge on a fundamental point: whether new local direct-democratic institutions should oversee and constrain existing representative governments or displace the essential functions of elected officials. Both positions, however, begin from a criticism of electoral representation and the existing party system. The source of this criticism is the evident failures of long-established parties to perform their representative functions, but also reflects a deeper pessimistic conviction that political parties are inherently oligarchic and thus ultimately threaten democracy as a system of popular rule (for a critique, see Wolkenstein 2024). We can trace this pessimistic stance within radical democratic theory toward traditional representative institutions, and political parties in particular, to 1968.

The crisis of parties in 1968 was distinct, driven by an unprecedented wave of protest among young people and the most politically advanced segments of the working class. At the core of these movements was a rejection of all forms of delegated power, whether to parties, parliament, or the state, which were seen as separate from, and even opposed to, the democratic

power of ordinary citizens. For the first time, political parties themselves came to be viewed by these movements as mere byproducts of the capitalist system, despite having previously been understood, both in theory and in practice, as primary mechanisms for generating new political formations and ideas and for enabling real social representation them by taking peoples' demands for change into account (Rossanda 1981).

The movements of 1968, however, were also marked by a crisis of political organization. Although they were highly successful at mobilizing and articulating emergent needs and demands that existing parties could not integrate, they refused to establish themselves within any institution or develop new political forms of their own. Unlike earlier social movements (most notably the labor movement), which were integrated into parties through processes of institutional reform and intermediation with local council and union organizations, those of 1968 remained fragmented, isolated, and partial. In the wake of these unarticulated demands, movements and parties entered into a mutual impasse: the movements dissipated, while the parties became more defensive, rigid, and resistant to demands for change.

This historical experience offers an important lesson for contemporary debates. No-partyism (the view that popular rule is better realized without parties) can give way to anti-partyism, in which parties are treated as inherently opposed to the "true" will of the people and rejected altogether. Yet anti-partyism is paradoxical: rather than enabling more direct forms of popular rule, it often consists in eliminating the mediating structures through which collective political agency can be exercised, leaving citizens increasingly exposed to the power of the state or a single leader. Gramsci grasped this paradox in his analysis of the early stages of fascism when, he noted, "fascism has presented itself as the anti-party; has opened its gates to all applicants", while in practice abolishing the freedom to organize first by destroying the

organizations of workers and peasants, such as the Chambers of Labour, before dismantling parliamentary institutions and consolidating a single-party regime (Gramsci 1921, 84; 1924, 122).

Rather than adopting a no-party stance, or treating movements as the only valid political agents, reformers today should adopt a more realistic and less triumphalist analysis of the shortcomings and potentialities of political parties. This realistic-optimism as opposed to pessimism toward representative institutions is a much more feasible approach to party-based popular sovereignty (Wolkenstein 2020). As Wolkenstein (2020) argues, abolishing parties is neither feasible nor desirable given their central role in organizing elections, legislatures, and governance, thus, "we should invest our intellectual energies into devising strategies for organizing parties in a different, more democratic way" (5).

The task, then, is not to abandon parties as vehicles of popular rule, but to rethink what form they need to take to enable citizens to govern themselves more directly and substantively. One good reason for retaining the centrality of parties in contemporary democratic systems lies in their unique national-representative function: their capacity to translate diverse collective experiences and demands into a legislative assembly that can guide the more equitable distribution of public goods and services. This is a representative function that more localized, non-electoral institutions of popular rule simply cannot achieve on their own.

Strictly procedural intra-party reforms, however, remain inadequate, as they limit participation to voting and periodic input, thereby restricting society's role in politics. Without robust organizational structures that involve citizens in ongoing collective deliberation and action, parties no longer serve as the means through which ordinary citizens can constitute

themselves as a collective subject of power, nor do they provide effective means for influencing and constrain the centralization of political will and decision-making.

Amid these recent proposals, scholars of party politics and normative democratic theorists have largely overlooked Gramsci, who developed one of the first systematic theories and defenses of the mass party-form within the modern representative regime. These contemporary debates lack serious engagement with his model, including its internal structure and the conditions under which it was developed. Contemporary debates have paid little serious attention to his model, including its internal organization and the historical conditions under which it emerged. In part, this absence reflects the widespread view within the social sciences that the mass party-form of organization is obsolete, if not normatively undesirable, following its decline since the 1990s and the success of populism in transforming representative democracies (Urbinati 2019b; Wolkenstein 2020, 61; Biezen and Romée Piccio 2013). Missing from these important discussions on the future of party democracy, therefore, is a strategy for renewing the mass party as an organizational form capable of articulating a multiplicity of social demands by linking a dominant social bloc to diverse social movements and coalescing them around a common political project.

Looking Ahead: The Gramscian Mass Party as a Guide for Democratic Party Reform

The ongoing debate on the democratic value of political parties unfolds within a much wider theoretical discussion about the crisis and future of representative democracy. Put simply, the question of whether parties are necessary for a healthy democracy is not simply about parties themselves, but about a deeper issue: what it means for the people to exercise political freedom in representative systems, and whether and how popular agency should be institutionalized.

Against this broader backdrop, this dissertation has argued that Gramsci offers the most adequate institutional response to the crisis of party-centered democracy among the theoretical frameworks and proposals considered. His proposal for a new mass party directly confronts the division between leaders and led by rethinking the party-form as both a popular participatory and civic-educative institution. Rather than reducing the party to a mechanism of inter-elite competition, confining its role to parliamentary compromise, or replacing it with a charismatic form of political leadership, Gramsci reconceives the party as an institution that facilitates the participation of all parts of society in the creation and pursuit of a common political project.

Without such an organized form of popular agency, party centralization tends to become an authoritarian imposition from above. Where popular agency is effectively organized, however, party centralization can assume a democratic character, expressing a unified collective will generated through pluralistic and equal participation. Yet even where citizens today are prepared to act as a single collective will, contemporary political systems lack a mass party structure capable of channeling and sustaining a national-popular will. This is precisely where Gramsci's theory of the mass party retains its contemporary relevance: as a framework for party reform and institutionalizing popular agency beyond their role as electoral or administrative machines.

Developing this Gramscian framework for party reform requires historical contextualization, namely, returning to the concrete attempts made to translate his model of the mass party into the institutional framework of parliamentary democracy. In particular, it calls for renewed attention to the Italian case and the postwar experience of the Italian Communist Party, the political party that sought to institutionalize Gramsci's modern Prince in order to solve the contradictions between its central leadership group and the spontaneous activity of its working

class and popular base.[9] While a full historical reconstruction of the Gramscian party lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, an in-depth analysis of its postwar experience would provide fruitful ground for research on party reform in democratic theory. A few lessons from this experience merit brief consideration here.

The postwar development of the PCI shows, first, that the "mass character" of the party cannot simply refer to the size of its membership or formal inclusion alone but should be understood in terms of its capacity to remain connected to concrete social struggles and the demands emerging across society. In the early postwar years, the PCI built such a mass party not by promising to solve all of society's problems or by presenting itself as the sole representative of the hardworking common citizen against the elites and the political establishment, as many populist parties do today. Rather, it became a mass party through the links it established with grassroots structures such as unions, factory councils, and local organizations through an extensive network of party branches, and above all through its efforts to educate millions of ordinary people by involving them in active political life.

In the immediate postwar years, the social composition of the PCI consisted largely of industrial and agricultural workers, many of whom had not completed elementary school, struggled to read or understand the national language, and had little prior experience with trade unions or political struggle. Through participation in local party branches, however, they learned to write, read books and newspapers, and engage with the essentials of national history and political life. In the evenings, they would spontaneously gather in public squares across the country to debate political questions and develop ideas of their own.

The party cadres responsible for organizing and educating this mass base numbered only a few thousand and were often brought in from different regions of Italy. Most were also workers

politically formed through clandestine anti-fascist activity in the partisan struggle, the Spanish Civil War, or years of prison and exile, where they encountered Marxism largely through the teachings of the Comintern. Alongside them were younger intellectuals and students from anti-fascist and partisan circles, many of whom were cultivated in literature, the arts, and cinema, though often less trained in political theory, history, or political economy. The leadership itself remained relatively small and was headed by Togliatti, whose political thought had been shaped through the founding experience of the PCd'I and *L'Ordine Nuovo* in 1919 alongside Gramsci, Umberto Terracini, and Angelo Tasca, which served as principal organs of the Turin factory council movement.

By 1946, the PCI had reached roughly two million active members, making it larger than any other communist party in Western Europe and one of the largest in the world. Members joined not primarily on the basis of ideological identity, but because the party's program emerged from sustained engagement with the concrete conflicts and demands developing within society. In this way, the PCI sought to function as the collective intellectual of the working and popular classes envisioned by Gramsci: a party capable of combining strong organizational cohesion and discipline in action with openness to discussion and ongoing popular participation. Yet, the PCI's attempt to combine centralized leadership with mass participation reveals the difficulty of sustaining the dialectical unity that Gramsci regarded as essential to the democratic function of the mass party.

Over time, the party's efforts to balance centralized decision-making with responsiveness to an increasingly plural and differentiated society oscillated between two poles. At times, the party assumed an increasingly parliamentary character, making compromises that proved to be more opportunistic than genuinely responsive to the public interest. At other times, it reverted to

an older Leninist model grounded in the rigid assumption that political consciousness resides primarily within the leadership group, while the working and popular base possesses only fragmented economic concerns to be educated and directed by the party from above. Thus, the PCI moved closer to Lenin's original idea of a party that excludes all but the most dedicated and professional activists and ultimately departed from Gramsci's belief in the wisdom of ordinary people and his concern for mass involvement in the formulation of the Party's policy.

What this experience underscores is that the main challenge for democratic party reform today is not simply how to strengthen internal party organization (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018; Wolkenstein 2020) or mobilize various social movements, but how to build democratic institutions capable of mediating between them so that party leadership and spontaneous mass action can be brought into a durable and productive relationship. Recent attempts to rethink the party-mass relationship, however, do not live up to this reciprocal unity Gramsci saw as necessary for the development of an organized democracy.

The model of the "movement-party" has gained particular prominence among radical democratic theorists and has found application across the political spectrum, from far-right parties such as Brothers of Italy, Lega, Alternative for Germany, Fidesz, Vox, and National Rally to the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and radical left parties such as Podemos, Syriza, and *La France Insoumise* (Della Porta et al. 2017; Caiani and Císař 2019; Kim 2025). The movement-party, as a 'hybrid' model, aims to establish a unity between party leaders and 'the masses' or 'the nation', but it does so only loosely, often reproducing an organizational form that is more elitist and concentrated on the power of the party's leader than traditional long-established parties (Wolkenstein 2020, 4).

Despite important differences between radical right and radical left variants, left-populist models of the movement-party like Podemos and Syriza, influenced by the post-structural discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, is predicated less on a Gramscian reciprocal relation between centralized leadership and autonomously organized movements than on a vertical relationship between the party leader and a largely undifferentiated popular base (Kim 2025). Because their connective ties to society remain weak, these parties need to compensate by emphasizing a logic of equivalence across diverse social cleavages and the personal role of the leader, who builds consensus primarily through the media and symbolic appeals whereby the people as a network of social movements functions only as a catch-all (i.e. empty) signifier.

A more Leninist approach to social movements has also re-emerged in recent years in the work of Jodi Dean (2018), who has called for the creation of a new, highly disciplined communist party capable of transforming dispersed left struggles into a unified revolutionary subject against neoliberal capitalism. For Dean, the people is constituted as a collective political subject through shared affective bonds and desires for an egalitarian future beyond capitalism. Yet this collective subject, which initially appears in the form of a politically mobilized "crowd" through protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street, only fully comes into being through its expression in the party. Unlike the historical experience of the PCI, the People as a collective subject is not conceived as an alliance of autonomously organized social groups: workers and intellectuals partaking in a common struggle through grassroots party branches. Rather, in Dean's model, the party functions as the principal institutional apparatus directing political activity from above and organizing an otherwise atomized public.

Unlike Gramsci, Dean places little emphasis on the internal democratic structure of the party or on building alliances with social movements beyond itself. The party instead becomes

the privileged bearer of revolutionary consciousness and the primary interpreter of social and political reality. In doing so, it risks reducing the relationship between the people and the party, as their organizational expression, to a hierarchical structure imposed upon a fragmented mass.

The Gramscian model of the mass party offers an alternative both to the contemporary movement-party and to more Leninist models of party organization. The key insight Gramsci offers is that neither an unstructured relation between leaders and masses nor a disciplinary party structure can create the conditions for an organized democracy. A democratic party cannot stand above society and organize passive individuals from the top down, nor can it simply coexist with an atomized public. Rather, if a new mass party is to exist, it needs to cultivate relationships with autonomous movements and associations developing outside itself that, while emerging from specific conflicts and demands, are capable of becoming an organized political subject. In this way, the boundaries of the party are not defined merely by isolated leaders or a politically passive population, but by the participation of ordinary citizens as political actors in their own right.

The Gramscian mass party continues to offer a powerful model for critically evaluating competing paradigms in contemporary democratic theory, including anti-party perspectives, theories of party elitism, populist "hyper-party" models, deliberative approaches to intra-party democracy, and actually existing forms of party organization in contemporary democratic regimes. At the same time, the limits of Gramsci's model for contemporary democratic politics need to be acknowledged. Shaped above all by the experience of proletarian revolutionary movements, his conception of the mass party does not adequately address the independent role of women within the party or the distinct conceptions of partisanship emerging from feminist struggles (Bortolotti 1987).[10]

The limited presence of women, reflected as well in the postwar experience of the PCI, points to a broader marginalization of women's perspectives on partisanship, leadership, and political participation within the history of political thought. Moreover, as a working-class party, the Gramscian model raises the persistent problem of sectarianism: how competing demands are to be prioritized within a party that seeks to represent the people as a whole. The tension between the historical centrality of the working class and the proliferation of non-class-based demands, concerning gender, race, peace, and other axes of conflict, remains an enduring challenge that cannot be definitively resolved by opening up participation within the party.

Despite these limitations, Gramsci continues to offer one of the most flexible frameworks for thinking about intra-party democracy because of his emphasis on building popular alliances beyond narrow class interests. Thus, what I do not regard as a limitation of the Gramscian model is the threat of mono-party rule frequently attributed to his Modern Prince or to any party that aims to organize an organic solidarity of interests across all of society's parts. Gramsci's mass party does not seek to eliminate competing interests and values, but to mediate those conflicts by forging a common project. Its enduring relevance lies precisely in rethinking the party as a form of organization that sustains both centralized leadership and popular participation, partisan unity and pluralism.

Final Thoughts

By revisiting Gramsci's theory of the party and situating it within a wider political-intellectual field than that of existing scholarship on his thought, this dissertation has sought to clarify his distinctive contribution to ongoing debates on the relation between political parties and popular rule in democratic theory. As I have sought to show, Gramsci offers a compelling normative standard for evaluating regressive and progressive models of political representation

and party leadership, tied directly to their capacity to address the socio-economic and ethical-political problems as recognized by the general population. This Gramscian standard of leadership is worth recovering to empower citizens, through their own partisan action, to overcome the crisis of democracy, even in the face of oligarchic encroachment, populist authoritarianism, and unresponsive electoral representation.

The Gramsci that emerges from this reconstruction is not only as a theorist of revolutionary politics, but also a critical theorist of party democracy whose writings help address the institutional and normative problems at the core of contemporary representative democracies. This dissertation therefore intends to serve as a contribution to the fields of normative democratic theory, intellectual history, and contemporary political science concerned with diagnosing the crisis of democratic institutions and designing meaningful citizen-empowering party reforms. Many citizens who refrain from participating in party politics do so out of mistrust in their parties and elected representatives or because they are stifled by the hegemony of passivity and indifference toward conflicts that concern the public interest. As Gramsci insists, such indifference has to be resolved through a party that simulates political action by opening a space for the free intellectual activity of multiple groups in directly and substantively determining the common good, regardless of political affiliation, class position, or ideology.

Ultimately, the lesson that Gramsci's revolutionary conception of partisanship intends to impart to society is a civic republican truth about what it means to be a free and publicly-responsible citizen. To be a revolutionary partisan, he suggests, is to recognize that although one is an individual capable of making choices, those choices have meaning only insofar as one becomes part of, and takes part in, a greater cause. It is through participation that we discover the capacity both to act freely and to be ourselves within the collective. This, I contend, is Gramsci's

lasting insight, which remains available for rediscovery by today's partisans and all those committed to the present and future of democracy.

NOTES

[1] For the first systematic attempts to revitalize the study of parties and partisanship in normative democratic theory, see Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Russell Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship* (Oxford University Press, 2016). On the connection between the new wave of normative theories of parties and the broader turn toward empirically informed political theory, see Simone Chambers, *Contemporary Democratic Theory* (Polity Press: 2023), 162. For a more positive reassessment of their role in democracy and possibilities for democratic reform than is typically found in political philosophy and empirical political science, see Fabio Wolkenstein, *Rethinking Party Reform* (Oxford University Press: 2020), 5; Ingrid Van Biezen, and Michael Saward, "Democratic theorists and party scholars: Why they don't talk to each other, and why they should." *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 1 (2008): 21-35.

[2] For the exception, see Jonathan White, and Lea Ypi, "Rethinking the modern prince: partisanship and the democratic ethos." *Political studies* 58, no. 4 (2010): 809-828. This is the first attempt to introduce Gramsci's notion of the modern Prince to the contemporary debate on parties and their place in normative democratic theory, see Jonathan White, and Lea Ypi, "Rethinking the modern prince: partisanship and the democratic ethos." *Political studies* 58, no. 4 (2010): 809-828.

[3] I understand Gramsci's idea of hegemony as organized consensus, which refers to the way political leadership over society is secured by winning the conscious agreement of subordinate groups while minimizing the necessity of force. I borrow this definition of hegemony as "organized consensus" from Morera (1990b, 166). Hegemony is not reducible to spontaneous or passive acquiescence but refers to an individual's conscious agreement to a certain sociopolitical order as legitimate, that is, as an expression of their beliefs and interests. This agreement to a dominant conception of the world is the result of political struggle with rival group seeking hegemony, and it takes varying levels and degrees of participation, commitment, and intensity of obligation (direct or indirect, active or passive), with Gramsci attaching more normative weight to the former of each pair (see Femia 1981, 33). Gramsci's conception also presupposes a rational and ethical dimension to human acts of consent insofar as political leadership must translate particular interests into universal aims in order to generate broader social identification and deeper commitment. However, hegemony does not imply the absence of coercion, as has been often suggested, since Gramsci understood coercion and consent as existing in a dialectical unity (see Cunningham 2006, 568). Nevertheless, the essence of Gramsci's theory of hegemony is that, in modern states, where civil society is more developed (with multiple parties and private association), the rule of some group over others is maintained more through consent than coercion (Karabel 1976). Gramsci's emphasis on direct and active participation of the citizenry in the selection and renewal political leadership makes him a novel contributor to 'classical' theories of rule by consent and democratic alternative to the tradition's opponents, such as Joseph Schumpeter.

[4] On the many conflicting democratic and anti-democratic interpretations of Gramsci's political thought, see Joseph Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford University Press, 1981). Femia (1981) underscores the "open, non-sectarian, humane, and democratic thrust" of Gramsci's thought and, in particular, interprets his theory of the party as a more democratic alternative to the Leninist model by pointing to "its concern for popular participation and free discussion" (177, 190). For further democratic interpretations of Gramsci that highlight his non-elitist, equal participatory model of political action, see Esteve Morera, "Gramsci and Democracy," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 23, no. 1 (1990a): 26; Charles Mills, "Getting out of the cave: tension between democracy and elitism in Marx's theory of cognitive liberation," *Social and economic studies* (1990): 13-16.

[5] See Luciana Castellina, "The pci: The Communist Giraffe." *Notebooks: The Journal for Studies on Power* 1, no. 2 (2022): 356-367. "The Gramsci genome" is a concept used to underline Gramsci's influence on the historical experience of the PCI. Lucio Magri (2011) defines it as "the extraordinary reservoir of ideas Gramsci bequeathed to the PCI, and which it used fruitfully, though in partial ways that suited its purposes (19). The term "genome" functions as a metaphor of a living organism – which Gramsci frequently employed himself – to suggest that that different elements of his thought contain latent revolutionary potential that could be activated and renewed under changing historical conditions.

[6] Schumpeter repeatedly defines his minimalist conception of democracy as an elite competition for the people's vote in opposition to what he calls the "classical doctrine of democracy", that is, to the eighteenth-century definition of representative democracy as a method for producing a "general will" that political leaders can detect and implement. Yet, he never specifies precisely which "classical authors" he has in mind. This ambiguity is significant

because several thinkers commonly associated with the classical tradition do not fit the target of his critique. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, cannot plausibly serve as Schumpeter's primary interlocutor since Rousseau famously rejected electoral representation and advocated for direct democracy. The ambiguity surrounding Schumpeter's "classical" adversaries therefore raises broader doubts about contemporary interpretations of his famous theory of competitive leadership. On the one hand, it complicates strictly descriptive interpretations that treat his theory as offering a more realistic account of democracy as elite competition for the people's vote in contrast to supposedly idealistic models of democratic self-government (Shapiro 2016). On the other hand, it also casts doubt on more recent readings that portray Schumpeter as an incipient critic of oligarchic tendencies within representative government (Piano 2025). Rather than criticizing a clearly identifiable democratic tradition, Schumpeter's argument depends on constructing an abstract conception democracy against which his minimal theory can define itself. Consequently, it remains unclear whether his theory is best understood as a realist correction to democratic idealism, a critique of elite political capacities, or instead (as is my view) a strong endorsement of a narrow procedural conception of democracy that justifies the decision-making authority of competent elites over a passive electorate.

[7] For an excellent detailed analysis of Togliatti's publication of Gramsci's writings and how the PCI made use of his political strategy of hegemony as a struggle for cultural leadership, see Francesca Chiarotto, *Operazione Gramsci: alla conquista degli intellettuali nell'Italia del dopoguerra* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2011). Chiarotto provides concrete historical evidence of the PCI as a mass party attempting to construct a hegemonic political culture through the making and political use of Gramsci as a national (and not simply as a communist) intellectual, while showing how this operation was at times in tension with Gramsci's own conception of national-popular leadership. The publication and political appropriation of Gramsci's writings generated some of the most passionate debates and political oppositions over whether his theory of hegemony is compatible with a liberal and pluralist parliamentary democracy. On this point, see Alessandro Carlucci, "Gramsci, Language and Pluralism" in Mark McNally (eds), *Antonio Gramsci* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015).

[8] For a recent and original account of Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli that informs the revolutionary partisan reading developed here, see Michele Battini, "*Armi proprie e improprie*" in the work of Some Representative Italian Readers of the Twentieth Century" in David C. Johnston, Nadia Urbinati, Camila Vergara (eds), *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 520-594.

[9] Several retrospective political memoirs by dissident PCI intellectuals written in the twenty-first century after the party's dissolution revisit precisely this contradiction within the party: how to reconcile party leadership with the spontaneous political activity of its mass base, including the struggles of workers, students, women, peace and environmental activists in post-war Italy. See Rossana Rossanda, *The Comrade from Milan* (London: Verso, 2020); Lucio Magri, *The Tailor of Ulm* (London: Verso, 2011); and Luigi Pintor, *Memories from the Twentieth Century* (London: Seagull Books, 2013). Their reflections document the PCI's intra-party conflicts over party democracy, namely, the issue of bureaucratization, and the relationship between centralized leadership and mass participation.

[10] For an important critique of the missing perspectives of Italian feminists in Gramsci's political thought and its implications for the Communist Party's treatment of women's emancipation, see Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, "*La questione femminile nell'Opera di Antonio Gramsci*," in Annarita Buttafuoco (ed). *Sul movimento politico delle donne* (Rome: Utopia, 1987), 128–178. See also Nadia Urbinati, "Nothing changed, but nothing was the same again: On the 80th anniversary of Italian women's suffrage." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 30, no. 2 (2025): 230–251.

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