

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: A TALE OF TWO MODERNITIES: A LIBERAL
ALTERNATIVE TO A LIBERAL MODERNITY FROM
VICO TO HAVEL

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The resurgence of the political theory of Marx, Lenin and even Communism itself is increasingly seen in left political theory as the only means of successfully mobilizing the “energy and rage” of the people against capitalism in the wake of the 2008 economic collapse. It also threatens to draw politics and political theory back into the dangerous territory of twentieth-century illusions. This dissertation—taking its cue from jeffrey isaac's 1995 article in *Dissent* condemning the “strange silence of political theory” regarding the revolutions of 1989—looks to introduce the political thought of 1989 into contemporary left political theory. The work of Leszek Kolakowski, Adam Michnik, Vaclav Havel and Gyorgy Konrad are representative of a political theory that consciously works to avoid the ideological traps and illusions packaged within modernity's displacement of the authority of the natural world with the Cartesian promise to be able to both know, order, and modify that world. This dissertation places the east and central European dissident theorists of 1989 in conversation with Giambattista Vico—who in his oration *On method in contemporary fields of study* (1710) recognized the presence of this tension that would undergird modernity—and the Italian antifascist theorists Benedetto Croce, Piero Gobetti and Antonio Gramsci, whom he would later inspire. Through their similar confrontations with modern totalitarian states, both the Italian antifascist theorists

and the theorists of 1989 identified within modernity a rupture between “truth”, concrete reality, and humanity itself. A rupture that produced regimes and politics that promised humanity's emancipation from absolutism, while normalizing its subjugation in new and increasingly sophisticated ways. Their revised theoretical approach to modernity sets aside the ideological illusions of the twentieth-century in a compelling manner, and instead offer a principled foundation for the active preservation of democracy and human autonomy. Read collectively they represent more just a critique, but also a sophisticated set of political ideas that answer those who would otherwise approach them as naïve revolutionists or even defenders of the status quo.

**A TALE OF TWO MODERNITIES: A LIBERAL ALTERNATIVE TO A LIBERAL
MODERNITY FROM VICO TO HAVEL**

by

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Introduction

This dissertation aims to address what Jeffrey Isaac referred to as the “strange silence of political theory” regarding the revolutions of 1989.¹ Political theory, he had argued in 1995, seemed to avoid taking seriously those revolutions that were as much about ideas as they were about governments and politics. Isaac outlines several possible reasons for this, some of which I will address here. But strategically, this is perhaps not surprising. Limiting our understanding of 1989 to localized politics and regime change does a lot to contain their critical power, the object of which was modernity itself, and of which our own western liberal-democracies are an obviously central part. The politics of the day happily enlisted dissident theorists as allies of their cold war strategies and rhetoric, and the political theory that emerged reflected this. Isaac points to a popular attitude by which “the Central European literature of revolt may be historically or politically significant but it is [seen as] not especially innovative or genuinely theoretical....no deep issues are raised or discussed in their writings, and there is thus no reason to incorporate what they have written into our theoretical discussions.”² In order to overcome such prejudice theorists like Vladimir Tismaneanu in a 1993 special edition of *Partisan Review* characterized the dissidents of 1989 as the re-discoverers of “the values of the American Revolution.”³ However, for Tismaneanu and Isaac dissident contributions extended well beyond the parroting of American liberalism by “interrogating the foundations of the

1 Jeffrey C. Isaac, “The Strange Silence of Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 23, no. 4 (November 1, 1995): 636–52.

2 Jeffrey C. Isaac, “The Strange Silence of Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 23, no. 4 (November 1, 1995): 639–640.

3 “Special Issue: Intellectuals and Social Change in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Partisan Review* 59, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 617.

status quo” and rehabilitating “the political significance of doubt,” doubt that would expose in society and political life “the camouflage of barbarism” wherever it might be found.⁴ American political theory was uninterested in acknowledging such a revolution in ideas and in many ways it remains hesitant to do so even today. Isaac openly wondered if this “strange silence” wasn’t at least in part a consequence of these ideas being “too contemporary, too recent, and...too early to expect them to be incorporated into scholarship.”⁵ But nearly two decades later, it is not Havel, Konrad, and Michnik that have been engaged by a new era of political theory invigorated by the economic catastrophe of 2008 and the Occupy movements of 2011 that emerged in its wake, but Marx, Lenin and Communism itself. In Isaac’s review of Jodi Dean’s popular new book *The Communist Horizon*, he finds himself once again defending the theoretical importance of the anti-totalitarian dissident experience against a new generation of deniers, though now from the heart of the so-called revolutionary left.⁶ Dean’s first salvo in this criticism is a preemptive broad shot against all liberals and democrats who might question the viability of communism as belonging “in a set” with capitalist and conservative partisans. It is a language that recalls the memory of “running dogs” and “useful idiots”, as well as a category that Isaac identifies as including himself and, we can assume, the entire generation of 1989 dissidents.

“Those who suspect that the inclusion of liberals and democrats in a set with capitalists and conservatives is illegitimate are probably democrats themselves... they should consider whether they think any evocation of communism should come with qualifications, apologies, and condemnations of past excesses. If the answer is “yes,” then we have a clear indication that liberal democrats, and

4 Ibid.

5 Isaac, “The Strange Silence of Political Theory,” 637.

6 Jeffrey C. Isaac, “The Mirage of Neo-Communism,” *Dissent* 60, no. 3 (2013): 101–7, doi:10.1353/dss.2013.0062.

probably radical democrats as well, still consider communism a threat that must be suppressed-and so they belong in a set with capitalists and conservatives.⁷

It is a criticism that announces a distrust of democracy and that reassures fellow travelers that “‘communism’ isn’t the bad thing its critics have claimed, and communists on the *authentic* Left ought to stop worrying about the history of twentieth-century communism.”⁸ In short, it is a return to critiques that seek to marginalize the theory that emerges from 1989. It makes little difference if this is done by conflating their anti-communism with that of “capitalists and conservatives” as Dean does, or, arguing in the opposite direction, as Aviezer Tucker did, that Havel and the other dissidents misunderstood modernity and democracy and therefore did not sufficiently credit consumerism for its positive anti-totalitarian role.⁹ In either case, we are asked to subordinate their voice to the chorus of already established ideological perspectives understood to be “universal” and more critically powerful, thus drawing political theory back into the territory of twentieth-century “illusions, and the communist illusion in particular.”¹⁰ For British philosopher Tony Judt the importance of the experience of the “communist illusion” as well as the other illusions of the twentieth-century, were essential to understanding its politics, particularly the traps that lay within modernity itself. However, for Dean such an experience “is again becoming a discourse and vocabulary for the expression of universal, egalitarian, and revolutionary ideals.”¹¹ It is seen as the only means of successfully mobilizing “energy and rage” of the people

7 Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London ; New York: Verso, 2012), 7–8.

8 Isaac, “The Mirage of Neo-Communism,” 103.

9 Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 165–169.

10 Tony. Judt and Timothy. Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 70.

11 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 8.

against capitalism. But as Isaac points out, “giving no indication that this “energy and rage” is something to be slightly troubled about,” a rage that similarly fueled the utopian illusions of the twentieth-century.¹² The crisis of society that we are living through may invite the kind of energy and rage that Dean identifies. We need only observe it in the “new global revolutions” expertly covered in books like Paul Mason's *Why It's Kicking off Everywhere*.¹³ However, Isaac is correct when he insists that for any alternative to be truly viable it must maintain a “serious commitment to democracy.”¹⁴ This leaves little room for a revived communist horizon and especially one that leans heavily on Lenin while avoiding any mention of Gramsci.¹⁵ This being the twenty-fifth anniversary of the revolutions of 1989, such assertions should not be taken lightly. The excuses that it is “too contemporary, too recent”, or that the theorists of 1989 were too “conservative”, or that they have simply failed to tell us something new are certainly no longer valid.

This dissertation will argue that the theory of politics and action that emerges from 1989 is representative of a larger established philosophical critique of what Havel called the *crisis of modernity*, a crisis of truth, regimes, and politics. The dissident experience was shaped by their struggle with what James C. Scott referred to as “high modernism”, the late twentieth-century “faith” in the possibilities of science and technology in the planning and organization of society be it through capitalist entrepreneurship or

12 Isaac, “The Mirage of Neo-Communism,” 104.

13 Paul Mason, *Why It's Still Kicking off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*, Rev. and updated 2nd ed (London: Verso, 2013).

14 Isaac, “The Mirage of Neo-Communism,” 106.

15 There is no mention of the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci anywhere in Dean's book. The great socialist historian Eric Hobsbawm believed that Italy was a unique microcosm of world capitalism and thus a theorist like Gramsci where especially sensitive to both formal and informal power in the modern state.

communist “planning”.¹⁶ However, while Scott makes it clear that Cold War regimes were largely defined by this high modernist commitment, social theorist Marshall Berman also refers to Solidarity and the struggle against those very same regimes as “modernist breakthroughs” as well.¹⁷ This modernism of “antimodernity” would help the dissidents of 1989 form and embrace distinctive conceptions of truth, regimes, and politics. Taken together the experience of modernity and all of its contradictions, which may have peaked with Cold War high modernism, were in fact something much older and attendant to the development of humanist reason itself. It begins with the displacement of the authority of the natural world with the Cartesian promise to both *know* and subsequently modify that world. While the *crisis of modernity* may be understood as a particularly contemporary dilemma brought into sharp relief by the overwhelming capacity of our technology, it is one with deep historical and intellectual roots. It is the recognition that packaged within the promise of scientific knowledge are unanticipated dangers and evils. In his oration *On method in contemporary fields of study*, delivered in 1708 at the University of Naples, Giambattista Vico recognized almost immediately this powerful tension that would come to occupy his thoughts and especially those of ensuing generations of Italian activists and intellectuals like Benedetto Croce, Piero Gobetti and Antonio Gramsci when confronted by the modern state made grotesque.¹⁸ He asked his audience to at once “consider the many great and wonderful discoveries by which mechanics, enhanced by geometry and physics as they are taught today, seems to have

16 James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale Agrarian Studies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 4–5.

17 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Viking Penguin, 1988), 12.

18 Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, ed. Paul R. Wilson, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 259.

enriched society! One may assert, without fear of contradiction, that the warfare of our time derives from these three sciences. So far in advance of that of former times that, faced with our method of fortifying and storming cities, Minerva would hold her own Athenian fortress in contempt, while Jupiter would curse his three-forked thunderbolt for being blunt and clumsy.”¹⁹ This struggle to come to terms with and to mediate against such dangers would become increasingly characteristic of the experience of modernity, such that Berman would later conclude with all the irony that modern life could muster that “to be fully modern is to be anti-modern”.²⁰ Havel understood the nature of this fundamental threat to human life as well if not better than any philosopher and it is sharply reflected in his theater work.

It is with this in mind that this dissertation will reach back to the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico and enlist him in the effort to demonstrate a coherent but independent effort on the part of Vico, the Italian antifascists and the anticommunist dissidents of east and central Europe in identifying within modernity a rupture between “truth”, “concrete reality”, and humanity itself. A rupture that produced regimes which promised liberty at the price of submission to authority, and a politics that emerges from the contradictions of modernity and contributes to a kind of systematic threat to human autonomy. Consequently, it speaks to a conception of modernity that sets aside the ideological illusions of the twentieth-century for “the only horizon worth keeping in view...that of democracy itself” and the need to preserve human autonomy.²¹ Read collectively they

19 Giambattista Vico, *Vico: Selected Writings*, trans. Leon Pompa (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 36.

20 Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 14.

21 Isaac, “The Mirage of Neo-Communism,” 107.

represent more just a critique, but also a sophisticated set of political ideas that answer those who would otherwise approach them as naïve revolutionists. And as Isaiah Berlin argued in his famous study on Vico and Herder, “when an idea of genuine audacity and power is met in the history of thought, the question of its sources is bound to present itself to historical scholars.”²² Isaiah Berlin was speaking in general terms about the thought of Giambattista Vico, though he may as well have been talking about Croce, Gobetti, Gramsci, or even Havel and Konrad. For Berlin, Vico was a figure of such originality that this question of sources had to be asked and on this point he followed: “Is it possible to trace the origins of [Vico's] view and method... Or was his vision spontaneously generated in his own fervid imagination?”²³ Our inability to resist asking such questions, however tempting or important they might be, leaves Berlin cautious about their tendency to force “the assumption that no idea can ever be wholly original.”²⁴ Vico, it was assumed, must be standing on the shoulders of giants. As a method, such a directive “applied rigorously, threatens to melt the individuality of any human achievement into impersonal factors, and so lead to a kind of historicist depersonalization.”²⁵ However, such questions—questions that pertain to the history of ideas—contribute to developing a greater perspective on the text or theorist at hand as well as our own ideas and theories. They project the text and theorist's voice *into* philosophy and political theory, making any “strange silence” either impossible or unbearably loud and so, unavoidable. Berlin tells us that philosophers “turn to the historian because we do not understand the copy of the text

22 Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 114.

23 *Ibid.*, 118.

24 *Ibid.*, 114.

25 *Ibid.*, 115.

we already have. Giving us a second copy will not help. To understand the text just *is* to relate it helpfully to something else. The only question is what that something else will be.”²⁶ The key to better understanding the dissident thought of 1989 is then to be found in the careful selection of *something* appropriate with which to properly compare it. Richard Rorty's approach to “great dead philosophers,” what he called “rational reconstructions” offers a method well suited to relating the dissident theory of 1989 to contemporary democratic theory and establishing their importance. In his monograph on Rorty, Alan Malachowski argues that in the hands of Rorty himself such an approach “confers dual philosophical favours. Rorty ostensibly does the thinkers a favour by reformulating their position so that it ends up in better overall shape, and he does himself a favour in thereby creating new allies.”²⁷ If we are to take Isaac at his word—and I see no reason not to—the position of the theorists of 1989 seem to be in need of a similar reformulation or at least a recasting, and I would argue that there is no shortage in history of ready allies.

Rorty recognizes the value of a more esoteric approach to philosophy and the need to understand “what a philosopher says in his own terms,” but he describes this as a very “minimal sort of understanding...like being able to exchange courtesies in a foreign tongue.”²⁸ Such an understanding and particularly a political theory wholly invested in this method risks becomes arcane and unrelatable. It therefore it becomes necessary to

26 Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 11.

27 Alan Malachowski, *Richard Rorty* (Chesham [England]: Acumen, 2002), 50, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10455579>.

28 Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 52–53.

draw any given philosopher and their philosophy into our own time and relate them adequately to our practices. Rational reconstruction as a process not only brings relevance to “dead philosophers”, but it also arms the present. Rorty argues that “it is perfectly reasonable” for those trying to come to terms with a dead philosopher to believe that such a task is only possible after bringing them into our own context. Furthermore, one could even say that the philosophers themselves—Locke in his example—could have found out “what he really meant...in the Second Treatise, only after conversations in heaven with, successively, Jefferson, Marx, and Rawls.”²⁹ This is not to say that each thinker is necessarily dependent upon another, or even necessarily connected to them, but rather that placing philosophers in conversation with each other and with contemporary thought in this manner acts as a force multiplier of ideas.

Rational reconstructions typically aim at saying that the great dead philosopher had some excellent ideas, but unfortunately couldn't get them straight because of 'the limitations of his time'...They are written in the light of some recent work in philosophy which can reasonably be said to be 'about the same questions' as the great dead philosopher was discussing. They are designed to show that the answers he gave to these questions, though plausible and exciting, need restatement or purification – or, perhaps, the kind of precise refutation which further work in the field has recently made possible.”³⁰

The dissidents of 1989 are, in this way, also positioned to be best understood and their theory strengthened only after conversations with those who, in coming before them, faced similar conditions and challenges. By relating them to the experience of the Italian antifascist struggle of a generation earlier, as well as Vico's critical appraisal of the then new geometrical method of science and his own subsequent “new science”, intellectual connective tissues are constructed between each of them and strengthened. In so doing it

²⁹ Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner, *Philosophy in History*, 54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

demonstrates their relevance and importance and in Isaac's terms helps political theory itself avoid "intellectual obscurity".³¹

In his essay on "The Future of Truth", Leszek Kolakowski argued that the drive to find objective truth, truth that can be known and tell us about "how things really are", is hard wired into the psyche of humanity.³² The consequences of this compulsion are as remarkable as they have been devastating, and echoes an observation made nearly three hundred years earlier by Giambattista Vico. Because there is little reason to believe that humanity will ever tire of its search for truth in this absolute sense, it is important that we come to terms with the consequences of that search, those who claim to have found truth, and especially when they seek to impose that truth on others. This dissertation examines the human search for truth and the effort to balance that search against a dangerous tendency of some of the consequences to lead society down the path to regimes and a politics characterized by ideological domination and dehumanization. When Vico was confronted with the remarkable achievements of Descartes' "new critical method" he was justifiedly impressed. "Consider the many great and wonderful discoveries by which mechanics, enhanced by geometry and physics as they are taught today, seems to have enriched human society!" However, Vico tempers this enthusiasm with caution and the question that is then posed by Vico and subsequently carried through the development of his *New Science* is whether or not there is a conception of truth that can harness the productive power of rationalism, but preserve the human dignity and autonomy essential

31 Isaac, "The Strange Silence of Political Theory," 650.

32 Leszek Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 295–296.

to maintaining a “free” society. Is there an available conception of truth that can act as a mediating force against ideological domination, while resisting the tendency of such unified theories to become dangerous themselves? And it was a question that would ultimately underlie and occupy the Italian antifascists and East European anticommunist dissidents as they too sought the means, in both theory and practice, to come out from under the lies and inverted truths that dominated their societies.

Italy in the period following the First World War presented what was perhaps a perfect storm of conditions contributing to the rise of the first great exercise of ideological domination in the twentieth-century. Troops returning to Italy from the battlefields found themselves disillusioned by a war that failed to live up to the democratic promises made by the liberal regimes that had lead them to the trenches. A whole generation, angry and demanding change believed that Italy's liberal government under Giolitti failed to account for the interests of all Italians and that the First World War was, in the end, little more than a bourgeois war fought by the masses in name of bourgeois interests. This was at least in part a consequence of the political method practiced by the liberal government of Giolitti that came to be known as Giolittism. For Gobetti, this practice of procedural compromise wasn't politics at all, rather it was the very negation of politics and so it encouraged an apolitical citizenry. Parliamentary government as a form of rational consensus building, had reduced politics to debates over administrative concerns—debates over debt limits, budgets, oil pipelines, fracking, and tax regulation—but it had assumed as settled any debate over its fundamental values. In such an argument it is not

always possible to arrive at consensus, compromise, or even an agreement on principles or institutions upon which consensus or compromise can be based. To do so necessarily privileges one truth against all others. The Church acts in this way, as does the Science that followed it; however, in the case of science, rationalist methods based on mathematical reason and objective empirical observation replace scholastic methods premised on faith and scriptural exegesis. The natural tendency to resist such powerful ideological constructs by embracing a more pragmatic relativist approach, in turn presents even more pernicious political problems, as it has the unintended consequence of stripping humanity of its capacity to identify ideological and subsequently existential threats. Such a pragmatic agreement might work well for the purposes of efficiency and stability; however, reducing truth to a matter of procedure and consensus leaves open the possibility for the manipulation of that manufactured consensus in name of the best-armed truth. Machiavelli was brutally aware of this when he argued that “all armed prophets have conquered, and the unarmed ones have been destroyed.”³³ For Gobetti this is exactly what happened under Giolitti's government, whereby a small “well-armed” clique of ideologues came to dominate Italian society. It wasn't because they possessed the truth that they came to power, but rather because they accumulated power and a brutal willingness to use it that they could dictate truth. Relativism had become a convenient instrument of manipulation because, as Kolakowski would later argue, it “sanctions our indifference.”³⁴ Paradoxically truth understood in relativistic terms makes possible the domestication of a people, where the prophet armed with both physical as well as

33 “Machiavelli: The Prince: Chapter VI,” accessed October 4, 2014,
<http://www.constitution.org/mac/prince06.htm>.

34 Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 275.

ideological weapons can impose their own conceptions of truth. While not a danger in principle, understood in this way relativism, in conjunction with a predilection for paternalism, makes totalitarianism possible. Gobetti emphasizes this when he argues that “those who identify liberalism with tolerance and with problem-oriented technique have no understanding of what liberalism is.”³⁵ True liberal tolerance, he adds, “is a matter of moral education.”³⁶ The distinction that Gobetti is making here is one that can be traced back to Vico and is present in all of the theoretical perspectives examined in this dissertation.

Prepared in part by the paternalist legacy of the Church and weak institutions of an only partially completed Risorgimento, Italy represented a dangerous constellation of conditions that threatened political life. But emerging from those who confronted this system was a unique theoretical reconstruction of liberalism that rescues its strongest assets while guarding against its greatest defects. Many at the time, disillusioned by the perceived failures of liberalism, saw in Marxist socialism a highly attractive alternative. “To give oneself to Marxism”, argued Carlo Rosselli, “was like diving into the open sea after paddling around in a pool, so rich did its uninhibited realism seem in comparison with all the ideological haze and low-grade patriotism before.”³⁷ Marxism was thus embraced as a fiery and exciting continuation of the incomplete Risorgimento that had seen the bourgeois liberals entrench themselves in power and historical materialism seemed to provide the revolutionary answer, the “light from above”, that would show the

35 Piero Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, ed. Nadia Urbinati, trans. William McCuaig (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 129.

36 Ibid.

37 Carlo Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 35.

way. However, the workers' movement emerged in response, quickly stifling its revolutionary energy, with the change occurring so quickly that it led to a crisis within Italian socialism and Marxism. How could they square the successes of the labor movement—something that was the result of direct initiative and independent will—with Marxist historical materialism? This led to an intellectual crisis and revisionism within the parties, and liberals and socialist revisionists alike ultimately stripped historical materialism from the 'Marxist system' among them Benedetto Croce and also Carlo Rosselli. This had the immediate effect of weakening the old socialists and Marxists and generated two broad consequences. Stripped of its unified orthodox reading Marxism as a 'system' was crippled and became severely fragmented: "Various political and cultural currents could now legitimately claim a connection to Marx, and the adjective 'Marxism' became increasingly generic and vague."³⁸ As the party submitted to the critiques of the reformists, it became less revolutionary and increasingly satisfied with working within the very Giolittian framework that so many believed had failed and led to the war. It was seen as a return to the Giolittism that the antifascists, and especially Gobetti, had rejected, and it reduced Marxist socialism in Italy to just another class of liberal politicians, sapping it of its capacity to both challenge liberal dominance as well as inoculate against the emergence of fascism. Having lost its energy and "ethical fire" it was no longer attractive to the youth and they quickly became disillusioned.³⁹ It was in such an environment that the weakened Socialists were unable to stand up against the threat of Fascism as they struggled to even maintain their own relevance. Though the old guard

³⁸ Ibid., 29.

³⁹ Ibid., 50.

condemned Mussolini, but they were unable to match him. Disillusionment demanded new alternatives and from the perspective of those clamoring for change during this period in Italy there were few visible options. And it was in this fertile ground that the first seeds of Fascism began to sprout and quickly demonstrated itself—to those willing to see it—to be a considerable threat, not merely to Italy, but to modernity itself. Unlike all prior ideological systems fascism exposed all of modernity's principle weaknesses. In a world increasingly committed to rational truth, but characterized by politically domesticated persons, society was exposed to the reemergence of aggressive “totalitarian” programs willing to be everything to everyone. The fascist ideology was a method more than a morality or ethic because it knows no morality and “shifts constantly, avoiding coherence, firm positions, or precise distinctions.”⁴⁰ It is the ironic presence of “liberal tolerance” that paves the way for fascist intolerance and makes space for the incoherent and aggressive fascist doctrine. The intransigence that Gobetti identifies as the solution cannot rest on the determinist truth of the old idols of blood, territory and religious dogma, or we return to the same trap that we were promised emancipation from in the first place.

The solution as Gobetti understood it was not to redouble the conservative liberal strategies of Giolitti, but neither was it to “get rid of the bourgeoisie” or the “possessors of capital” and replace them with wholly anti-bourgeois government. To Gobetti's way of thinking such a strategy would be akin to tossing the baby out with the bathwater. What needs to be recognized is that in the end, even the proletariat are “bourgeois” insofar as

40 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 61.

they are fundamental components of the modern bourgeois world. And like Vico, for all its faults, modernity has brought with it considerable achievements that should not be abandoned. It is precisely the workers own liberal tendencies, that give them their revolutionary potential as producers.

“Certainly in the modern world it was the owners of industry who came to think of themselves as producers before the workers did. And the revolutionary potential of the workers lies in their capacity to become more vigorously bourgeois (as producers) now that many industrialists no longer know how to fulfill their function as investors and entrepreneurs, because the bourgeois system, with its challenge to Catholicism on the ideal plane and its proven impact on industrial production, is not headed for decline; on the contrary, it awaits fuller realization at the hands of a new elite (even if the new elite should prove to be the dictatorship of the proletariat).”⁴¹

What was necessary was finding a way to harness the productive power of the bourgeois class, but prevent that class from reserving to itself privileges that threaten the autonomy and liberty of the masses. And even if a movement or a regime rejects the fascist or totalitarian label, and does not follow policies that were put in place by the actual fascist regimes of the 1920s and 1930s, if they are born out of middle-classes fears and anxieties – fears of socialist class antagonism, fears of immigration, and of victimization – then they are, whatever their names, cousins of fascism.⁴²

“Fascism was not a function of the presence of fascists.”⁴³ It was the function of those segments within society that enabled and even welcomed fascism or something very much like fascism. It is for this reason that “fascism” as a specific threat is perhaps more credible than one might anticipate. Rather it is the social, political and economic structure that facilitates and makes possible fascism (or something very

41 Ibid., 91.

42 David Ward, *Piero Gobetti's New World: Antifascism, Liberalism, Writing* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 42.

43 Ibid.

much like it) that is important. This is what made Gobetti's goal "to be everywhere oneself" so significant. The call to "replace the last remains of revealed truth with the truth won day by day through the labor of all" was not merely a rhetorical exercise, the likes of which we are too familiar with these days, but an invitation that draws attention to the vital need for political renewal. As such, we cannot help but turn to another set of thinkers whose most popular slogan captures a similar ethic of resistance and renewal. "Living within the truth." The slogan made famous by Vaclav Havel in his essay "The Power of the Powerless" argues that "living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. The principle must embrace and permeate everything. There are no terms whatsoever on which it can co-exist with living within the truth."⁴⁴ It is an essential call for a moral and political reformation commensurate with the Italian antifascist effort. It is a call to follow Rosselli and "tear down a world" and to cry out as Havel instructs, "The emperor is naked!" Havel makes this connection clear when he offers his interpretation of the reality of the Prague Spring as "usually understood as a clash between two groups...those who wanted to maintain the system as it was and those who wanted to reform it."⁴⁵ "It is frequently forgotten," he adds, "that this encounter was merely the final act and the inevitable consequence of a long drama originally played out chiefly in the theatre of the spirit and the conscience of society."⁴⁶ While Gobetti and Gramsci did not live to see the long drama of fascism "played out," it was clear to them, as it would later become clear to anti-communists dissidents like Vaclav Havel, that "winning" in

44 Havel, *Open Letters*, 147.

45 Ibid., 151.

46 Ibid.

dissident terms did not necessarily equate to the assumption of state power alone. In fact, it was quite possible to imagine a “victory” in their terms that results in total defeat. As Gobetti, Gramsci and Michnik make clear, without a corresponding transformation in the moral base, one that agrees with a self-conscious revolutionary class, the victory will be short-lived and tend to recreate the very superstructure is sought to replace. This sat at the heart of Havel's own anxieties and misgivings around his own political career, and why in nearly all situations, when asked he identified himself as a playwright first and foremost. His hesitance to take ownership of political power was not an act of modesty or political gamesmanship on his part, though this is often the case of many politicians in our cynical era, but rather one prompted by his own “antipolitical” perspective and its accompanied anxieties. Consequently, antipolitics and its strain of liberalism by definition cannot present a complete political program of the kind demanded by the politics of both parliaments and politburos. Because it cannot claim special access to truth is cannot know what its future looks and so cannot guide us there. Havel adds, “there is nothing more illiberal and utopian than to want to assign it an obligatory path to be followed.”⁴⁷ Instead, it advocates struggle, not the “permanent revolution” of Marx that was used to justify Stalin's ideological violence that steadily whittled away a society in pursuit of its utopian ideal, but the “unfinished revolution” that Havel and Michnik see as fundamental to democracy and is a process that is continually unfolding.⁴⁸ Michnik

⁴⁷ Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 90.

⁴⁸ Here I am reminded of the figural sculptures of the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). While I am told his works represents a kind of distillation of man to their “cores”. To me they appear to reflect this totalitarian approach to truth, politics, and ultimately humanity caught in between. The sculptor, much like the State, reduces the figures in brutal manner to their very “cores” in the effort to establish conformity with the social ideal. Consequently, there is a disturbing equality observed between

adds, “a completed revolution is in essence a betrayed revolution” it turns into its opposite.⁴⁹ This is what Gobetti believed had happened to the Risorgimento, a liberal revolution that stalled and became its opposite. And what also happened to the Jacobins and Bolsheviks who having completely their revolutions began to enforce its pathologies on society.

Each of the antifascist and anticommunist theorists discussed in this dissertation was subject to the criticism that they do not provide a complete political theory. Even Gramsci's celebrated notebooks, as extensive as they are, do not comprise a “system” as such. And so they they are criticised for not providing an adequate alternative program to the systems of which they are critical. However, this is precisely the point because as Konrad points out, “If the moral opposition tries to act like a political opposition, it may soon find that millions are standing behind it asking, “Where do we go from here?””⁵⁰ This is what the opposition wants to avoid because it is under conditions like these that movements fall into the routines of the very “politics” and dogmatism they are resisting. It misunderstands the kind of pressure that antipolitics is trying to exert. They are not looking to establish a new ideological platform which can be assimilated, rather their focus sees the central task as being moral, ethical and critical. It is why Gobetti rejected political parties outright, and why Gramsci did not

Giacometti's various figures; however, as they approach this core they become increasingly deformed, unrecognizable, and inhuman, absent personality or individuation. Absent faces or what could be called functional limbs, they appear powerless to speak or act on their own behalf or on the behalf of others. They are no longer capable of life or politics.

49 Václav Havel, Adam Michnik, and Elżbieta Matynia, *An Uncanny Era: Conversations between Václav Havel and Adam Michnik* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 2014), 82.

50 György Konrád, *Antipolitics: An Essay*, 1st ed (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1984), 119–120.

adopt as his own the Leninist model of the Party, but struggled to construct his own concept of the party that was less the embodiment of a select vanguard and more that of a perpetually dynamic collective will of the masses. To the antipolitician the crisis of the regime is that its institutionally based politics is fundamentally conservative. Konrad makes this clear when he argues that “no matter what ideology a politician may appeal to, what he says is only a mean of gaining and keeping power. A politician for whom the exercise of power is not an end in itself is a contradiction in terms.”⁵¹ And as Michnik and Havel point out, “traditional parliamentary democracy is no solution.”⁵² There is no “program” that can be introduced that will not be absorbed by the regime and put in service of system's own ends. It was for this reason that civil society became the terrain on which the antipolitician engaged in ideological struggle and served as the conscience of the regime. And it was only through an autonomous independent civil society that an individual can avoid becoming the domesticated apolitical subject criticized by Gobetti and become a fully conscious individual capable of full political engagement capable, in Gramscian terms, of being a philosopher. The Gobetti's “revolutionary liberal”, Rosselli's “liberal socialist”, Gramsci's philosopher, Konrad's antipolitician, and Havel's dissident are all, in effect, this individual capable of full political engagement. And it is why both Gramsci and Havel are unwilling to limit their respective categories to a particular group or class.⁵³ There are however two principles broadly identified with this activity. A commitment to political conflict and liberal pluralism, or non-

51 Ibid., 95.

52 Havel, Michnik, and Matynia, *An Uncanny Era*, 179.

53 Havel, *Open Letters*, 167–171.

domination; and a commitment to a renewed moral life. “To be ourselves at every moment; to realize every possibility of action for ourselves and for others at every instant.”⁵⁴ That is, “our idealism cannot be limited to theoretical endeavor; it must pervade us and everything with a single breath of intimate, intense life.”⁵⁵ It a position captured completely in Havel's famous call “to live in truth”. Such an idealism is one that recognizes the historical processes that make totalitarianism dependent upon a society already deformed by arrested development, that has stunted its capacity for further social and political development, and that has effectively alienated the people from their own moral and political life. Overcoming this is the goal of all the figures addressed in this dissertation.

But as we tear down a world of prejudices and shortcomings we are building a world of concrete reality with ardor and patience. Let us replace the last remains of revealed truth with the truth won day by day through the labor of all, and generic abstractions with patient, open-minded scrutiny of the little problems and the big ones as they arise. Only in this finding of solutions and making them systematic are we really doing politics.⁵⁶

As ideological reformers, these theorists evoke Havel's intransigent mission that believed that “the intellectual should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations.”⁵⁷ It is my hope that I have been able to demonstrate in the course of this dissertation that there is a particular strain of liberal theory laying amidst the proverbial historical reeds that once recovered helps us unpack the nested challenges posed to

54 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 73.

55 Ibid., 76.

56 Ibid., 74.

57 Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvězdala*, 1st American ed (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1990), 167.

human freedom and autonomy by a society dominated by a commitment to ideological truths. In view of this analysis, an often disparate and previously narrowly interpreted set of activists and philosophers—figures like (Chapter 1) Giambattista Vico and Benedetto Croce; the Italian antifascists (Chapter 2) Piero Gobetti and (Chapter 3) Antonio Gramsci; and the anticommunist dissidents (Chapter 4) Leszek Kolakowski, Adam Michnik, Vaclav Havel and Gyorgy Konrad—become much more interesting, and a critical assessment of their contributions to political theory more complex when read as key figures in developing a broader theoretical challenge to the “crisis of modernity” as identified by Havel, and recognized by both Dean and Isaac.

Both the Italian antifascists and dissident theorist of 1989 were faced with unique sets of historical conditions that exposed them to particularly extreme and grotesque images of already existing modern tendencies, what Havel had described as “the Avant-garde of a global crisis”.⁵⁸ This experience is something that the anticommunist dissidents, faced with a state powerfully armed with material weapons, as well as ideological weapons and truth claims, came to understand so well, but it was Gramsci who, in the face of Italian fascism that perhaps offered the most complete analysis with his theory of cultural hegemony. And so, In order to draw attention to the seriousness of these political and philosophical claims, I turned to the work of the Italian antifascists of a generation before, who made similar claims regarding what is effectively the “weaponization” of truth by political regimes in the form of ideology. Both sets of thinkers and activists—ultimately rooted in Vico's approach—appeared to offer a two-fold approach to the

⁵⁸ Havel, *Open Letters*, 260.

problems they observed in their respective societies. On the one hand there was the need to engage in an active resistance against a real and persistent threat in the form of the state or those institutions that wield ideological truth (scientific or otherwise) for the purpose of social and political domination and control. And on the other, the need for an equally powerful and “universal” source of truth that avoided replicating the ideological traps of the regime it replaces. Beginning with Vico there is a recognition of being faced with a profound problem. If we are driven by our nature to seek out truth, and our understanding of truth becomes a precondition for establishing the “facts” that construct “reality”, then how can we hope to resist or change “reality” when we are an instrument constituted by the very “reality” we hope to change? The answer is found in what are essentially three corresponding arguments. First, Vico's concepts of “verum factum”, common sense, and divine providence. His novel approach to divine providence is means of finding a mediating force by which concrete moral and ethical boundaries can be established without sacrificing autonomy.⁵⁹ Second, Gobetti's concepts of politics as conflict and a self-conscious intransigence. Third, the Gramscian concepts of common sense, “critical self-consciousness” and cultural hegemony. Fourth, the concepts of truth articulated by Kolakowski as it manifests itself in the work of Michnik, as well as Havel's own concepts of “Living in Truth”, “memory of being” & “God as horizon”. It is an investigation of these ideas that form the core of the the four chapters that make up this dissertation and will be organized in the following manner.

59 Consider the sphere of social media. Collectively it represents a force that guides, shapes, and influences the decisions and lives of its composite parts. However, social media (in its uncorrupted form, a problem into itself) does not exist as an independent force itself that externally wills or influences humanity, rather it *is* humanity, or construct of humanity itself that in turn influences it.

Chapter One will turn to the earliest days of what we call modernity and the point of liberalism's earliest development in order to acquire a sense of the terrain of the struggle. It begins with an examination of the shared efforts of the scholastics and early-Renaissance thinkers to understand humanity's place in god's plan. Modernity emerged not as a definitive break from earlier philosophical efforts, but rather as its continuation of those efforts by other means or methods, and a recasting of the question. I will then explore the revolutionary potential of Vico, positioning him as a powerful precursor to radical dissident politics from Gramsci to Havel and the Occupy movement. Somewhat marginalized in American political thought, I will argue that Vico's contributions to the twin fields of epistemology and historiography, as well as his distinctive conception of providence provide a path to understanding the struggle for an alternative path within modernity that challenges the dominance of Cartesian determinism and offers a significant step down the road to a theory of knowledge and politics that is more open-ended while remaining rooted in the concrete experience of history. Taking up the diverse interpretations of Vico as both anti-modernist and conservative symbol, as well as a precursor to Marx and post-modernism, he will be positioned as an original theorist who escapes conventional categories while contributing to an alternative interpretation of liberal modernity. It will then be argued that we can recover some of these lost assets in the form of the unique intellectual legacy of Italy, particularly as observed in the experience of Italian cultural and intellectual development, and the work of Vico and much later Benedetto Croce, his most powerful voice in the 20th century.

Rooted in the unique Italian historical-intellectual tradition of Italy characterized by the influence of Vico and Croce, Chapters Two and Three, explore the political theory of the revolutionary liberal Piero Gobetti and the communist philosopher and organizer Antonio Gramsci. Representing a broad range of political and intellectual commitments these theorists nonetheless converge on a singular approach to the political challenges of ideological domination present in the rise of Italian Fascism. Both theorists were steeped heavily in the in an intellectual culture dominated by the philosophical heritage of Vico's critical stand against Cartesianism and the dominant intellectual figure of Benedetto Croce. Their experience under the ascendancy of fascism and the failure of Italian social and political life to adequately meet the fascist threat led them to explain fascism, not as the result of determinist external forces—what had been described by some as an anomalous parenthesis—but rather as a distinct product of Italian life and historical development. They wanted to understand what it was about Italy itself that produced fascism and, perhaps more importantly, develop a further understanding of how it might be resisted. The antifascists were distinctive from earlier resistance movements because they realized that ultimately, fascism was an evil of their own creation, and consequently the key to its defeat lay largely in difficult task of critical self-examination. Italian intellectuals responded to the emergence of fascism by not only looking towards the State or towards external influences, but also by asking what it was about Italian life itself that contributed to the Italy's decline into Fascism. Chapter two will focus on the work of Piero Gobetti, a self proclaimed liberal who early on identified fascism as “the autobiography of the nation”.⁶⁰ Gobetti's project was focused not merely on a political

⁶⁰ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 213.

revolution, but also on a reformation of the people themselves. He was most concerned with establishing conditions that would create in the Italian people a mentality or personality that was absent the defects that led to fascism. First and foremost this meant rethinking completely the foundations of moral and ethical life. Thus, he became a liberal critic of liberalism. It is for this reason that Gobetti arrives at the conclusion that traditional liberalism had become incapable of creating the kind of dynamism and revolutionary energy that is required to maintain the emancipatory character of liberalism. To do so, Gobetti set out in search of new locations of liberal revolutionary energy. And for Gobetti, it turned out that liberalism thrived in unexpected places. This chapter will examine his distinctive ability to locate liberal values at the heart of political theories and activities often understood as decidedly antiliberal, such as the factory council movement of the communist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, as well as his critique of liberal atrophy in the form of Giolittism. Chapter Three will focus on Antonio Gramsci a figure much admired by Gobetti and who was thought of favorably in return.⁶¹ There is perhaps no figure who understood the twentieth-century that was to come, and consequently our own twenty-first, better than Antonio Gramsci. While he is probably best remembered as a radical anti-Capitalist, it must also be remembered that while he always understood himself to be a follower of Marx, he was deeply critical of the scientific Marx and “of Marxism contaminated with positivism and scientism”.⁶² And yet it was this *Marxist system*, which in the hands of the political program of Lenin paved the way to one of the only examples of a politically realized socialist state. For those like

61 Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince: And Other Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1957), 49–51.

62 Maurice A. Finocchiaro, *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 71.

Leszek Kolakowski, who saw Marxism as inexorable linked to Lenin and ultimately Stalinism, the theoretical work of Gramsci by comparison is an increasingly “liberal” alternative. It was for this reason that both Gobetti and Gramsci converged on both the need for class alliances, as described in 'The Southern Question' and the critical need for the development of a spontaneous and independent politics that can exploit cracks in even the most dominant hegemonic order. To further this effort Gramsci introduces the idea of cultural or hegemonic struggle, rather than revolutionary violence, as a means of organizing independent social movements within society. And this, as Gobetti also recognized, was dependent upon the right kind of education and intellectual guidance. This reflects Gramsci's strategy of social transformation by way of a “war of position” that would avoid the pitfalls of direct confrontation, where even if victorious, would only succeed in replicating the same defects that led to fascism. While tactically significant, what is often missed in Gramsci, but is brought into clearer focus when read alongside his Vician heritage, is a critical struggle for 'truth' and the capacity to know it autonomously and piece it together in ourselves; to make our conception of the world coherent and to then square it with the social and political order. It is this transformation, what Gramsci calls “critical self-consciousness” that is the goal, to “know thyself” as the product of the historical process”.⁶³ “The goal”, for Gobetti, was “to be everywhere oneself.”⁶⁴ In these two important figures of the antifascist movement we see the development of an approach to politics and philosophy that leans heavily on a Vician/Crocian concept of liberal “idealist” pluralism and an open-ended politics. And it is an understanding of

⁶³ Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 59.

⁶⁴ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, xi.

politics that positions them as precursors to the “antipolitics” of the liberal anticommunist dissidents of Central and Eastern Europe.

Finally, Chapter Four turns to the anticommunist dissident movements of Eastern Europe and in particular the work of Leszek Kolakowski, Adam Michnik, Vaclav Havel, and Gyorgy “George” Konrad, who echo the original approach to both Marxism and liberalism characterized by Gobetti and Gramsci. Beyond their shared “Gramscian” conceptions of 'hegemony' and 'civil society'; the concepts of 'antipolitics', 'solidarity', and 'living in truth' as uniquely expressed in the East European dissident movements can be closely connected to the decidedly “open Marxist” and “Revolutionary liberal” theories of the Italian revolutionary left. For seventy years the people of Eastern Europe suffered under the ideological domination of communism. Despite its theoretical intention to provide greater social justice, its focus on the centralization of authority and economic planning smothered any hope for a truly free society. This was a direct consequence of the belief in scientific progress towards a knowable universe and the privileged status afforded those who claim special access to that knowledge, namely the Party. Kolakowski similarly argued that it was “Marx's anticipation of man's perfect unity and his myth of the proletarian consciousness that led to his theory being turned into the ideology of the totalitarian movement.”⁶⁵ And yet, without any sense of irony, politicians and ideologues declared victory for a similarly constructed economic ideology in neoliberalism and the politics of advanced capitalism. Having offered to solve the problem of ideological domination by replacing one unified ideology with another

⁶⁵ Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 104.

“infinitely more subtle and refined”, the more insightful observers, who had just emerged from life behind the “iron curtain” and whose experiences under communism sensitized them to ideological propaganda, responded en force.⁶⁶ In turn they offered critiques not merely of the totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism that dominated their own experience, but of one whose contours they recognized even in the west and as more broadly associated with modernity itself. Antipolitics, as it came to be known, built on a historicist liberal tradition first revealed in Vico's *New Science* and what he understood as the limitations inherent within the seemingly limitless potential of Cartesian science. It was a struggle, not merely for politics—though this was a profound consequence of the outcome—but for “truth” itself, and the right to reasonably claim access to it. And this is a struggle that has continued through both the Italian antifascist movement and the East-European anticommunist dissident movements. However, rather than be viewed as a contributing to an alternative narrative around both epistemology and political life, they are often viewed as relevant only within their own local and narrowly historical contexts, which are intimately tied to the particular conditions of their times. However, a closer comparison of the two, and read in light of Vico's own critique of Cartesian rationalism, reveals that the theory and action that comes out of these movements represent a more coherent and widely relevant model of liberal resistance to ideological domination of all stripes.

⁶⁶ Havel, *Open Letters*, 208.

The argument introduced in this dissertation begins with Vico and Croce, and enlists the Italian antifascists and anticommunist dissidents of Eastern Europe, constructing an historical and theoretical narrative that emphasizes a compelling philosophical alternative to dominant political programs. This is especially evident when brought to bear on any political form that asserts its own theoretical conclusions as assumed premises upon which societies and economies ought to be built. As such, they have considerably more to say about contemporary political theories of democracy and political life than they have been given credit for. They represent significant critical appraisals of both the form, and particularly the underlying function, of ideology as an instrument of hegemony and democratic and personal manipulation. Their contributions in a number of areas relevant to the challenges facing our contemporary democracies are considerable and important as their successes in facing down fascism and state communism demonstrate. Incidentally, the efforts of the more organized social and political movements that fall under the Occupy heading exist as a testament to the vitality of such a position. It also indicates that such movements can be understood as organic to their respective societies no matter how varied and diverse; a product not of external forces, but rather of historical conditions and the people that make them. It acknowledges the fundamental need to persistently defend human autonomy in any struggle for freedom where the claims are individual, personal and represent an effort to find truth and create a politics that coalesces around the commitment to “replace the last remains of revealed truth with the truth won day by day through the labor of all, and generic abstractions with patient, open-minded scrutiny of the little problems and the big ones as they arise.”⁶⁷ Such a position

⁶⁷ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 77.

can serve as the foundation for both the critical tools and the practical methods of engaging with our increasingly complex and deeply integrated political world; a 'philosophy' in the active sense that need not be burdened with the baggage that one defined by either either a communist or capitalist horizon demands.

Chapter 1: The Other Liberalism: the Liberal Philosophy of Giambattista Vico

Vico's radical introduction of a *new science* sought to emancipate humanity from the transcendent forces of Cartesian determinism on the one hand, while simultaneously working to preserve the transcendent nature of god—of a concrete truth—through a unique interpretation of divine providence as expressed through autonomous human life. The Church, which had played an incredible role in creating in Italy an insulated cultural environment allowed for the development, via Vico, of a unique intellectual culture. Benedetto Croce, himself a Neapolitan deeply steeped in the legacy of Vico, represented a key figure in creating an intellectual culture in the late 19th and early-20th centuries and served as both inspiration and symbol for the Italian antifascist movement through his unique liberalism that adheres to the traditional liberal focus on the individual, seeing the individual as lying at the center of a process of continual struggle for freedom that was not associated with any particular ideological vision. In this sense, Vico via Croce affirmed a commitment to pluralism, liberal freedom and a democratic way of life, providing a potent formula for Italian antifascism. And Vico via Croce and Gramsci would make his presence felt in the work of the later dissident politics of the theorists of 1989 if only because his presence was “in the air”.⁶⁸ In a chapter on “Civil Society and the Polish Solidarity Movement”, David Beem argues that the “conceptual connection” between the Solidarity and Gramsci is “stiking.”⁶⁹ He points to Kolakowski's critique of Marxism, “especially the passivity born of a belief that the coming revolution had been

68 Christopher Beem, *The Necessity of Politics: Reclaiming American Public Life*, Morality and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 115.

69 Ibid.

scientifically established.”⁷⁰ In Gramsci, such a criticism was under the influence of Vico and Croce.

If this conclusion demands more attention it is only because Italian political theory has always been a bit unfamiliar to the rest of Europe, and especially the United States. In part, this can be traced to their having been spared the religious reformation and their association with the positivist scientific revolution that swept through the rest of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Simply put, the assumptions that the northern enlightenment brought with it elsewhere, quite often, have not been taken for granted in Italian intellectual life. Though often seen as a source of backwardness, I will argue here that it is precisely this isolation and these novel conditions that would contribute to the originality found in the best of Italian thought. Though we might trace elements of this legacy as far back as the ancients, it is an intellectual tradition begins in earnest with its first great point of departure from the rest of Europe in the work of Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). In what is perhaps his best known work, the *Scienza Nuova* or the *New Science*, the Neapolitan philosopher developed a distinctive philosophy of history that introduced new concepts of knowledge and culture, challenging what was then becoming the dominant Cartesian and positivist perspective. While he was largely unknown in his own time, today his influence can be seen throughout the humanities and social sciences. Yet, rather than representing an anti-modernist position that implies a kind of resistance to the progress and development of scientific modernity, or the position of precursor to post-modern skepticism that seeks to leave behind a 'corrupt' or 'broken' modernity,

⁷⁰ Ibid., 279.

Giambattista Vico stands as a powerful forerunner of forms of radical politics from Italian Antifascism, through the dissident politics of the revolutions of 1989 and 2011. But to understand him as such we must invest in a reading of Vico as neither anti-modern, nor post-modern, but rather as (lacking an adequately distinctive term) new-modern.⁷¹ What was necessary was a new science that accounted for the contingent nature of man, but simultaneously strove for the same degree of rigor, that aimed to find truths that were as useful as Cartesian truths had been in their respective fields. For this Vico turned to 'common sense', which he understood as knowledge necessary to conduct oneself in everyday life. It is 'good sense' precisely because it helps us understand that the historical development of a given society is not the manifest result of a single force or will external to human life, but rather a force that emanates from the historical expression of the independent and capricious wills of that society.⁷² Reason cannot offer a road map to understanding this society, but 'good sense' or 'common sense' if studied with great care could. Vico's *New Science*, without denying the value of knowledge in the form of abstract and transcendent truths (he was, after all, a devout Catholic) nonetheless makes the claim that alone such truths cannot tell us much about human life, not because man is unaffected by these truths (such as the laws of physics or mathematical constants), but that such truths cannot be transferred effectively to the sphere of human social and political life. "Thus those whose only concern is for the truth find it difficult to attain the means, and even more the ends of public life. More often than not they give up, frustrated

71 I use this term as a nod to both the term 'post-modern', though I wish to avoid it, instead preferring to acknowledge Vico's best known work the *New Science*, which he recognized as every bit a part of the modern task of human emancipation.

72 While Vico doesn't make this distinction, Gramsci will later point to a variant of common sense he calls 'good sense' and which he identified with the 'spontaneous philosophy' of the masses and that for Gramsci contained the germ of alternative conceptions of the world.

in their own plans and deceived by those of others.”⁷³ This passage is among the most radical ever written and prepared those Italians steeped in his intellectual tradition to see the approach of those who would seek to “use force to make their way through the maze of life” and run roughshod over history.⁷⁴ It was a warning that was to anticipate the ideological horrors of twentieth and twenty-first century political life. And it is also Vico, who challenges us to rethink how we understand the relationship of the individual and the State in the context of the ideological struggles that even to this day consume us.

The Struggle for Modernity

While a full account of the intellectual struggle that shaped modernity lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is necessary to sketch out to some degree the conflict that would lead to this unique philosophical development in Italy and captured in Vico. This begins with an analysis of the two distinctive though interconnected paths by which liberal modernity might have come to be understood. And their differences lie in the very nature of our understanding of knowledge and how it is that one constructs a theory by which decisions can be made and informed action can be taken. How to achieve this is one of the essential political questions—for it sets the stage, in some sense, for all others—and it is the arguments associated with answering this question, a question of means and method, that forms the basis of the struggle for modernity.

73 Giambattista Vico, *Vico: Selected Writings*, trans. Leon Pompa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 42

74 Vico, *Vico*, 43

For most of history humanity has turned to either the revealed wisdom of their gods or, in the context of the West, the wisdom of their most ancient philosophers. In both cases these sources of wisdom have been seen as irreproachable authorities in matters of philosophy, metaphysics and even natural science. All of this changed with the arrival of what has come to be known as the enlightenment, which brought with it the introduction of the concepts of self-consciousness and individualism; concepts from which we derive our modern ideas of liberty and the pursuit of human freedom and emancipation. In time, intellectuals increasingly dismissed the authority of the ancient idols as indicative of prejudice, more often rooted in custom and habit than in truth. It is a complicated effort that lingers with us even today as we dismiss so many attitudes and perspectives seen as pre-modern myth or superstition, while many others persist and in some cases even proliferate. Philosophers and intellectuals began to try and establish a means by which these old assumptions could be replaced with a more objective truth, truths upon which sounder theories could be built, and more effective actions taken, all in the effort to develop a clearer picture of the universe and humanity's place in it. From this effort emerged two great methodological perspectives that have since guided the progress and development of the modern search for knowledge and truth, with one quickly overshadowing the other. The first one, with which we are most familiar, sees humanity as subject to immutable laws and principles and assumes that these laws are either revealed to us through some divinity, or that they are ultimately discoverable through the application of the rational methods of science. This was most famously characterized by Rene Descartes and relied upon a kind of formal logic or reasoning insulated from the

subjectivity and uncertainty of perception and experience. This could be achieved through a kind of methodological purity derived from either purely abstract or mathematical reason, or based on the strict “objectivity” of empirical observation. Method would become a filter through which only the most refined truths could pass. Descartes set himself to the task of achieving this with the famous opening lines of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1639) in which he declared that he was,

“struck by how many false things [he] had believed, and by how doubtful was the structure of beliefs that [he] had based on them. [He] realized that if [he] wanted to establish anything in the sciences that was stable and likely to last, [He] needed – just once in [his] life – to demolish everything completely and start again from the foundations.”⁷⁵

What had held up humanity in the search for knowledge and undivided truth was not the inability to reason, but rather our irrational commitment to opinion, custom, and in many cases beliefs that without the benefit of objectivity were reduced to superstition. 'Real' truth, as opposed to the 'perceived' truth of *common sense*, could be achieved through the rigorous application of *reason* or *good sense*—understood differently than Vico or Gramsci understood it—what we now call the *scientific method*.⁷⁶ Looking past the uncertain world of men, the Cartesians turned their attention to the world of reason that they understood lay beneath it. The great achievement of science was the discovery of the existence of a natural order to the structure and forces that guide the universe that is independent of any divinity. It did not dismiss entirely the possibility of the divine, and here I paraphrase the American physicist Stephen Weinberg, but it made appeals to a

75 Descartes, Rene, “Meditations on First Philosophy by Rene Descartes,” *Marxists.org*, accessed September 20, 2014, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/descartes/1639/meditations.htm>.

76 Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*.

divinity no longer necessary. In this sense science, following on the heels of religion, supplants it, but not before adopting its structure. In both cases, knowledge is predicated on one's ability to access objective laws and is measured by their productivity, a demonstration of the power of the laws to provide answers in the form of self-evident truths. Humanity's place in such an order is that of a subject and insofar as one possesses any autonomy it is to recognize oneself as subject and to tinker (perhaps in vain) amongst the complex of existing *a priori* laws and principles in hope of arriving, ultimately, at the godhead.⁷⁷ While knowledge is obtainable by us, it is also external to human experience, and though we may suffer its effects, and recognize or even anticipate its movements, we do not contribute fundamentally to their creation and so we cannot ultimately know them as their creator does.

The second perspective sees in man a purposive actor, moved by his own will in participation with history as well as those independent and impersonal laws. This perspective argues that while humanity might be subject to certain external laws that govern the physical world, though these laws may be converging upon truth they cannot ultimately reach that horizon. However, human life is also subject to conditions that are themselves human created; that is, they are historical. And because we have created them,

⁷⁷ Vico, *Vico*.

Despite all of the great achievements made by science we are still no nearer to answering the existential questions of meaning and purpose. Since all is subjected to scientific skepticism save the first truth of reason itself, "since nothing is excluded, it is infinite." The scientific search for such answer is an infinite regress. "The only way in which skepticism can be refuted is if the criterion of the true is to have made the thing itself...when we arrange these elements we make the truths which we come to know through this arranging; and because of this, we grasp the genus or form by which be do the making." That is, we come to know its purpose. Deduction can only carry us so far. In the end, Sherlock Holmes, for all his powers of perception and reason, required as confirmation of the Truth of his deductive analysis access to the "organizing power" of Moriarty.

they can be known to us and provide us with truths the likes of which are only available to creators themselves.

“...the universal principle of [Vico's] theory of knowledge, that the condition under which a thing can be known is that the knower should have made it, that the true is identical with the created : *verum ipsum factum*.

This, he explained, is precisely what is meant by saying that science is to know by causes, *per causas scire*. Since a cause is that which has no need of anything external in order to produce its effect, it is the genus or mode of a thing: to know the cause is to be able to realise the thing, to deduce it from its cause and create it. In other words, it is an ideal repetition of a process which has been or is being practically performed. Cognition and action must be convertible and identical, just as with God intellect and will are convertible and form one single unity.

Now once this connection of the true with the created is recognised as the ideal, and indeed, since the ideal is the truly real, as the true nature of science, the first consequence of such a recognition must be that science is unattainable to man. If God created the world, he alone knows it *per causas*, he alone knows its genera or modes, he alone possesses scientific knowledge of it.”⁷⁸

History understood on one hand as the consequence of external causes and on the other as a product of human will, a nod to the later development of the concept of the *inversion of praxis*, which sees man as subject to forces of his own creation. For Vico, the study of these forces in the form of history could reveal their own useful truths discoverable, not through abstract reason but rather, through creative imagination. This perspective took a different view towards common sense truth and consequently the methods that would undermine its significance. It is a method of reasoning based in historical or practical knowledge, and came to be known as *historicism*. Marx, as it will later be shown, picked up this mantle only to run with it straight into the arms of science. Historicists argued that their premises rooted as they were in practical life rather than abstraction could be used to

78 Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, trans. R. G. Collingwood (London: Howard Latimer, Limited, 1913), 5.

arrive at equally significant truths, especially regarding human life. Both perspectives lead to a radically different understanding regarding the forces that characterize human life and subsequently how we can best come to understand and manage the conditions of human life. However, in its defense of 'old prejudices' the latter has often been described as anti-modern or even reactionary; Descartes and the scientific method having demonstrated themselves to be the 'truly revolutionary' and 'progressive' method. While much of modern life has been dominated by Cartesian rationalism, both of these perspectives contributed enormously to the expansion of human knowledge and emerged from the enlightenment struggle for modernity. Far from having been decided, it remains an ongoing battle with great consequence. Vico found himself at the crossroads of this theoretical struggle, and will be presented as a decisive figure in this tale of the two modernities.

Liberal-modernity begins in earnest with the emergence of the Renaissance Humanist position that says man is capable of ordering his environment in such a way that it is knowable in a permanent and intelligible manner. To this we add the idea that such knowledge can be arrived at, not through any revealed wisdom or truth, but through the application of human reason. That such an ordering is possible—and that humans are in a position to create such an ordering—answers a basic human need to make sense of the world and human experience in such a way that makes the individual an agent in the making of that world. The careful distinction to be made here is that it is humanity itself and human individuals themselves that are understood to be able to establish real

knowledge of human experience and, moreover, on the basis of that knowledge, transform that experience in such a way as to improve it and make it more comfortable. It is the introduction of the modern concept of progress. Locke, one of the great architects of modernity understood in this manner, spoke of the social contract as human creation devised as a means to escape the “inconveniences” of the state of nature. This placed humanity itself squarely at the heart of civilization's foundation and made of their contract a formula for good government.⁷⁹ Modernity exists then, not so much as an original conception of the world as it is a powerful confirmation and reorientation of that age old human struggle to order it and locate humanity within it. In this manner the idea of a teleological absolute, or transcendent guiding force remains within the bones of modernity and is passed on from Plato and Aristotle, to the scholastics, and on to Descartes, Marx and Hayek to name a few. The difference here rests largely in methodology and in how we have come to categorize and value knowledge.

The development of this process during the enlightenment is deeply tied to the existential questions of faith that emerged from the conflicts that arise at the frontiers of Christianity's cultural and political expansion. For more than a millennia, and at least since the time that Peter was declared the rock upon which the universal Church would be built, Christianity grew and expanded as all comprehensive ideologies do, by incorporating into itself what it could of the local traditions it sought to replace and eliminating or suppressing that which it cannot. That is, it grew like a fruit tree, its branches pruned and cauterized to promote a designated outcome, with all other ends

⁷⁹ John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*.

forgotten. The establishment of holidays like Christmas and Easter are perfect examples of this. And, like most dominant ideologies, it was the very success of the Christian expansion that would sow the seeds of crisis that is so central to the story here. The Church, which had until this time consolidated its power and authority in Europe increasingly found itself facing the challenge of accounting for knowledge and achievements that did not always conform to the received wisdom of the Church. It was the newly established global reach of Christianity that led to the rediscovery of the knowledge and achievements of the ancient and non-Christian world, in many cases through contact with Islamic thought at the frontiers of Christendom. For a faith that relied upon the revealed word of God in the form of scripture as the source of all true knowledge, such conflicts commanded the full attention of period scholars. It became the task of medieval Christian philosophers to resolve the contradictions that emerged in the effort to establish and maintain universal Christian truth and to harmonize Christian dogma with a world that was increasingly pluralistic.⁸⁰ This was achieved through a method developed by the scholastics and most widely recognized in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. It is important that we begin with scholasticism precisely because it is foremost a method, and as such it represents a first step in the direction of what is ultimately a conflict over not just political theory, but political action.⁸¹ It was a system of thought, relying less upon what a single man could achieve as individual than what that

80 It was an experience that confronted western philosophy with the challenges associated with what we today refer to collectively as globalization. It is a story altogether familiar and exhibits the tensions that exists at the heart of any deterministic or transcendent ideology. This will be addressed further in later chapters.

81 The scholastics were not strictly speaking 'the first step' in this battle. In fact, were space to permit it we can probably trace the substance of this paper's critique to the "ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy made famous by Plato.

individual might bring to bear upon the growth and development of a body of human knowledge. In this we see the source of that famous dictum attributed to Newton and later cherished by all men of science—but almost certainly of Catholic, and moreover scholastic, origin—regarding dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants.⁸² It was an intellectual movement based on rigorous dialectics; a method of critical thought that was highly structured, emphasizing logical reasoning and the pursuit of knowledge through inference drawn from scripture. It was a worldview that placed God squarely at its center and as such perceived causation as transcendent or external to human will, such that the development and progress of human life acted according to laws that existed independent of humanity itself, that is, divine laws. As agents, humanity was largely written out of the equation and the medieval scholastics, in their pursuit of knowledge, could now retreat into their abbeys and quietly engage in their dialectical study of the laws that shape not only historical processes, but all of life. It was most certainly Jesuit monks and not the lone philosopher of the ancients that stood as the template for the modern scientific academy. The scholastic method became more esoteric as it was refined in the effort to produce more 'accurate' scholarship through the application of an increasingly formalized and abstract logic. Bacon, Descartes, and Newton would later draw heavily from the scholastics while formulating their own new methods of inquiry, though Descartes would break from the scholastics when he replaced scripture as the causal model, for a modern

82 John of Salisbury and Daniel D McGarry, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 167.

“We frequently know more, not because we have moved ahead by our own natural ability, but because we are supported by the [mental] strength of others, and possess riches that we inherited from our forefathers. Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to [puny] dwarves perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.”

model rooted in a geometrical view of the universe. However, it was not for nothing that the British economist John Maynard Keynes, in a lecture read before the Royal Society of London, referred to Newton as “not the first of the age of reason, he was the last of the magicians.”

Before Descartes, an alternative method of inquiry emerged in the late medieval and renaissance period as a response to the rigid logic of scholasticism, which it saw as overly subject to mechanical argument and whose achievements were ultimately seen as largely unproductive. This of course was largely a matter of perspective as the task of the scholastics was not the creation or discovery of knowledge so much as it was the consolidation of it. After all, the *Summa Theologica* roughly translated means the “summary of theology”, a unified theology. This methodological focus on the consolidation of knowledge, rather than its creation or discovery, would prove the perfect template for strategies of ideological defense in the centuries to come. Pico della Mirandola, a Florentine philosopher of the generation that preceded Machiavelli—motivated in part by the now flourishing trade in ideas from the Muslim world and Europe's own recovered legacy—presented the humanist philosophy of the Italian Renaissance in perhaps its most developed form in his oration *On the Dignity of Man*.⁸³ Humanism, it must be remembered, particularly the early form of humanism to which Mirandola was part, was not yet secular and the early humanists saw themselves as very much part of the scholastic effort to empower their Christian faith. However, they

83 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

rejected the esoteric and dry method of the early-middle ages with a renewed interest in classical antiquity's focus on a universe with humanity at its center, in an attempt to strengthen Christianity through a renewed interest in human potential. The humanists reemphasized the Christian position that man was the peak of God's creation and their primary task became finding humanity's place in God's plan. Subsequently, humanists came to question what it was that made humans distinctive among all of God's creations, and in his oration Mirandola offers an answer based on man's capacity to make himself. Man, created in god's image, was himself a creator because "at man's birth the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life. The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him."⁸⁴ In this Pico argues for rank hierarchy of varying degrees of an active and contemplative life in which man can create himself. Because man is able to make himself he is free to "equal their lot", to make himself an animal or be as the angels.⁸⁵ For Mirandola the divine order was not to be found outside of man, but as an expression of his will, an idea that will find its way into Vico's humanist interpretation of divine providence. Until this point philosophy, and particularly the work of earlier 'humanists' like Aquinas, had not focused so clearly on understanding the human condition as a function of human capacity and potential. It is this that makes man distinct among all of creation, his ability to change himself, and it constitutes one of the earliest and most complete articulations of what we have come to understand as the liberal freedom of creative autonomy.⁸⁶ Mirandola finds the dignity of

⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁶ Vico, *Vico*, 209–211.

For Vico, it was this imaginative, creative capacity of humanity and especially early humanity that counted as the "the first wisdom" and poets rather than philosophers who were responsible for the spontaneous creation of the world of nations.

man, his freedom, is rooted in his ability to control his own fate and his own destiny. This is a decidedly different conclusion from that of the scholastics who sought only to understand the laws of god to whom man was subject and establish an accord with them, and did not see man as a constitutive part of god's will and thus an agent in their own creation.⁸⁷ It is not without significance that Mirandola, for all his commitment to his faith, was condemned, in part, as a heretic of the Church. This legacy of Italian humanism had a profound impact on Italian intellectual life as did the domineering influence of the Church. And it would ripple all the way from Machiavelli to the debate with which this dissertation engages, and which has been systematically displaced by the assumed self-evidence of Cartesian rationalism.⁸⁸

Thus two opposing though fundamentally related currents of thought were established on the basis of the proper method of regarding the world and the proper source of knowledge. Each offered their own key to unlocking the processes that guide humanity's development. On the one hand, knowledge as achieved through the application of formal logic to natural law as revealed through scripture, resulting in an understanding of

87 As we will see later, this forms the crux of the distinction between the two liberalisms as it were. One perspective sees human autonomy as paramount. The capacity of humanity to create itself and act as an agent in its own destiny. The other perspective sees humanity as subject to discoverable forces outside of human control. This latter perspective, which came to dominate, reduces human agency to a function of the environment, albeit an environment that we can come to know and perhaps even dominate. It is the latter half of this equation that presents itself as 'revolutionary', but in whose name and in whose interests? Whatever liberating effort is entered upon on such grounds finds itself unavoidably susceptible to exploitation and the forces of ideological domination.

88 György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 111–113.

Lukacs famously points to this in *History and Class Consciousness* when he argues that “What is novel about modern rationalism is its increasingly insistent claim that it has discovered the principle which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society are found to confront mankind. Compared with this, every previous type of rationalism is no more than a partial system. In such systems the ‘ultimate’ problems of human existence persist in an irrationality incommensurable with human understanding.”

knowledge as divine, universal and transcendent. And on the other hand, knowledge understood as a function of the human capacity for self-creation, resulting in an understanding of knowledge as both particular and pluralistic, and fundamentally contingent though no less 'true' as a result. These two forms of knowledge thrived alongside each other, each in many cases complementing the achievements of the other. This was the position that Vico would take on on scientism. "With astonishing ease of method, analysis provides solutions to geometric problems which were unsolved by the ancients."⁸⁹ But this balance of power was upset with the introduction of a remarkable innovation in the pursuit of knowledge that would set the course of modernity until our own time, and arrived at the confluence of both religious reformation and scientific revolution. The method of the scholastics would be reborn in the wake of a protestant reformation sparked by Italian humanism in northern and western Europe and introduced a new universalism in the form of Baconian and Cartesian scientism. The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were a revolutionary period. Educated men of letters—scientists, philosophers, politicians, etc—saw around them a confusing and often bewildering world and one increasingly marked by religious violence, and sought to understand it and arrange knowledge of it in a more orderly and harmonious manner. Like the scholastics before them who sought to bring harmony to an increasingly pluralistic world through the application of formal logic in the effort to establish continuity with the underlying divine law, these scientists looked beyond or beneath history and the world of man to a world of reason guided by natural law. Descartes believed that his scientific method could be used to discover these underlying truths and

⁸⁹ Vico, *Vico*, 35–36.

principles that guide all things, including human society. These discoverable laws exist independent of human society and it is human society that is instead governed by them. The implications of this on the order of human life and politics was profound. In the absence of a *divine* constant in the form of the universal Church, Cartesianism revealed a *natural* constant around which knowledge could be similarly ordered.⁹⁰ Vico calls this constant the “first truth” of the Cartesian Method and we find it articulated in that famous Cartesian maxim, *cogito ergo sum* or, “I think therefore I am”.⁹¹ Much effort has been expended on coming to terms with this maxim and it has been challenged, defined, and redefined over the years in every way imaginable. We can understand this as the culminating statement of Cartesian doubt or skepticism; that radical doubt that tells us that we must eliminate all beliefs that are possible to doubt. Essentially, this eliminates very nearly all existing knowledge. You even have to subject yourself and the very nature of your existence to this radical doubt, and it is the consequence of this that leads Descartes to his famous first truth. The very act of doubting your existence is proof of that existence, or at least a proof of the existence of your thought. If you doubt something, you are engaged in the act of thinking about it, and for someone to think implies one who thinks, or, simply put one who exists. However, this didn’t confirm the existence of the body as such, which still remains unknown, but rather the existence of the mind and of the capacity to think and express thought. Therefore, Descartes

⁹⁰ This was, almost without reservation, an enormous advance in the cause of human emancipation. No longer could innovative discoveries of natural world be called on in a way that could be taken seriously to defend their theories on the grounds of religious dogma. That they continued to do so in practice only highlights the absurd decline of religious influence. Here I am reminded in part of effort by certain political factions in the US Congress to submit questions of statutory civil rights or scientific research to religious tests, an equally absurd proposition, wherein its purpose is anything but rhetorical.

⁹¹ Vico, *Vico*, 56.

concluded that the first truth was the existence of reason and it is from this first truth—through the application of the critical method—that Cartesians would step by step construct a new system of philosophy and science. Like the scholastics before them the Cartesians, armed with methodological certainty, can retreat from history and human life itself in pursuit of a unified theory. It is this methodological application of reason for the purposes of discovering truths and creating knowledge that Descartes and Vico referred to as analysis.

The success of the "Scientific Revolution" rested largely on these methods and principles, which were seen as so powerful that they eventually found their way from the field of theology and the study of scripture to other fields as well, and eventually would be reborn in what has come to be known as the 'scientific' method of inquiry. Rather than providing a logic based on inferences made from the irrefutable premises of scripture, scientific logic turned to the irrefutable and self-evident premises of mathematics, geometry, and above all reason. This in turn came to be perceived as having universal application across all fields. The excitement that accompanied the great achievements made in the fields of physics and the natural sciences eventually spilled over into other areas that asked why they should not also reap the benefits of these methods. It was on this basis that the abstract and disinterested ideas that characterized mathematical thinking became the guiding principles for nearly all imaginable areas of human endeavor and inquiry. It was on these grounds that the study of philosophy and politics became dominated by this mathematical and geometrical method of investigation. This proved significant for human

development in Europe for a number of reasons, not the least among them being that it provided for an *absolute* foundation for truth in the absence of traditional divine sources of Truth.⁹² This was significant for no less a reason than maintaining the social and political order of the age, which was marked by the widespread chaos and factionalism as a result of the Protestant Reformation, the Thirty Years' War and wane of the Holy Roman Empire, and the bloody decline of Catholic influence in England. It seemed to respond to the demands of the time which sought out, if it were possible, the means by which order could be restored without god as the referent. It was through this process that the social sciences were established using these mathematical scientific methods to identify and then demonstrate the universal and, moreover, *self-evident* validity of the concepts, principles and foundations of political authority and government. And this was especially important where religious conflict meant that universal agreement on divine arguments could no longer be assumed.

“A universally valid method had finally been found for the solution of the fundamental questions that had exercised men at all times—how to establish what was true and what was false in every province of knowledge; and, above all, what was the right life that men should lead if they were to attain those goal which men had always pursued—life, liberty, justice, happiness, virtue, the fullest development of human faculties in a harmonious and creative way.”⁹³

No figure perhaps in the history of philosophy recognized and applied this as effectively as the great English philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes thought that the geometrical methods of science might be used to bring peaceful

92 Much later, Hegel would later present another variation on the theme in the form of his concept of 'absolute immanence'.

93 Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990), 51.

resolution to questions of political legitimacy in the chaos of England's 'glorious revolution'. The greatest example of this is Hobbes' classic of political philosophy: *The Leviathan*. In this work Hobbes sets out to resolve the bloody violence and disorder brought about by this unprecedented loss of stability at the hands of the 'liberating' forces of the reformation, through an appeal to the new constant around which the consolidation of power could be made legitimate. Hobbes' response to this dilemma was remarkable in that it both upheld the disaggregation of political power from religious power, but also challenged the newer more radically democratic conceptions of political authority by arguing instead—on the principles of logic and scientific reason—for a set of principles that would act as a kind of universal, but secular source of political authority. This reveals the underlying tension that exists within the new emancipatory framework supplied by the scientific enlightenment, one that promised humanity's emancipation from the superstitions and absolutism of our irrational past, and normalized humanity's subjugation in new and more sophisticated ways. It is a pattern that would repeat in the centuries that followed at great human cost. Existing as he did in a nation reduced to a state of chaos and disorder, Hobbes believed that access to a universal and self-evident truth was necessary for the preservation of order and security even if it meant a leviathan.

He was convinced that there can be no true knowledge anywhere without proper method, and that here the geometers and physicists held the key. Increasingly he felt the inadequacy, even in social and political inquiry, of other purported paths to truth. He abandoned an early belief that universal verities about men and states can be reached by induction from a study of history; indeed, he urged, in no inquiry will the mere amassing of observations, however regular and consistent, yield general laws—"experience concluded nothing universally."⁹⁴

94 Hardy Grant, "Geometry and Politics: Mathematics in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes," *Mathematics Magazine* 63, no. 3 (June 1, 1990): 148–149, doi:10.2307/2691132.

This reading of Hobbes makes clear the dramatic shift and separation that takes place in the wake of the scientific revolution and sets a precedent for nearly all of western political philosophy to follow; the belief that despite the evident plurality of human existence, if there was to be stability and order in the realm of human affairs it could only be accomplished through the proper understanding and ordering of the universal laws underlying human life. This assumed premise for the healthy functioning of a society and especially an economy would be challenged by radical liberals and democrats as well as Vico, Croce, Italian antifascism and later anticommunist dissidents. Enlightenment theorists like John Locke would provide for institutional and procedural reforms all in the effort to mediate the ill effects of this new approach to politics, but without calling into question the foundations of the method that had otherwise proved itself beyond reproach. While the continental rationalists and British empiricists may have disagreed on the relationship of experience to the nature of knowledge, they did agree on the virtues of Descartes methods. And thus reborn, the methods of late-medieval scholasticism were adapted to a wide variety of fields and the results were nothing short of spectacular. Such was the singular success of the scientific revolution that for the children of the enlightenment, it only seemed natural that the social sciences and metaphysics—spheres until now dominated by the humanist tradition—could be equally conquered through the application of scientific method as Hobbes and Locke had appeared to do. Reason alone, whether applied to divine law, the natural laws of the physical world, or the laws underwriting human life, was capable of producing knowledge. It is a view that says that observation, subject to strict methodological controls, and the application of logic and

mathematical analysis are the only source of worthwhile knowledge capable of granting us access to the principles underlying the universe. Increasingly the humanities took a back seat to science even in those areas where the humanities had traditionally held sway and could be observed in philosophical analytics as well as Abbé Sieyès and Auguste Comte's *sociologie* that created “methods in essence analogous to those of, if not physics, at any rate the biological sciences.”⁹⁵

The first shift in this process occurred with the movement from late-medieval scholasticism to Italian humanism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and then with the movement away from Italian humanism as a consequence of the emergent Protestant Reformation and the associated Cartesian revolution in north and western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both shifts contributed fundamentally to establishing the very framework upon which we construct our understanding of the individual's relationship to society, politics, and knowledge itself. However, the narrative that emerged from these dynamic periods—particularly their varied perspectives on knowledge, history, and science—has often been viewed as a singular progressive path marked by the dominance of the “modern” method championed by Descartes. Consequently, this dominance was then seen to be subject to periodic interruption by moments of ‘backwardness’ or ‘anarchic radicalism’; rather than being understood as the legitimate expressions of an alternative liberalizing movement in history these ‘moments’ were seen as aberrations that needed to be suppressed or eliminated.⁹⁶ In this way,

⁹⁵ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 50.

⁹⁶ Vico, *Vico*, 40.

“...one cannot deny any part of it [the method] without attacking its very basis.”

movements that might have been seen as advancing the cause of human freedom, have often been rejected as the enemy of that effort, or have to tread lightly in positioning themselves in this manner. Often in such cases they are forced to sacrifice their wider concerns for narrower and more localized interests. Such is the dominance and tenacity of this narrative that one is often compelled from the outset to adopt models of resistance that conform to the very premises that they are looking to confront, and often unconsciously at that. They are “like people whose parents have left them property lacking nothing in the way of splendor and usefulness, so that all that remains for them to do is to rearrange [their] plentiful furniture, or adorn it with some slight embellishment to suit their current taste.”⁹⁷ It is this musical chair theory of action to which Vico was so adamantly opposed. It stripped from humanity any real autonomy and while it might serve the interests of advancement in the knowledge of the natural sciences, in the “world of nations” and practical life it would only serve to obscure that advancement, contain it within the prescribed narrative.⁹⁸ Understood in terms of political action, Vico introduces what amounts to a theory of ideological domination smuggled in this powerful Cartesian method, but one that also provided a key to unlocking the potential for radical progress and transformation that escaped even the dominance of Cartesian methods. To Vico, it was a key component of what he called his ‘new science’, and to those who fell under his influence it provided a clear path out from under similarly constructed and dominating or totalizing world views, be they fascist, communist, or otherwise. Under such obscured conditions of ideological domination resistance tends to fall into one of three categories.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ One such example is the scientific study of economics, which has come to dominate a field one called political economy, and at least on purely scientific grounds has provided results that are anything but self-evidently reliable.

The first can be described as an 'illiberal' or 'anti-liberal' position that rejects 'liberalism' itself—seen from within this game of musical chairs as oppressive and immanent to modernity—as the problem, then struggles impossibly to maintain itself as essentially modern, careening back and forth between ideological extremes unable to get its bearings and see beyond the assumptions that at the core of their premises. This is the position that I believe we are most familiar with and is observed in the Capitalist-Communist dichotomy and their failure to recognize a common vulnerability.⁹⁹ The second is similarly anti-liberal, but sees the solution in reactionary revolutionism, seeking to essentially re-set modernity on the model of a more 'heroic' time, usually theocratic or absolutist in design. Berlin keys in on this to some degree in his well known essay on de Maistre and of whom he said, “seemed to be gazing calmly into the classical and feudal past , but what he saw even more clearly proved to be a blood-freezing vision of the future.”¹⁰⁰ This is the position that is most familiarly observed in Fascism, Nazism, and conservative extremism of the kind endorsed by de Maistre. The third position can be described as something of a 'counter-enlightenment' position that recognizes the entire enlightenment project as somehow tainted, a position that identifies itself as distinctly apart from that tradition, in search of new theoretical horizons, something entirely post-modern. However, it is a position that remains blind to the radical skepticism that keeps them frozen in their own antipathy or drives them to revolutionary action that remains tethered to the object of their criticism. Aspects of all three positions will be analyzed here, but it is the post-modern tradition that ought to be kept in sight throughout

⁹⁹ Later, this vulnerability was famously tabbed by Francois Lyotard in the *Post Modern Condition* as that of the “grand narrative”. There are, however, considerable distinctions between this and Vico perspective.

¹⁰⁰ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 102.

this analysis. In assuming the 'post-modern' label, theorists recognized the failures of the liberal/anti-liberal struggle and indicated a decisive break from what they observed as moment of crisis. But they also fall into a two-fold trap of allowing themselves to first be driven from the table and the discussion they have every right to be part of; that of defining liberal-modernity itself; and second, trapped by their own antipathies, the struggle for change appears simultaneously violent, ineffective, and without concrete direction. While such positions may be variously recognized as bold, ambitious, and perhaps even romantic, they are also more than likely wrong. In reflecting on the development of liberalism since its earliest incarnations of the late-medieval period it becomes clear that the problem is not one of finding a new or different future, but of revisiting the scenes of struggle in the development of liberal-modernity and recovering the lessons of another conception of modernity that finds “universal” expression through a few key “localized” movements.

One such 'movement' begins with Italy. In sight of these revolutions, but out of their complete reach, Italy was cut off from these developments by the still powerful presence of the Catholic Church, whose influence had been sharply felt by Mirandola, Machiavelli, and Galileo alike, and which saw many of these innovations as tied to the heretical religious reformism of western and central Europe. It is for this reason that Italy's enlightenment followed a unique path that presents a distinctive variant of liberal modernity that remains deeply suspicious of the truth claims of Cartesian scientism. Nurtured in part by its isolation from rest of Europe, it was an isolation that would have

profound effect on the intellectual and cultural development of Italy and whose consequences and critical potential were relegated to the sidelines of western political and philosophic thought until it resurfaced in dramatic fashion in the 20th century during Europe's darkest hours of crisis and especially in Italy—where a nation found itself subject to a terrifying union of myth and reason in Fascism—and turned to their unique intellectual heritage for a “new” theory of resistance, whose legacy can still be felt today and form the critical heart of this paper.

Vico and his Critics

Italy occupies a rather unique position in the intellectual development of Europe. Possessing the rich cultural and intellectual tradition of the Romans and the early Renaissance, Italy was positioned to be one of the most influential forces in the rise of ‘modernity’ and in some ways it has; however, despite the significance of the Italian enlightenment, the force and influence of the Vatican and the Catholic Church was such that the great reformation that swept the rest of Europe and ushered in so much radical change somehow passed Italy by. It is this lack of a reformation that contributes to what a great many Italian intellectuals believe is the political backwardness of Italy in twentieth-century. Piero Gobetti, among others, would lament that “Italy did not have a Reformation of its own and that the absence of a religious protest here accounts for Italy’s political and ideal immaturity.”¹⁰¹ Though Gobetti would later add that Machiavelli represented an Italian equivalent to the reformation and that it was due to the dominant

¹⁰¹ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 137.

presence of the Church that “his ideas were unable to find any social terrain in which to take root or individuals who would live them out.”¹⁰² Outside of Machiavelli's Florence and the overwhelming presence of the Vatican, none contributed more to the shaping of what would become modern Italian culture and Italian identity than Naples, which Benedetto Croce described as “one of the most important states of old Europe... [and] one that had been first, or one of the first, in social progress.”¹⁰³ Chief among Naples' contributions was Giambattista Vico and it was the unique experience of Italian cultural and intellectual development captured in the highly original and creative work of this seventeenth century Neapolitan philosopher that contributed to the development of Italian culture and thought, which was to become something entirely unique and separate from that of the rest of Europe. Consequently, he would come to shape the Italian understanding of wider European cultural concepts in ways that would reverberate through 'post-modernity'. Though Gobetti would later argue that in Vico's own time he had “found no echo in the practical world.”¹⁰⁴ It was through Benedetto Croce—perhaps the most influential intellectual figure in twentieth-century Italy—that Vico would find a new audience and a new purpose in recasting liberal thought and politics in a century that had suffered unbearably the unintended consequences of scientism's unrivaled dominance in the form of fascism, Nazism, communism and capitalism. Of Vico Croce declared that he,

“...would never in the world temper the admiration and indeed amazement with which I regard Vico's *Scienza Nuova*. Every time I return to this book I recognize its unique place in the history of thought as the powerful forerunner of a whole

102 Ibid., 111.

103 Benedetto Croce, *History of the Kingdom of Naples* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 7.

104 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 111.

group of important doctrines and of a manner of thinking and feeling which contrasted sharply not only with the intellectual framework of the author's own time but also with that of the age which immediately followed, and was to find an echo only amid the circumstances that ripened a whole century later.”¹⁰⁵

While Vico recognized the successes of Cartesianism he remained critical of its potential when applied to human life, which he saw as forever subject to the indeterminate nature of free-will. Thus human life was not the subject of universal laws, but the contingent experience of individuals and societies. This historical understanding of human life exposed the tension that existed between Cartesian science and human agency.¹⁰⁶ Though Cartesian science had contributed to man's ability to rationally understand the world around him and even at times his ability to shape it in ways never before achieved, it also contributed to the understanding of a world in which the individual however expanded his abilities remained largely powerless. He was subject not to the force of his will, but to the myriad of known and as-yet-undiscovered natural laws, among them those laws of man said to be predicated on the newly discovered and scientific constants that lay beneath them. It was this tension that Vico's historicism, his “new science” sought to overcome through the human sciences [humanities]. To this end Vico famously declared that:

The criterion and rule of the true is to have made it. Accordingly, our clear and distinct idea of the mind cannot be a criterion of the mind itself, still less of other truths. For while the mind perceives itself, it does not make itself.¹⁰⁷

This concept of truth as being rooted only in what is made deeply influenced Vico's work and the core of his argument in the *Scienza Nuova* (The New Science, 1725) in which he

105 Croce, *History of the Kingdom of Naples*, 39.

106 This tension between scientific determinism and human agency constitutes in one form or another the true heart of the crisis of modernity.

107 Vico, *Vico*, 55.

argued that political life is wholly constructed by humans and not subject to immutable abstract ideas and truths that can be known independent of history. For Vico, human beings and the civil world in which they existed, what he called the 'world of nations', was both historical and created by humanity itself. We can know history because we created it and it is through our study of history and human life that we can come to learn “the universal and eternal principles, necessary for every science, upon which everything in nations arose and is preserved”.¹⁰⁸ Today, we call these sciences the social sciences. What he essentially proposes is that Cartesianism is not the only game in town and that they do not hold a monopoly on the ability to make truth claims. It is an argument whose core thesis Gramsci would later pick up, whether consciously or unconsciously, in “The Southern Question” where he picks up on the use of propaganda as an instrument of subjugation on the basis of politically motivated 'biological' and 'natural' truth claims, declaring that “once again “science” had turned to crushing the wretched and the exploited.”¹⁰⁹

To understand what Vico means here we ought turn briefly to what it is that he is arguing against specifically. Let us take for example the root of all ‘scientific’ inquiry, the self-evident logic of mathematics. Mathematics represents a pure construction of the mind and as such, according to Vico, it can yield certain truths. For example, $2 + 2 = 4$, or if all sides of a triangle are equal in length then then all of the angles of that triangle will also

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 198.

¹⁰⁹ Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 31.

Interestingly enough, he concludes this passage with a critique aimed at socialism, stating that “this time it was cloaked in socialist colours, pretending to be the science of the proletariat.” Here Gramsci alludes to a critical shortcoming that he observes in Marxism as a 'science' and perhaps the antipathy that the Italian antifascists shared for marxist determinism.

be equal. However, for Vico, understanding humanity was not simply a matter of applying mathematical truths to the study of the social sciences, as Hobbes had hoped. While such a method might give us an approximation of truths with relation to humanity it can give us no definite knowledge on the order of fundamental guiding principles of human life. Social contract theorists like Hobbes try to explain the movement of humanity from a state of nature in which there is an absence of law into the state of civilization and law on the basis of a 'social contract' or the idea that government is the result of an agreement of or among the people. A social contract, therefore, presumes the understanding of a kind of institutional framework and cannot be in and of itself the foundation of human life without representing a set of *a priori* interests. It is this set of human interests, independent of those 'immutable' principles that guide the natural world, that represent the object of Vico's historicism, and for Vico those human interests are largely contingent and not wholly rational. Instead, Vico argues that it is the humanities that can offer real knowledge of human life, that is knowledge that is superior to that of Cartesian science because societies are themselves, like mathematics, our own construction. And like mathematics, the study of which is best done through direct analysis, it is through the study of human creation, the catalog of which is human history, that we can best arrive at real knowledge about human life. And this is perhaps best achieved through the study of 'practical wisdom' and 'common sense'. Vico makes his meaning clear in his critique *On Method in Contemporary Fields of Study*, where he argues that "since the sole aim of study today is truth, we investigate the nature of things, because this seems certain, but not the nature of men, because free will makes this

extremely uncertain.”¹¹⁰

In this he divides truth into 'knowledge' and 'practical wisdom' and it was Vico's belief that the humanities were capable of providing truth in the form of practical wisdom in a way that was every bit as 'true' as knowledge achieved through scientific methods in their own respective fields. Vico explains that this is because “those who excel in knowledge seek a single cause to explain many natural effects, but those who excel in practical wisdom seek as many causes as possible for a single deed, in order to reach the truth by induction.”¹¹¹ It was an idea that contributed significantly to the development of a philosophy of history that captured much of what would become central to 'humanist historicism' and 'revolutionary historicism'. It began a movement away from assumptions about human nature as a known constant that underlies all of human life and is wholly subject to eternal laws outside of human influence to a condition in which every detail of human life becomes an object of study and knowledge. Central to this emerging philosophy of history was not only the capacity of human beings for self-knowledge, but the role of 'common sense' as a chronicle of that collective self-knowledge in making the 'world of nations'. At its core it represented the understanding that human life and the historical world was made by men and women rather than having been imposed upon them by transcendent laws and principles. This constituted an open hostility to both enlightenment natural law theory as well as religions that saw humanity as subject to such laws. It is also a theoretical position that would reject the materialist

110 Vico, *Vico*, 41.

111 Ibid., 42.

conceptions of history associated with Hegel and Marx that merely replaced the transcendent providence of Christianity and the Church, with that of a transcendent ‘world spirit’ that superseded man in the form of the state, or a materialist conception of the state rooted in the “productive forces” of any historical moment. Thus emerged this unique Italian perspective that declared that it was man and man alone who created his world, and therefore man alone who had the ability and duty to remake it!

The foundation of humanist historicism is the belief that a true understanding of man can come only from an objective assessment of man as he is, not as he ought to be, man as he is revealed in the historical record rather than man as revealed in the visions of theologians and philosophers. This study of man as he actually developed in history involved a revolutionary change of perspective, for it constituted a rejection of the well-established belief that only that which is constant can be an object of knowledge¹¹²

Here Edmund Jacobitti emphasizes the idea that human history and societies were created through the long and difficult process of change marked by contest and struggle, and not the outcome of transcendent and uncontrollable forces—be it that of religious dogma, Marxist determinism, or even the economic determinism of the neoliberal faith in Capitalism. The key to understanding the world, which man created, was to understand history and how history itself was ‘made’. It was those who understood the twists and turns of history and could glean from it truth in the form of practical wisdom and common sense that could follow the indirect route to truth and “will be successful in the long term, as far as the nature of things allows.”¹¹³ In this way, Vico follows Machiavelli's lead in developing a human science that brackets, but does not deny the influence of a force that exists beyond human will, be it “fortuna” or God's will. It is an understanding

112 Edmund E Jacobitti, *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

113 Vico, *Vico*, 43.

of the relationship between human life, the making of history, the practice of politics, and the role of the individual that would again surface in Gramsci's development of the concepts of culture, praxis and hegemony.¹¹⁴

While Vico is not widely read in American philosophy departments and even less so in departments of political science, those who are familiar have often become so through a handful of essays by Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss, two powerful figures in twentieth-century American intellectual life.¹¹⁵ However, even Strauss began as something of a skeptic, once revealing in a lecture that he initially “did not see any reason why [he] must study Vico. Of course [he] had read about Vico in the literature, but whatever was there was not sufficiently attractive to [him] to devote serious study to it.”¹¹⁶ In time he would change his mind. Isaiah Berlin, on the other hand, saw Vico as nothing less than “the true father of the modern concept of culture and of what one might call cultural pluralism.”¹¹⁷ Edward Said too took Vico seriously, but that was literary criticism, which draws regrettably little attention from political scientists and philosophers.¹¹⁸ Consequently, Vico has remained something of an obscurity in American political thought and almost entirely the reserve of those specialists who frame his thought in the context of the counter-enlightenment, therefore positioning Vico as something of an “anti-modern” and this idea has, for the most part, stuck.¹¹⁹ However, in 1983 a volume edited by the late Italian

114 These concepts are explored thoroughly in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, ed. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (New York: International Publishers, 1992) and especially his essay on “The Southern Question”, *The Modern Prince & other writings*. (New York: International Publishers, 1992)

115 Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*; Berlin, *Vico and Herder*.

116 Leo Strauss, “Seminar in Political Philosophy: Vico” (University of Chicago, Autumn Quarter 1963).

117 Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 59.

118 Edward W Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

119 Mark Lilla, “G. B. Vico: The Antimodernist,” *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 17, no. 3 (July 1, 1993):

theorist Giorgio Tagliacozzo took up the question of whether or not the seventeenth/eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher shared some “affinities” with Marx, which is to inquire about his affinities with modernity itself.¹²⁰ The results were mixed, but it was a remarkable question. To what extent could we consider Vico a “revolutionary” in the modern sense of the term and what, if any, affinities did this relatively obscure Neapolitan philosopher and career academic share with with a progressive politics of the left as characterized by Marx? For a figure so often regarded as anti-modern this association suggested fractures existed in the commonly held interpretations of Vico, Marx, and modernity itself. By revisiting this question and exploring the revolutionary potential of Vico in the face of his contradictory reputations. While Vico's anti-cartesianism is widely agreed upon, as is his noted defense of the humanities in the face of scientific encroachment, Vico is better understood as an original thinker who was, in many ways, ahead of his time, as Berlin suggests. To do this we must first engage with some of his best known interlocutors.

Historically, the most dominant reading of Vico has been that of the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, whose book *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (1913) was the first major treatment of Vico's work published in English.¹²¹ Croce's reading of Vico is significant here for two reasons. First, it is through Croce that Vico's philosophy is introduced into modern Italian intellectual life. His idealist interpretation of Vico saw in him something more than just a precursor of nineteenth-century German idealism. Croce

32–39.

120 Giorgio Tagliacozzo, *Vico and Marx, Affinities and Contrasts* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983).

121 Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*.

goes so far as to argue that the nineteenth-century is “an advance upon Vico” and his “distinction of the the two worlds of mind and nature.”¹²² It is an interpretation that would set the agenda of Vician scholarship and establish Vico's significance in two major fields of study that will rest at the core of this paper: the philosophy of knowledge, and consequently the philosophy of history.¹²³ For Croce, Vico's theory of knowledge takes direct aim at Cartesianism, which he argues, “had guided European thought for more than half a century, and was to maintain its supremacy over mind and spirit for another hundred years.”¹²⁴ By enlisting Vico, Croce had hoped to upset the dominant position that Cartesianism had enjoyed.¹²⁵ Croce presented at once the two central themes that were to dominate Vico studies for the century to come. He argued that Vico called into question the elevation of the “geometrical method” of deductive analysis as “the ideal of perfect science”, which isn't to denounce its evident utility as such. For both Vico and Croce, no such perfect science was possible. Vico's concern with Cartesian rationalism was not that

122 Ibid., 241.

“Almost all the leading doctrines of nineteenth-century idealism, we have seen, may be regarded as refluxes of Vician doctrines. Almost all; for there is one of which we find in Vico not the premonition but the necessity, not a temporary filling but a gap to be filled. Here the nineteenth century is no longer a reflux of, but an advance upon Vico... His distinction of the two worlds of mind and nature, to both of which the criterion of his theory of knowledge, the conversion of the truth with the thing created, was applicable, but applicable to the former by man himself because that world is a world created by man, and therefore knowable by him, to the second by God the Creator, so that this world is unknowable by man; this distinction was not accepted by the new philosophy, which, more Vician than Vico, made the demigod Man into a God, lifted human thought to the level of universal mind or the idea, spiritualised or idealised nature, and tried to understand it speculatively in the “Philosophy of Nature” as itself a product of mind. As soon as the last remnant of transcendence was in this way destroyed, the concept of progress over looked by Vico and grasped and affirmed to some extent by the Cartesians and their eighteenth-century followers in their superficial and rationalistic manner shone out in its full splendour.”

123 Benedetto Croce, *Historical Materialism and the Economics of Karl Marx*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 67.

It is through Croce that we are introduced to the interpretation of Marx's philosophy of history as a reduction of history to economic forces. In this reading history was not the product of expressed through human autonomy.

124 Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 1.

125 Croce, *Historical Materialism and the Economics of Karl Marx*., 94.

it lacked the capacity to contribute to human knowledge. In fact, he was well aware of the incredible contributions that the Cartesian method had brought with it. However, he was concerned by the intoxicating effects of its own seemingly limitless success. In a manner not entirely unlike that of Rousseau, he feared that humanity itself was dangerously diminished by this subordination to rationalism. Modernity's increasing commitment to scientific truth begins a process by which scientism begins to isolate methodological or scientific thinkers from the rest of society. In this manner society's system of institutions and social relations—under the direction of scientism—have the effect of reducing humans under such conditions to a 'dehumanized' state, diminishing in their capacity for creative agency and rendering their “everyday behavior.. strange and intemperate.”¹²⁶ For Vico the stereotype of the socially awkward scientist is no mere cliché, but rather a potentially dangerous and dehumanizing effect of the de-emphasis of liked history and the humanities. Descartes rejected all knowledge that had not been subject to geometric analysis, in particular historical knowledge since these modes of thought were, in his opinion, illusory and untrustworthy because, as Collingwood would later point out, history “never happened exactly as they describe” and this suggests that the truth of history is somehow “concealed or distorted” in order to favor a particular interpretation.¹²⁷ To become real knowledge, they must either “become clear and distinct” in which case they lose their original character, or, cease to be worthy of any serious

¹²⁶ Vico, *Vico*, 37.

¹²⁷ R. G. (Robin George) Collingwood, “The Idea of History” (Oxford University Press, 1956), 61.

Incidentally, this amounted to a major criticism of history as a 'philosophic' discipline and on the face of it is not without merit. However, where this led to Descartes dismissing history as not providing a path to true knowledge, Collingwood points out that this was, in fact, a kind of historical criticism in itself. He points out that Vico would later carry this critique out more completely in his analysis of history and of Cartesianism itself. Later, we will find this reflected in Gramsci and particularly his concepts of culture and hegemony.

consideration.¹²⁸ Croce likens Descartes view of history to daylight as compared to light of a lamp. Decartes believed that “the daylight of the mathematical method renders useless the lamps which, while they guide us in darkness, throw deceptive shadows.”¹²⁹ History, like the myths and superstitions are valuable only as approximations of the truths that Descartes' method can—and has—revealed.

Strauss famously dedicated a series of seventeen lectures to Vico whom he ultimately recognized as a key figure in addressing the “problem of history”, and he describes this problem as fundamental and one that calls into question the very nature and even possibility of political philosophy, understood as “the quest for the good society or the just society.”¹³⁰ The question that is brought to bear upon the problem of history is the idea of progress itself, and its relationship to knowledge. Strauss argues that the fundamental questions of political philosophy have been raised since the beginning and that from this has emerged innumerable responses. This led to a condition that he describes as “the anarchy within political philosophy” because unlike in the natural sciences, no general progress has been made. Which is to say that there is little consensus in the field and even less “law” and this, he argues, “lends to skepticism” within the field.¹³¹ It is the notion of progress—of the pursuit of knowledge as working towards

128 Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 2.

129 Ibid.

130 Strauss, “Seminar in Political Philosophy: Vico”; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2d ed (New York: Norton, 1978), 84.

Karl Marx saw himself as struggling to find a solution to the “riddle of history” which he believed was achieved by communism. Their affinity it would seem rests at least on this fact, that both Vico and Marx struggled to make coherent sense of the apparent anarchy of history. But where Descartes' modernity (and consequently Marx's) saw the solution in the discovery of rational laws that in effect transcend history and guide it, Vico introduced a unique concept of providence contained within human history that preserved human agency.

131 Strauss, “Seminar in Political Philosophy: Vico.”

“consensus” and a seamless whole—an assumption championed by the scientific revolution that has come to define modernity. The quest for the good society is possible only if philosophy can be understood as part of this progress. Understood on these terms the study of history can either be seen as Descartes saw it, “unworthy of intelligent men interested in the advancement of objective knowledge.” Or, it can be made to conform to the task which scientism has set modernity and make the study of history and philosophy more scientific, reducing their normative claims to measurable data points, which—when subject to proper methodological tools—may yield discoverable laws that guide the progress of human life in same manner that the motion of heavens is guided by astronomical laws. It is on the basis of this understanding of the laws that guide human life that humanity can make progress towards the good society. With Vico however, a third possibility is presented; one that presents history not a problem to be overcome or conquered by science, but one that presents history as part of a “new science”, one that fundamentally calls into question the scientific/Cartesian/positivist conception of progress' claim to modernity itself. Berlin dedicated even more time to Vico than Strauss and makes clear exactly how significant Vico was to resolving the “problem of history”. However, Berlin is quick to point out that the pluralism of Vico is nothing like the anarchic pluralism described in part by Strauss and deplored by Descartes and apparently resolved through the introduction of his methods.¹³² History and inherited culture did not

132 Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 60.

"Vico did not suppose that men are encapsulated within their own epoch or culture, insulated in a box without windows and consequently incapable of understanding other societies and periods whose values may be widely different from theirs and which they may find strange or repellent. His deepest belief was that what men have made, other men can understand. It may take an immense amount of painful effort to decipher the meaning of conduct or language different from our own. Nevertheless, according to Vico, if anything is meant by the term 'human', there must be enough that is common to all such beings for it to be possible, by a sufficient effort of imagination, to grasp what the world must

serve to disconnect various societies from one another and shroud them in the mists of provincialism and superstition as Condorcet once lamented.¹³³ Instead of cutting them off from progress, it represented a record of that progress. History, captured in culture and language, represented an autobiography of a given society and of their imaginative responses to the conditions of their development. For Vico, it wasn't necessary to look beyond human experience to immutable laws in order to chart the path of history, much less recognize it. Berlin describes this as “the same sort of method as that used by modern social anthropologists.”¹³⁴ It differs only in Vico's reliance on his unique interpretation of providence and it is through the exercise of human consciousness, what Isaiah Berlin referred to “the divine spark in man”, that providence works its will.¹³⁵

In spite of this potentially radical claim, much of what had been written about Vico centers on a reading that positions Vico as anticipating the German historical school and Romantic poets and has been widely associated with a movement referred to as the “counter-Enlightenment” or “anti-modernism”.¹³⁶ The identification of Vico as an anti-modernist or vanguard of a counter-enlightenment has come to dominate Vico scholarship and as such has made of Vico something of a favorite in those circles of political theory where he has been read in strict contrast to the radical forms of politics

have looked like to creatures, remote in time or space, who practised such rites, and used such words, and created such works of art as the natural means of self-expression involved in the attempt to understand and interpret their worlds to themselves.”

133 Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat Condorcet and Elkanah Tisdale, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia: Printed by Lang & Ustick, for M. Carey, H. & P. Rice & Co. J. Ormrod, B.F. Bache, and J. Fellows, New-York., 1796). Chapter: “Eighth Epoch: From the Invention of Printing, to the Period when the Sciences and Philosophy threw off the Yoke of Authority.”

134 Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 60.

135 Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, 52,69.

136 Lilla, “G. B. Vico,” 34.

that emerged in the nineteenth century and especially Marx.¹³⁷ Consequently, this has placed Vico at the center of a struggle for the very orientation of “modernity” itself. This has led to at least one notable symposium in particular, organized by Giorgio Tagliacozzo, which resulted in an ambitious volume of essays called *Vico and Marx: Affinities and Contrasts* (1983).¹³⁸ It is a symposium that seems to have been provoked by three passing references to Vico that Marx made among his works: the first was in a letter to Ferdinand Lassalle, the second in a letter to Engels, and last, in a footnote to *Capital*. In each instance the reference was brief, but later Marxists took this as a sign of an affinity between Vico's cyclical interpretation of history and Marx's own materialist conception of history.¹³⁹ Kenneth Minogue—the popular conservative Australian political theorist—in his review of Tagliacozzo's edited volume responded to the suggestion that Marx and Vico shared certain affinities with a joke, comparing Vico's influence upon Marx as “gnat-like in scale” and resting upon “a handful of references.”¹⁴⁰ For Minogue, whose commitment to a conservative brand of liberalism was famously and skillfully argued in the *Liberal Mind* (1964), Vico's influence on a more radical variant of liberalism is limited to similarities exhibited between Vico's famous claim that:

“The civil world itself has certainly been made by men, and that its principles therefore can, because they must, be rediscovered within the modifications of our own human mind. And this must give anyone who reflects upon it cause to marvel how philosophers have all earnestly endeavoured to attain knowledge of the natural world which, since He made it, God alone knows, and have neglected to meditate upon this world of nations, or civil world, knowledge of which, since men had made it, they could attain.”¹⁴¹

137 Kenneth Minogue, “Marx & Vico,” *Encounter*, March 1986.

138 Tagliacozzo, *Vico and Marx, Affinities and Contrasts*.

139 Karl Marx, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: 1860-64, Letters*. (1985) Vol. 41, p.355, 352

Karl Marx, *Capital: Vol. 1*. Ch. 15, Sec. 10, Note 4

140 Minogue, “Marx & Vico,” 59.

141 Vico, *Vico*, 198.

And what Minogue argues is its similarity “with a little pushing and shoving”¹⁴² to Marx's own claim that:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”¹⁴³

This, argues Minogue, is nothing more than a “superficial resemblance to the Vician doctrine.”¹⁴⁴ And to those who dismiss the affinities of Marx and Vico this is easily argued, after all in Marx's body of work there are only scant references to Vico. That Vico was an innovative and original thinker may be argued, but he was no prophet to Marx or for that matter to radicalism in general. It is an attempt at nothing less than a cutting of the line that tethers Vico to the radical political struggles of the nineteenth and subsequently the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries.

Minogue makes the distinction between Marx and Vico a clear one. Vico stresses the importance of the creative capacities of humanity, with “emphasis on the imagination” in a way that Marx missed completely.¹⁴⁵ Marx, on the other hand, “presents man as an animal whose mind merely reflects the world.”¹⁴⁶ It is a question of agency and on Minogue's reading Marxian man is without agency in the world. In spite of any consciousness he might achieve, he remains wholly subject to its various forces as expressed in Marx's theory of historical materialism. While Marx's “famous formula”

142 Minogue, “Marx & Vico,” 60.

143 Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 595.

144 Minogue, “Marx & Vico,” 60.

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid.

might appears to be similar to Vico's own, it completely loses sight of Vico's most original and important contribution, his “brilliantly colorful” account of the origin of civilization that placed human life squarely at its center, under the guidance of providence.¹⁴⁷ Vico's concept of providence was unique to say the least. His was not a strictly causal theory of providence in that it did not exist outside of humanity, or external to it—to be discovered as one might discover the laws of physics—but rather within humanity and as an expression of the “world of nations” or “civil world” of humanity and understood through its history.¹⁴⁸ Minogue recognizes providential development as the “interpretive key” to Vico's philosophy and that seems correct. It was this understanding of providence that Leon Pompa argues helps Vico answer what was the central question of his philosophy: “how it can be that, in the absence of a rational capacity for discerning the truth,” which is to say that in matters of rational development humanity did not spring into this world fully formed, “...the poetic imagination should produce beliefs which, though false, nevertheless contain the elements of later true beliefs rather than later false beliefs.”¹⁴⁹ How is it that man, brought into this world that has been divinely ordered—perhaps as confirmed by scientific and mathematical discoveries of the day—came to find its way to reason with only the benefit of creative imagination? How did *imagination* transform itself into reason? For Vico, divine providence provides the answer. Because the divine order of the universe is both infinite and eternal it “must express its orders through ways as easy as our natural human customs; and with infinite wisdom to advise it, what it arranges must be wholly [permeated by] order.”¹⁵⁰ All of

147 Ibid.

148 Vico, *Vico*, para. 331,1108.

149 Ibid., 21.

150 Ibid., para. 343.

human experience therefore, is at the same time a manifestation of divine providence and human imagination, the collected wisdom of which—expressed in language and culture—is what Vico calls common sense.¹⁵¹ Marx—like Condorcet and Descartes before him—ultimately saw history as something to be conquered by reason, unlocked by the formula of historical materialism.

For Vico scientific knowledge based on Descartes “first truth” and what he called “the instruments of the sciences” were ill-equipped to address the problems of human life. The problem begins with this new critical method dismissing common sense in favor of self-evident reason because when this method comes to dominate a field, its authority must remain absolute.¹⁵² This is a problem for Vico because unlike the natural world which he understood, as Descartes did, to be guided by reason, deduction as a method simply could not work. Humanity was not without free will and as such it was a product of human action and therefore its creation was a collective act largely contingent upon a great variety of independent human wills, rather than say an abstract concept of “god's will” or “natural law.” Therefore, no “single cause” could ever be ascribed to human life, which is the methodological goal of deductive reasoning. To emphasize the point, Vico declared that “men are for the most part fools, governed not by reason, but by caprice or

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 163.

Vico would famously refer to common sense as “judgment lacking all reflection, felt in common by a whole order, a whole people, a whole nation or the whole of mankind.” This concept along with the Vician concept of providence will be discussed later at greater length, especially as they relate to Gramsci, whose own concept of common sense and historicism draws heavily on Vico.

¹⁵² Ibid., 40.

“One cannot deny any part of it without attacking its very basis.” This is because like the scholastics before them the integrity of knowledge is founded and built upon a single self-evident premise and as such it cannot tolerate any challenge to that premise.

fortune.”¹⁵³ To understand humanity then required a more “indirect route” that had to account for the “many causes” representing the diversity of independent human wills. Vico was convinced that for this task even the incredible rational power of Cartesian science would fail, it simply did not fit the object of its study. Vico cautions, “since those who transfer this method to the sphere of practical wisdom have not cultivated common sense and, content with a single truth [the self-evident truth of reason], have never sought after probabilities, they fail altogether to consider what men feel in common about this one truth or whether the probabilities appear true to them.”¹⁵⁴ This for Vico represents a real problem for politics and especially democracy, because the necessary assertion of a “single cause” or truth onto society, especially “in the case of princes and rulers...has sometimes been the cause of great damage and evil.”¹⁵⁵ What does this mean for politics and political action? This is the central question we must carry forward from here. As Vaclav Havel once argued, “system, ideology, and apparat [the methods of our time] have deprived us—rulers as well as the ruled—of our conscience, of our common sense and natural speech and thereby, of our actual humanity.”¹⁵⁶ Recapturing humanity's freedom from the domination of a system or method becomes critical and for Vico doing so relied on the careful interpretation of divine providence, what he understood as the natural means by which god guides a humanity that possess free will.¹⁵⁷ However, how are we to understand 'free will' if providence is somehow intermingled with humanity's exercise of it? Do we really possess free will if it is guided by an externally imposed force? This was

153 Ibid., 43.

154 Ibid.

155 Ibid.

156 Havel, *Open Letters*, 258.

157 Vico, *Vico*, para. 310.

a question posed by Vico, but also one that concerns all who would try to come to terms with imposed ideology or ideological domination.

Vico calls into question interpretations of providence by those who would equate them with those true principles of Descartes, deduced only by proceeding “solely from the light of reason” from self-evident first principles. Croce explains that for Vico, divine providence is dialectic in nature, springing forth from human creative imagination in the effort to help regulate the course of history. Croce argues that Vico rejected any understanding of providence as the “final cause” in and of itself, as we might understand Descartes concept of pure reason.¹⁵⁸ Much like Mirandola's formulation of humanity's role in the divine order, Vico offered a careful defense of human autonomy that did not require that man forgo the existence of certain laws and principles that guide the universe, be they a divine or scientific, only that such laws do not *dominate* human will, but are instead known through the expression of that will. Croce explains this by showing that for Vico divine providence is simultaneously individualistic and transcendent.

“History is made by individuals: but individuality is nothing but the concreteness of the universal, and every individual action, simply because it is individual, is supra-individual.”¹⁵⁹

The individual is known relative to its social context and that context is known as an expression of multiple individual wills.

“Neither the individual nor the universal exists as a distinct thing: the real thing is the one single course of history, whose abstract aspects are individuality with out universality and universality without individuality. This one course of history is coherent in all its many determinations, like a work of art which is at the same time

¹⁵⁸ Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 112.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 116.

manifold and single, in which every word is inseparable from the rest, every shade of colour related to all the others, every line connected with every other line. On this understanding alone history can be understood.”¹⁶⁰

It is the space between the individual and the universal in this “work of art” that captures providence. Vico argues that this introduces a conception of history and human society that is not absent external influences, but also not determined by first causes beyond that of human creative action itself. Vico explains this by first pointing out that though human nature seems to be rife with vice—pointing to “violence, avarice and ambition” being “prevalent throughout all of mankind”—humanity has also demonstrated the capacity to “create in him good practices in human society”.¹⁶¹ Humanity, though seemingly driven by the determined force of these vices, through the creative action of legislation under the guidance of providence “creates civil happiness”. It is free will that makes this transformation possible and is the basis for the “civil orders” that establish human society.¹⁶² And it is “divine providence” that guides humanity towards this end. Similarly, history and especially language and “common sense”, being the catalog of human action under the guidance of providence, becomes uniquely capable of providing valuable knowledge regarding human life that is beyond the reach of “pure reason”.

The question it seems is not whether Vico can be understood as a precursor to Marx—it might be said that Marx's failures can be attributed precisely to his departure from Vico—but rather why it is that Marxists and figures of the left would feel the need to develop such a connection and, furthermore, why others still would feel it necessary to defend

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Vico, *Vico*, para. 132.

¹⁶² Ibid., para. 132–133.

Vico against that claim. Neither of these perspectives gets it quite right. Vico is not the key by which we can come to better understand Marx, but rather the key to understanding those who follow Marx; especially those who, steeped in the traditions of Vico and on the basis of this influence, developed more sophisticated interpretations of socialism and liberalism that demanded a shift in how we understand modernity and the possibility for social and political transformation.¹⁶³ Vico laid out the blueprint for a rejection of the kind of determinist economic and social philosophies that would come to dominate the 19th and especially the 20th centuries and lead it headlong into crisis. It is therefore safe to say that Vico's impact on the development of Italian identity and especially its relationship to 20th century Marxism and Capitalism was unparalleled if only for having provided Italian intellectual life with the theoretical germ that would help to temper the extreme 'idealist' and 'rationalist' impulses of the day and give rise to robust forms of liberal theory as distinctive alternatives to 'old-style' liberalism, parliamentarianism and the Marxist system.¹⁶⁴ Simply put, the ideas that came about through the religious reformation and scientific revolution, the positivist philosophic trend that dominated Europe in that period dating back to Bacon and Descartes never really gained favor or

163 This was particularly evident in the work of the Italian Anti-fascists and later the Eastern European Anticommunist dissidents, figures who escaped definition within "modern" political categories. Two key figures that connect Vico to Italian Antifascism and subsequently East European Anticommunism are Benedetto Croce and Antonio Gramsci. I address these figures more closely elsewhere, instead focusing in this paper on the characterization of Vico in such a manner as to provide the basis for such a connection. Edmund Jacobitti (Professor Emeritus of History at Southern Illinois University) develops aspects of this connection in his book *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy* (1981) and his essay "From Vico's Common Sense to Gramsci's Hegemony" (1984) in the Tagliacozzo volume.

164 Jacobitti, *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy*, 142–143.

I do not wish to suggest here that there is an absence of idealism in Italy as a consequence of Vico's humanist historicism. In fact, idealism would come to define much of Italian life in the build-up to World War I as it would throughout Europe and was even present at the core of Benedetto Croce's philosophy. However, for Croce and consequently throughout Italian intellectual circles there was an understanding of idealism tempered by the rejection of the unitary implications of dialectical synthesis that resolved every human aspect into a singular truth.

took hold in Italy. While it may have been understood to have contributed to a certain kind of backwardness it also provided the conditions for the development of a radically different, though still fundamentally liberal, interpretive key to understanding the development of human life and the organizing structures of society and it is through the lens of this alternative historical-intellectual path that we can best reconstruct our understanding of contemporary liberal theory. Vico's legacy is to those who engage with his work and particularly his critics. He is a figure who is often just as likely to be read as part of an historical counter-enlightenment as he is a forerunner to 'postmodern' conceptions of radical democracy. However, neither reading of Vico does justice to Vico understood on his own terms, as he was by his inheritors in his own native Italy. We can come to recognize this through the influence that his ideas had in shaping the political theory of Italian antifascism in the 1920s and 1930s and particularly the work of Piero Gobetti and that most Vician of Marxists, Antonio Gramsci. A figure who in his own political theory had sought to reshape Marxist materialism in the light of Vician and Crocean historicism.

Chapter 2: Italian Anti-fascism: Piero Gobetti & the Politics of Liberal Revolution

The last chapter identified the foundational significance of Vico's challenge to Descartes' "new critical method" and the unique conditions that led to its development. For Vico, Descartes' claim to have established a whole new way of conceiving of the universe and consequently human life, even knowledge itself, represented a particular danger. Vico did not ignore the incredible contributions that the new critical method made to unlocking the secrets of the universe, rather, he was concerned with what he saw as the considerable risk involved in falling completely under its spell.¹⁶⁵ Central to his philosophy of history and ideas was an understanding regarding the limits to these new modern methods and particularly their adoption at the expense of alternative methods now rendered obsolete, antiquated or 'anti-modern'. It was for this reason that Vico set himself to the task of developing what he called the 'new science', the goal of which was to provide a path out from under the dominant and rapidly totalizing world view of Cartesian modernism. By the twentieth century Vico was largely forgotten and on the world stage neither classical liberalism nor the Marxist socialist system escaped the dominance of a modernity defined almost exclusively by the standards imposed by scientific methods and conceptions of knowledge. Consequently, they emerged as the ideological poles of twentieth century politics, but remained two sides of the same Cartesian coin.

If the unique conditions of Italy in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries were enough

¹⁶⁵ Vico, *Vico*, 36.

"Consider the many great and wonderful discoveries by which mechanics, enhanced by geometry and physics as they are taught today, seems to have enriched human society!"

to give rise to the original philosophical perspective of Vico, the same could be said for the twentieth-century. Owing to its “historical peculiarities”, Social historian Eric Hobsbawm believed that Italy was uniquely positioned to produce original political thinking. Vico and Croce were clearly evidence of this. For Hobsbawm, Italy was “a microcosm of world capitalism.”¹⁶⁶ What this meant was that within a single relatively small country you had the experience of both advanced industrialism as well as regions largely untouched by capitalism and modernity. The factories of the north, especially with the Fiat plant in Turin standing as a testament to the former, with the rural peasant south and its status of semi-colonialism representing the latter.¹⁶⁷ Consequently, Italy's labor movement was both industrial and agrarian, both proletarian and peasant. Italy also possessed an old but fragile bourgeoisie, which has initiated an incomplete revolution in the Risorgimento.¹⁶⁸ Thus, the Italian bourgeoisie had never acquired the same footing as it had elsewhere in Europe or America. They were also “especially conscious” of their revolutionary role, in a way that the more established bourgeois nations were not.¹⁶⁹ Italy, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was also a uniquely Catholic nation, having resisted the protestant reformation under the powerful influence of the Catholic church. “Italy was the great nonparticipant in the wars of religion, which were the principal leaven of liberalism, the birth pangs of modern man.”¹⁷⁰ It kept the Italians politically passive, but

166 E. J Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 317.

167 Ibid.

168 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 148–149.

The Risorgimento “had created a specific revolutionary situation without being able to bring it to completion or to satisfy it and which, although it remained potential while the technicians and diplomats were striving to create the Italian state as a work of art, became turbidly explicit when the completed state revealed itself to be void of ideal significance and incapable of receiving life from the masses.”

169 Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 318.

170 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 104.

for Hobsbawm, it also meant that Italians were keenly aware of a significant ruling elite that existed beyond the formal state.¹⁷¹ It was an experience, common to all Italians, that made them uniquely sensitive to the concept that Gramsci would later refer to as 'hegemony' and that other antifascists would point to as a particular 'mentality' of the masses created by their historical and cultural experience.¹⁷² Thus Italy sat as cauldron of diverse political experiences that positioned them in such a way as to offer unique insight into political conditions that remained absent elsewhere.

The focus of this chapter will largely be on the first of a series of key figures in the Italian antifascist movement. Piero Gobetti (1901–26), one of the earliest and most influential liberal antifascists, championed a unique form of politics in response to the moral and political threat represented by the rise of Fascism in Italy. In developing what he called Revolutionary Liberalism, Gobetti drew on the philosophical heritage of Giambattista Vico's critical stand against Cartesianism as Gobetti and the Antifascists faced the ideological and material threat of fascism. They set out to explain the rise of Fascism, not as an externally imposed historical 'parenthesis', but as a product of historical and cultural contingency; explain why the conditions of Italy, which might have resulted in either a Liberal or Socialist revolution, instead produced fascism; and lastly faced with such a threat examine the strategies and tactics that might be employed to bring about change. In a way that differed from resistance movements before them, the Italian antifascist movement took its lessons from their Vician heritage and become one of self-examination

¹⁷¹ Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 318.

¹⁷² Ibid.; Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, chap. 7.

and self-criticism. Italian intellectuals responded to the emergence of fascism by not only looking towards the State or towards external influences, but also by asking what it was about Italian life itself that contributed to the Italy's decline into fascism.

It was clear to all that fascism represented a significant problem, but what the Italian intellectuals understood immediately, in a way that others facing oppressive regimes had not was the role that Italian life had played in allowing fascism to rise to power in the first place. This attitude towards engaging the rise of fascism in Italy was famously captured in Piero Gobetti's characterization of fascism as as the 'autobiography of the nation'.¹⁷³ It was a characterization that challenged the then dominant perspectives that argued that fascism represented an historical 'parenthesis', albeit one that Gobetti wryly suggested would nonetheless “probably not be short”.¹⁷⁴ This difference of interpretation regarding the origins and character of fascism represented a fundamentally different understanding of history and knowledge, and therefore the role of the individual and the masses in meeting the challenges posed by fascism. For Gobetti and those who shared his autobiographical perspective on fascism the struggle against fascism became as much an individual responsibility as it was collective. And this understanding of history, moreover this understanding of man as historically contingent has its roots in historical-intellectual tradition of Vico that called into question the positivist philosophic trend that dominated his time. Cartesianism, with its emphasis on truth being rooted in observation and verification had unquestionably contributed to a wealth of advances in the natural

¹⁷³ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 274.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 24.

sciences and for the children of the enlightenment, it only seemed natural that the social sciences and metaphysics could be equally conquered through the application of Descartes “scientific method”. Vico embraced the idea that truth is plural and varies between perspectives and that a rational and 'geometric' understanding of the human world is necessarily a distortion that contributes to an imperialist perspective. This understanding of humanity as messy, unpredictable, and resistant to empirical thinking has resonated throughout the postmodern world, but in his time Vico was largely without an audience save in his native Italy. The individually empowering legacy of Vico (via Croce) and the deeply felt perception of man’s ability, even obligation, to create the world for himself was so pervasive that it even found its way into the fascist ideology. However, where it failed to remain true to the Crocean legacy was fascism's faith in a dogmatic nationalist imperative that would see that their own ideological interests come to dominate Italian life, and the suppression of the pluralism that Gobetti saw as integral to his own revolutionary liberalism. For Gobetti, such a nationalism meant “a collapse to the lowest grade of dogmatism” that “has no reality and no content other than imperialism.”¹⁷⁵

Croce's Critique of “Absolute Idealism”

The manifold success of Descartes' “new critical method” had led to Vico being overlooked throughout the Cartesian dominated west. However, in Vico’s own Italy his thought became infused with the very intellectual culture of Italy. This became especially apparent during the period of Italy’s Fascist rule. Vico would make this transition to the 20th century on the back of perhaps the single most influential figure in Italian

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 72.

intellectual life in the first half of the 20th century, Benedetto Croce. It is under this twin influence of Vico and Croce on the cultural and intellectual climate of Italy that the Vician theory of history and knowledge would contribute to the arming of a subsequent opposition movement.¹⁷⁶ The question of just how this arming took place has us turn to what Edmund Jacobitti points to as “the central purpose of Croce's mature thought” and the overcoming of 'Hegelian dualism'.¹⁷⁷ Croce wrote extensively on the work of Vico, Hegel, and Marx all in the effort come to terms with a dualism that he argued saw Hegel's philosophy “rent into two factions: those who accepted the physics and materialism of the philosophy of nature and made of it an immanent materialism, and those who accepted the philosophy of the Logos and made of it a transcendent God.”¹⁷⁸ Croce understood both of these perspectives as divided into an extreme left (as characterized by the iron necessity of the materialist conception of history) and right (that of a divine animating force in transcendent theology) as being unable to properly account for the “concrete reality” of human autonomy in history. This echoed Vico's attempts to call into question the tendencies of both Cartesian scientism as well as the tendency within dogmatic Christianity to strip humanity of their central role in the making of human life.¹⁷⁹ In this

176 Giovanni Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Fascism: With Selections from Other Works* (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction, 2002), 51–52.

Vico cultural influence was so great that he was even enlisted by the Fascists themselves in their attempt to legitimize Fascist ideology. Calling upon Vico and his famous theory of *corsi e ricorsi* in their defense of barbarism as part of an “heroic morality”.

177 Jacobitti, *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy*, 145.

178 Ibid., 144.

179 In the previous chapter it was argued that the Italian Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola represented the earliest critique of the dogmatic Church through his humanist philosophy developed in his oration *On the Dignity of Man* in which he focused on man's capacity to make himself as both his defining characteristic as well as his most intimate connection to God. For Mirandola the divine order was not to be found outside of man, but as an expression of his will. He found the dignity of man, his freedom, in his ability to control his own fate and his own destiny. The Church, having been disarmed by this new Christian interpretation branded him a heretic.

manner Croce establishes Vico's historicism as something entirely distinctive from that of Hegel.¹⁸⁰ Croce sought to reconcile the existence of history as the unfolding and indeed making of concrete reality with the emerging dominance of systems of thought that presented themselves as self-contained. Contrary to the overreaching fascist interpretation, Vico provided a formidable foundation for such a task. Nothing in Vico's work suggests that any individual or ideological form, is capable of knowing the entire past, present or future of a society.¹⁸¹ On the contrary, Hegel appears to provide the path for ideologies of both the right and left to establish regimes and orders capable of ignoring history as 'concrete reality' in favor of an absolute idealism.¹⁸² The problem as observed here is not so much the attempt on the left and right to preserve the 'ideal' or their own conception of the 'true', but in its attempt to dissolve their attachment to concrete reality, which is contingent and plural. To do so, for Croce, is to deny the individual an autonomous role in history. Consider for instance the individual under the universal and transcendent Church, or, the individual under Marx's determinist historical materialism or under neoliberal capitalism. In each case, be it the 'truth' contained in the theological doctrine of providence, the 'iron necessity' of historical materialism, or the 'invisible hand' of the "free market", human will is reduced to a mere instrument of the essential 'system' or process.

180 Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Fascism*, 63.

This is key because the Fascists present an understanding of the state that sets "Italian and German thought" on a singular path in which "the State is not a superstructure which imposes itself from without on the activity and initiative of the individual in order to subject him to coercive restriction." Rather, "the State and the individual are all of a piece."

181 Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, 4,73.

182 Indeed Hegel is the subject of several critiques that consider his philosophy as having contributed to the ideological foundation of 20th century authoritarianism, among them are Karl Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945) and in various works of Isaiah Berlin.

It is true that the concept originated a century ago in the extreme deliriums of the extravagancies of the exhausted Hegelian school; nevertheless, I feel nothing but astonishment at the conception of man and his history as the prey of a god or demon (economy) who drags him along, trailing illusions of truth, beauty, moral and religious sublimity, all of which are of economic substance.¹⁸³

Croce's project—like Vico before him—becomes one of unifying truth with “concrete reality” or, in a borrowed page from Vico, unifying thought with action in asserting the role of will in human life. This, in the effort to keep such theoretical programs from alienating themselves from the 'truth' of lived human life. It was a project he referred to as 'absolute historicism' and was clearly distinct from Hegel's own 'absolute idealism', focusing on the autonomy of history and the assertion of history as creative self-knowledge.

In examining Hegel, Croce engaged in a critique of the kind of historical determinism that would find its way into Marx and more broadly into all utopian or teleological visions of political idealism, while retaining the dialectical nature of experience. It was for this reason that Croce's sympathetic interest in Marx's materialism remained consistent with his eventual rejection of Marx, on the grounds of his economic determinism.¹⁸⁴ For Croce, there was no 'end of history'. Unlike Hegel or Marx, he did not promote a distinctive subject, instead arguing for a pluralist approach that was more open-ended. History was an endless process of self-making, building on Vico's distinctive dialectical concept of *corsi e recorsi*. Like Hegel's dialectic that followed that of Vico, it is a concept that regulated historical development and the progress of human knowledge;

183 Benedetto Croce and Angelo A De Gennaro, *Essays on Marx and Russia*. (New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1966), 1.

184 James Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 1st ed, Italian and Italian American Studies (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 25.

however, unlike Hegel, it does not point to a single ultimate goal. It was clear that for Vico human culture thus represented a kind of sedimentary layering of history acting as the record of its development. Accessing these layers can provide access to concrete knowledge about human life. It is an idea that Gramsci would later borrow when he referred to humanity as a product of historical deposits in need of an inventory.¹⁸⁵ It would also contribute significantly to what is perhaps Gramsci's greatest contribution, his theory of hegemony and hegemonic struggle. For Vico, his novel interpretation of providence represented the dynamic force serving this development and this struggle, but a force only evidenced in autonomous human action and history, not in that of the State, Party program, or dominant ideology. Rather than promoting a distinctive subject, Croce argued for a pluralistic approach that was more open-ended; therefore, politics—to his understanding—was far more instrumental than essentialist.¹⁸⁶ This also explains Croce's initial support of fascism and consequently his subsequent rejection of it.

All political ideologies represented a kind of universalism that Croce rejected. Ultimately, Croce envisioned a politics defined by autonomy, self-discipline, and self-creation; a distinctively refined vision of politics—what some have criticized as aristocratic—that

185 Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 324.

186 Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*.

I struggle here to understand the position of Marx on this issue. On the one hand his broad philosophical-economic system is fundamentally “essentialist” in that it provides a basis and rationale for the necessary development of history along a prescribed path. However, his well known argument in the “Theses on Feuerbach” that “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it”, is suggestive of an underlying instrumentalist approach to politics. Moreover, his essays on “Estranged Labor” and “Wage-Labor and Capital”, focused on labor as “life-activity” that demands agency, seem to further emphasize this point. The question that plagued both the Marxist “revisionists” as well as contemporary Marxists appear to hinge on which reading takes precedence.

clashed mightily with the base and often dirty politics of parliamentary government.¹⁸⁷ Gramsci recognizes this tension and comes to terms with it when he shatters one of the great barriers to politics understood in this manner, declaring that “all men are intellectuals”, but adding the cryptic caveat, “but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”¹⁸⁸ Empowered by individual autonomy, this ennobled or 'elite' politics of Croce is precisely the manner of politics that must be cultivated in order to maintain freedom even within oppression. Croce represented for Gobetti a message of the rebirth of an idealist vision of thought and action and set the revolutionary humanist principle of self-creation and creativity at the center of Gobetti's politics. “To be ourselves at every moment, to realize entirely our possibility for action for ourselves and for others in each instance.”¹⁸⁹ It is an effort on the part of Gobetti, by way of Croce, to set liberal idealism against the prevalence of positivism and “replace the last remains of reveal truth with the truth won day by day through the labor of all, and generic abstractions with patient, open-minded scrutiny of the little problems and the big ones as they arise. Only in this finding of solutions and making them systematic are we doing politics.”¹⁹⁰ The American philosopher Richard Rorty would echo this message in his critique of the American left which he too believed was no longer engaging in politics proper.¹⁹¹ Gobetti referred to it

187 Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 42.

Piero Gobetti—a figure greatly inspired by Croce's politics—also fell victim to criticisms of “aristocratic snobbery, greatly overestimating the power of ideas without referencing any obvious social constituency.”

188 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 9.

189 Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 36.

190 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 77.

191 Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, The William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization 1997 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 28.

“Instead of seeing progress as a matter of getting closer to something specific in advance we see it as a matter of solving more problems. Progress is”, he argues, “measured by the extent to which we have made ourselves better than we were in the past rather than by our increased proximity to a goal.”

as the need “to be everywhere oneself”, much later Vaclav Havel would express the concept in terms of “living within the truth” and the “independent life of society”. It is a vision of politics that is both anti-bourgeois and anti-communist, and seeks to cultivate in its adherents a mentality that escapes narrow political categories and promotes a kind of radical cultural and political reformation. If it is aristocratic, it does so in a manner that attempts to elevate popular culture or 'common sense' to the level of philosophy. It was a mentality that had great resonance and appeal with those in Italy who found themselves frustrated by both the failures of their own established “elite” expressed in the dominant conservative Italian liberalism and *Giolittismo* or *Transformismo*, as well as the emergence of radical nationalism and fascism, and instead sought to create their own organic intellectual elite.

Giolitti & the “Politics of Compromise”

When Gobetti discussed the “misfortunes of Italian public life” one of his hardest blows was struck not at the Fascists themselves, but rather against the Italians themselves and the existing liberal regime of Giovanni Giolitti and the political practice of what he termed *Giolittism*.¹⁹² Giovanni Giolitti served largely uninterrupted as the Liberal Italian Prime Minister from 1901-1914 and again from 1920-1921 and was considered a master of the politics of compromise that came to be known as *transformismo*. Norberto Bobbio criticized the transformist policies as a system of “political compromises that had suffocated all initiative from the base.”¹⁹³ It was political style that Gobetti loathed

¹⁹² Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 63.

¹⁹³ Norberto Bobbio, *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy*, The Giovanni Agnelli Foundation

because he fundamentally rejected the idea that one could, or should, trade the conflict inherent in the exercise of democratic and pluralist liberty for the steadying hand of authority and focused above all on stability and order, and an at-all-costs interest in preserving the parliamentary system. This was a problem because it amounted to no less than the domestication and pacification of politics itself. Struggle and conflict, the very essence of Gobettian politics, would be effectively abolished in the name of harmony and stability. This was the hallmark of 'old-style liberal politics' and of transformismo and for Gobetti, such political methods could not be trusted. Furthermore, as long as this form of politics remained dominant, there could be no effective opposition. Politics of this kind is the effective negation of struggle and opposition and instead represents a form of political life with obedience and passive compromise at its center. It is a concern that anticipates Vaclav Havel's own fears regarding the negation of politics under post-totalitarianism. Havel, enlisting Gramsci, demonstrates that it is a mechanism with implications and consequences that run even deeper in the political consciousness. They are forms of politics that seeks only to “defend its clients and its privileges[...]it enters into discussion only to collaborate.”¹⁹⁴

In practice, opposition is minimized by way of political deals, compromises, or favors, all in an effort to win over adherents to liberal parliamentary government and diffuse potential enemies by absorbing them into the parliamentary system.¹⁹⁵ By creating an “inclusive”, “tolerant” government and political alliances it was hoped that stability and

Series in Italian History (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995), 120.

194 Gobetti, as quoted in Ward, p.85

195 A similar critique of parliamentary party politics was proposed by Carl Schmitt, though with decidedly different conclusions, in his now famous work on the *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*.

growth could be achieved. Giovanni Giolitti was a master of this practice. On its surface such coalition building would appear not only to be practical, but even wise. The example of Italian inter-war politics reflects this as the people, fearing the volatility of the socialists and the workers' movement and having confused social harmony for democracy, welcomed the steadying hand of Giolitti. For Gobetti, this was a commitment to the negation of politics and as such “victories” were temporary at best as they ultimately empowered destructive forces within new government, such as Mussolini’s fascist Party, to take control.¹⁹⁶ This was compounded by the concept of historical materialism, the problem of the political party, and also by a tension observed by Gobetti in the popular and to his understanding misunderstood concept of solidarity.

For Gobetti, a liberal society is one in which the conditions exist for productive struggle and this begins with a willingness of the members of that society to engage in struggle. “His sphere of action”, Bobbio tells us, “was [therefore] not political in the strict sense but rather ethical and pedagogical.”¹⁹⁷ To a large extent this was at least initially dependent upon vigorous political parties. The party was, for Gobetti, “the essential evil” because it promoted what he referred to as an “unnatural dualism between the state and the individual.”¹⁹⁸ This unnatural dualism emerges as a function of the institutional basis of the government. For a state to function as a democracy, it must be an expression of the people; and this can be expressed as either a direct democracy or a representative one.

¹⁹⁶ It is a political method that is still popular for its tendency towards stability, but the risks remain. It can be observed in American congressional politics in, for example, the coalition between traditional conservative Republicans and so-called Tea Party Republicans, a minority wing of the party that had come to dominate the coalition's agenda.

¹⁹⁷ Bobbio, *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy*, 118.

¹⁹⁸ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 78.

Direct democracies have, for various reasons, proved to be impractical in the context of a modern state, and so the tendency has been towards representative democracy. The historical materialism of the socialists along with the absolute idealism of the conservative liberals and fascists ultimately led to the party becoming the key political unit as the expression of a particular unity. However, Gobetti believes that the party acts to obscure the people rather than elaborate upon them and that this is necessarily so because, among other problems, there are no constitutional provisions overseeing this connection between people and the state. Parties, for the most part, go unregulated. In this manner the dualism of the state and party, two key components of the modern democratic state, is unnatural in that the party does not satisfy the demands of the people, rather it subverts them. Gobetti believes that this problem can be remedied through higher degree and quality of participation by the people. The key to this is treating the people as a distinctive factor in public life rather than as an abstract entity (voter, constituent, consumer). Gobetti suggests that what is necessary is getting rid of the parties as they are currently conceived, what he describes as “random groupings of individuals on the basis of interests that are by nature too diverse and sometimes dangerous”, in favor of “more logical groupings” or what he calls “leagues”, which are established “as the occasion presented itself, on the basis of concrete interests and issues and aiming at clearly defined results”. Gobetti believes that this would make representative government far more active and likely to work, “with the voters taking sides on the issues and choosing as their representatives (representation in both senses: the choice of the individuals and the delegation of power to them) deputies in favor of protectionism or against protectionism,

favorable to centralization or favorable to decentralization, and so on.”¹⁹⁹ Gobetti is clear on this point, for him the party stunts the democratic spirit of the people because parties act in the interest of their own ideological agendas and therefore the people become increasingly disinterested as the party loses touch with the people and the people (and the state) lose touch with each other. For Gobetti, the unrefined notion of solidarity, especially with regard to an ideological movement or party, functions in much the same way. This is revealed in the critical tension that exists between the concepts of individualism and solidarity. For Gobetti the politics of solidarity all too often came at the expense of individualism because solidarity did not promote struggle as Gobetti understood it. For Gobetti, the solidarity of the socialists and even the fascists was rooted on the underlying assumption of a positivist conception of politics understood as a “static concept of social harmony”.²⁰⁰ This promoted a concept of democratic politics that was fundamentally utopian, relying on subordination to a particular system and conditions, but that ignored the contingency of human life and sacrificed individual struggle. Progress, argued Gobetti, does not come from the negotiation of struggle between adversaries, but through their conflict. Solidarity represented forgoing the contested terrain of individuals for the sake of a pacified political life, “social harmony” in the interest of the ruling class. Recent statements by the presiding Hong Kong government regarding recent democratic protests reflect this exactly. This, necessarily represents the exchange of real democracy for some absurd illusion of democracy, manipulation and is a clear moral failure. When struggle ends, as it often does after compromise and

199 Ibid., 78–79.

200 Ibid., 134.

collaboration, degradation begins. Again, what is necessary, is to reignite the energies of the people through a higher degree and quality of participation. However, Italy, worn down by centuries of Catholic paternalism, found themselves reduced to the condition of servility and deference.

But already we could see the signs of exhaustion, the longing for peace. It is hard to grasp that life is tragic, that suicide is more of a day to day practice than an exceptional measure. In Italy there is no proletariat and no bourgeoisie, only middle classes. We knew that; and if we hadn't known it, Giolitti would have taught us. So Mussolini is nothing new; but Mussolini offers us experimental proof of that unanimity; he attests to the nonexistence of heroic minorities, the provisional end of heresies.²⁰¹

For Gobetti, this leaves only the option of withdrawal from a failing political life in preparation for a future in which a new politics exists. It is a preparation for that “long, and no longer open, war of resistance” that “had to devote itself to cultivating and spreading the values of moral resistance and personal and political integrity.”²⁰² It is a concept central to antifascist politics and finds itself most completely theorized in Gramsci's concepts of hegemonic struggle and the “war of position”, and Havel's later concept of the “parallel polis” borrowed from Patocka. Intimately connected to this is the concept of *intransigence* which Gobetti represented as the holding onto of one's principles, principles that may adapt so long as they remain your own, which is not to be confused with dogmatism. It was a central characteristic of the antifascist and the new ethical Italian as Gobetti understood it.

Fascist rejection of the Marxist principle of historical materialism—a belief shared in fact

201 Ibid., 214.

202 Ibid., xxxiv.

with the old liberals and the liberal antifascists—breaks the critical link in the chain that might have connected concept of solidarity with social progress even if a dogmatic one. Solidarity is the means by which the steel of the revolutionary mass was tempered and historical materialism the means by which they were made to fulfill their revolutionary task. However, unmoored from historical materialism this revolutionary mass loses its direction and the State emerges as the solution for the fascists. As Gentile reminds us, “for Fascism...the State and the individual are one, or better, perhaps, “State” and “individual” are terms that are inseparable in a necessary synthesis.”²⁰³ In this manner fascism acts a surrogate for wayward socialists for whom the promise of revolutionary renewal had been broken. Yet, for both the socialist and the fascist, solidarity is the instrument of liberty, but it is an instrument understood in terms of submission to authority. “If we do not accept historical materialism, we will have a *guardian* to assess the *level of social solidarity that has been attained*.”²⁰⁴ Coupled with this practice of solidarity as obedience, Giolittismo contributed to the decline of political life, and prepared both Italy and Italians themselves for movement into fascism.

Social solidarity can come only from the exercise of individual rights, which are naturally bounded by the similar rights of everyone else. Those who preach abstract solidarity are ripe to become servants at court. Order does not exist as though it were some sort of biological given; order exists as autonomy, and the only possible preparation for it is the exercise of intransigence, active participation in political life.²⁰⁵

The Giolittian model of liberal parliamentary politics was unquestionably a political style born of the positivist spirit of the age and saw political society as an instrument to be

203 Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Fascism*, 25.

204 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 134.

205 Ibid., 137.

tuned or an account to be balanced, and in this way the operation of society at large can be compared to that of any closed system. Once we understand the rules or mechanisms of that system, all of its component parts can be brought into harmony. Consider the mechanical operation of an engine, the efficiency of assembly line production, or even the play of a game, all of which depends on the smooth interaction of parts and some agreed upon parameters, standards and rules. Giolittism reduced the individual into one of so many parts and effectively removed *active participation* from political life. But for Gobetti, as it was for Vico, human life was not ordered in this manner, though it came to be governed to the contrary and Giolitti was among its preeminent practitioners.

In a game, as long as everyone plays by the rules there is stability and order existing within the game and it can be played—provided they are written in this manner—to mutual benefit.²⁰⁶ One of the key features of such a game is that it is able to include numerous players and even expand its field of play, such as in tournament play. It also expects that once new players are included they will recognize the reward of playing the game by the rules and in turn conform them. Incidentally, this remains a key feature of democratic theory regarding elections. It is therefore an idea that relies first-and-foremost on the concept of the rational actor. That is, the politically motivated actor whose actions conform entirely to reason and logic. The rational actor is introduced at the center of the Cartesian revolution with Descartes' famous claim: *cogito ergo sum*. It is further

206 It is for this reason that many, particularly social contractarians, argue that stability and order are the key components to maintaining a “good” society. Though this has historically been seen as a liberal principle, in time it has become a fundamentally conservative force, especially if we consider the how and in whose interests the initial rules of the game are implemented. The assumptions of scientific idealism obscure this.

reinforced by the belief that the universe itself is organized according to a rational order that is discoverable to those who “direct the mind” accordingly.²⁰⁷ Of course, sometimes there are potential players who wish to play by different rules, but these players are not pushed aside as this would lead to the instability that naturally comes with an outsider. And so there is often compromise as rules change and adapt so as to maintain the stability and integrity that exists within the game. However, sometimes there is a player who not only wants to play by different rules, he wants to change the whole game itself. In such a situation, how does this system respond? Dissent, to the extent that it deviates from the truth inherent in the system, is understood as anomalous. This is to say that it exists outside and *external* to the system. Such anomalies cannot be tolerated to any great extent as it threatens the existence of the order itself. This represents the problem that fascism presented to Italy and to Giolitti's conservative liberal government. From the Giolittian perspective one simply cannot exclude the player, especially this player, because excluding such a radical opposition player would undoubtedly create instability, so it does what it believes is best, it seeks to incorporate them. Again, the only instrument at hand is a tried and true one, compromise and assimilation. But, the compromise required to maintain stability is so severe that it is transformed instead into collaboration. Rather than assimilating the extremist elements, such elements are instead sheltered within the system and given the opportunity to flourish.

Gobetti's frustration with the Giolitti's version of liberal politics was, in many ways

207 René Descartes et al., *The philosophical writings of Descartes. Vol. I Vol. I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

inspired by two key intellectual figures of Italian life, the Sicilian socialist Gaetano Salvemini and Benedetto Croce.²⁰⁸ Salvemini looked at the liberal parliamentary system of Giolitti and challenged its very nature on the basis of regional and class prejudices, attacking Giolitti's liberal parliamentary government as a haven of corruption and gangsterism.²⁰⁹ However, where Salvemini was primarily effective as a moral critic of Giolitti's government along this Marxist class line, Gobetti believed the problem to be even more profound; a problem connected to methodological assumptions that deny the inherent contingency of human life. Here he turned to Croce, who provided a clearer path to unlocking the philosophical problem that Gobetti recognized at the heart of Giolittism and that persisted beyond class struggle alone. While class struggle remained an important feature of political consciousness it ran the risk of being too reductive.

208 Ward, *Piero Gobetti's New World*, 16.

One of the problems that the antifascists faced was that while the critiques of the liberal parliamentary system provided by Salvemini and Croce—though not inherently anti-liberal in way that Gobetti understood them—provided powerful critiques that would help to undermine liberal government, they also served the interests of the emerging fascist movement which was also calling for Italian renewal albeit of a decided different variety. Fascism was a result of the same drive for renewal as Gobetti and others. What made antifascist renewal different was the antifascist focus on personal and collective liberation. Fascism would never and could never lead to the kind of revolution and change that Gobetti and others demanded because Fascism was incompatible with liberty and freedom achieved through creative agency and autonomy. Positivism denies the masses individual and collective agency, having reduced life to “scientific formulas, determinism, evolutionism, and the sense that the future has already been mapped out in advance.”

David Ward, *Piero Gobetti's New World: Antifascism, Liberalism, Writing*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) p.16

209 Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 23.

Salvemini argued that Italian politics was dominated by northern interests and that the south, particularly the southern peasants, were almost entirely excluded from politics. This division was existed in direct contrast with Giolotti's supposedly progressive government. It was on this basis that Salvemini provided an opposition, both to the Giolotti's liberal government as well as the Italian socialist movement lead by Turati, which concentrated on the interests of the northern proletariat to the exclusion of the southern peasants. The centralized liberal state, he argued, was “obliged to base itself on corrupt and fictitious parliamentary majorities, representing only a minimal part of the population, who from day to day sell their adhesion to the anti-constitutional policy and, in exchange, obtain duties on grain, protective tariffs, the rewards of the mercantile navy, immunity for banking crimes, etc.” This was the sickness of a state that had fallen under the control of a “handful of profiteers and parasites,” forced to dish out “bloody repression to defend itself from the malcontents’ who could not participate in the dishonorable trade-offs between executive and parliament.”

Let us look for a moment at one of these great problems, a political factor that everyone is talking about these days: the class struggle. For most people this expression has a certain fairly clear meaning that has grown by accretion to include the consciousness of social privilege, the reciprocal hatred that flows from it, and the need for a resolution in which the hatred and the privileges that cause it will be extinguished. But this meaning is so elastic that many people have become convinced that a coup d'état, a revolution, will sweep away and resolve everything. Revolution: there you have a very quick solution. And the other is just as facile: conservatism, reaction.²¹⁰

For Gobetti, human life reduced to “historical materialism...and the theory of the class struggle”, though “established forever as tools of the social sciences”, is not itself sufficient.²¹¹ While unquestionably useful, Gobetti understood this as an excessive attack upon the “concept of social distinction”, which he believed must necessarily arise out of the “concept of equality of chances and variability of outcomes.”²¹² While class struggle was a significant lens through which to analyze history, it was not something to be resolved or finally overcome. It was in this manner that Gobetti “extended the liberal notion of competition to include the phenomenon of class struggle.”²¹³ To do so was to affect a return of liberalism to the political traditions with which it shared common ancestry (socialism) in its more revolutionary past.²¹⁴ While Gobetti agreed in principle with Salvemini's socialist class critique of Giolitti's method, he also feared that a 'revolutionary' program of this manner, one which denies its liberal affinities, would only result in the emergence of an equally repressive regime. Such an analysis would rest at the heart of the Italian liberal antifascist critique. Croce represented the assertion of a pluralistic conception of human life and individual liberty, stripped of Descartes'

210 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 67–68.

211 Ibid., 23.

212 Ibid., 68.

213 Ibid., xxvii.

214 Ibid., xxviii.

scientific idealism or the absolute idealism of Hegel, which he saw as threatening. For Gobetti, this was the rebirth of Vico's defense of the need for a new science, and he would similarly call for the renewal of liberalism.

The Road to Fascism: “Anti-modernism” & Autobiography in Italy

Gobetti came of age at the end of what socialist historian Eric Hobsbawm famously called the “long nineteenth century”.²¹⁵ It was a period of remarkable transformation in human society, a period of great revolutions driven by the “heroic model of science” that would emerge from the methods unified by Bacon and especially Descartes that promised access to the universal foundations of truth and knowledge.²¹⁶ It was a revolution that brought with it the promise to deliver man from the obscurity and myth of the past into an age of social and political 'scientific' progress. However, Gobetti witnessed this long century collapse in the ruins of the First World War and its aftermath, as modernity gave rise to increasingly aggressive regimes that demanded total control over society on the basis of their ideological conceptions of truth. As a student journalist and publisher, Gobetti both witnessed and testified to these transformations in Italy, but unlike those who had decided to reject modernity altogether, he remained hopeful of the possibility to “radically renew liberalism and weld it to mass-based politics.”²¹⁷ He was relentless in the pursuit of restoring Italian political life, which he saw as deeply damaged and as not merely the victim of Fascism but also expressed in Fascism. As a law student at the

215 E. J Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848*. (Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1962).

216 Joyce Oldham Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret C Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994).

217 Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 1.

University of Turin Gobetti set up his own review, *Energie Nove* ('New Energies'), when he was only 17. Not unlike the fascists themselves, he promoted a radical cultural and political renewal, but with a decidedly different interpretation to that of the Fascists. Gobetti embraced and advanced a concept that he referred to as “revolutionary liberalism”. In this Gobetti drew heavily on the work of Croce, setting the revolutionary humanist principle of self-creation and creativity at the center of his politics. It existed in dialogue with much of Italy's liberal antifascist theory, especially the liberal socialism of Carlo Rosselli, and the work of Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci. This would also contribute to the development of later radical democratic theory expressed, for example, in the work of Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio.²¹⁸ It is from this that the Italian antifascists developed a conscious understanding of politics as not restricted to the authority and activity of the state or an unwavering commitment to the system that supports that state, the result of which is not merely unanimity or consensus, but a kind of homogeneity dependent upon a coercive use of state power. To limit democratic recognition, representation and political activity to institutional behavior is to limit or restrict legitimate political action to the sphere dominated by those who control access to power and government. Doing so fuses “politics” with acts of official policy and cannot help but reify the dominant political order. For Gobetti, this was, in fact, the absence of politics. Consequently, philosophical positivism—embodied in the ideal State—quickly becomes the focus of antifascist attention as it denied the masses individual and collective agency, having reduced life to “scientific formulas, determinism, evolutionism,

²¹⁸ Norberto Bobbio is perhaps best known in American political theory for his influence on the work of radical democrats like Chantal Mouffe and Ernest Laclau, as well as his cosmopolitan approach to the philosophy of international law.

and the sense that the future has already been mapped out in advance.”²¹⁹ Gobetti drew from Croce the lesson that the determinism of the positivist era needed to be discarded. Gobetti followed Croce's lead in the struggle to overthrow the determinism of the positivist era, and it is from his thought that Gobetti begins to see individual agency as essential to this renewal; individual agency that had, until now, been stripped away by positivism.

As the First World War approached social and economic inequality was achieving new heights throughout Europe. Critics of positivist and conservative interpretations of liberalism swelled the ranks of socialist parties and had come to play an increasingly prominent role in politics. The old guard liberals epitomized by Giolitti were, not without reason, fearful. Sorelian syndicalists—radical revolutionists inspired by the voluntarist politics of Georges Sorel—tired of “official” socialist party lines which embraced the very democratic party politics that they blamed for the conditions leading up to the war.²²⁰ They came to see the war as a “necessary evil” or rather “an ill that was nonetheless an instrument of good” and entered the war in search of the revolution that the traditional parties of the left failed to deliver.²²¹ Rosselli makes this transition clear in his chapter on

'Marxism and Revisionism in Italy', concluding that this “new generation was idealistic,

219 Unfortunately, I have lost my note here and am in the process of trying to track down this quotation.

220 Bobbio, *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy*, 57.

Georges Sorel (1847–1922) was a French social philosopher and a critic of Marxism. He is best known as the leading theorist of an aggressive strain of syndicalism, that advocated the use of the general strike, creative violence, heroic myth and a vanguard of intellectual elites as part of a revolutionary program. His criticism of Marxist historical materialism as well as bourgeois liberalism made him attractive alternative to reform-minded revolutionaries even including Gobetti; however, as Bobbio would later point out his “inextinguishable hatred of democracy” would confirm “the old conservative within him” and align him with Mussolini’s Fascism. His best known work is *Reflections on Violence* (1906 and 1908).

221 Ibid., 91.

voluntaristic, and pragmatic” and was “destined to offer itself up to the war.”²²² A whole generation, dissatisfied and impatient, returned from the First World War transformed and politically disoriented. It was an experience that brought with it unparalleled discontent, especially discontent with a modernity that had promised paradise and instead brought with it the Armageddon. In the *Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm argues that among the more extreme elements—those dissatisfied returning veterans who made it through the war, but had not been turned against it—there was “a sense of incommunicable and savage superiority, not least to women and those who had not fought, which was to fill the early ranks of the postwar ultra-right.”²²³ Another product of modernity—and particularly bureaucratization—was the creation of a great many low-level intellectual jobs and a lower-middle class. This class of people exploded in Italy after the First World War. Perhaps this is even a greater problem today. As this class of people, equally filled with a sense of “entitlement” finds itself compressed into the proletariat, this educated group increasingly “felt unrepresented and misunderstood.”²²⁴ In combination, they set the tone for postwar politics dominated by an intolerant attitude towards prewar attitudes, especially towards liberalism seen as bourgeois and decadent as well as socialism that had failed on its revolutionary promise. The classical liberal regimes and their politics were seen as having brought the world to the brink of total annihilation, and the socialist parties which had atrophied under parliamentary politics were powerless to affect change. As Nadia Urbinati notes in her introduction to *On Liberal Revolution*, those returning were “shocked by so much blood and violence” and in such “deep spiritual crisis” that

²²² Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 50.

²²³ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 2001), 26.

²²⁴ Ward, *Piero Gobetti's New World*, 12.

they “could have become anything.”²²⁵ “Anti-liberal” politics became increasingly popular, but existing socialist alternatives no longer appeared viable. In its place emerged something new, a kind of ‘anti-politics’ which increasingly threatened Italian life as it professed to preserve and glorify it.²²⁶ Piero Gobetti—a politically vigorous student who had been too young to fight in the war—believed that he “faced the postwar crisis without the prejudices that afflicted *combatants and defeatists*.”²²⁷ He believed that the postwar crisis was at its core a moral problem because in that having been so completely shattered and disoriented by the war, the hidden forces that had guided the political life of the nation were now exposed. “The demagogic illusion”, he added, “cast no spell on us.”²²⁸ The task that lay before Gobetti and the rest of his circle of antifascists was primarily forensic and introspective. They were “led to seek the wider and deeper reasons for...Italy’s inability to achieve organic unity...and to make their own practical contribution to the living reality of organized society.”²²⁹

Fascism was announced when Mussolini denounced the nineteenth-century as “the century of socialism, liberalism, democracy” and declared enemies of them all. Unfortunately, conditions were now ripe for him to be heard. Italian Fascism emerged successfully only as something of a political chameleon adapting a variety of seemingly

225 Bobbio, *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy*, XVII.

226 Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 156.

Here I use the difficult concept of ‘antipolitics’ in the manner that would be understood by Piero Gobetti and described in part in James Martin’s book on *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*. “The “antipolitics” of party strategy, populist demagoguery, and the forces of reaction.”

This is to say a form of political life characterized by the absence of politics and particularly liberalism as an “ethic of conflict” or in Gramsci’s “philosophy of praxis”

227 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 109.

228 Ibid.

229 Ibid., 110.

incompatible characteristics and exploiting the cracks between the two great ideological poles of modernity (classical liberalism [capitalism] and socialism [communism]) in developing their own program. Cracks, incidentally, that were similarly exploited by those who were its most successful critics. In his 1927 essay *Sobre el Fascismo*, Jose Ortega y Gasset offered one of the most useful insights into one of perhaps the most significant and telling features of fascism, revealing on the one hand why it has become so difficult to come to terms with and also why it is so critical to develop an understanding of fascism and combat it.

Fascism has an enigmatic countenance because in it appears the most counterpoised contents. It asserts authoritarianism and organizes rebellion. It fights against contemporary democracy and, on the other hand, does not believe in the restoration of any past rule. It seems to pose itself as the forge of a strong State, and uses means most conducive to its dissolution, as if it were a destructive faction or secret society. Whichever way we approach fascism we find that it is simultaneously one thing and the contrary, it is A and not A...²³⁰

However, these paradoxes are owed not to necessary inconsistencies within fascism, but rather in the attempt to understand fascism outside itself, that is, in the context of another ideological norm that fails to recognize it as a complete conception of life and instead sees it as a mere aberration to be reconciled with the dominant ideological narrative. Fascism, it turned out, could not be constrained within the confines of conventional politics. “None of the so-called democrats and liberals had realized that Mussolini could not be shackled with programs, that he would betray any agreement and beat all comers at the game of shrewdness.”²³¹

230 Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism-Fascism-Populism* (London: Verso, 1979).

231 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 224.

While there exists a great number of theories surrounding the rise of Fascism in Italy; what cannot be denied is that it was in no small part a consequence of the failure of both a conservative liberalism and a Marxist socialism that were too weak and ill prepared to contend with the single-mindedness of fascism. Italian fascism was thus something entirely different from previous reactionary and authoritarian movements and its apparent contradictions are unique features of the development of fascism and establishing something like a political theory of fascism. What becomes readily apparent is that the fascist ideology is not so easily categorized along the traditional left-right spectrum as many have hoped to do in the past and continue to do to this day. However, Italian intellectual life, exposed as it was to both Vico and its own legacy absent a reformation and subject to another totalizing way of life in the Church, prepared its most creative philosophers and political activists to meet with this unique political threat in original and important ways. In this sense, to try to understand fascism purely in terms of the dominant liberal-socialist paradigm of the twentieth (and now twenty-first centuries) is to misunderstand the threat that fascism represents, as well as the appropriate means to confront it. Even within Piero Gobetti and Carlo Rosselli's careful criticism of Fascism as "reactionary" we will see that they are careful to leave significant space for us to develop a more nuanced understanding of what appears to be the incoherent nature of fascism as both reactionary and revolutionary, as coming from both the left and the right.²³² To explain this we have to begin with the understanding that Mussolini champions a theory that is inspired as much by Sorel and Lenin as it is by De Maistre and Nietzsche.

²³² It is Antonio Gramsci's later development of the now well-known concept of hegemony as tied to a sedimentary understanding of historical and cultural development that unlocks the real fascist threat. It is this unique nature of Italian Fascism coupled with the that provided the fertile ground for the equally unique development of Italian Anti-fascism.

Regarding both Lenin and Mussolini, Francois Furet declared that:

“Mussolini belonged to the betrayed tradition of the republican Risorgimento. By marrying national renaissance with the socialist idea returned to its revolutionary vocation, these two “leaders of peoples” forcibly destroyed the bourgeoisie order in the name of the higher concept of the community.”²³³

Jacob Talmon in his seminal work *Myth of the Nation and Vision of the Revolution* tells us that Mussolini considered Sorel an inspiration, declaring that “What I am, I owe to Sorel.” To this Sorel responded by calling Mussolini “a man no less extraordinary than Lenin.”²³⁴ This, it should be said is remarkable considering that one of the most enduring features of fascism has been its obsession with violence (distinctively Sorelian and Leninist in motivation), but particularly a violent anti-Socialism. And yet, if there is one thing that Mussolinian fascism abhorred more than socialism, it was the perceived impotence of conservative liberalism. It was this balancing act of anti-Socialism and anti-Liberalism that famously placed Italian Fascism as a political “third-way”. But, a third way unlike that of the liberal socialists, or democratic republicans, etc. It was a third-way that could have gone in any direction. But for Piero Gobetti and like-minded antifascists, for Italy, it could only have ending in fascism. It was also a third way that was uniquely dangerous, rooted in Mussolini’s violent anti-liberalism and in his reactionary nationalist ideology. In his dialogue with Ernst Nolte, Furet reminds us, however, that fascism is revolutionary.²³⁵ This is critical in understanding Italian fascism as something new and distinctive.

233 François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 172.

234 J. L Talmon, J. L Talmon, and J. L Talmon, *Myth of the Nation and Vision of Revolution: Ideological Polarization in the Twentieth Century* (New Brunswick, U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 451.

235 François Furet and Ernst Nolte, *Fascism and Communism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

The novelty of fascism in History consists in its emancipation of the European Right from the impasse that is inseparable from the counterrevolutionary idea. In effect, the nineteenth century counterrevolutionary idea never ceased being trapped in the contradiction of having to use revolutionary means to win without being able to assign itself any goal other than the restoration of a past from which, however, the revolutionary evil arose. There is nothing like this in fascism. It is no longer defined by re-action (reversal) against a revolution. It is itself revolution. I think that by insisting on underscoring the reactive character of fascism, you underestimate its novelty. After all, what needs to be understood is the formidable attraction it held for the masses of the twentieth century, whereas the counterrevolutionary idea had none of this influence in the preceding century.²³⁶

We might for the sake of example consider it as something akin to an anti-revolution informed by what Bobbio called a negative or anti-ideology. To this extent Mussolini was able to harness the confluence of like-minded ideological currents and channel them to his will, anti-democratic, anti-liberal, anti-communist, anti-socialist, and anti-European.²³⁷ It is this seemingly paradoxical “reactionary revolution” that so confused the efforts of both the socialists and the old conservative liberals to accurately characterize and meet the fascist threat. A closer reading of Rosselli suggests this.

The impotence of Marxist socialism in the face of problems of liberty and morality is also shown by its relative inability to see into the phenomenon of fascism. It sees in fascism only a brutal case of class reaction...they overlook the whole moral side of the question, everything characteristically Italian that the Fascist phenomenon reveals. Fascism is not explicable purely in terms of class interests.²³⁸

Rosselli goes on to tell us that battling fascism is then not a simple matter of combating class reaction, though he does not dismiss it as an inherent component. Fascism is something far more complex than left politics (namely the Marxists) had until then contended with and, I would argue, still contends with. Rosselli and many of his

236 Ibid., 89.

237 Bobbio, *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy*, 123.

238 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 107.

contemporaries such as Piero Gobetti argued that what was missing was the ability to confront a new type of mentality that had its roots in a moral crisis particular to Italian political and social development.

Fascism in Italy is a sign of infancy because it signals the triumph of the facile, of trust, of enthusiasm. We could analyze Mussolini's cabinet as though it were just another governing ministry. But fascism has been something more: it has been the autobiography of the nation.²³⁹

Italy has the ignominious distinction of being one of the first of the fragile inter-war democracies to fall under authoritarian rule with only Lenin's rise to power in 1917 predating it. Mussolini's assumption of complete power in 1922 was a full decade before we would see Hitler's successful rise to power. However, the seeds were planted much earlier. On the surface it was a gradual process by which the conservative liberal institutions of parliament failed to adequately face down the fascist threat. Piero Gobetti saw this as the result of "old-style liberals and democrats" pursuing a strategy of bourgeois politics in dealing with Mussolini. Gobetti was not alone in this critique as the decade of the 1920s was marked by a great variety of anti-parliamentarianism and anti-liberalism. This was largely because the horrors of the First World War were widely interpreted to be the result of a great failure on the part of the conservative liberal governments that were too heavily invested with capitalist and aristocratic interests. It was seen as a failure of the promise of the liberal revolutions of the 19th century. Most notably, Carl Schmitt would later make a similar anti-liberal and anti-parliamentarian critique, though where Gobetti and other antifascists differed from Schmitt was that theirs was not a complete rejection of liberalism, but only of the failure of the conservative

²³⁹ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 213.

“old-style” liberal. Thus Gobetti became an advocate of a “revolutionary liberalism” rooted in political conflict and pluralism. Piece by piece Gobetti and later Carlo Rosselli—whose own “liberal socialism” contributed greatly to antifascist theory—witnessed the erosion of the liberal standards of individual liberty, representative government, and the steady social progress that accompanied them.

Though not a complete picture, Antifascists like Gobetti and Rosselli saw the rise of Italian Fascism as a confluence of moral and political crisis. On the one hand, an ineffectual but vocal left (equally anti-Liberal as we understand it here) stood in ideological opposition to fascism, but politically became too focused on debating socialist orthodoxy. This led to a fragmentation of a potentially strong oppositional force that may have stood in the path of the rise of fascism. On the other, it was argued that the old conservative liberals, fearing the influence of the larger radical left as much if not more than the smaller but more unified fascists, collaborated with the far right believing that such a coalition would keep the radical left in check. However, as Norberto Bobbio points out, “once the Right had come to power with the help of the old Liberals it turned against them.”²⁴⁰ What they failed to understand was that Mussolini could not be checked by such political gamesmanship – at the very least his political shrewdness could not be discounted – because his agenda and interests were not politically the same as the parliamentary liberals. He had no interest in maintaining the government, only replacing it, his was a *revolutionary* program. Here, the novelty of a truly revolutionary right cannot be understated. The problem as Gobetti would argue is that the liberals never took

240 Bobbio, *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy*, 107.

seriously their adversarial role, they had lost their capacity to act as a kind of liberal vanguard and in this manner the old bourgeois liberalism became servile, facilitating the rise of autocrats protected under the guise of democracy. What was needed to maintain true liberty was contention in an agonistic pluralism. Gobetti argued that the old liberals...

...were simply disoriented. None of them comprehended the historical situation of which fascism was the outcome; they persuaded themselves that what they had here was a passing phenomenon, one they could defeat if they were shrewd, and that was best handled by dealing, collaborating, setting out precondition as bargaining chips.²⁴¹

Central to this problem was the illusion of a benevolent “paternal guardianship” that Mussolini’s dictatorship cultivated, which played on the political immaturity of Italy. It was an illusion that would become useful in the hands of many future politicians intent on centralizing their power and authority. It was a paternalism that reduced the ranks of the democratically enfranchised to that of subjects of the predatory political instincts of powerful elites. In Italy, these were the fascists and in particular Mussolini; first in Russia and later in Eastern Europe, they were the Party. Gobetti’s concern for the lack of a Protestant reformation, which would have presumably corrected for this weakness, comes to mind. While it is unlikely that such a reformation alone would be a sufficient vaccine, it was this lack of an Italian reformation that led Gobetti to make the argument for “fascism as autobiography” and lead him to conclude that “at heart the Italians are all fascists and democrats like him [a liberal writer who advocated ‘dealing’ with fascists]. Fascism exists, so let’s derive some benefit from it, let’s temper its impulsiveness by electing fascist deputies to parliament. Fascists become democrats: that’s how revolutions

²⁴¹ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 224.

are legalized.”²⁴² Gobetti and Rosselli’s concern over the lack of an Italian protestant reformation, and a historical reliance of the people on religious and populist leadership, habituated Italy to the idea of transferring moral and political authority to others. This moral failure became the key and it is in this way that fascism infuses a reactionary element, in that it conjures up and clings to pre-modern conceptions of the individual not as citizen, but as subject. Gobetti concludes that:

Fascism wants to cure the Italians of the political contest and reach the point at which the roll is called and all the citizens declare that they believe in their country, as if the whole of social praxis could be fulfilled simply by restating convictions.²⁴³

This idea that fascism represented the 'autobiography of the nation' and that it sought to 'cure the Italian people of the political contest' spoke to a problem that the Italian antifascists recognized as central to modernity and one that was expressed first by Vico. It recalls the problems laid out in Croce's critique of Hegelian dualism and expressed in the belief in the State's capacity to act as a manifest unity of thought and action that supersedes or transcends the contingency of human life and the individual. “For Fascism...the State and the individual are one.”²⁴⁴ This is fundamentally challenged by the understanding that there are necessary limits to the capacity of any ideology or method to create a truly organic and unified conception of truth and knowledge. To do so, is the total manipulation of society, the conclusion of which is the “ideal state”, the fascist state in Italy, the communist state in Eastern Europe, and the neoliberal state in the west. Mussolini made fascism's intentions clear in the 'Doctrine of Fascism' (1932): “Against

²⁴² Ibid., 132.

²⁴³ Ibid., 212.

²⁴⁴ Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Fascism*, 25.

individualism, the Fascist conception is for the State; and it is for the individual in so far as he coincides with the State, which is the conscience and universal will of man in his historical existence.”²⁴⁵ Drawing from Vico, via Croce, the antifascists believed that such a condition was not an historical anomaly, but rather the anticipated consequence of a commitment to such a doctrine of truth. “This mistake was held to be a great fault not just in the case of private citizens, but also in the case of princes and rulers, and has sometimes been the cause of great damage and evil.”²⁴⁶ This lesson would become central to the “revolutionary” liberal critique of modernity and find its way into the antifascist analysis of Italian social and political life and especially their analysis of fascism itself. In this manner, and taken as a whole, the antifascist interpretation of fascism is less as a cause of Italy's political problems than as an effect. This understanding of fascism stands in stark contrast to previous conception of political authoritarianism particularly, but also political authority in general. Gobetti's liberalism, while notably unrefined, expressed this full spectrum need for renewal, though gave little in the way of detail on how this would be done beyond a close connection to the concepts of active participation, struggle and conflict. In this sense, Gobetti is less of a systematic thinker in the tradition of the philosopher who develops is prescriptive in their conception of the “good society”, and more of an 'agitator of ideas' and social antagonist. Perhaps such a notion of philosophy is even incompatible with Gobetti's politics. However, it is in these attributes that we can find some of Gobetti's greatest contributions and it would also would form the ethical core of Gobetti's politics. Gobetti's liberalism exists as the underlying principle that

245 Stanislaw G. Pugliese, ed., *Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and the Resistance in Italy: 1919 to the Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 88. Mussolini, “Doctrine of Fascism” (1932)

246 Vico, *Vico*, 43.

creates the conditions of liberty and autonomy that are at the core of the self-emancipation of individuals and that Gobetti believed existed in conflict with positivism.

Gobetti's Liberalism

Gobetti represents a considerable challenge to readers who are looking for a hermetic philosophical system, or even a prescriptive recommendation. Instead, all we are left with from this tragically short life are a remarkable collection of letters and commentaries of an incredibly intelligent, politically and socially vigorous thinker whose commitment was to action: action in the form of political conflict and action in the form of individual renewal and struggle. Thus far we have examined the singular influence of Benedetto Croce on his work, especially as it informed his critique of Giovanni Giolitti's failed politics as it contributed to the rise of Mussolini's Fascism. His work in to this end is, in many ways, typical for thinkers of his youth and energy. And though he did not leave us with a complete "philosophy", it is clear from the publication of his most aggressively political journal that his political vision would surely contribute to one. It might also be said that if we are to accept his commitment to Vician and Crocean historicism, such a rendering of his thought into a system or formula would only undermine that commitment. Like Vico and Croce, Gobetti turns to contingent cultural and historical sources in constructing his political theory. Gobetti grounds his liberalism on an interpretation of history and culture (understood as Vico did) that differs radically from that of the positivist liberal perspective that was then dominant throughout Europe and remains largely dominant to this day throughout the west. He challenged a conception of

politics that was fundamentally systemic or institutional, and dependent on the rationally organized constitutional apparatus of the state. This rational constitutionalism remains integral to our modern conceptions of politics and especially government. Even the 'radical' left retains a shared belief in this conception of politics and the understanding that a "politics without the organizational form of the Party is politics without politics."²⁴⁷ Gobetti believed that constitutionalism of this sort can only lead to liberal decline into an oligarchic state. For Gobetti it is the job of the "revolutionary liberal" to advance an agenda of moral and political autonomy, to even include "class struggle" in order to counter the tendency to transform the state into an instrument of an oligarchic minority. It is a political theory that is aggressive towards conventional interpretations of politics and measures itself against different standards. His liberalism does not rely on "meta-historical foundations" (such as the historical materialism of Marx) or other transcendent foundations that provided measurable tests of "progress". For Gobetti it is the moral and political autonomy of the individual and "praxis"²⁴⁸ that is key in constructing a politics that is free. Furthermore, it is marked with a willingness to remain open to all political traditions. He aggressively promoted "pluralism" and a diversity of opinion and perspective. Pluralism was essential for Gobetti because he believed that politics could never be reduced to the application of "pure reason" or reduced to a deterministic progress of history. This is because people do not develop objective opinions out of neutral information. Politics is about shared opinions and experiences, and therefore it does not exclude the irrational. In fact, the irrational quite often sits squarely at the center

²⁴⁷ Vladimir Il'ich Lenin and Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917* (London; New York: Verso, 2002), 297.

²⁴⁸ Here, praxis refers to a process of putting theoretical knowledge into practice.

of our politics. For this reason, we must embrace politics as the shared experience of struggle among differing and often antagonistic opinions. The primary concern of politics should therefore not be to prevent political seizure and the fulfillment of a rational political program, but rather to prevent the blockage of political conflict and legitimate “competition” among perspectives. That is, prevent the manipulation of the “rules of the game” by the state or those who wield sufficient power to influence or control the state to their advantage.

In his excellent study of Gobetti, James Martin argues that “Gobetti’s language may seem somewhat esoteric, but it reflected the pervasive idealist culture at the time, according to which spiritual renewal was a vital precondition for wider political transformation.”²⁴⁹ Nowhere was this more evident than in his earliest journal which was dominated by Croce’s idealist vision that challenged all modes of determinism. The journal was aggressively critical of all socialist and “old liberal” party doctrines, which were seen as dogmatic and inflexible. As the politics of the day increasingly become diverted from this Crocean ideal and the politics of the day turned to an emerging fascism lead by Benito Mussolini. It was in this climate that Gobetti first took up the antifascist banner directly and in 1922 he shuttered *Energie Nove* in order to rethink his politics in the face of this new threat. Shortly thereafter he began publishing a new, more militant, weekly political review called *Rivoluzione Liberale* (“Liberal Revolution”). It was a journal that conducted a campaign of criticism and resistance against the Fascist government of Italy. It was in this journal that Gobetti developed his distinctive interpretation of liberalism

²⁴⁹ Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 36.

(“revolutionary liberalism”) that clashed mightily with the politics of compromise and stability that marked the conservative liberal government of Giovanni Giolitti that Gobetti believed had allowed Mussolini and the Fascists to rise to prominence. As a journal it was a focal point for the early anti-fascist resistance movement and its contributors and readers unified in the clarity and power of their analysis of the problems that affected Italy and their mutual opposition to fascism. In late 1924, under increasing pressure from the fascists, Gobetti shuttered *La Rivoluzione Liberale* and began *Il Baretto*, a literary journal. This represented a shift in tactics from the militant nature of the *La Rivoluzione Liberale* to what Urbinati describes as a preparation for a “long, and no longer open, war of resistance” that “had to devote itself to cultivating and spreading the values of moral resistance and personal and political integrity.”²⁵⁰ This concept of the “long war” is central to anti-fascist politics and finds itself most completely theorized in Gramsci's concept of the “war of position”. It is an actualization of Vico's twin theories of *verum factum* and *corsi e ricorsi* one that places Gobetti and the Italian antifascists (and the uniquely Italian philosophic experience) to bear on the development of global resistance movements in that liberal values can be developed locally and internally through a dialectical process that need not be externally imposed from another country, or even another class or top down from the state. The seeds of liberal revolution lie within the autonomous individual. And, it is conflict, at times open and direct, but most importantly conflict rooted in cultivating moral resistance and the personal and political integrity of the individual.

250 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, xxxiv.

The Italian antifascists were inspired largely by Piero Gobetti's activism and his particular form of liberalism that focused on liberalism as a 'liberating' force; what he called 'revolutionary liberalism'. It was a philosophy that focused on emancipation rather than “a system of judicial guarantees or...a form of state organization and management.”²⁵¹ The Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio summarized a Gobettian revolution as:

...a revolution bringing liberation from the traditional ills of Italian society, in the name of a liberalism understood philosophically as an antagonistic conception of history, economically as the theory of the free market, and politically as a state ruled by law, a state that guarantees the exercise of the fundamental civil liberties and, as such, stands in opposition to any form of autocratic state (of which fascism was to be the brutal incarnation).²⁵²

Gobetti's attitude towards bourgeois modernity and capitalism was not unlike that of Vico's towards Cartesianism, which he likewise saw exerting its influence ubiquitously. Gobetti was well aware of the incredible contributions that the bourgeois free-market brought with it. However, he was concerned by its transformation into a reductive doctrine, effectively negating its liberal function. Gobetti resisted an overemphasis on economics, though he recognized it as an integral feature of modernity and necessary role that it played and will continue to play in the development of modernity. We would be hard pressed to disregard the achievements of the free-market in terms of medicine, technology, etc. However, this understanding was such that it was not exclusively linked to capitalist markets alone. In fact, to speak of the free-market only in terms of the economy would be especially dangerous. This is because a serious problem emerges when morality and politics are conditioned by laissez-faire as a political/economic doctrine. It reduces man from the status of autonomous citizen to that of a mere

251 Ibid., xxi.

252 Ibid., xii.

commodity or consumer.²⁵³

Economists and politicians have always preferred to concentrate on the figure of the consumer, a mere logical construct, vulgar, parasitic, and apolitical. The efforts of the free-marketeers to create a consumer consciousness were bound to come to nothing, because the consumer is not a cipher, not an individual capable as such of political consciousness.²⁵⁴

Gobetti's concern here is that under such conditions, the individual becomes incapable of acting politically, incapable of political consciousness. In this manner he loathes consumerist economism as much as perhaps the parties, in both instances individuals are reduced to abstractions. Gobetti's free market ideal was that laissez-faire should not be limited to trade (as it often is in Capitalist theory), but also extended to the social and political spheres:

“He thought of social conflict between the owners of capital and the owners of labor as not only unavoidable but even positive, because it helped to protect and advance the realization of individual autonomy while forcing economic management to pursue restless innovation. Consequently, to Gobetti, liberalism was the most radical alternative to both socio-economic corporatism (fascism) and protective state socialism (etatism).”²⁵⁵

As such, the task of recapturing the vitality of liberalism through revolutionary liberalism was not just a task for the political economism of either liberal free-trade or socialist historical materialism, it was a moral-political task, that involved among other things the recognition of the fact that liberty is not abstract ideal to be imposed by any given system, but an ideal that is manifest in the reality of pluralism and the recapturing of individual autonomy and authenticity. In this respect, Gobetti's central contributions in

253 Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 203–217.

This process is also famously illustrated in Marx's “Wage Labor and Capital” (1849)

254 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 128.

This is an analysis that will be revisited in Vaclav Havel's innovative analysis of what he describes as the Post-Totalitarian system as intimately related to a modern global consumerist culture.

255 Ibid., xvii.

combating fascism are not explicitly that of a philosopher, but rather as a cultural critic and as an interpreter of ideology, what James Martin, borrowing from Quentin Skinner, calls an “innovating ideologist.”²⁵⁶ His principle interest in the face of the collapsing Italian State and the “march on Rome” of Mussolini's fascism was to cultivate a renewal of liberalism. For him liberalism was not simply a narrow doctrine of individual rights, free trade, and parliamentary institutions; commitments that alone provided no resistance to rise of fascism and no guarantee of liberty. It was a liberalism that recognized the gravity of Italy's moral-political crisis and presented an open ethic of liberation based on a struggle against transcendent beliefs and imposed, hierarchical systems. He therefore saw his liberalism as related to radical and revolutionary movements of all kinds that sought as its goal emancipation and non-domination. Through his emphasis on the emancipatory element of liberalism he connected liberalism with the political struggle and conflict among opposing social and political forces. In this way, his critique of liberalism is one that makes space for the class conflict of Marxian socialism as well as a competitive individual autonomy, and points to recent developments in radical democratic or “agonistic” theories of democracy. Gobetti believed that positivism and its accompanying materialism had contributed to an “eclipse of spirit.”²⁵⁷ A movement to a version of idealism was necessary, but not one that fell into the Hegelian trap. Gobetti and Gramsci both saw in positivist liberalism a tendency towards the domestication, appeasement and pacification of the masses and it is precisely what Gobetti challenged in identifying 'the masses' and the proletariat in particular as the new social and political

²⁵⁶ Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 4.

²⁵⁷ Ward, *Piero Gobetti's New World*, 11.

antagonist and *liberal* revolutionary class. It is what made his otherwise “confused” conception of politics coherent.²⁵⁸

It is also what drove Gobetti to a truly novel interpretation of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia as a liberal revolution.²⁵⁹ It was from the perceived success of their movement and from the example of the workers movement in Turin, as well as his admiration for Antonio Gramsci, that Gobetti came to understand the working class as the revolutionary subject of his liberalism.²⁶⁰ In their efforts to occupy and manage the factories themselves, Gobetti argued that the workers represented a spontaneous struggle for autonomy and collective freedom that could act as a model for the revitalization of Italian politics and life. While the workers' movement was eventually defeated by the government, Gobetti remained inspired by their effort and by the Marxist and communist argument that it was the working class—the proletariat—that constituted a new revolutionary subject. This is because the bourgeoisie has lost their revolutionary character, concerning itself more with the maintenance of order and the preservation of privilege and power. For Gobetti, they ceased to be liberal or perform the liberal function.

258 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 73.

259 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 209–210.

“The Russian revolution is not just a socialist experiment. They are laying the groundwork for a new state there. Lenin and Trotsky are not just Bolsheviks; they are the men of action who have awakened a people and are busy re-creating its soul...The experiment in socialization has failed for now (and, we believe, forever) because it runs directly counter to the interests and the mentality of human beings. But even as evidence of this failure, the revolution has been useful and necessary...the Russian people have for certain begun to form a political consciousness in these years, and for that reason the soviets were necessary, even if they were not welcomed by the people at first, even if they will necessarily have to make way for other institutions better adapted to the manifestation of the popular will...the work of Lenin and Trotsky...is the negation of socialism and an affirmation and exaltation of liberalism.”

260 Antonio Gramsci was a fellow ex-student, the intellectual heart of a workers movement in Turin of 1919-1920 which led to factory occupations, a leader in the Italian Communist Party, as well as the editor of the radical journal *L'Ordine Nuovo*.

Italian political life under their direction had become politically stagnant, cultivating conditions ripe for Fascism, which was able to harness the frustrations of those who felt alienated from political life. However, Gobetti understood that the complete overthrow of the bourgeoisie as the socialists contended would not work. What was necessary was a means by which liberalism—so intimately connected with the bourgeoisie, but simultaneously so spectacularly failed by them—could be made revolutionary again. This is because those principles and values which had come to define the great achievements of modernity, were principles and values *of the bourgeoisie*, but they needed to be extended beyond the bourgeoisie themselves. They needed to lose their class character and instead be carried forward through a new revolutionary subject, as one passed the baton in a relay race.²⁶¹ For Gobetti this new revolutionary subject was the proletariat. In this manner, Gobetti the liberal was brought nearer to the revolutionary left even though he was “explicitly non-socialist”.²⁶² This is where the political idea of spontaneity and organic unity becomes so vital. For Gobetti the revolution could only be maintained by not succumbing to an externally imposed authority—the new elite (insofar as there had to be one) had to emerge spontaneously and organically. If not, they would lack authenticity and fall into the same ideological traps. Revolution supplanting revolution, without progress. This is why Gobetti looked to the proletariat and especially the workers’

261 Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 483.

The use of this metaphor is my own, but it is key, because unlike the socialists and communists who saw also recognized in the proletariat a new revolutionary class, Gobetti did not see as the goal of the proletarian revolution the destruction and replacement of a class whose “existence is no longer compatible with society.” Gobetti recognized the revolutionary value of the bourgeoisie as producers and organizers of modernity, and saw only the need to strip them of the class character, but not their function. In this sense, the Gobetti wished to preserve the relay team in which the lead runner acts as the bearer of their organic unity, whereas Marx sees the lead runner as product of his conditions and as supplanting the ‘team’.

262 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 73.

councils, which “arises in correspondence with the real needs and the real aspirations of modern civilization, apart from its dogmatic postulates.”²⁶³ The workers councils represent something different from unions, which for Gobetti engaged in a collaborative politics not unlike Giolitti. The councils represented an exercise in free initiative and it was a “notable example of Laissez-faire” as the proletariat acting “vigorously bourgeois (as producers)” in their struggle and in their demands for control over the means of production.²⁶⁴ Unlike the unions which preserved class relations, the councils transcended them while preserving their functions. For Gobetti then, the workers' councils, though communist in origin, weren't sowing the seeds for a socialist revolution, but for a liberal revolution or rather a liberal renewal, returning liberalism to its revolutionary origins. Spontaneity was seen as essential if such a renewal was to be understood as an authentic and organic representation of the people. “Our precise task becomes the elaboration of the ideas of the new ruling class and the organization of every practical effort that will lead to that end.”²⁶⁵ But this new ‘ruling class’ or body of new intellectuals cannot be externally imposed as this would inevitably collapse into oligarchy, reflecting the immaturity of Italy, and return Italy to tyranny.²⁶⁶ This reliance upon a spontaneous and organic elite or ruling class represents a particular kind of problem for Gobetti, that does not go entirely resolved in his work, though the attention that he pays to Gramsci

²⁶³ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 99.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 100,91.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 120.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 231.

“Where a majority holds power with complete security, you have a veiled oligarchy and nothing else. The formation of a government majority through the electoral process is always the result of negotiations and ambiguities (the Gentiloni pact); blackmail is the tool systematically employed by the tyrant to make the ranks of the democratically enfranchised the slaves of his instincts.”

suggests how me might have addressed it.²⁶⁷ If Gobetti offers his readers any prescriptions it is the following: “A precise technical task awaits us: the preparation of free spirits capable of abandoning prejudice and joining with the popular initiative at the decisive moment.”²⁶⁸ What is needed is some program of education to “enlighten the necessary elements of the life of the future (industrialists, investors, entrepreneurs) and train them in this new freedom of vision.”²⁶⁹ Recognizing those liberal elements of modernity and returning them to their original revolutionary task. Is such a task possible? If so, how, do we prevent these newly educated elites from succumbing to the same historical temptations of power and privilege of the bourgeois elites? While Gobetti never describes such a program in any detail, he does offer a “guiding idea” to “bond us together politically in this action.” Let the myth of the revolution against the bourgeoisie [Marx] lead, through the dialectic of history [historicism and Vico], to an antibureaucratic revolution [Vico/Croce contra Descartes/Hegel].”²⁷⁰ In each case we have taken up Gobetti's fragmentary proposals in attempting to stitch together an understanding of Gobetti's revolutionary interpretation of liberalism. 'Liberal revolution' is a concept that turns on “the argument that liberalism was an emancipatory ethos immanent to popular struggles to extend freedom, rather than a doctrine of eternal, transcendental principles or a form of state.”²⁷¹ To be revolutionary, “liberalism had to be grasped as an active,

267 The problem of 'elites' and the need for a 'ruling class' has been a consistent challenge for democracies whose legitimacy rests on popular sovereignty. Consider, for instance, the American Revolution's reliance on an elite self-appointed ruling class, or Bolshevik Revolution's reliance upon a similarly self-appointed elite. The key was not establishing the need for a 'ruling class', which is all but self-evident, but rather how to establish the legitimacy of those elites. For Gobetti, so-called parliamentary institutions were not sufficient. It could only be achieved where the ruling class was understood as a spontaneous and organic 'product' of the class it represents.

268 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 185.

269 Ibid.

270 Ibid., 124.

271 Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 67.

combative theoretical outlook, one with political struggle as its fundamental principle, not consensus or compromise.”²⁷² For such a revolutionary project to succeed, a new and enlightened elite capable of self-education was necessary to guide it. From our “post-colonial” and “post-modern” perspectives this emphasis on elites cannot possibly be understood as liberal, and more to the point may even be perceived anti-liberal. However, Gobetti was not unaware of this criticism. It was precisely his shared concerns that lead to his interest in Gramsci's workers' councils as being uniquely up to the task of establishing an intellectual elite that it not imposed upon the masses, but rises up from the masses organically. Understood in this way, leadership evolves through the course of collective struggle, but as individuals, rather than as mass-men, and emerges like cream rising to the top. In this way, the elite leadership emerges from within society and on its own terms.

Having recognized the systemic threat of Fascism as rooted in a moral crisis the problem then became how to understand the motivations and the roots of this crisis. What elements of society are to blame for the ascent of Fascism? The leaders of industry and finance? The large landowners and other assorted supplicants to the ruling elite who seek to protect their power and privilege? For Gobetti all of these played their part to be sure, however, it was the political immaturity and the susceptible nature of the people in general who allow it to occur. It is a critique that shifts the emphasis away from Mussolini, and places it squarely on the Italian people themselves and, I would argue, of the potential that exists within the nature of peoples in general. It is *we (they) the people*,

²⁷² Ibid.

not any man, who represent the real problem. In his time, Gobetti's understanding of fascism was unique and pointed to the fascist movement as something considerably more than just a radical fringe movement. Instead Gobetti understood that it represented an ethical crisis. Consequently, fascism was destined to gain ground among a people in crisis, upon which it sustained itself. And it would endure until this ethical crisis was finally addressed.

Like Gobetti, Rosselli argues that confronting fascism is not a simple matter of combating class reaction. Fascism, they realized, was something far more complex than either traditional left politics or the conservative liberals had faced before. Gobetti argued that what was missing was the means to confront this new type of mentality that sprung from the moral crisis that had its roots in both Italian social and political development.²⁷³ As a problem rooted in Italy's social and political development Gobetti saw Fascism in Italy as “a sign of infancy”, that it had not yet produced the antibodies capable of resisting the fascist mentality that he believed existed in the rest of Europe.²⁷⁴ Having died a victim of fascism in 1926 and without the experience of having seen totalitarianism unfold across Europe and threaten the world, one cannot help but wonder if Gobetti would have come to think of this development as more than merely Italy's “autobiography” and a sign of its own infancy, but rather the autobiography of modernity itself. Gramsci, who survived to see Hitler's rise to the Chancellorship in Germany in

²⁷³ It is not controversial to maintain that we have not evolved past the political problem of preserving liberal democratic ideals in the face of anti-liberal and antidemocratic threats. However, perhaps the most controversial argument that is advanced in this dissertation is that this “moral crisis,” identified as wholly unique to the Italian experience, can in many ways be extrapolated to include aspects of both the Anticommunist struggle and perhaps even our contemporary context.

²⁷⁴ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 213.

1933 and the Moscow show trials of 1936 and 1938, would come to suggest as much with his ideas of hegemony and of hegemonic struggle. Later still, Havel, from under the lived experience of life under post-totalitarianism and the capitalist west, would confirm the diagnosis, declaring that all societies face the same task in resisting the “irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal, and inhuman power-the power of ideologies, systems, apparat, bureaucracy, artificial languages, and political slogans.”²⁷⁵

One of the most difficult aspects of politics to come to terms with is the idea that government, even under the best of circumstances, is rooted in collaboration. If Gobetti achieved nothing else, he has painfully exposed this wound, often plastered over, and proposed a means by which we may come to recognize and perhaps cauterize the wound. The key is the reformation of the democratic citizen. Gobetti's interpretation of liberalism was shared by a number of contemporary antifascists, among them Antonio Gramsci. They both elaborated a theory of emancipation and liberation that depended on political conflict or class antagonism. It is from the friction between classes that real change emerges. Gobetti and Gramsci saw change as coming at the hands of a committed elite dedicated to the task of cultivating in a fertile workers movement a new world. It was a revolutionary theory that relied on an intellectual elite whose role significantly deviated from that of Lenin's vanguard even as it paid homage to it. Gobetti was a “militant intellectual” and he viewed the intellectual classes as a kind of vanguard. And like Trotsky and Lenin their task would be the creation of 'new moral types' that would become the leading actors in a political and cultural revolution, but he cautioned

²⁷⁵ Havel, *Open Letters*, 267.

vigilance regarding such new intellectual leaders, demanding a policy of intransigence and active citizenship as an inoculation against decline. And he has little patience for those who would do otherwise, those he called the “apolitical ones”.

If you are in politics, you are a combatant. Either you pay court to the new bosses, or you are in opposition. Those in the middle are neither independent nor disinterested. The regime welcomes skeptics. All it asks of citizens is to surrender their dignity and their political rights: there is a man in Italy who is taking care of things, so let everyone else admire him and get on with their work, or have fun at the festivals, or hide themselves away in the library.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 129.

Chapter 3: Italian Anti-fascism: Antonio Gramsci's “Surprising” Marxism²⁷⁷

As we have seen, Piero Gobetti was a political thinker of great energy who developed a critique of fascism that was both critical of Marxism, as well as the parliamentary liberalism of Giolitti's government. Freedom, as Gobetti understood it, was not achievable through institutional mechanisms alone. Freedom could only be achieved through the lived experience of history and political life, and the state and apparatus of government—even the institutions of democracy such as parties and elections—are not guarantor of the political. Under the influence of dogmatic ideology, the state and its institutions, even liberal democratic institutions, can become the negation of politics and a barrier to liberty. Systems and formulas cannot create a moral or ethical state. For this reason, Gobetti understood politics as inherently pluralistic and therefore believed that it was not the proprietary task of any single historical class, but the persistent, open-ended struggle of conflicting social and historical forces that give rise to the ethical state. Neither the bourgeoisie nor the proletariat are revolutionary by virtue of their class character, but rather as historical outcomes. In this respect, human individuals become the makers of history and the founders of philosophical and political truth, which cannot exist prior to lived human experience. Antonio Gramsci—the Italian Marxist political theorist and politician—extends this theory of political action that we observe in Gobetti's work and the antifascist narrative generally, so much so that to Gobetti, Gramsci was “more than a [political] tactician or a combatant,” he was a prophet.²⁷⁸ However, while a prophet

²⁷⁷ Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 316; Antonio Gramsci and Carl Marzani, *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Cameron Associates, 1957).

²⁷⁸ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 22.

receives their wisdom from a divine source, the sources of Gramsci's wisdom can be traced elsewhere, namely the intellectual heritage of Italy itself. Gramsci was imprisoned in 1926 by Mussolini's fascist regime and is perhaps best known for his *Prison Notebooks*, written between 1929 and 1935.²⁷⁹ This period resulted in nearly 3,000 handwritten pages of notes and commentaries in addition to his pre-prison works, much of which he dedicated to working through the thought of his own Italian intellectual heritage. Gramsci's Marxism developed under the influence of Italian thinkers as diverse as Machiavelli, Vico, Benedetto Croce, and Antonio Labriola to name a few. In many ways this is perhaps the most exciting aspect of Gramsci's work and it is also for this reason that we can join Eric Hobsbawm when he says that Gramsci is “the most original thinker produced in the West since 1917” or at least one of its most gifted; pushing to develop a decidedly 'non-Marxist' Marxism that readily draws on the influence of revolutionary conceptions of liberalism and humanist historicism—where Marx and Engels themselves had avoided it.²⁸⁰ And it is an investigation of this heritage, particularly the influence of Vico and Croce on Gramsci as part of a wider elaboration of critical liberal democratic theory, that will be the focus of this chapter.

Born and raised in Sardinia, Gramsci had a heightened sensitivity to the tensions that existed between the various formal institutions that were set up as a result of Italian unification and the reality of regional social, economic, and class divisions, and the so-called problem of two Italys. This, he believed, contributed to the durability of capitalism

²⁷⁹ Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ix, xvii–xviii.

²⁸⁰ Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 316.

and the uneven development of socialism across nations. In the introduction to a slim volume of Gramsci's essays (one of the first in the English language), Italian-American Socialist Carl Marzani cites a lengthy passage written by Gramsci, we are told, in 1920, just before the Fascist take over of Italy. In this he describes Italy as resting at a crossroad of history in which Italy was faced with one of two alternatives:

...either the working class conquers political power...or an enormous reactionary victory of the propertied class will take place. No violence will be overlooked to subdue the industrial and agricultural workers and to subject them to servile labor: they will try to smash inexorably and irretrievably the organs of political struggle of the working class and they will seek to incorporate the organs of economic struggle, the unions and the cooperatives, in the machine of the bourgeois state.²⁸¹

The west and especially America, it was believed, had avoided such a crossroad in which social and economic divisions became so stark as to obscure authentic politics all together. In Gramsci's review of Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, though critical of its artistic merit, he recognized the novel as being important just the same. He believed that it represents "an increase in self-criticism, that a new American civilization is being born that is aware of its strengths and its weaknesses", which is to say that it was perhaps immune to the kind of degradation that Gramsci felt Europe was quickly succumbing to.²⁸² In his mind America had become critical and conscious of itself in a way that Old Europe was not. Marzani remained unconvinced of this prognosis, arguing in 1957 that this review was already some 25 years old (today nearly 80 years old) and that "in the last few years leading American writers have been shying away from critical appraisal of

281 Gramsci and Marzani, *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*, 12.

282 Antonio Gramsci and David Forgacs, *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 296.

American mores.”²⁸³ We should be fearful, it was argued, if such a trend were to continue. And should it, America might also come to find itself as such a crossroad.²⁸⁴ In publishing *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*, Carl Marzani encouraged us to learn from Gramsci's example. It is a lesson that begins with his very characterization of Gramsci as an “open Marxist”. Unlike those who have seen Gramsci as a precursor to post-Marxism, Marzani notes that Gramsci “is a Marxist in the great tradition of Marx himself, a thinker with an open mind, disciplined in the search for truth.”²⁸⁵ This idea of the “openness” of Gramsci's Marxism is key. It is an openness with regard to Marxism built on a foundation set by Benedetto Croce and echoed by other Italian Antifascists like Gobetti and Carlo Rosselli. In this manner the anti-Marxist Croce sat at the center of Gramsci's “surprising” and “open” Marxism, one that would find him praising “a certain strata of left-wing intellectuals” like Gobetti.²⁸⁶ In light of those critics that inextricably set Marx on the unavoidable trajectory to Lenin and Stalin, this “open-Marxism” looks increasingly like another liberalism. And it is one that would later find its way into the political theory of East European dissidents like Vaclav Havel's own surprising liberalism, though critical of the communist regimes under which they suffered, remained cautious of the western consumerist hegemony as well.

283 Gramsci and Marzani, *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*, 10.

284 Michael Suh, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, June 12, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

The *Pew Research Center for People & the Press* recently announced that according to their findings, Americans are more ideologically divided than ever before. Many of us, it would appear, no longer accept a “critical appraisal of American mores” and as such our politics are becoming increasingly polarized, revealing our own “problem of two Americas”, perhaps signaling our rapidly approaching Gramscian crossroad.

285 Gramsci and Marzani, *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*, 5.

286 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 48–51.

Since the late 1970s the social sciences have been broadly influenced—and at times dominated—by what can only be called Gramscianism, a political theory shaped by the refined concepts of *hegemony* and the *philosophy of praxis* that have contributed to Gramsci's widespread influence. However, he is often cast as the prototypical post-Marxist, however, Peter Thomas argues in his recent book *The Gramscian Moment*, that Gramsci is uniquely positioned to rescue a suddenly revived Marxism. However, this full-throated defense of 'Gramsci as Marxist standard-bearer' is also something of an overreach. Instead, with his emphasis on a lived or “open” Marxism, Gramsci follows the Italian philosophic tradition in which an authentic politics is understood in terms of a unity of philosophy and politics, but one that avoids the idealist/determinist traps of Hegel and Marx. These traps were most clearly identified by Benedetto Croce, and would later find their way into Gramsci's own political theory. This represents the truly unique evolution of a liberal political theory more sensitive to the social nature of historical and political development. Gramscianism is connected to a kind of overcoming of the Marxist system, in favor of “the real, undying Marxist thought, which continues the heritage of German and Italian idealism, but which, in Marx, was contaminated by positivist and naturalist incrustations.”²⁸⁷ A critique of the Marxist system also sat at the heart the well known “liberal socialist” Carlo Rosselli.²⁸⁸ Gramsci's approach to Marx was as something of a theoretical toolbox and draws in large part from Croce's earlier search for what was living and dead in Hegel's thought; setting aside what was no longer useful, while

287 Antonio Gramsci and Richard, Cox, Virginia Bellamy, *Antonio Gramsci: Pre-Prison Writings* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40.

288 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 7–16.

retaining its formidable strengths. Thus, Gramsci as “anti-Croce” is something of an echo of Croce's own “anti-Hegel”.²⁸⁹ Thomas criticizes those readings that look to Gramsci “as a forerunner of contemporary rhetorics of post-communism and post-Marxism” as instrumental, “rhizomatic,” and “over-determined.”²⁹⁰ However, while it is true that Gramsci remains committed to the Marxist ideal, it is clear that he is also somehow moving past Marx, while still recognizing his central role in the development of the modern consciousness in a way that “everyone is a bit of a Marxist, without knowing it.”²⁹¹ This is, in effect, our point of departure. Without question, the specter of Marx cannot be excised from Modernity, but we can disentangle ourselves from the “vulgar materialist” aspects of him.²⁹² In ‘The Revolution against *Capital*’ Gramsci makes it clear that the time for Marxism—at least a particular conception of Marxism—has passed as evidenced by the Bolshevik Revolution, which he saw as “a revolution against Karl Marx's *Capital*”.²⁹³ “Events”, he continues, “have overtaken ideology. Events have exploded the critical schemas whereby Russian history was meant to develop according to the canons of historical materialism...the canons of historical materialism are not as iron-clad as it might be thought, as it has been thought”.²⁹⁴ With that added emphasis on the receding relevance of historical materialism Gramsci resigns to the past any ‘Marxism’ which would subject man to “categorical imperatives and absolute, unchallengeable norms, lying outside the categories of time and space”.²⁹⁵ Gobetti, the

289 Gramsci's “anti-Croce” will be taken up further later in this chapter.

290 Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, Historical Materialism Book Series, v. 24 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009), 46.

291 Gramsci and Bellamy, *Antonio Gramsci*, 54.

292 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 378.

293 Gramsci and Bellamy, *Antonio Gramsci*, 39.

294 Ibid., 39–40.

295 Ibid., 54.

liberal activist, similarly concluded that “the Marxist experiment in Russia has undoubtedly failed.”²⁹⁶ Instead, it was a triumph of liberty and Lenin and Trotsky weren't just building a new Marxist state, more importantly they “have awakened a people” and were “busy re-creating its soul.”²⁹⁷ This shift in perspective and emphasis saw the real success of the revolution in it having “awakened a people” and was “busy re-creating its soul”.²⁹⁸ Gramsci too noted that “the revolution is not simply a matter of power – it must be a revolution in people's behavior, a moral revolution.”²⁹⁹ This idea of character formation and of 'soul making' can be seen as drawn from the deep cultural well of Giambattista Vico.³⁰⁰ Gobetti instead saw in the revolution “the negation of socialism and an affirmation and exaltation of liberalism”.³⁰¹ He saw in the Russian Revolution the defeat of the 'tsarist mentality' and the existence of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia led Gobetti and Gramsci to a similar conclusion; that Marx—particularly the Marx of *Capital*; of economism and historical materialism—had been refuted in theory and increasingly so in practice. Gramsci rejected the doctrinaire Marxist system as had Gobetti and Carlo Rosselli. Rosselli would later conclude that “Marx the socialist... belongs to a phase [of development] that was certainly essential but that is now outmoded in the history of the socialist movement.”³⁰² This rejection of the materialist conception of

296 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 209.

297 Ibid.

298 Ibid.

299 Gramsci and Bellamy, *Antonio Gramsci*, 31.

300 Giambattista Vico was an eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher best known as the author of *Scienza Nuova* (*The New Science*, 1725). Vico is one of the key cultural figures in the shaping of modern Italian intellectual identity, especially through his influence on the idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce. He has thus contributed to what became the uniquely Italian perspective of such figures of the antifascist movement as Benedetto Croce, Antonio Gramsci, Piero Gobetti and Carlo Rosselli, to name just a few.

301 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 210.

302 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 74.

history in combination with a commitment to the socialist thought that underlies Marxism, without being “Marxist”, is central to realizing a particular theory of political action that sees the 'crisis of fascism' and the 'crisis of communism' as well as the 'crisis of capitalism' as cut from a similar cloth and as a fundamentally moral or ethical crisis. It is one that recognizes at its core the need to negate an ideological system that has become ossified socially and politically, and has created the conditions of a servile mentality.

...if the Bolsheviks renounce certain of Marx's assertions *in Capital*, that does not mean that they renounce the deeper message which is its lifeblood. All that it means is that they are not "Marxists", they have not used the works of the Master to compile a rigid doctrine, of dogmatic and unquestionable claims. They are living out Marxist thought—the real, underlying Marxist thought, which continues the heritage of German and Italian idealism, but which, in Marx, was contaminated by positivist and naturalist encrustations.³⁰³

This idea of living out Marxist thought—instead of being subjected to a doctrine in its name and its immutable laws—is central to realizing a politics of action that is centered on a respect for the autonomous individual.³⁰⁴ Gramsci conceived of the individual as fully realized within civil society and as the determinate component of history, and therefore human life, society and government. It is a perspective that has its roots in an Italian intellectual experience that is decidedly Vician.

303 Gramsci and Bellamy, *Antonio Gramsci*, 40.

304 The positivist turn that Marx takes as he moves from the Marx of the 'Philosophic Manuscripts' and the 'Manifesto' to *Capital* effectively places Marx in the same terrain of Bentham and Spencer, whereby man is no more spontaneous or autonomous, but subject to the 'natural laws' of the Capitalist free-market.

“New Science”, New *Marxism*?

Vico is best known for his formulation of a 'new science' in reaction to Descartes' Cartesian rationalism and its method. Vico called into question the Cartesian claims that knowledge and truth could only be found through a process of observation and verification, particularly in the realm of humanistic fields. He questioned what had become the dominant belief that Cartesian 'science' was the only path to truth. He believed that we can only really know as true, particularly where human thought and action is concerned, that which we have created. This, in contradistinction to Descartes' belief that we might develop and arrive at distinct truths independent of a highly contingent human nature and history. Vico embraced the idea that truth is plural and varies between perspectives and that a rational and geometric understanding of the human world is necessarily a distortion that contributes to an imperialist perspective. This understanding of humanity as messy, unpredictable, and resistant to empirical thinking has resonated throughout the post-modern world, but in his time Vico was largely without an audience save in his native Italy.

While Vico recognized the successes of Cartesian positivism in the natural sciences he remained critical of its potential when applied to human life. For Vico, human life was subject to the contingency of individual and social experience and, therefore, could not be the subject of Cartesian laws. This understanding of the historical development of human

life revealed a tension between Cartesian science and human agency. It is true that Cartesian science had contributed to a scientific revolution that allowed man to rationally understand the world in ways that were never before possible; however, it also led to a world guided entirely by mechanical laws of nature under the effects of which the individual was left largely powerless to influence his existence. Just as the laws of physics guide the motion of the stars, so too the laws of nature guide the behavior and movements of human life. Vico turned this view on its head presenting an understanding of human life and history as rooted in the idea that real knowledge cannot come from 'objective' observation alone, but only through the study of that which we made ourselves. Therefore, we can gain knowledge of human life not through abstractly observing it, dissecting it, and divining from that observation the transcendental laws that underlie it, but rather through the study of the individuals and the culture that inhabits that society. The principle that underlies Vico's thought is the idea that “verum [the true] and factum [what is made] are interchangeable”, that is, “the criterion and rule of the true is to have made it”.³⁰⁵ Quinton Hoare summarizes in a footnote to Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* that for Vico “doing is a means of knowing” and “that only the object of human action could be truly known”.³⁰⁶ Italian intellectuals and activists like Gramsci incorporated this philosophy of history into their political thought, accepting as fundamental the capacity of human beings for self-knowledge and the role of self-knowledge in making their world, not abstract economic laws. This led Italian thinkers—and Gramsci in particular—to develop political theories that centered on the critical role

³⁰⁵ Vico, *Vico*, 51,55.

³⁰⁶ Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 364.

of agency and individual action—rather than historical imperative—in the revolution. That is to say people are not fated, at such, to any particular destiny be it fascist, communist, or capitalist.³⁰⁷ Any outcome was only possible so far as it was made possible through the action or inaction of individuals and society.

Though wholly committed to “*living out* Marxist thought”, socialist historian Eric Hobsbawm described Gramsci as something of a “surprising Marxist”.³⁰⁸ Surprising, perhaps, because his Marxism owes more to his liberal Italian heritage and the unique Italian experience than to any commitment to a doctrinaire Marxism tied to “vulgar materialism”.³⁰⁹ This is particularly evidenced by Gramsci's extensive commitment to the study of the works of Benedetto Croce, in part owed to the restrictions of censorship, but also owing to his recognition of Croce's own critique of Marx and the need to resuscitate Marxism “on Croce's own grounds”.³¹⁰ The last chapter also took up a discussion of Croce's struggle with Hegelian “dualism” as identified by Jacobitti. This was a critique that drew from a deep Vician philosophical well that offered a unique dialectical approach to understanding knowledge and history. Gramsci similarly draws on Croce's “speculative idealism” in offering his own critique of “Marxism as a closed system of unalterable scientific laws and immutable truths.”³¹¹ Gramscian Marxism as a

307 Popular philosopher and culture critic Slavoj Žižek alluded to this idea in his speech to occupy protestors in Zuccotti Park during the Occupy Wall Street movement in October 2011: “It is easy to imagine the end of the world...but you cannot imagine the end of capitalism.” Something has compelled us to accept the absolute reality of capitalism when we don't even accept the absolute reality of life—ideology.

308 Gramsci and Bellamy, *Antonio Gramsci*, 40; Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 316.

309 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 406–407.

310 Gramsci and Marzani, *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*, 13.

311 Beverly L. Kahn, “Antonio Gramsci’s Reformulation of Benedetto Croce’s Speculative Idealism,”

reformulation of Crocean philosophy reads in contrast to Gramsci understood in terms of an “anti-Croce” perspective. While Gramsci himself does refer to his work—especially that of the *Prison Notebooks*—as something of an “anti-Croce”, it was fundamentally a project of reworking of Croce's historicism.

It is particularly worth re-examining and criticising all historicist theories of a speculative character. A new Anti-Duhring could be written, which from this point of view would be an "Anti-Croce"..."³¹²

Gramsci was convinced that Marxism was failing to achieve its promises because it was relying too heavily on a deterministic materialism in part owed to the kind of Cartesian scientific thinking just described, but also to Hegel's absolute idealism and that Hegel's transcendent and positivistic tendencies have weighed down and disoriented Marxism. Such thinking had led politics and the revolution astray; instead, what was needed was to make politics more 'concrete'. Gramsci achieves this by substituting Vico's own unique philosophy—via Croce's critique—for the Hegelian variant, thereby resuscitating Marxism and the Marxist promise, Marx is “preserved” as its orientation is reversed. While Marx had already claimed to “stand Hegel on his head”, Gramsci in agreement with Marx, merely trusted that he keep his word. The critical turn here is to reinsert human autonomy and creative agency into Marxism, something that Marx himself claimed to achieve with his dialectical materialism. Materialism, reduced to economic laws fell back into the same Hegelian trap. This is a position more fully analyzed by Carlo Rosselli in his book *Liberal Socialism*.³¹³ Vico's critique of the boundaries of

Idealistic Studies 15 (January 1985): 18.
312 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 371.
313 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*.

Cartesianism, and the need for a “new science” would make its way into Gramsci who similarly held that there is no “truth” or “fact” of human life that exists external or prior to, humanity itself. As such, human life is historic in that it is a human creation. This contributes significantly to the development of both Gramsci's “surprising” revival of the *philosophy of praxis*—an understanding of the unity of thought and action that is far more Crocean and liberal—and the idea of *hegemony*, not as the realization of an ideal (Leninist) proletarian State, but rather as contested ideological terrain that remains an open-ended and unresolved project.

How it is that Gramsci can be both Vician/Crocean, as I argue, as well as an *anti-Croce* as Gramsci himself claims?³¹⁴ Naturally this requires some clarification especially if this *anti-Croceanism* is to be understood as part of a wider effort to re-energize Marxism. Much like the “antipolitics” that would come to be the hallmark of Havel and the East European dissident movement decades later, it is a critique that both exposes the limitations of a narrowly defined politics, as well as makes use of the concept's' most revolutionary tendencies. For Havel, anti-political politics was understood as politics “as service to the truth”.³¹⁵ In this manner Havel's antipolitics is not a rejection of politics as such, but a movement beyond politics “as the technology of power and manipulation”.³¹⁶ Gramsci's anti-Croceanism strikes a similar tone. Maurice Finocchiaro argues that in all of Gramsci's critiques of Croce's analysis of Marx, he fails to recognize his own basic

314 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 371; Evan Watkins, “Gramsci's Anti-Croce,” *Boundary 2* 14, no. 3 (April 1, 1986): 121–135, doi:10.2307/303237.

315 Havel, *Open Letters*, 269.

316 Ibid.

dependency on Croce himself. “Gramsci, although aware that he is specifically indebted to Croce, does not seem to be aware of his methodological dependence, this is another reason for elaborating the critical dimension of Croce's work.”³¹⁷ Despite Gramsci's claims to the contrary, he fails to transcend Croce's method. He has “the self-image and pretension of an anti-Croce, accompanied by very real Crocean commitments.”³¹⁸ In this manner Gramsci believes that he can re-imagine Marxism by re-imagining Croce. His anti-Croceanism is a movement beyond Croce while still retaining elements of his philosophy. Gramsci's relationship to Croce is clarified when he noted:

In February 1917 ... I wrote that just as Hegelianism had been the premise of the philosophy of praxis [Marxism] in the nineteenth century, and one of the origins of contemporary civilization, so the Crocean philosophy could be the premise of a revival of the philosophy of praxis in our time, for our generation.³¹⁹

This revival brought Gramsci far closer to the liberal individualist perspective than many in the radical left are willing to concede, yet his relationship with Gobetti remains our clearest reminder. Vico and Croce emerge as key bricks in the foundation upon which Gramsci built his famous interpretation of the concept of *hegemony* as pervasive and constructive, influencing the development of individual and cultural personality and as a process that is never finally established, but always contested and open. It is this contest that represents the critical terrain for political activity. What were the contours of Gramsci's theory that would form the foundations of this conceptual understanding of human life as historic and intimately tied to autonomy and dignity? Here we talk about

317 Finocchiaro, *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought*, 234.

318 Ibid., 239.

319 Marcus E Green, *Rethinking Gramsci* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon [England]; New York: Routledge, 2011), 219.

the related concepts of 'praxis' and of 'hegemony' and the recognition of the State as 'hegemonic' insofar that its power rests in its ability to maintain the balance between the violent use of coercive power and a 'manufactured' consent derived from the influence of hegemony. The concept of hegemony referred to a deep combination of the cultural and political power of one class over others. It was something more than merely the coalition or alliance of if separate interests, but the real assimilation, through ideological domination, of ideas and interests of the power elites and it compelled belief and especially obedience. The concept of hegemony itself is borrowed from Lenin who first used it to theorize the necessary class alliance lead by the revolutionary vanguard in establishing the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.³²⁰ For Lenin, the idea of hegemony helped to theorize the narrow process by which an elite vanguard tempered the steel of the masses, proletariat and peasant alike.³²¹ That Giolitti forged alliances in a similar manner did not escape Gramsci's attention or that of the rest of the antifascists. However, Gramsci would develop the concept further pushing it well beyond that of Lenin's coercive tactical interpretation, instead developing the concept into a comprehensive social and political theory that would help provide an answer to that persistent critique of Marxism that asks why it is that the communist revolutions predicted so boldly by Marx never quite unfolded as he had predicted. The Gramscian concept of 'hegemony' offered an explanation for the particular challenges posed by advanced capitalism and bourgeois hegemony and made it clear that traditional Marxism severely underestimated the ability of the bourgeois state to defend itself and the powerful role that ideology plays in that

320 Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *Lenin Collected Works, Vol. 17* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 54–59.

321 Borrowed from the title of Nikolai Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, published serially from 1932-1934.

defense. In a recent book by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, he asks why it is, despite the mounting evidence of gross social and economic inequality and our near universal condemnation of it, we continue to tolerate the abuses of the capitalist system.³²² After all, our participation is not compelled at the barrel of a gun or point of a bayonet. The answer has much to do with the ideological resources available to the dominant hegemonic order. The focus would be on what military commanders today refer to as “winning hearts and minds”, without which any revolutionary change in regime cannot be made stable. “To fix one's mind on the military model is the mark of a fool... only politics creates the possibility for manoeuvre and movement.”³²³ This represents a dramatic shift in the revolutionary emphasis on strategies incorporating a rapid and overwhelming “war of manoeuvre and movement” to that of a “passive revolution/war of position” (political action) by which the supporting superstructure—the institutions, culture, and civil society—might be transformed piece by piece.³²⁴ Gobetti echoes this when he argues for a reorientation of politics: “as we tear down a world of prejudices and shortcomings... Let us replace the last remains of revealed truth with the truth won day by day through the labor of all, and generic abstractions with patient, open-minded scrutiny of the little problems and the big ones as they arise. Only in this finding of solutions and making them systematic are we really doing politics.”³²⁵ Carlo Rosselli would follow, cautioning against a politics that leans too heavily on “the imposition of view by an enlightened minority,” in favor of “people coming around to a belief...out of a *long sequence of*

322 Zygmunt Bauman, *Does the Richness of the Few Benefit Us All?* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

323 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 232.

324 Ibid., 106–114, 238–239.

325 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 77.

positive experiences.”³²⁶ Lived historical experience, the “marginal” action of individuals, and the influence of culture and civil society all became central to the revolutionary process. In this manner, Gramsci and the antifascists would prefigure the anticommunist dissident struggles a generation later. Like Gramsci they would promote a “passive revolution” focusing on a different kind of war to be fought on the terrain of ideology, self-examination, and the cultivation of 'civil society', rather than the centralized revolution preferred by old Marxists.

Critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political "hegemonies" and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one's own conception of reality. Consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one. Thus the unity of theory and practice is not just a matter of mechanical fact, but a part of the historical process, whose elementary and primitive phase is to be found in the sense of being "different" and "apart", in an instinctive feeling of independence, and which progresses to the level of real possession of a single and coherent conception of the world. This is why it must be stressed that the political development of the concept of hegemony represents a great philosophical advance as well as a politico-practical one. For it necessarily supposes an intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of reality that has gone beyond common sense and has become, if only within narrow limits, a critical conception.³²⁷

The problem that was basic to Gramsci and a primary concern of his fellow antifascists, as well as Havel and the East-European dissidents, was how to get a 'subaltern class' to 'come to know itself' in Rosselli's terms and how to position itself to develop and rise “to the phase of ethical-political hegemony in civil society, and of domination in the State.”³²⁸

That is, how is it that the the proletariat are to become conscious of itself and “of its

326 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 101 [emphasis my own].

327 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 333.

328 Ibid., 160.

strength, its possibilities, of how it is to develop” to such an extent that they are able to seize State power for themselves?³²⁹ This becomes a very critical question as it represents a crossroads of sorts in which the 'antipolitical' position held by significant segments of the dissident movement argued against the formal seizure of state power, fearing its corrupting influence. Hungarian writer and activist George Konrad addressed this concern in his 1984 volume *Antipolitics* when he asks: “Is there, can there be, a political philosophy—a set of proposals for winning and holding power—that renounces a priori any physical guarantees of power?”³³⁰ The focus on internal emancipation and the force of moral resistance displays a reticence shared by those who actively resist domination by the state since Socrates, to take up the reins of power themselves, fearful of its corrupting influence. Gramsci is no less concerned about the infectious potential of power, which is why he is so concerned with the role of intellectuals in society and revolution, particularly the need for them to emerge as a spontaneous and organic leaders. “A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise "leadership" before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power) ; it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to "lead" as well.”³³¹ This expression of the dialectical relationship between a subaltern social group and its subsequent exercise of power through the transitional function of 'leadership' suggests that Gramsci has a far more dynamic understanding of leadership than that of a Giolittian styled politician, general, or bureaucratic apparatchik. It is intimately bound with his understanding of the

329 Ibid., 159.

330 Konrad, *Antipolitics*, 92.

331 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 57–58.

role 'intellectuals' must play in achieving class, hegemonic and subsequently State power.

The Struggle For Organic Unity In Gramsci & Gobetti

Gramsci saw in Gobetti, a liberal with proletariat sympathies, the embodiment of the new conception of liberalism captured in his “liberal revolutionary” position. A position that emerged in reaction to the historical climate of Italy and the rise of fascism. While many within the party argued to fight against the influence of bourgeois liberal intellectuals like Gobetti, Gramsci argued that “Gobetti served us as a link,”³³² capable of modifying the old mental orientations and helping to establish a new “inclusive national project.”³³³ As we have seen this new inclusive national project, one that employed a “system of class alliances” was central to Gramsci's revolutionary strategy.³³⁴ “Why ought we to have fought against the “Liberal Revolution” movement? Perhaps because it was not composed of pure Communists.”³³⁵ This was a position that Gramsci, in light of his hegemony thesis, could not defend. The concept of hegemony reflects an understanding of the revolutionary process in which a diversity of social, political, and cultural demands are woven into a framework of beliefs and values by intellectuals and 'the party'. However, for Gramsci and liberals like Gobetti, this cannot be a top-down effort a la Lenin. It must be organic in that it must emerge from within the new revolutionary class (as identified by Gobetti, Rosselli, and Gramsci), the proletariat or the workers. It is the role of intellectuals to bring coherence to *already known* experiential knowledge.

332 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 50.

333 Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution*, 113.

334 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 30.

335 Ibid., 50.

My study on intellectuals is a vast project...Moreover, I extend the notion of intellectual considerably, and do not limit myself to the habitual meaning, which refers only to great intellectuals. This study also leads to certain determinations of the concept of State, which is usually understood as political society (or dictatorship; or coercive apparatus to bring the mass of the people into conformity with the specific type of production and the specific economy at a given moment) and not as an equilibrium between political society and civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the entire national society exercised through the so-called private organizations, like the Church, the trade unions, the schools, etc.); it is precisely in civil society that intellectuals operate especially (Benedetto Croce, for example, is a kind of lay pope and an extremely efficient instrument of hegemony even if at times he may find himself in disagreement with one government or another, etc.).³³⁶

Gobetti believed in a 'democratic revolution' that was comprised of an alliance between the workers, peasants, and intellectuals. This is a message shared by Gramsci as well, who pressed revolutionaries to infuse their political activity with a sense of spiritual renewal, rejecting positivism and simple political formulas that remove individual agency from the equation. Genuine moral, political, and cultural change is dependent upon the preservation of this agency. Gramsci's understanding of politics and political action and especially his re-conceptualization of hegemony and the radical potential of intellectuals clarifies the otherwise unexpected relationship he has with the liberal Piero Gobetti, upon whom he represented a formidable influence, contributing heavily to the development of Gobetti's understanding of radical politics. It was Gramsci that motivated Gobetti to transform his liberal theory into a revolutionary project, namely revolutionary liberalism. Liberalism understood first and foremost as ethical, emancipatory and revolutionary. Gramsci also gave shape to the subjects of this revolutionary liberalism in the proletariat, whom Gobetti came to see as central to the development of a new political order. For

³³⁶ Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 56.

Gobetti, the proletariat represented the new liberal base for political change as their revolution was not to be created on the basis of some external influence or design, but created organically from within. He saw in them the roots of the new ruling class that was to revitalize and replenish the stores of liberty in Italy.

It was Gobetti's exposure to the factory council movement through Gramsci that inspired Gobetti in this direction. At their core the factory councils were understood as an organizational means of asserting worker control over the means of production, and Gramsci was their most prominent advocate and theorist. The attraction of these workers councils existed in their capacity to facilitate the integration of the various economic and political aspects of the workers' daily lives and to organize them democratically in a way they unable to do before. To this extent, distinctions between public life (factory life) and private life (life outside the factory) were broken down, allowing workers to organize and manage production on the basis of collective interest. The construction of socialism was significant—and particularly the role of production in society—not merely because it was a necessary step on the path to a classless society, but that it was precisely control of the means of production (as demonstrated in the Workers Movement in Turin) that created the proper level of political consciousness under capitalism. It was the unique experience of the workers councils that provided the proper education necessary to modify the behavior and form the habits of those who fell under the considerable sway of capitalist hegemony. Therefore, the basis of socialism for Gramsci is not a process rooted in economics as such—the planned economy and collective ownership of the means of

production advanced by Marxism-Leninism—but the political and social education that it affords. For Gobetti, this represented genuine revolutionary political activity in that it actively pushed the workers, the proletariat, in the direction of new political forms; furthermore, it was generated not through externally driven party, which would be contrary to the autonomous liberal ideal, but was a product of self-creation by the workers.

Integral to the success of a Gobettian liberal revolution or a Gramscian passive revolution was a “cross-class strategy” that Gobetti observed in Gramsci's councils and that we see emphasized in his analysis of what came to be known in Italy at the time as “the southern question”. In his essay of the same name Gramsci offers a glimpse of many of the fundamental issues that were to occupy his thought for years to come; the means by which the industrial proletariat and peasants can be brought together in common opposition to capitalism and fascism. For Gramsci, the 'southern question' represented the key challenge standing in the way of a genuine socialist revolution in Italy, and spoke to the problem of two Italys.³³⁷ While representative of much larger historical divisions, the problem of two Italy's was drawn in sharp relief with the “unification” of Italy at the end of the Risorgimento. Quite simply, this so-called unification did not reflect the reality of the entirely fragmented nature of Italy at that time—socially, culturally and economically. And this could not have been more clearly articulated than through the stark division of Italy into an industrial north and an agrarian south. Since the Italian Republic was largely

³³⁷ The problem of two Italys represents an excellent concise treatment of the powerful role that hegemony plays in obscuring power. Gramsci analyzes what he believes are the unique historical features of Italian life that have contributed to uneven development within Italy.

a product of the north, and particularly that northern industrial city of Turin characterized by the Fiat Plant, it drew attention to the tension that existed between what Richard Bellamy called a 'legal' Italy and a 'real' Italy. Gramsci believed that this tension represented the key obstacle to the socialist efforts to build class alliances. It is through his analysis of the southern question that Gramsci sketches out his understanding of the contours of power that lie behind these divisions and that maintain bourgeois capitalism.

To illustrate this point Gramsci engages with one of the dominant social and political issues of his day—one that persists even in today's Italy—that of the great division of between the industrial north of Italy and the agrarian south. These divisions have been recognized in Italy as perhaps beginning with the different political roots of the regions, namely the long republican tradition that was prevalent in the north versus the status of the south under the Kingdoms of Naples and the Two Sicilies, who were variously under the imperial influence of the French and Spanish. However, this division was made starkly clear in the time following Italian unification and especially during the rapid industrialization of the north following World War I. This industrialization process was limited largely to the north, and particularly the great industrial city of Turin. For most of Italy, and particularly in the south, there was little change and life remained heavily rural, agrarian, and decidedly “servile” in its mentality. This is a term with which Gobetti and later Rosselli both refer to the Italian masses. It was only owing to the workers' movement, a spontaneous movement in the Turin, that, in the words of Gobetti, they

unleashed their “free, revolutionary wills”.³³⁸

For Gramsci, the bourgeoisie of the industrial north was not only subjugating Italy's industrial proletariat, but the peasants of the south as well. “The bourgeoisie of the North has subjected southern Italy and the Islands and reduced them to the status of exploited colonies.”³³⁹ Like Gobetti and Rosselli, Gramsci saw in the workers' movement in Turin the only viable solution to this problem. Only the industrial proletariat were seen as capable of providing leadership in the name of “the general revolutionary action of the two allied classes.”³⁴⁰ This was essential because it would not be possible to sustain a revolution without a workers majority, this much was known to Marx as well. Therefore, it was the job of the Italian communists to build a “political alliance between the workers of the North and the peasants of the South to overthrow the state power of the bourgeoisie.”³⁴¹ For Gramsci, Lenin represented the “most recent great theoretician” of the philosophy of praxis, moving away from economism and toward a theory of action.³⁴² Leninist revolutionary theory argues that the industrial proletariat—led by a vanguard party—was to lead the masses to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Gramsci expected the proletariat to play a similarly revolutionary role; however, where he differs from Lenin is in the means by which this vanguard led. For Lenin the role of the vanguard was to educate the workers and peasants from outside; however, this was an entirely different

338 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 126.

339 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 28.

340 Ibid., 30.

341 Ibid., 29.

342 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 240, 158.

understanding of education than that which Gramsci advocated. For Gramsci it was important that this educative process was not in itself manipulative. This is not to say that Gramsci rejected the old Marxist-Leninist goal of building a revolution through the achievement of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but rather that the success of such a revolution relied heavily on a recognition of the meaningful historically produced cultural and regional particularities. He advocated a contingent understanding of the 'truth' of Marxism such that it was only 'true' insofar as it constituted the best expression of its historical context. Marxism without determinism. In this sense, Gramsci did not seek to transcend Marxism so much as he sought to extend Marxism, pushing it into areas on the periphery of the advanced capitalist state, making it more adaptive. Richard Bellamy argued in favor of this historicist perspective in 1994, shortly after the collapse of Communism in the east and the subsequent loss of the 'allure' of Euro-communism. "There was always a certain incongruity about the fact that a certain champion of a revised Marxism suited to the advanced economies and political systems of the West came from a peripheral region of one of the West's least industrialized nations and most fragile liberal democracies."³⁴³ Bellamy argued, and I agree, that the great benefit of reading Gramsci's early works—such as the *Southern Question*—is that "the frame of reference of his ideas are harder to avoid."³⁴⁴ Gramsci was not content to speak generally of "the revolution", but rather of the how the revolution must manifest itself in the particular context of Italy. There was no general formula, history and context mattered. He was not content to speak of the agrarian question in general, or of combined and

³⁴³ Gramsci and Bellamy, *Antonio Gramsci*, x.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

uneven development in general—it was a problem of the Italian national political context. Thus, Gramsci's answers to this question focused on national specificity, and offered a way of theorizing such specificity in the context of hegemonic struggle. And his response was, as much as the problem itself, a product of Italian context.

Where earlier socialist movements were content to focus on the industrial proletariat, or the southern peasants alone, it was Gramsci who first theorized the necessity of their solidarity. It required Gramsci to completely rethink—as has the other 'reformists' and activists like Gobetti and particularly Rosselli—the relationship of Marx and all of the so-called subaltern classes. Gramsci argued that it was not the industrial proletariat alone that ought to be enlisted in the struggle, but the peasants as well who had shared interest with the workers in dismantling what Gramsci perceived as parasitic system of bourgeois banks and industry. And it was the task of the workers to guide them in this effort. This was outlined in the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo*, in January 1920:

In imposing workers' control over industry, the proletariat will direct industry towards the production of agricultural machinery for the peasants, of textiles and shoes for the peasants, and of electrical energy for the peasants; it will prevent industry and the banks carrying out any further exploitation of the peasants and chaining them like slaves to their strongboxes. In breaking up the autocracy in the factories, destroying the oppressive apparatus of the capitalist State, and installing the workers' State, which will subject capitalists to the laws of useful work, the workers will break all the chains which bind the peasant to poverty and despair; in installing the workers' dictatorship, having in its hands industry and the banks, the proletariat will direct the enormous power of state organization towards helping the peasants in the struggle against the landowners, against nature and against poverty; it will give credit to the peasants, institute co-operatives, guarantee personal security and property against plunderers, and carry out public expenditure for development and irrigation. It will do all of this

because it is in its own interest to direct industrial production towards the useful aim of peace and brotherhood between town and country, between North and South.³⁴⁵

In presenting an argument favoring the creation of “a system of class alliances”—one that is capable of mobilizing “the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State”—Gramsci is presenting an argument about hegemony and more particularly an argument for developing a “hegemony of the proletariat.”³⁴⁶ But what is it exactly that Gramsci means by hegemony? Owing in part to his place in the unique cultural environment of Italy, Gramsci understood in a way that was entirely novel to the communist movement at the time, that power is not maintained through the strict domination of one group by another group through the use of violence and political and economic coercion alone. The existing bourgeois hegemony relied on the manufacture of “consent” in the form of a “common culture” maintained by the coercive power of dominant economic and political power of a particular class. Gramsci maintained that it is through the effective use of ideological weapons and the power inherent to a hegemonic culture that power is quite often maintained through a good deal of ‘consent’ on the part of the oppressed. That is, it is often the oppressed who are the greatest defenders of the status quo. However, consent in this sense is highly contingent and relies heavily on careful cultivation and maintenance through the constant manipulation and tuning of the relationship between those who govern and the governed. In western democracies, whole industries are built on this task.³⁴⁷

345 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 29.

346 Ibid., 30.

347 Jeffrey A. Winters, *Oligarchy* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 21.

One such example is the wealth defense industry as outlined by Jeffrey Winters in his recent book *Oligarchy*. “Ideological dominance thus plays an important role for oligarchs in defending their

In this case the class in question is that of the bourgeoisie. This power was supplemented by the support of the masses who—to varying extents—reinforce bourgeois hegemony through their adoption and support of, among other things, the bourgeois narrative. The fundamental difference between the hegemony of the proletariat and that of the bourgeoisie is that a proletarian hegemony, as conceived by Gramsci, is necessarily one that is spontaneous and organic to the masses, and is therefore absent the coercive influence present in ideological narrative of bourgeois hegemony, which is fundamentally maintained through manufactured consent. One of the concerns expressed by Gramsci—as well as the other Italian antifascists—is that the old determinist Marxist system rested on similar footing and so was also often relied on the use of physical violence. During the early period of capitalism it appeared clear that the use of violence might alone be responsible for bourgeois domination. However, Gramsci prefigures “post-Marxist” analysis and demonstrates through his analysis of hegemony and the arrival of advanced capitalism, and that domination is not achieved through physical violence alone. It is secured through a more complex inter-relationship of cultural, economic and political forces. Gramsci saw the embodiment of this complex structure in fascism, particularly in fascism's ability to adapt itself and to incorporate disparate ideologies into itself. Gramsci realized that it was not enough for a proletariat vanguard party to lead the masses. Havel would identify the same mechanism under the communist “post-totalitarianism”. What was necessary to combat this was for the revolutionary party to adopt an inclusive

material dominance,” says Winters, “there should be no illusions. All such theories, ideologies, and norms serving to secure property claims...are erected ultimately on coercive capacities.”

national strategy of solidarity in the effort to unite northern workers and southern farmers against fascism and capitalism.

Gramsci articulates the challenges faced in such ideological struggle when he describes the interaction between a Sardinian peasant and soldier sent to Turin as part of a regiment called to put down a workers' strike. For the Sardinian, all the strikers are, to him, members of the 'gentry' earning wages that far exceed that of the poor 'country-folk' in Sardinia. Ideology is therefore embedded in the unconscious minds of the masses through the effective use of propaganda and the manipulation of culture, and in the process they begin to incorporate the values and interests of those who are in a position of authority. In this manner, authority is maintained by the ruling power remaining sufficiently flexible; able to adapt to changing conditions and modify its tactics. The politics of resistance must, therefore, remain similarly adaptive if it is to be successful. Gobetti recognized this as a problem as well, pointing out that Fascism was successful in part because of its ability to improvise and adapt to fit circumstances.³⁴⁸ It was this quality that made bourgeois capitalism such a formidable enemy. Through the state, bourgeois capitalism was able to maintain its control by influencing and shaping the mentality of the masses through a highly efficient use of propaganda that is constantly shifting over the uneven terrain of political life. Such is the effectiveness of these efforts that often what can appear on first glance to be the free expression of one's interests and desires can, on further investigation, reveal itself to be the unconscious influence of state power, as was the case

³⁴⁸ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 215.

with the Sassari brigade. However, this process isn't entirely one way and often it is the case that some values of the masses are absorbed into the dominant culture. The nature of power is in this sense reflexive and fluid and Gramsci argues, therefore, that power is never something that is secure or finally achieved, rather is it a perpetual process.³⁴⁹ Because of this incessant activity, Gramsci rejects the notion that power is ever secured or fixed; moreover, that there is even any finally achievable political end. Politics is therefore best understood as the process whereby theory is put in the service of practice, and constantly reshaped by the reflexive experience of history and hegemonic struggle.

But then the northern worker—also from Sardinia—argues that he too is poor, and though he may earn far more than the Sardinian peasant, they both share a mutual enemy in the capitalists.

Were these events without consequences? No, they had results which still persist today and continue to operate in the heart of the masses. In a flash they lit up brains which has never thought in such a way before and which remained impressed and radically changed.³⁵⁰

In this sense the struggle that is to be undertaken by the proletariat, if they are to mobilize the majority of the working population, is one of education. Here, it is important to make

³⁴⁹ Consider for example the example of something as presumably benign as the notion of “American food”. What American food is, is not something absolute and definitive, rather it represents the tastes and cultural traditions of the majority, and yet these tastes are preserved through the process of acculturation, both passive in the manner of family cooking, etc. as well as more aggressive forms of marketing and exercise of state power. However, such is the case that what we call American food is changing. Inasmuch as the producers and advertisers of foodstuffs have an interest in selling their “American” food products, they recognize the existence and demands of non-traditional palettes. It is in this manner that we get for instance Jalapeno Ketchup; standing as example of both the hegemonic capacity of Ketchup, but also its vulnerability to the reflexive flow of power.

³⁵⁰ Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 35.

the distinction between Gramscian and Leninist approaches, in which the educative task is does not come in the form of an ideological pedagogy, but rather to stimulate a “process of inner liberation” and provide for “the working class's own expression of itself.”³⁵¹ For Gramsci, “the first problem to be solved...was that of modifying the political orientation and general ideology of the proletariat itself, as a national element which lives inside the complex of the life of the State and undergoes unconsciously the influence of the schools, of the newspapers, of the bourgeois tradition.”³⁵² This was fundamentally a process of self-examination and ultimately ideological struggle. This amounted to nothing less than a theoretical coup, as it was simultaneously critical of the bourgeois liberals as well as the socialists; though unlike Gobetti and Rosselli, Gramsci sought to preserve the centrality of Marx through the creative reinterpretation of the dialectic Marx borrows from Hegel. It was a demonstration of Gramsci's understanding of revolution as an act of moral will, not the result of deterministic economic laws. It was a rejection of the positivist reading of Marx that championed self-emancipation on the basis of individual will and moral dedication, a distinctly humanist interpretation. For Gobetti, this represented a significant break with the brand of socialism that had dominated in Italy and had failed so completely in dealing with the old-style liberals and their eventual capitulation to the fascists. It was a program that clearly rejected the bureaucratic model of Italian politics that favored the old political order (including the socialists) and demonstrated the need for a new political order in Italy. Despite the similarities that exist between Gramsci and Gobetti, it is important to note that Gobetti's

351 Ibid., 24.

352 Ibid., 31.

interest in socialism, communism and Marxism exists not so much in their various political doctrines, but only insofar as they contribute to advancing his principle of a politics characterized by creative autonomy, which he understood as a fundamentally liberal task. “The outcome doesn’t concern me because I accept it as the measure of my action... The goal: to be everywhere oneself.”³⁵³

For Gramsci, Gobetti represented just the kind of left leaning liberal intellectual that the left movement required, as his program to reform Italian society and political culture dovetailed well with his theory of hegemony. For Gramsci, hegemony was something more than merely the guiding leadership of a movement, or even the domination of a particular ideological conception. It was a combination of cultural and political domination, wholesale, of one class over the others. This came in the form of politics and morality; it was not through force alone. In a significant sense, it was through the cultivated “consent” of the masses, and the careful cultivation of culture, etc., that hegemony was reinforced at the hands of the coercive use of economic, cultural, and political power of the bourgeoisie. Gobetti recognized that a new class of intellectuals was necessary in order to establish a new Italy, that is, break the hegemony of the bourgeoisie and establish a counter-hegemony rooted in the masses. Central to Gobetti’s liberalism—as it is to Gramsci’s political theory—is the need for a revolutionary movement “from below” and for an elite to emerge from below to become the leadership for the revolution. This established a strong mutual impression that would endure and

³⁵³ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*.

find itself reflected in both Gramsci and Gobetti's analysis into the crisis of the liberal state. While there are evidently considerable similarities in the analysis' of both of these thinkers, it is not a point that should be overstated as there remains considerable differences between the two as well. While Gobetti's liberalism is a radical deviation from traditional Italian liberalism, his analysis remains one that is firmly ensconced in liberalism. The same cannot be said for Gramsci, who through all his critiques remains a committed—at least in principle—Marxist.

Philosophy As “Soul-Making”

Marx's famous passage from his *Theses on Feuerbach* on interpreting the world versus changing it runs deep through Gramsci's own interpretation of the 'philosophy of praxis', in which understanding the world properly and transforming it is a unified task.³⁵⁴ For Gramsci, these have become fused in political action, in the “passive war” that marks hegemonic struggle until “one system of social relations disintegrates and falls and another arises and asserts itself”.³⁵⁵ This historical conception of human life and politics led Gramsci to develop an understanding of the 'lifeblood of Marx' as being the 'philosophy of praxis' and his recognition of the need for a “new type of man and of citizen” with “the will to construct within the husk of political Society 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

354 Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 145.

355 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 119.

normal continuation, its organic complement.”³⁵⁶ While Gramsci was committed to understanding his 'philosophy of praxis' in the context of a reinterpretation of Marx, we can observe in the shared resolve of his fellow antifascists that Gramsci's position relied less on the necessity of a Marx 'well-understood', but in an active and vital commitment to liberal autonomy well-understood, as Rosselli would argue, as a 'method' in service to a socialist end.³⁵⁷ It is a thoroughly modern re-articulation of a profoundly revolutionary position first articulated in the liberal-humanist oration of Pico della Mirandola on the dignity of man.³⁵⁸ Interestingly, this idea of 'dignity' so clearly aligned with the liberal-humanist departure from a more doctrinaire Church and so clearly asserted with the Reformation was only revisited openly in an Italy that was never able to complete the break owing to its unique relationship with a powerful and influential Catholic Church.³⁵⁹ It would take centuries under the isolating collective experience of Catholic paternalism, the demoralizing experience of failed revolutions, the First World War and the rise of Fascism for them to rediscover this essential element of human life.³⁶⁰

356 Ibid., 268.

357 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, xlii.

In her introduction to Rosselli's *Liberal Socialism*, Nadia Urbinati notes that “both Gramsci and Rosselli felt the need to overcome the abstract universalism of class theory. It is for this reason that they abandon a doctrinaire Marxism in favor of the “method of class struggle” he first theorized.

However where Rosselli was happy to “overcome Marxism”, Gramsci was resolved to resuscitate it.

358 Here I only mean to suggest that we can draw a connection between the 'emancipatory' liberal-humanist position of the early Italian Renaissance and its attempt to insert human autonomy into history as a break from the doctrinaire Catholic Church. Mirandola's 'Oration on the Dignity of Man' would assert the greatness of human achievement as function of free-will and man's capacity for self-determination.

359 Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli clearly sees in the Florentine clerk the glowing embers of this revolutionary task, that was otherwise suppressed.

360 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*; Havel, *Open Letters*, 147.

It led Gobetti to what he understood as his ultimate “goal: to be everywhere oneself.” Havel—under the pressure of similar forces—would later punctuate his analysis of 'post-totalitarian' society declaring that the only way to successfully combat it was to 'live within the truth'. And which echos in the claims of protestors who today when challenged on the nature of their demands respond: “For you to join us!”

One of the central contributions of Gramsci and the Italian Antifascists is the reintroduction of the idea that man is capable of becoming a transformative force in his own life, capable of shaping both his own character as well as the material conditions of the world around him, an understanding of 'philosophy' that is inseparable from political action.³⁶¹ It is an historical task “undertaken by a specific class of people to change, correct or perfect the conceptions of the world that exist in any particular age and thus to change the norms of conduct that go with them; in other words, to change practical activity as a whole.”³⁶² And the task of cultivating 'conceptions of the world' is best understood as a 'practice' centered on “developing the element of independent responsibility in each individual.”³⁶³ Gramsci's call for a personal and independent responsibility informs the vital role of intellectuals in contributing to the awakening of the political consciousness of the proletariat and by extension society as a whole. As Walter Adamson argues in his book *Hegemony and Revolution*, this leads to a much broader definition of intellectual than what we mean in our everyday use.³⁶⁴ This suggests that Gramsci's greatest contribution exists in his realization that the dominance of the bourgeoisie is not nearly so inevitable as Marx or others might have imagined to begin

361 It is a concept that is notable as least as far back as Socrates and the *Apology*. Socrates suggests the existence of a perpetual struggle exists between power, authority and the interested defense—without reflection—of the status quo, with that of wisdom and reason. For Socrates as well as Gramsci the preferred weapon of that struggle is 'philosophy'. Interestingly, there is no suggestion on Socrates' part that philosophy—as he practices and advocates it—will ever 'win' insofar that it will bring to power a single definitive regime. Socrates eludes to this in an earlier dialogue with Euthyphro in which the conversation suggests that perhaps there is no essential nature or unrivaled ideology, only the continuing task of resistance against any ideology that would claim such complete power. This perspective differs considerably from Plato's account of politics in *The Republic*.

362 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 344.

363 Ibid., 32.

364 Walter L. Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 143.

with, it was neither determined or permanent. The hegemony of the bourgeoisie was rather the result of substantial organization and conscious effort; and that while pervasive and resilient, can be contested through philosophy understood as practice. Gramsci points to the inability of the Risorgimento in Italy to unite the people around the bourgeois class as “the cause of its defeats and the interruptions in its development.”³⁶⁵ For Gramsci, this is proof that bourgeois hegemony is not assured. In the attending note Gramsci argues that in order to become truly hegemonic one must transcend the 'economic-corporate phase' and create a state, which necessarily requires the 'consent of the governed' a process that requires an extended notion of the intellectual or philosopher as politician, or “as a transmitter of ideas within civil society and between government and civil society.”³⁶⁶ Gramsci sought to snap the masses, and particularly individuals, out of their social, moral and political passivity and submissiveness. Italy's unique historical conditions had made them susceptible to paternalism and dogmatism that did more to reinforce rather than relieve the Italian people of their chains, but it also gave them a unique insight into the influence of ideology and hegemony (vis-à-vis the Church). The failures of socialism, which had promised transformation but failed to halt the progress fascism, had to be accounted for if it was to remain attractive and relevant even as Italy's young intellectuals began to abandon it. Gramsci sought out a method or strategy for overcoming a Marxism that had ossified and ceased to be revolutionary in character. The problem begins with *ideology*, what Gramsci would closely connect to philosophy and the creation of a world-view and the development of “common-sense”, particularly the

365 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 53.

366 Ibid.; Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution*, 143.

ideology associated with the ruling class. It is embedded in the unconscious minds of the masses through the use of propaganda and the manipulation of culture, and that through this process the masses incorporate the values and interests of those who are in a position of authority. However, as discussed earlier, this process isn't entirely one way and often it is the case that some values of the masses bleed into the dominant culture. The nature of power is in this sense, even if only marginally so, is reflexive and fluid and Gramsci argues, therefore, that power is never something that is secure or finally achieved, rather is it a perpetual process and it is something that needs to be maintained.

In *The Southern Question* Gramsci illustrates his point with several examples of the power of ideology in the service of bourgeois hegemony. First, among the masses of the North, is the myth of southern inferiority characterized by a kind of colonial ideology known as *southernism*, which characterizes the South as a “lead weight which impedes a more rapid civil development of Italy; the southerners are biologically inferior beings, semi-barbarians or complete barbarians by natural destiny; if the South is backward, the fault is not in the capitalist system or in any other historical cause, but is the fault of nature which has made the southerner lazy, incapable, criminal, barbarous.”³⁶⁷ To this end, Gramsci accused the Socialist Party of itself “being the vehicle of bourgeois propaganda” in that they had not rejected these values.³⁶⁸ Second, is the use of *blocs* to establish social, cultural, and political alignments that favor bourgeois hegemony. Among the peasants of the South, there is an effort to establish a prevailing sense of regionalism

³⁶⁷ Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 31.

³⁶⁸ Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 31.

as an alternative to any system of class alliance that might advantage the peasants themselves. Gramsci describes the situation in which the “Young Sardinia” movement, a Southern socialist group, sought to unite the peasants and the gentry in the name of their local grievances against the State into a *regional bloc*, selling in part the illusion of the unified interests of the southern peasants with that of the landowners and gentry. This was maintained in the name of regionalism, a petty nationalist ideology that peddles among the peasants “inflammatory and rhetorical discourse...with all the frills of provincial oratory,” conjuring up “the memory of past sufferings” and “the idea of a compact bloc of the noble sons.”³⁶⁹ All this in the hope of returning to a “more prosperous and richer country which offered prospects of livelihood, even though of a modest kind.”³⁷⁰ It is not the landowners and local capitalists who are to blame, or so the argument goes, but the unfamiliar outsiders.³⁷¹ Thus, the peasants are actually kept in service to the local landlords, who are in turn in league with the Northern capitalists, all the while dividing the subjugated masses against each other. The masses of peasants were hammered to ideological conformity through the concession of political ground to intellectual elites. However, this also works against those few organic intellectuals that would try to emerge and challenge the power of these blocs. Gramsci points out that while “there exist great accumulations of culture and intelligence in single individuals or in restricted groups of

369 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 34.

370 Ibid., 33.

371 This kind of effort to establish a regional bloc was also a familiar tactic taken in the attempt to preserve the ideological hegemony of institutional racism as the United States faced its own “Southern question” during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. I am reminded in part of the Bob Dylan song “Only a Pawn in Their Game” (1964) recounting the assassination of Medgar Evers, in which Dylan speaks of creation of a regional bloc comprised of southern political elites and poor southern whites on the basis of ideological racism. However, Dylan suggests in his description of these poor whites as pawns in a wider political game, that their authentic interests perhaps lie closer to the blacks with whom they share an impoverished, if only marginally better, existence.

top intellectuals, there exists no organization of average culture.”³⁷² This means that the most prominent southern alternative intellectuals were compelled to abandon the south for the north in order to find work. But even where they could find themselves welcomed into circles outside of the southern bloc, they were compelled to do so in an environment tainted by “southernism” in which the “presentation of the southern problem should not exceed certain limits”, that is it should “not become revolutionary.”³⁷³

Another similar challenge facing the working classes is something Gramsci refers to as “bourgeois democracy” which he argues characterizes the “bourgeois state system.”³⁷⁴ Primary among the tactics used to stunt mass action by the working class is the use of *political blocs* to exploit perceived or even cultivated divisions. The successful creation of these political blocs results in what Gramsci describes as a kind of domestication of the workers or working classes. The greatest example of which was the defeat of the workers movement at Fiat factory in Turin.

Giolitti wants to domesticate the workers of Turin. He has defeated them twice... both times with the help of the General Confederation of Labour, that is, of corporative reformism. He now thinks that he can bring them into the framework of the bourgeois state system.³⁷⁵

Here Gramsci is alluding to not just the class alliances fostered through a state union (the General Confederation of Labor) but it also points to the vital role that intellectuals play in guarding against this dangerous variety of “class co-operation” in which the

372 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 47.

373 Ibid., 48.

374 Ibid., 40.

375 Ibid.

“proletariat will no longer exist as an independent class but only as an appendage of the bourgeois State.”³⁷⁶ This is further exacerbated by efforts on the part of the dominant national industrial bloc of the capitalists and the industrial workers who, through the use of propaganda and the careful manipulation of culture, both divide the industrial workers internally through distinctions between trades, crafts, and professions and simultaneously bind them to the framework of the bourgeois state system through collaboration in the form of state controlled trade-unions. Divisions between northern and southern workers are also reinforced through similar means of social manipulation. Therefore, managing or controlling the means of social manipulation by which power is preserved becomes central to the revolutionary task and it is a process that requires constant vigilance and maintenance. While this critique was readily observed in the case of capitalist attempts to subvert the workers, Gramsci also saw this as a fundamental limitation within the existing Italian socialist movement as well. This kind of laying of the blame squarely at the feet of both the 'liberals' and the 'socialists' invokes the likes of Gobetti and Rosselli, but also recalls Vico who declared in his *New Science* that “the civil world itself has certainly been made by men, and that its principles therefore can, because they must, be rediscovered within the modification of our own human mind.”³⁷⁷ In this manner he is confirming the definite connection that can and must exist between philosophy, that act of rediscovering the modifications of the human mind and politics and the making of our civil world. It is not enough therefore to point to the bourgeoisie of the north and call out: “Oppressor!” It was also necessary to look inward and engage in process of self-

376 Ibid.

377 Vico, *Vico*, 198.

examination. And education plays a key role in, “developing the element of independent responsibility in each individual.”³⁷⁸ The role of the proletariat then is to engage in hegemonic struggle, the proletarian intellectual is a vehicle for class elaboration, and philosophy as the practice of that elaboration.

The proletariat, in order to be able to rule as a class, must rid itself of all corporative hangovers, of all syndicalist prejudices and incrustations. What does this mean? That not only must the distinctions which exist between trades and crafts be overcome, but that it is necessary, in order to win the trust and consent of the peasants and of the semi-proletarian categories in the cities, to overcome prejudices and conquer certain egoist traits which can exist and do exist in the working class as such, even when craft particularism has disappeared from its midst. The metalworkers, the joiners, the builders, etc., must not only think as proletarians and no longer as metalworkers, joiners or builders, but they must take a step forward: they must think as members of a class which aims at leading the peasants and the intellectuals, of a class which can conquer and can build socialism only if aided and followed by the great majority of these social strata. If it does not do this, the proletariat does not become a leading class, and these strata, who in Italy represent the majority of the population, remain under bourgeois leadership, and give the State the possibility of resisting and weakening the proletarian attack.³⁷⁹

Simply put, the workers must come to recognize their status as the product of the manipulation of the historically dominant hegemony. As such, the accepted world-view is neither natural, nor determined by external laws; but rather the product of specific actions informed by ideological class interests. This leads Gramsci to develop an analysis of intellectuals as specific, or organic, to each class and a category that is central to the organization of society and especially to the entrenchment of their own specific class. It is

³⁷⁸ Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 32.
³⁷⁹ Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 36.

through their efforts that the ideological dominance of a single “philosophy” or world-view is maintained. In this manner we are all subject to the influence of this well-provisioned agent of ideological domination.

The task of the revolutionary is, therefore, that of breaking the hold of ideology over the masses as propagated by the hegemonic order, but how is it that we can come to recognize “truth” and step out from under the influence of ideology. This political problem was most notably elaborated upon by Plato in his famous “Allegory of the Cave”, but also taken up by the antifascists who themselves recognized the dangerous influence of ideology. For Plato, the task of a philosopher—one who pursues wisdom and knowledge through reflection—was extremely difficult and a job that not anyone was capable of doing. Only a particular class of individuals were understood to be capable. It is philosopher king who will lead the others out from the cave under the guidance of their special access to truth. For Plato this did not represent a political problem because intellectual activity and philosophy itself was understood to be an objective activity; that is, an activity as we as a class that is independent and exists outside the traditionally recognized class structure. Cartesian scientism assumed a similarly objective position, ignoring its role as a component of the class-structure. Gramsci argues that philosophy and intellectuals—Platonic, Cartesian, or otherwise—are not independent and are elemental components of the class into which they are born and sustained.³⁸⁰ Gramsci describes these intellectuals as “organic”, describing a very intimate relationship between

380 Ibid., 118.

the intellectuals and the class of which they are part. A critical point to make here is that Gramsci is clear to point out that intellectuals that emerge in this manner, regardless of their class affiliations, come to “see themselves as autonomous and independent of the ruling social group.”³⁸¹ That is, they see themselves as possessing access to knowledge and truth independent of the interests of ruling class to which they are organically connected to. Gramsci connects this to the idea of “social utopia”, which is, at its base, a kind of illusion. These kinds of intellectuals, he argues, are always connected to the interests of the class itself, by definition. And this presents a critical problem for any conception of life that sees individual autonomy a key component to securing freedom. Central to the political theory of antifascists like Gramsci was that the path from the metaphorical cave, though perhaps aided by an elite or ruling-class, could not simply become a function of an externally imposed ideology or elite.³⁸² In principle “direction” had to be “spontaneous” and “organic” and emerge internally from within the class themselves. The problem is that most people have been conditioned to understand philosophy as “something which is very difficult because it is the intellectual activity of a specific category of specialist scholars or of professional and systematic philosophers.”³⁸³ It is something that stands out of reach of the great masses of people and ultimately makes subjects out of citizens. This understanding of philosophy represents a political problem for Gramsci, who responds with the famous claim that all men are “philosophers” and “intellectuals”, posing the following question:³⁸⁴

381 Ibid., 120.

382 Jacobitti, *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy*, 145.

383 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 58.

384 Ibid.

Is it preferable to “think” without having critical awareness, in a disjointed and irregular way, in other words to “participate” in a conception of the world “imposed” mechanically by external environment, that is, by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the time he enters the conscious world; or is it preferable to work out one's own conception of the world consciously and critically, and so out of this work of one's own sphere of activity, to participate actively in making the history of the world, and not simply to accept passively and without care the imprint of one's own personality from outside?³⁸⁵

The choice for Gramsci is clear. He first argues that everyone always belongs to a particular group that shapes one's way of thinking and working. First and foremost, man is a conformist, what he refers to as a “man-mass”.³⁸⁶ And, in fact, most belong to several different “man-masses” and this is what leads to the incoherence of peoples' personalities and personal conceptions of the world. And, to a great extent, this cannot be avoided. What is important is that individuals must come to recognize this, so it then becomes one's task to “know thyself” and come to recognize yourself “as the product of the historical process which has left on you an infinity of traces gathered together without the advantage of an inventory”.³⁸⁷ Taking this inventory is the most essential step in realizing an organic conception of the world. This entails rigorous self-examination and criticism of one's own conceptions of the world and the attempt to “make it coherent and unified.” Because “philosophy can't be separated from the history of philosophy nor culture from the history of culture,” for one to properly be a philosopher, that is have a “critically coherent conception of the world” one must have an awareness of the role that culture and history play in its development.³⁸⁸ And history and culture are fundamentally captured

385 Ibid.

386 Ibid., 59.

387 Ibid.

388 Ibid.

in language. Gramsci adds, “if it is true that any language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it will also be true that the greater or lesser complexities of a person's conception of the world can be judged from his language.”³⁸⁹

Philosophy is thus connected with the process by which one comes to think about and conduct oneself in social life. Consequently, it constitutes a polemic with "common sense" and is linked to the effort to change the conception of the world expressed in "common sense". Or, does it remain "the intellectual activity of a specific category", a matter reserved for “specialist scholars or of professional and systematic philosophers.”³⁹⁰

"The relation between common sense and the upper level of philosophy is assured by 'politics'.”³⁹¹

Gramsci then stresses that “all men are intellectuals,.. but all men do not have the function of intellectuals in society.” What Gramsci is pointing to is the existence of an artificial divide between what we call “intellectual” and “non-intellectual.” When we say “intellectual” Gramsci says what we really mean is “professional intellectual”, that is, we are referring to those individuals in a society or particular “system” [Capitalism for instance] that perform the “immediate social function of the category of professional intellectuals.” In this case we might refer back to the clergy or even military specialists as the professional intellectuals of the feudal system. In the capitalist system, the organic intellectuals are not just the entrepreneurs or managerial class, but also all of those whom

389 Ibid., 59–60.

390 Ibid., 58.

391 Ibid., 65.

we now associate with the “culture industry”.³⁹² Conceding the authenticity of intellectual activity and philosophy to this category of “professionals” represents a considerable victory for the dominant hegemony.³⁹³ While other members of society not involved in this professional intellectual activity engage in “muscular nervous effort” or labor, Gramsci argues that even these categories still require some degree of intellectual effort. And so, it is not right to say that there are “non-intellectuals” as such, but rather that they are engaging in “different levels of specific intellectual activity.” For Gramsci, “there is no human activity from which all intellectual intervention can be excluded—homo faber cannot be separated from homo sapiens.” Every man, therefore, “develops some intellectual activity; he is, in other words, a ‘philosopher,’ an artist, a man of taste, he shares a conception of the world, he has a conscious line of moral conduct, and so contributes towards maintaining or changing a conception of the world.” Gramsci argues that what is necessary—in the case of the proletariat at least—is to change the relationship of that intellectual activity with the “muscular-nervous effort” and move it towards a “new equilibrium”. Because it is this “muscular-nervous effort” that is actually “perpetually changing the physical and social world” it is important to break its connection with the ‘professional intellectuals’ [of the old class order] in order to “become the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world,” that is, create a new alternative or counter-hegemony.³⁹⁴ Religion and common sense are resistant to

392 Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution*, 143.

393 A. J. Liebling, *The Most of A.J. Liebling*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 158.

Here I am reminded of a brief essay by the journalist and media critic A.J. Liebling who on the matter of “experts” in the press cautioned against conceding their ground. “One the position is conceded, the expert can put on a better show than the reporter. All is manifest to him, since his conclusions are not limited by his powers of observation.” A similar concession of ground to professional intellectuals invites the same disadvantage made all the more dangerous given the stakes at hand.

394 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 121–122.

philosophy precisely because philosophy seeks to establish unity or coherence in our conception of the world, what Gramsci calls “critical self-consciousness.”³⁹⁵ He argues that where it is impossible to establish such unity 'freely' it can be imposed 'authoritatively', which is to say imposed top down under the protection of law and exercise of violence and coercion. This is the problem that Gramsci, Gobetti, Rosselli and Croce observed in the legacy of the Church and that they see in the emergence of Fascism. It is also the problem that Havel would later identify under post-totalitarianism. This points to what Gramsci identifies as “the fundamental problem of every conception of the world view, of every philosophy which has become a cultural movement, a “religion”, a “faith”, in other words, which has led to practical practical activity and volition, in which it appears as an implied theoretical “premise””.³⁹⁶ This *theoretical premise*, says Gramsci, is what we call *ideology*. The problem that every world view faces when it is reduced to such theoretical premises is the preservation of ideological unity, especially as expressed within a given social bloc and it is for this reason that we cannot separate philosophy from politics. It is also the reason why Gramsci turns to self-examination and civil society as the proper terrain for resistance and revolution.

Closing Gramsci

Gramsci makes a transformative break with the traditional concept of the philosopher and intellectual and theorizes two distinct categories of intellectual that exist in opposition and to some degree in competition with one another in the reflexive construction of both

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 67.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 63.

their own ideological terrains—presided over by a particular 'common sense'—as well as the 'superstructures' of both civil society and political society. On the one hand is the 'traditional' intellectual, which was once 'spontaneous' to its own class and is, by definition, set against the newly emerging 'spontaneous' intellectual. This has also been understood as an 'organic' intellectual in other translations. The organic intellectuals is that category of intellectual that emerges with and from the revolutionary class. For Gramsci this new intellectual class must emerge from the workers, the proletariat. While he recognizes that all people are in practice intellectuals, Gramsci further explains that only some people can perform the functions and exercise the status of intellectuals in society. This leads to a struggle between these competing categories for control. This is most visibly recognized in the struggle between the intellectuals that support the institutions of the state and its attendant lines of power—those 'experts' and 'professionals' of bourgeois capitalism—and the 'intellectuals' of the subaltern classes, which are often not recognized as such. It becomes the task of the newly formed organic intellectual to push against countervailing forces and work to develop the progressive aspects of their given classes' 'common sense' thereby creating new spheres of competing power, the object of which is the complete restructuring of that given society. It becomes a tactical expression of the role of the intellectual in hegemonic struggle. The result, while perhaps not explicit, is a constantly contested boundary between the classes whereby the contours of the hegemony are shaped.

I believe that such a reading, which would be familiar to those acquainted with the broader Vician inspired Italian Antifascist movement, is vital to understanding Gramsci's contributions to a conversation that came to dominate much of modern political thought regarding man's role in the construction of human life, especially what Gramsci called 'everyday life' and the role of men and women as individuals and members of societies in the making of that life. It is a conversation that in this particular context took place in Italy under conditions unique at the time in Europe, and had begun, as we have seen, at least with Vico in the eighteenth century who challenged the assumption of the Cartesian position as illustrated in the first chapter makes it clear that man is empowered only insofar as he might be shown his chains, the narrative of which—when accepted as natural law—becomes the stuff of ideology. Political action under such terms are accepted only where they recognize the accepted order. In the fields of physics and chemistry such an approach has yielded profound results that have expanded dramatically our understanding of the natural world. In politics and human life they have only yielded the domination of one class or group over another. However, it reached its most dramatic and consequential heights during the Italian antifascist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, in the work of Benedetto Croce, Piero Gobetti, and Carlo Rosselli, and perhaps especially Antonio Gramsci who provided the most developed analysis of the politics of ideology. Furthermore, it was Gramsci who was best positioned to serve as the vehicle carrying these ideas beyond the confines of Italy. Gramsci refocuses attention on a wider more fundamental challenge to the dominant theories of history and knowledge that underwrite our contemporary politics, completing the transition from Vico and the

perception of Italian anti-fascism as a regional/national theory of revolution and resistance captured in the work of Gobetti and Rosselli, to a wider international perspective that includes figures like Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik and George Konrad. They would enter this conversation in their own right and where they could, contribute to furthering a theory of political action that could not help but reflect a liberal Italian inheritance. This legacy is now being handed off to revolutionary movements across the world as an alternative liberal tradition.

Chapter 4: The Open (Liberal) Politics of East-European Dissent

Antonio Gramsci made it clear to intellectuals and activists alike what was first argued by Vico some centuries before, that knowledge, and particularly our methods of acquiring that knowledge has limits and so it is not possible for the many facets of human life and the natural world to be captured under a single unifying principle. Furthermore, it represented “the fundamental problem of every conception of the world view, of every philosophy which has become a cultural movement, a “religion”, a “faith”, in other words, which has led to practical activity and volition, in which it appears as an implied theoretical “premise”.”³⁹⁷ And the “problem of conserving the ideological unity of a whole social bloc which is held together and unified precisely by that ideology.”³⁹⁸ In this sense, all ideologies seek to reinforce themselves through an imposition upon the masses of people for the purposes of unifying the social bloc under their own preferred theoretical premise. The existence of these competing ideologies are revealed in the “conflict between thought and actions, that is, the co-existence of two conceptions of the world”.³⁹⁹ Such conflict or incoherence does not always represent ‘bad faith’ on the part of the individual, but they do represent the degree to which that individual has passively accepted or passively submitted in an unreflected manner to an imposed conception of the world, which may in fact differ significantly from other assumed conceptions of the world. It is a process of ideological struggle for control over an individual's mind.⁴⁰⁰

397 Ibid., 62–63.

398 Ibid., 63.

399 Ibid., 61.

400 Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 67–68.

Consider the following example from the 2004 book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* in which the author looks to Kansas, a state with a historical legacy of left-wing populism that movement that might

Gramsci outlined this process when he argued that the manner in which we all think, work and live is shaped in large part through a reflexive relationship with the society in which one lives. This isn't to say that we lack autonomy, only that we do not exist in the world without context. Most importantly, our development is deeply influence by this context. This leads Gramsci to the conclusion that most individuals belong to and are shaped by several different—and even at times conflicting—contexts. Gramsci focused on the importance of recognizing this layered aspect of our nature and engaging in the kind of work necessary to unpack those layers. The task is to “know thyself” and come to recognize yourself “as the product of the historical process which has left on you an infinity of traces gathered together without the advantage of an inventory”.⁴⁰¹ This

have been expected considering its rural and agrarian history. However, in recent decades Kansas has become overwhelmingly conservative.

“Not long ago, Kansas would have responded to the current situation by making the bastards pay. This would have been a political certainty, as predictable as what happens when you touch a match to a puddle of gasoline. When business screwed the farmers and the workers – when it implemented monopoly strategies invasive beyond the Populists' furthest imaginings – when it ripped off shareholders and casually tossed thousands out of work – you could be damned sure about what would follow. Not these days. Out here the gravity of discontent pulls in only one direction: to the right, to the right, further to the right. Strip today's Kansans of their job security, and they head out to become registered Republicans. Push them off their land, and next thing you know they're protesting in front of abortion clinics. Squander their life savings on manicures for the CEO, and there's a good chance they'll join the John Birch Society. But ask them about the remedies their ancestors proposed (unions, antitrust, public ownership), and you might as well be referring to the days when knighthood was in flower.”

Why is this the case? Well, the author gives a rather elaborate explanation that goes into some detail about the machinations surrounding what he calls the ‘conservative coalition’. That is the bloc that is established between economic conservatives and social conservatives. Essentially, it describes a kind of bait-and-switch tactic in which social conservatives appeal to voters on the basis of social issues—gay marriage, abortion, etc—then, when elected, they shift to more traditional economically conservative policy making. However, what this book doesn't, or rather can't, take into account is the dramatic way in which this coalition or bloc has gone so far as to unify the positions openly. It is for this reason that we can see poor farmers who lose their farms to unscrupulous banking practices vote against stronger banking regulations. It is the successful practice of ideological manipulation and domination.

401 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 59.

demands rigorous self-examination and self-criticism and ultimately an ethic of responsibility that was perhaps best captured by Havel whose particular liberalism called for an “existential revolution” that he saw as “a responsibility of ours, although it looks a little different in different places. But in the end, it's about standing up for your principles, and vouching for your own truth.”⁴⁰² Like the antifascists the anticommunist dissidents understood their struggle to have been precipitated by deep moral crisis which resulted in a demoralized humanity that needed to reclaim its dignity. In *Liberal Socialism* Carlo Rosselli remarked that the struggle against fascism began with the personal project of restoring “dignity and responsibility, the first steps on the ladder leading from slavery to liberty.”⁴⁰³ Piero Gobetti similarly argued that the rise of fascism represented a “crisis of conscience” or a “crisis of inertia” that had deep roots in Italian history.⁴⁰⁴ It was for this reason that the Italian antifascists, especially Gramsci, understood that “philosophy can't be separated from the history of philosophy nor culture from the history of culture.”⁴⁰⁵

The Italian Antifascists drew heavily from their Vician heritage, focusing on politics and philosophy as a practice of self-examination and character formation. Their commitment to human autonomy pushed them to focus their attention on what it was about Italian life itself—what it was about themselves as a society—that contributed to the Italy's decline into the oppressive totalitarian regime that was to define Italy for two decades. What they understood immediately, in a way that others facing similarly oppressive regimes had not,

402 Havel, Michnik, and Matynia, *An Uncanny Era*, 157.

403 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 86.

404 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 11, 109.

405 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 59.

was the active role that Italian life itself, and their own historical “hand in history” had played in creating the conditions that allowed fascism to take hold. fascism was not a parenthesis, an anomaly, or an external force imposed upon Italy. It was, as Gobetti had famously asserted, the autobiography of the nation. And it was only after the demoralizing experience of an incomplete revolution in the Risorgimento, the suffering of the First World War and the rise of fascism that the antifascists rediscovered the essential tools laid out by Vico to aid in their defense. It led Gobetti to what he understood as his ultimate goal: “to be everywhere oneself.”⁴⁰⁶ Eastern-European dissidents, under the pressure of similar forces in their struggle against communism echoed this refrain. Vaclav Havel in particular would punctuate his analysis of 'post-totalitarian' society declaring that the only way to successfully combat it was to 'live within the truth'.⁴⁰⁷ This formed the core of Vaclav Havel politics, who wrote in 1991 shortly after assuming the first presidency of recently liberated Czechoslovakia:

As ridiculous or quixotic as it may sound these days, one thing seems certain to me: that it is my responsibility to emphasize, again and again, the moral origin of all genuine politics, to stress the significance of moral values and standards in all spheres of social life, including economics, and to explain that if we don't try, within ourselves, to discover or rediscover or cultivate what I call “higher responsibility”, things will turn out very badly indeed for our country.⁴⁰⁸

When Havel stresses the significance of morality he is not making a theological claim, but rather a human one. It is a perspective that deeply connects a healthy political life with an equally healthy spiritual life. This is because spiritual or even religious life plays a significant role in grounding and shaping the world-view of a people. For Gramsci,

406 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, xi.

407 Havel, *Open Letters*, 147.

408 Václav Havel, *Summer Meditations* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1992), 1.

language, “common sense” and “popular religion” all played a similar role in shaping people's conception of the world.⁴⁰⁹ Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski argued that since people are, in this sense historical, it is the content of this past that gives form and content to their world-view.⁴¹⁰ In an inventive retelling of the story of Lot and his wife, written by Kolakowski in 1957, he reminds us that “we belong to the past, for we are unable to change it, while it fills the whole of our existence.”⁴¹¹ It was for this reason that Gramsci argued that philosophy and politics—and we might add history—could not be separated.⁴¹² For Havel and Kolakowski—as it was for Vico and Gramsci—myth, spirit, and even divine presence or popular religion represent key features of not just identity, but of humanity itself. Such a relationship exposes an underlying tension that permeates the secular modernity ushered in by Descartes. While unwilling to forgo the contributions of Cartesian sciences to modernity Vico observed within its advance a terrifying potential and cautioned its limits. By Gramsci and especially Havel's time this threat had transformed into crisis, one that Havel observes as both social and ecological, as well as political. It was this perspective that found its way more widely into the political thought and action of the East European dissidents struggling against the Communist system, seen in this light as ever but a part of a modern world dominated by science, technology and its rational and geometrical methods. For Havel, this “single, common crisis” was nothing less than a “juggernaut of power”. This contributed to a feeling of powerlessness and especially hopelessness among those living under the communist regimes of Poland and Czechoslovakia. However, it was the Polish

409 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 58.

410 Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 265.

411 Ibid., 311–312.

412 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 61.

philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, in the influential essay 'Hope and Hopelessness' (1971), who first argued that change in society was possible, but only to “the extent to which society believes that it is possible” and that as such, a society is “dependent in part on its own self-image.”⁴¹³

Developing an understanding of history free from ideological distortion became central to cultivating this authentic self-image, as it was to the Italian antifascists before them. History, culture, and an abiding respect for myth and popular religion—all elements rejected by the revolution led by Descartes—became vital to preserving dignity and humanity in the face of oppression.⁴¹⁴ In his 1986 Jefferson Lecture Kolakowski added that “we learn history not to know how to behave or how to succeed, but to know who we are.” History is therefore not to be dismissed in the pursuit of *truth*, in lieu of more rational methods, as Descartes and scientific positivists would assert, but is rather a political task central to empowering an opposition and expressed “by living in dignity”.⁴¹⁵ The Polish journalist and dissident Michnik further emphasized this in conjunction with the social and political need for a “new consciousness [to] be developed”, in effect restoring the responsibility and dignity that had been stripped away by the experience of communism.⁴¹⁶ The Hungarian writer Gyorgy Konrad introduced an *antipolitical* program the idea of which was “to encourage the internal emancipation of all those whom we

⁴¹³ Leszek Kolakowski, “Hope and Hopelessness,” *Survey* 17, no. 3 (1971): 51.

⁴¹⁴ Respect for myth and popular religion did not necessarily mean belief, rather an understanding of deep connection between this and popular culture, which along with language, contribute to the development of a particular conception of life. Identification with such a conception of life is central to one's identity and “self”.

⁴¹⁵ Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 148.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

meet.”⁴¹⁷ That is, we ought to resist self-censorship. We should, in Piero Gobetti's words, “to be everywhere oneself.”⁴¹⁸ “The greatest act on behalf of freedom is to behave toward everyone as though we were free men – even toward those whom we fear.”⁴¹⁹ What is essential in each understanding is the balance of a deep respect for individual autonomy and social conscience. This chapter will present the East-European dissident movement including Leszek Kolakowski, Adam Michnik, and Vaclav Havel and Gyorgy Konrad as theoretical heirs of the antifascists who present a form of *antipolitics* as a “rejection of the power monopoly of the political class” as well as a rejection of the “idea” or “truth” monopoly of the very same class.⁴²⁰

Leszek Kolakowski, “Hope And Hopelessness”

Leszek Kolakowski was philosopher and political exile from Poland, but he remained a key inspiration and in many ways a mentor to Adam Michnik and other Polish dissidents. And it is his idea of national autonomy as achieved through a historical understanding of self-examination and self-creation that sits at the heart of their various political theories of action, as well as that of the Solidarity movement in general. In no small way we might consider the impact of Kolakowski—one of the “creators of contemporary Polish culture”⁴²¹—as somewhat akin to that of Italy's Croce. In what is perhaps his most influential essay, 1968's “Hope and Hopelessness”, Leszek Kolakowski made what was

417 Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 82.

418 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, xi.

419 Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 82.

420 Ibid., 231.

421 Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 89.

(at the time) a startling claim about Poland's communist regime. The former party member broke with the revisionist position he had previously advanced and argued that revision from inside of the communist system was no longer possible. The claim itself was nothing new and was widely felt by a population who shared the opinion and were thus resigned to the experience of hopelessness in face of an impenetrable communist state. However, where the influential philosopher differed significantly from the others was in his rejection of the idea that the apparently impenetrable character of the state justified “hopelessness”. The “principle of unreformability” was, for him, little more than a comfortable excuse and acted as an “absolution in advance for every act of cowardice, passivity and cooperation with evil.”⁴²² Instead, he argued that some measure of improvement was in fact possible; moreover, it was precisely the belief in this possibility that began to make it realizable. Small but meaningful gains could be achieved, outside of the system and this was cause enough for hope. To clarify this point Kolakowski comments on what was then—in a historically Catholic country—one of Stalin's most notorious “historical quips” in which Stalin responds to the moral authority of the Pope by defiantly asking how many divisions of troops he has. The implication is clear, the perceived moral strength of the Pope is no match for the military strength of the Red Army, a point that appeared to be confirmed in the eyes of all who were familiar with the brutal defeat of oppositionists in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and later in the period of liberalization and ultimately defeat of the Prague Spring of 1968. However, Kolakowski points to “the poverty” of the conclusive “hopelessness” that flows from this story. To him it represented a kind of selective memory, one which “does not know how

422 Kolakowski, “Hope and Hopelessness,” 51.

to believe in anything apart from divisions.”⁴²³ He then remarks that this telling of Russia's revolution forgets that the Soviets emerged victorious, “not by virtue of possessing many divisions, but as a result of the moral collapse of the Tsar's empire and army.”⁴²⁴ This evokes Piero Gobetti's own assessment of the Russian Revolution in July 1919, shortly after its success, in which he argued that the Bolsheviks had created a state “in which the people believe because they have made it themselves—is essentially, in its inner dialectic, an affirmation of liberalism.”⁴²⁵ In this manner, it was not just the moral collapse of the Tsarist Regime, but also a positive act of awakening or soul-making.⁴²⁶ It is in the possibility of such an awakening that hope exists. Christopher Beem extends this “conceptual connection” to Gramsci as well in his book *The Necessity of Politics*.⁴²⁷ Ironically, this “liberal” Bolshevik revolution was quickly overtaken by an ideology—driven by iron laws of historical necessity—that quickly reduced individuals to extensions of the state. What had begun as an assertion of independent will and responsibility, quickly descended into ideological purges as early as 1921.

If we consider the principles that underlie Marxist science we can see how this came about. It begins with the compelling economic claim that humans have needs and that chief among them are economic needs. In order to meet these needs, humans are compelled to engage in behaviors and relationships that they would never choose for themselves. Looking around at our society and others—especially those marked by

423 Ibid., 46.

424 Ibid.

425 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 1.

426 Ibid., 209.

427 Beem, *The Necessity of Politics*, 113.

extreme poverty—this becomes readily apparent. The forces of production and mechanisms that make up our economic relations and actions are *the* determining factor in history. Marx is therefore arguing that the nature of every aspect of our life is a factor of these compelled economic needs. The historical process is, therefore, the result of the mechanical movement through history from one stage to the next, or “dialectical materialism”. This passage through time is, therefore, not the result of independent will, but rather the operation of historical necessity dictated by “scientific” historical laws. According to Marx, this historical process will eventually lead to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat and the abolition of the bourgeois mode of appropriation, and the socialization of the means of production and exchange as they conform better to the economic needs of collectivized production. Marx calls this society without class distinctions Communism. While it is easy to see how such a theory would attract the interest of the oppressed classes, it is also thoroughly deterministic; history progresses in accord with economic laws that operate as a function of iron necessity and, therefore, can only advance along a prescribed path. It is a thoroughly Cartesian view of history; man as subject to knowable and discoverable scientific laws. In the hands of a revolutionary party that claimed special access to these laws, it quickly transformed itself into a rigid dogma, one that was entirely inflexible. It replaced philosophy with catechism, responsibility with apathy, autonomy with subjugation, and humanity with automatism.

In his 1989 essay on “The Demise of Historical Man”, Kolakowski tells us that it was “the victorious march of Enlightenment rationalism” that had “robbed mankind of his

historical consciousness.”⁴²⁸ That rationalism, which had emerged as an an “objective” criteria for testing the truth of ideas, had no need for history. Rationalism demanded that truth could only be established by applying “clear and absolutely binding mathematical and empirical criteria elaborated by science.”⁴²⁹ And by the twentieth-century we were left with two equally ambitious ‘universal’ projects struggling to lay claim to the rationalist ‘truth’ of modernity: the ‘invisible hand’ of market capitalism, and those “iron laws” of history that drove communism. For both positions, history was little more than an inconvenience that had to be tolerated in the pursuit of a forgone conclusion, be it the profit maximizing utility of unobstructed global markets or a classless society. In the same essay, Kolakowski remarks in passing that Vico anticipated the “widespread feeling that we shape history.” Though Kolakowski credits Marx with this idea, the capacity for Marxian man to “shape history” owes less to his own will than to his ability to act as an organ of the state. Rosselli had been clear in his analysis: “In the Marxist system we are dealing with a human species that is sui generis composed of men who are by definition not free.”⁴³⁰ Rather than anticipating Marx, Vico appears to have anticipated Kolakowski himself who cautioned against an enlightenment ideal that “pronounced a death sentence on divine providence and then on God himself [and]... soon went on to kill Nature.”⁴³¹ However, both men were unwilling to forgo the gains of secular modernity. Kolakowski cautioning that such gains at the expense of rooted historical self-understanding leads to a dangerous “spiritual fragility” that threatens the individuals

428 Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 262–265.

429 Ibid., 266.

430 Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, 12.

431 Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 268.

ability to “withstand possible trials of the future.”⁴³² This fragility was revealed as much in 1920s Italy, where a ubiquitous Catholic dogmatism groomed the Italian people for the paternalist fascist state, as it was in the cultivated obedience central to the experience of life under the Communist state. Havel called it “living within the lie.” Kolakowski, drawing on the spirit of Vico, defended the value of an “imperative force tying people together” that gave a people a sense of self-understanding.⁴³³ Fundamental to the task of recovering our humanity and freedom, was recovering “our old religious roots – so that we can survive.”⁴³⁴ Havel put a name to this strategy of rediscovery and survival and called it “living in truth.”

In an essay asking whether or not there was “a future for Truth”, Kolakowski examined some popular conceptions of truth. One he called the *correspondence theory of truth*, which argues quite simply that the truth must correspond to reality. This is the kind of meaning that we ascribe truth in our daily usage. For example, when we say “the sky is blue” we understand that this description is true if it corresponds to the reality that the sky is, in fact, blue. However, Kolakowski points out that while this might satisfy our everyday “non-philosophical” use of truth, it quickly succumbs to closer scrutiny, for what we really mean, it is argued, when we say that truth corresponds to “reality” is that it remains coherent within a particular “internally coherent system”. The sky is only

432 Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 158–159.

433 Ibid., 159; Vico, *Vico*, para. 310.

For Vico, this was captured in his very original dialectical conception of divine providence that did not dominate human will, but was rather understood as the means by which divine guided a humanity that possessed free will.

434 Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 276.

“blue” insofar as there is a systemic understanding or agreement upon what “blue” is. He calls this conception of truth the *coherence theory of truth*. Where this understanding of truth breaks down for Kolakowski is that it does not satisfy what he perceives as the need of the rational human animal to know the Truth. This is because truth in this respect cannot be understood without reference to the system itself. It is not truth as such, there is no “unmediated perception of facts.”⁴³⁵ Which is to say that “the system” itself determines truth. In Gramsci's terms it represents that moment when a “world view” shifts and becomes an “implied theoretical premise” by which the “whole social bloc...is held together and unified.”⁴³⁶ This is what he calls “ideology”. In the case of Poland and the eastern bloc, it was being held together and unified under the ideology of state communism. Kolakowski's fear, was that like any rationalist system laying claim to absolute truth it had no need for history in the concrete sense that was so central to Croce's critique of Marxism. This is to say that it was not history itself that gave shape to the future, or even the present under the Communist paradigm, but rather the “iron laws” of history, laws that existed external to history itself. History in this sense becomes irrelevant as it finds itself subject to the laws rather than their source. Kolakowski puts a finer point on this critique when he argues that under such conditions history “in a perverse way... acquires its meaning from the future – i.e. from something that does not exist.”⁴³⁷ Here the historical forces are directed from outside of lived history. It was for this reason that Croce concluded that: “Communism does not even succeed in creating the historical manifestations of this Utopia in the world of fancy unless it reduces men to

435 Ibid., 290.

436 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 62–63.

437 Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 272.

puppets, devoid of nerves and blood, imagination, thought, and will.”⁴³⁸ This is precisely the trap that Kolakowski believed that Poland had fallen into and that Vico had anticipated. Under the domination of a pervasive “scientific” communist state, history had been all but eradicated and with it all elements of the sacred as they do not, and in fact cannot, conform to “mathematical and empirical criteria elaborated by science”. Consequently, those living under communism had become ill-equipped to resist.

“Hope and Hopelessness” represents one of the first significant assertions of a strategy and theory of political action and resistance first expressed by the Italian Antifascists. It represented a strategy that focused on preserving responsibility and dignity in human life and positioned them as key elements in resisting and opposing an ideological and oppressive state. It was argued that political freedom could not be achieved internal to a system that so ardently demanded that the state and civil society fall under the control of a unitary state. In our own time, it has been argued that a similarly unified power bloc is emerging, but not under the control of the state as such, rather under the control of an oligarchic minority that exercises its economic power in conquering the state as well as civil society, itself contributing to the development of a new form of oligarchic totalitarianism.⁴³⁹ The idea as outlined by Kolakowski became to locate an alternative source of power and to separate civil society from the social control of state power. In

⁴³⁸ Croce and De Gennaro, *Essays on Marx and Russia.*, 104.

⁴³⁹ Winters, *Oligarchy*, 10.

Among the many works addressing this suddenly pressing issue, perhaps the best is Jeffrey Winters' recent book *Oligarchy* in which he argues that such a process is resistant to traditional democratic checks. “Oligarchs and oligarchy will cease to exist not through democratic procedures, but rather when extremely unequal distributions of material resources are undone, and thus no longer confer exaggerated political power to a minority of actors.” Until then, I would add that oligarchy remains the new totalitarian threat.

doing so, it was believed that an independent source of revolutionary power could be found that was not connected to established power. Gobetti had linked this to “creative individualism”. In his celebrated essay *Power of the Powerless*, Havel drew on the work of Czech philosopher Jan Patočka in identifying the need to establish “parallel structures’ or independent social structures that could, over time, develop and act as a check against ideological domination of the state. In the case of the Polish Solidarity movement Christopher Beem argues that “this Gramscian revolutionary theory actually worked; it achieved the overthrow of the state.”⁴⁴⁰ But, how was it that “Polish dissidents developed a revolutionary strategy that bears so many remarkable similarities to Gramsci’s without any sign that the former was influenced by or even aware of the latter?”⁴⁴¹ Beem cites David Ost, suggesting that it was somehow “in the air”, which leads him to conclude that “the answer lies in the similar circumstances that faced both groups.”⁴⁴² However, there is something deeper going on than similar circumstances alone. In a passage in R.G. Collingwood’s posthumous classic *The Idea of History* he recounts one of Giambattista Vico’s powerful observations regarding the historical diffusion of ideas. “Ideas,” he says, “are propagated not by ‘diffusion’, like articles of commerce, but by the independent discovery by each nation of what it needs at any given stage in its own development.”⁴⁴³ While this is not a rejection of a cultural or intellectual diffusion thesis as such, it does call into question the proper relationship and especially the polarity of the relationship between ‘idea’ and ‘nation’. Vico—through Collingwood—argued that the ‘originality’ of an idea is unique to the historical conditions of each nation irrespective of the degree to

440 Beem, *The Necessity of Politics*, 115.

441 Ibid.

442 Ibid.

443 Collingwood, “The Idea of History,” 71.

which any actual 'diffusion' may have occurred. This means that though similarities may, and I would argue do, exist between the historical conditions of fascist Italy and communist Eastern-Europe this doesn't point to any universal laws independent of their respective histories. The point Collingwood is making is that ideas—facts and truths—don't exist independent of historical experience and the spontaneous discovery of ideas and knowledge is possible. It is a consequence of the lived historical experience of that society. The fact that they arrive at similar “truths” is only indicative of their function as rational beings to ask about meaning, to pursue their own humanity.⁴⁴⁴ In this sense, it is possible not only for a class or a people to discover or recover themselves as Gramsci's factory councils sought to achieve, but for them to do so in a manner that does not rely on external authority for direction. Gramsci's essay on 'The Organization of Education and Culture', which in no small way was influenced by the guiding hand of Vico's theory of knowledge, clarifies this point further. “Learning takes place mainly through a spontaneous and independent effort by the student, in which the teacher only acts as a friendly guide... Discovery of a truth by oneself without suggestion or outside help is creation, even though the truth is an old one.”⁴⁴⁵ Whether or not it is possible to demonstrate a single clear and unassailable line of thought from Vico to Kolakowski and the Anticommunists via Gramsci and the Antifascists is, therefore, less important than establishing the 'discovery of truth by oneself'; an idea that is organic to a particular society, but, exists in 'spiritual' if not actual dialogue with other similar movements. “The learner,” argues Collingwood, “invariably learns not what the other has to teach but only

444 Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 295.

445 Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, 132.

the lessons for which its previous historical development has prepared it.”⁴⁴⁶ To this end, the path that led to the two broad movements that form the core of this study—the Italian antifascist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, and the East-European dissident movements particularly in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary—were prepared by the pattern of life experienced under their own unique historical conditions. And they resulted in similarly shaped movements of resistance which could neither be considered provoked nor imposed by external influences, but instead recognized as organically “discovered” and it was this recognition that contributed to the success of the movements. It is also what allowed for the “hope” that Kolakowski encouraged. This is because even under the pervasive conditions of communism in which all facets of society have been infiltrated and a ubiquitous “surveillance state” established, the potential for creative autonomy exists. The development of social and political movements in this manner clarifies and makes possible an understanding of a political theory of action as both a ‘universal’, mobile and strategic on one hand, and as ‘organic’ and historically contingent on the other. “It shows mastery of the method; it indicated that one had entered a phase of intellectual maturity where it is possible to discover new truths.”⁴⁴⁷ It is the kind of ‘mastery’ that leads to political consciousness and an understanding of history and knowledge that underwrites Gramsci’s political theory. One of the central contributions of Gramsci—by way of Vico and Croce—is the idea that man is capable of becoming a transformative force in his own life, capable of both shaping both his own character as well as the material conditions of the world around him. And this remains a key

446 Collingwood, “The Idea of History,” 69.

447 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 132.

component of Kolakowski's own discovery in 'Hope and Hopelessness' and can be observed in the East European Anticommunist dissident movement most noticeably in the work of Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik and Gyorgy Konrad. Living under similarly 'unique' conditions a familiar pattern of thought emerged to inform a theory of politics that is both liberal and socialist. Rather than representing localized and regional manifestations of democratic resistance—a movement that is entirely particular to their time and place—these movements represent a distinctive theoretical perspective and a coherent political theory or political program of resistance that can be readily translated—as it was in their respective times—to inform current debates regarding active democratic movements throughout the world. Moreover, where it is possible to establish a commonalities between these two movements it can then be said to represent an effective alternative political theory of democratic resistance and even democratic revolution that is discoverable where “historical development has prepared it.” The task that is therefore assigned is to prepare the way. As a “program” this is made clear in Adam Michnik's “New Evolutionism” (1976) and later expanded in clutch of letters from Bialoleka Prison in 1982.⁴⁴⁸

Adam Michnik

Adam Michnik is former anticommunist dissident and currently the editor-in-chief of Poland's first post-communist newspaper—and now its largest newspaper—the 'Gazeta Wyborcza'. He was one the most visible opponents of the communist regime and perhaps

⁴⁴⁸ Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 135–148.

the most prominent member of the Polish Solidarity movement of the 1980s and helped negotiate Poland's transition to democracy in 1989. Michnik's position as a popular dissident and his role in the transition culminated in his participation in Poland's first non-communist parliament. He has since become an influential public intellectual and author. Like many of his fellow dissidents—Havel especially—Michnik believed that communism represented something distinct from other forms of totalitarianism. Rather than seeking the domination of society through the exploitation of social bonds in the manner of petty nationalism, etc., it set about “systematically destroying all social ties, political and cultural organizations, sports associations, and professional guilds, and abrogated civil rights and confiscated properties.”⁴⁴⁹ And in so doing “broke the moral backbone” of the people by preserving them in a state of perpetual anxiety.⁴⁵⁰ It was an effort—and a largely successful one that that—to break the moral center of the nation and reduce society to a state of disoriented powerlessness. Consider Havel’s greengrocer, the entirety of his social existence was replaced by life within the lie, which rendered him powerless and ultimately cultivated a psychology of captivity—captivity within the system, within the lie.⁴⁵¹ This psychology was understood to be characteristic of communities under communist authority and an experience he described as marked by:

Long periods of apathy and depolitization [that] were interrupted by sudden political earthquakes. These, however, were not followed by programs of reform or by alternative political plans. They were only protests, not reform movements. Supposed programs of reform were drawn up in government offices but they never reached the factory floors. Independent political thought did not exist in communist states; instead, the only choices left open to an oppositionist were either futile maneuvering or blind violence.⁴⁵²

449 Ibid., 43–44.

450 Ibid., 44.

451 Havel, *Open Letters*, 132–134.

452 Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 50.

Much like the Italians who concentrated on the central problem of the 'servile mentality' of the Italian people contributing to the rise and maintenance of fascism, Michnik observed that the Poles existed under conditions wherein they perpetuated their own servitude through “mechanisms of social apathy” established by the regime.⁴⁵³ In this manner Michnik also builds on Kolakowski's analysis in “Hope and Hopelessness”, rejecting the possibility of reform within the regime as well as the use of radical violence which he felt could only lead to a “blind alley”.⁴⁵⁴ This diminished political activity and was further aggravated by a “new social accord” established between the people and the regime—if the people do not make life difficult for the regime, the regime will not make life difficult for the people.⁴⁵⁵ Gobetti had been deeply critical of those he called the “apolitical ones” or those who, like the greengrocer, paid court to the regime through inactivity. “The regime welcomes skeptics. All it asks of citizens is to surrender their dignity and their political rights.”⁴⁵⁶ Michnik argued that this psychology did much more than merely create a kind of domesticated “hopelessness” it also created a kind of severe disorientation of individual identity.

Rationalist modernity—captured here in the communist system—eliminated the need for history as the basis of society and thus systematically destroyed all social and cultural ties, in favor of the new rationalist criteria. Consequently, the people themselves became detached completely from history, their social and cultural ties severed. Like many of the

453 Ibid., 51.

454 Ibid., 77.

455 Ibid., 49.

456 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 129.

dissidents, Michnik possessed a sensitivity to religion and spiritual life on the grounds that it provided not just a moral base, but also an essential foundation for civilization itself. “As long as civilization exists, the need for metaphysics will endure.”⁴⁵⁷ Detached from society and himself, the individual then seeks a reintroduction to civilization one that, in Havel's terms, “guarantee him a relatively tranquil life “in harmony with society”.” And the regime provides the mechanism by which this can be achieved: obedience. However, as Havel points out this is just an illusion of identity because it was achieved not through the confirmation of ones humanity and autonomy, but rather by its complete destruction.⁴⁵⁸ Even among the more politically motivated revolutionaries, this slave psychology distorted their own consciousness and the very idea of freedom itself became a misunderstood concept. Resistance and dissent came to be seen as synonymous with futile maneuvering and blind violence as they were seen to be the only avenues open to struggle. However, the state welcomed this kind of piecemeal violent resistance since it played to its strengths, and invited the kind of military intervention seen in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. It became a kind of ideological quicksand. The more you struggled against the regime, the deeper you appeared to sink within it. Hopelessness, did not merely compel servitude, but acted as a kind of shunt directing and controlling the physical and psychological efforts of the Polish people. This is because the individual trapped within this mentality is “incapable of discovering his own subjectivity, for he has been deprived of his community, his ideals, and his language. He is left alone with his hate, which spells hopelessness.”⁴⁵⁹ Even where the regime did expose itself to resistance

457 Havel, Michnik, and Matynia, *An Uncanny Era*, 130.

458 Havel, *Open Letters*, 133.

459 Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 50–51.

it invited the “slave revolt” because as Michnik points out. it had “little in common with a movement for social or political change.”⁴⁶⁰ The fundamental problem is that even if “the rebellious slave does free himself for a moment...his main desire is revenge, which is rarely constructive. The rebellious slave will at best look for a better tsar.”⁴⁶¹ In this manner, revolutionary action fails to correct or even recognize the servile nature of the movements and so it is condemned to repeat the pattern of servitude. This was because despite undergoing regime change “the political structure...remains unchanged” and this is a natural consequence of “the absence of an authentic political culture or any standards of democratic collective life.”⁴⁶² Putinism in Russia and the regime of Lukashenko in Belarus remain stark and persistent reminders of this tendency.⁴⁶³ Given these conditions, the only other option that reveals itself to the people is passive obedience. It was in this manner that a kind of ideological blindness was established through a carefully maintained social and political illusion.⁴⁶⁴

While Michnik argues that this experience is exclusive to communism, the fascist experience in Italy—layered upon the smothering presence of the Church—is described by the antifascists in similar terms and both outline remarkably similar strategies on how

460 Ibid.

461 Ibid.

462 Ibid., 142.

463 Havel, Michnik, and Matynia, *An Uncanny Era*, 151–152.

464 Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 483.

Gobetti had further cautioned against such blanket revolutionary strategies because this would also have the effect of not just sweeping away the offending regime, but also any gains it may have achieved. This was precisely what Gobetti hoped to avoid with the revolutionary factory councils (see p.102 of this dissertation). Gobetti did not see the proletarian revolution as an effort to destroy and replace a class whose “existence is no longer compatible with society.” Instead Gobetti recognized a continued value of the bourgeoisie as producers and organizers of modernity, and saw only the need to strip them of their class character, but not their function. Violent revolution of the kind advanced by radical Marxists at the time would effectively toss the baby out with the bathwater.

to break free from this servile state. Gramsci observed something similar in his analysis of “The Southern Question” when he criticized the socialist party itself of having itself become the vehicle of “bourgeois ideology’ and spoke of the need for the proletariat to “rid itself of corporative hangovers”, prejudices and “incrustations”.⁴⁶⁵ Much like the antifascists and perhaps even more-so like the Catholic philosopher Vico, Michnik leans on the Catholic Church as a “key source of encouragement” for those struggling to preserve their autonomy and find their freedom and dignity.⁴⁶⁶ He understood the church as providing the kind of rootedness necessary to the social and moral formation of the individual as a human. It was in this manner that Michnik tells us that Havel similarly “connected his religious outlook with his politics.”⁴⁶⁷ Michnik's attitude towards the revolutionary role of the Church is clarified in his essay “Conversation in the Citadel”(1982).

We need the Catholic Church – a church that will teach us moral values, defend national and human dignity, provide and asylum for trampled hopes. But we do not expect the Church to become the nation's political representative, to formulate political programs and to sign political pacts. Whoever wants such a Church, whoever expects these things from Catholic priests, is—whether he likes it or not—asking for the political reduction of the Christian religion. For we do not need a Church that is locked up, that is hidden behind the walls of a particular political ideology. We need an open Church.⁴⁶⁸

This ought to remind us of Vico's distinctive interpretation of divine providence. In his case the struggle was two-fold. In the first place, Italy itself was largely under the dominant influence of a 'politically reductive' Church (to borrow Michnik's term) and in the second place, Vico identified in Cartesianism the emergence of a similarly

465 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 31,36.

466 Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 145.

467 Havel, Michnik, and Matynia, *An Uncanny Era*, 186.

468 Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 327.

deterministic ideology. In both the institutions of his faith as well as those of the emerging scientific order Vico recognized achievements that he was unwilling to forgo, however, he also recognized the potential for great danger. What Vico hoped to achieve through his re-imagining of providence was the preservation of human agency against a Church that has become too deterministic, but did not undermine the need for “a divinity who sees into the depths of their [humanity's] hearts.”⁴⁶⁹ For Vico, as it was for Kolakowski and consequently Michnik and Havel, “a society of men can neither come into being, nor sustain itself, without a means whereby some should rely upon the promises of others and be quietened by their assurances concerning secret matters.” These matters, argues Vico, “can be nothing other than the idea of God in the attribute of providence.”⁴⁷⁰

It is in this manner that society is founded and grows. Much as Kolakowski does in his essay “Is There a Future for Truth?”(2001), Vico rejects pragmatic claims to truth. This is not because he believes them incapable of establishing civil society, but rather that such a society would “presuppose an idea of the true such that the revelation of something true is enough to oblige people to believe it without [requiring] any human evidence.”⁴⁷¹ The famous American journalist A.J. Liebling clarifies the danger of such a conception of truth in his essay on “experts”.

To combat an old human prejudice in favor of eyewitness testimony... the expert must intimate that he has access to some occult source or science not available to

469 Vico, *Vico*, 104.

470 Ibid.

471 Ibid.

either reporter or reader. He is the Priest of Eleusis, the man with the big picture... All is manifest to him, since his conclusions are not limited by his powers of observation. Logistics... favor him, since it is possible to not see many things at the same time. For example, a correspondent cannot cover a front and the Pentagon simultaneously. An expert can, and from an office in New York, at that.⁴⁷²

In Vico's terms, the pragmatic conception of truth advanced by Locke was just such a concession of position, and the antifascist and communist experience confirms this. Both instances amounted to a concession to “[men] with the big picture” that no longer needed history to confirm the legitimacy of their 'truths', which are guided instead by party 'consensus' or revealed Truth. Vico believed that a concept of providence that placed human autonomy at the center of the divine order would both shield mankind from the terrors of dogmatic faith as well as the worst excesses of rationalist modernity. As much as Vico was concerned about the potential excesses of Cartesianism he was certainly familiar with the terror associated with a dogmatic Church. In a note to his classic work on *Vico and Herder*, Isaiah Berlin tells us that Vico “may have feared charges of heresy” and that “the Inquisition, in the last years of the seventeenth century, had inflicted terrible punishment on some of his Neapolitan friends and contemporaries.”⁴⁷³ The shared experience of persecution and terror under the fascist and communist regime's lead both the antifascists and the anticommunist dissidents discussed in this paper to turn back to their history and to excavate their language, popular religion, and 'common sense' in an effort to recover their history, their identity, and consequently political life. Central to this dissertation has been a discussion of the role of history in our understanding of knowledge and truth; particularly the role of history as it differs from those utopian,

472 Liebling, *The Most of A.J. Liebling.*, 158.

473 Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, 43.

transcendental, and determinist views of truth and knowledge—most notably associated with fascism and communism. It is humanist historicism that sees human action within a contingent view of history as fundamental to character formation and national development, and ultimately human freedom.

One of the key concepts that was introduced by the dissidents discussed in this chapter was the political idea of 'dignity'. The concept of "living in dignity" formed the core of Kolakowski's program for the participation of intellectuals in the anti-communist opposition and therefore greatly informs the work of Michnik. In the essay "A New Evolutionism" Michnik argues that:

In searching for truth, or, to quote Leszek Kolakowski, "by living in dignity," opposition intellectuals are striving not so much for a better tomorrow as for a better today. Every act of defiance helps us build the framework of democratic socialism, which should not be merely or primarily a legal institutional structure but a real, day-to-day community of free people.⁴⁷⁴

This illustrates Michnik's commitment to both the socialism which he was born into and raised in, as well as a liberal humanism that respected individualism, personal responsibility, and 'human dignity'. In fact, for Michnik as well as a whole generation of dissident writers liberal humanist values and socialist values were seen as "not self-contradictory", but rather as complementary, or even necessarily associated.⁴⁷⁵ Kolakowski's famous 'conservative-liberal-socialist' position captures vividly the dimensions of a perspective shared with the Italian antifascist tradition of Gobetti, Rosselli, and Gramsci. Like these Italian thinkers, Michnik was able to locate in Marxism

⁴⁷⁴ Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 148.

⁴⁷⁵ Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, 225–227.

One of Kolakowski's best known essays illustrates this point, describing the 'credo' of 'conservative-liberal-socialist'.

and all other forms of totalitarian ideology a vision of collective emancipation that allows for the sacrifice of individual dignity in the name of achieving universal human emancipation. This is tied to the concept of historical materialism, which articulates this idea in terms of a grand narrative of class struggle. Kolakowski criticized this Leninist formulation of class struggle by connecting socialism not to a messianic universalism, but to humanism. In his 1968 book *Towards a Marxist Humanism*, Kolakowski looked to move the Left away from class antagonism alone towards a struggle for the moral convictions of the individual. Furthermore, Kolakowski thought that by shifting attention from class to the individual he was making the agenda of the left more universal. This also placed the individual squarely at the center of the struggle for socialism, but a socialism understood in terms of the autonomous 'responsible' individual rather than the individual subject to deterministic forces of history. This recasting of socialism on the grounds of an ethical individualism rather than as an 'egalitarian collectivism' was key in shaping Michnik's views. It is a perspective that replicates Croce's critique of Marx, and characterized an open-ended liberalism that rejected the universalism associated with the ideological state. In his prison letters, Michnik demonstrates his determination to find a political theory of action that is best attuned to this struggle against ideological totalitarian power and one in which "a new political consciousness be developed," one that remains faithful to the central role of the working classes as the prime vehicle for change.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁶ Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 144.

Michnik points to the Polish Solidarity movement, aided by an independent Catholic Church, as the means by which the powerful psychology of captivity was broken. Solidarity was the first non-communist independent self-governing trade union founded in 1980 in Gdansk Shipyard. At its peak its membership totaled just over a quarter of the total population. Michnik argues that the Solidarity movement gave its membership a taste for freedom because it was through their own efforts that “they forged their solidarity and discovered their strength” and that “they felt themselves to be a civic and national community.”⁴⁷⁷ In a 2003 interview titled “An Account of Our Victories, an Accounting of Our Freedom”, Michnik argued that all the Marxist training that he had been compelled to participate in only taught him that “there are no historical necessities” and that “history will be what we make of it with our hands.”⁴⁷⁸ This decidedly Vician statement is a clear rejection of the determinism associated with Marxist historical materialism. Taken together with his support of Solidarity it is a position that clearly recalls Gramsci and Gobetti's own commitment to the Turin factory councils and it not hard to imagine that it is Michnik rather than Gobetti who argued that, “the important thing is for them [the workers] to feel that political action is necessary and for them to believe that their salvation will come from taking action, not from living in hope or cultivating abstract justice.”⁴⁷⁹ Gobetti had argued that the state-sanctioned unions “tends to promote the consciousness of being wage earners in the workers, not the dignity of being producers; that accepts their status as slaves and seeks to improve it in reformist and utilitarian terms rather than change it.”⁴⁸⁰ While Michnik admits that as a movement

477 Ibid., 51.

478 Havel, Michnik, and Matynia, *An Uncanny Era*, 126.

479 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 125–126.

480 Ibid., 168.

Solidarity was not without its inevitable problems, it ultimately had the effect of cracking the veneer of the Havelian lie and like Solidarity, the Gramscian factory council was something more than another union. “In the council the worker would sense his full dignity as an indispensable element of modern life...thus he would reinforce his own aptitudes, seeking to create a practical organization through which his class might come to power.”⁴⁸¹ When faced with an awakening within the workers—whether through Solidarity or Gramscian factory councils—the establishment often redoubled its efforts and reverted to defending ideologies of the state, declaring that such activities are contrary to state or national interests and “will lead to national catastrophe, that all the people should unite their efforts to support the state.”⁴⁸² In the case of the Gramscian factory councils, they were quickly crushed before they had a chance to succeed as Solidarity would decades later.⁴⁸³

These redoubled efforts played heavily on the institutionalized anxieties of the people. Michnik was concerned that any defense of the ideology of the state became dangerous when “when a state’s power has been confiscated by a band of gangsters who impose their ways on the people.” Under these conditions “the attitude “loyalty to the state” is simple complicity in crime.”⁴⁸⁴ This was particularly the case during the period of “normalization” during which martial law was declared in the effort to deal with the so-called “anarchy” that resulted from Solidarity. During this period there was a crackdown

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 52.

⁴⁸³ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 168–169.

This was achieved through the combined lack of commitment on the part of Italian socialists, who confined the movement to Turin, and aggressive repression by the industrialists themselves.

⁴⁸⁴ Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 52.

on dissidents and thousands were arrested, Michnik among them. Normalization in this sense “meant the total destruction of all independent institutions.”⁴⁸⁵ Much like the Polish experience of communism, Gobetti had voiced concern over fascism's efforts to “dictate the future and keep Italy a political minor, servile and deferent toward its guardians.”⁴⁸⁶ In this case the 'guardians' that Italy surrendered to were gangsters in the form of the fascist state, and like in Poland “all it asks of the citizens is to surrender their dignity and their political rights.”⁴⁸⁷

The “fundamental issue” that has faced all dissidents and all persons who struggle in the face of this political atrophy was not only developing a general strategy of resistance, but also developing an understanding of the role of the individual. By determining how to participate and who is considered a participant, power can actively manipulate the democratic nature of a movement. It was for this reason that understanding the nature of participation became key for Michnik, particularly how it is that individuals could best participate in their own governance and the struggle for democratic non-domination. On the ground, this question is first addressed in the decision of whether to collaborate or to resist, whether to stay or go. When the Fascists rose to power in Italy, these were decisions that immediately faced every would-be defender of liberal freedoms and democracy. Fifty years later, Adam Michnik took up these questions himself in the context of Polish anti-communist resistance. As he contemplated the “forms of the underground” he concluded that “resistance against such a “state” is natural, and civil

485 Ibid., 81.

486 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 24.

487 Ibid., 129.

disobedience is the only attitude worthy of respect.”⁴⁸⁸ Central to any such program of resistance is “participation in authentic civic and intellectual life”, a central aspect of which was “a pinch of dignity, a pinch of fraternity. And a daily breath of truth.”⁴⁸⁹ Intransigence and an unwillingness to surrender his dignity and political rights remained at the forefront of Michnik's theory of action. After his first arrest following the imposition of martial law in December 1981, Michnik was asked to sign a 'confession' stating that he would “desist from activities “contrary to the law””, after which he would be released. Michnik refused to sign arguing that: “Ostracism would play into the hands of the people in power, since this is precisely what they want—to break society's resistance and the solidarity of the people by creating divisions.”⁴⁹⁰ The 'loyalty declarations' that the regime had people sign, had to be “voluntary” if they were to have any effect. Michnik resisted and opted to remain in detention because dignity and common sense “does not allow it [signing]” and that “to sign this declaration would be to negate yourself, to wipe out the meaning of your life.”⁴⁹¹ Here again we see the positioning of human dignity at the core of politics and perhaps no man of letters is better known for his intimate exploration of human dignity, politics, and conscience as Vaclav Havel.

488 Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 52.

489 Ibid., 62.

490 Ibid., 5.

491 Ibid., 5–6.

Vaclav Havel, Ideology As The “Juggernaut Of Power”⁴⁹²

I

Vaclav Havel was a playwright, poet, dissident and the first president of the Czechoslovakia after the fall of communism (1989-1992). He was also the first president of the Czech Republic (1992-2004) after the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Not unlike Gobetti and especially Carlo Rosselli, Havel was born into an upper-middle class family. Prior to communist rule his family had been relatively wealthy, with strong intellectual ties and it was this experience that steeped him in the humanistic and humanitarian values that were to become the hallmark of his political thought. However, the life that Havel led came to an abrupt end when the communists came to power. His “bourgeois” family ancestry meant that he was restricted in his career path. Unable to pursue traditionally “intellectual” careers Havel eventually found work as a stage hand. This would be his introduction to the world of theater where he would eventually gain prominence as a playwright. It was Havel's dramatic works—highly political in their content and speaking to the conditions of life under Czechoslovak communism—that were a key influence in shaping the unconventional aspects of what would become Havel's political theory of “living in truth” and his critique of post-totalitarianism made famous in the essay *Power of the Powerless* (1978). For Havel the claim that politics could survive under the conditions of ideological domination was absurd and absurdist theater held a mirror up to the lies that Czech society and post-totalitarianism in general was built upon. The very act

⁴⁹² Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 10.

of making this visible through his plays allowed for Havel—and those participating—to begin to carve out a space of truth.

In her recent book on political action in Havel's thought Delia Popescu points to this space of truth amidst the lies of post-totalitarianism as the center that gave rise to 'antipolitical' politics.⁴⁹³ It was antipolitical because it refused to engage with the state and *official* 'political life' on 'their' terms, and instead turned its focus on the individual and civil society as the center of true politics. This resulted in an effort to indirectly challenge the "reality" established by the system and create a parallel reality rooted in individual responsibility and an open civil society. Were this exercise to remain at the level of absurdist theater Havel might have remained the idealist that many of his critics saw him as; however, such was not to be the case. Through his dramatic work and his later political writings Havel helped individuals to rediscover their own identity and humanity, and therefore rediscover politics itself. Popescu focuses in on this as an act of *applied* political theory and it is hard to argue otherwise. Though Havel's writings aren't in themselves instructive in the sense of teaching lessons, or telling us how to construct an ideal society in the vein of traditional political philosophy, they do follow in the Italian tradition in which the work of philosophy begins with historical analysis, an interpretation that began at least with Machiavelli (a playwright himself incidentally) and certainly Vico.⁴⁹⁴ It represented a deep understanding of the practical nature of philosophy and would find its greatest modern expression in Gramsci's analysis of hegemony, which

493 Delia Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel's Thought: The Responsibility of Resistance* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2012).

494 Machiavelli, *Mandragola* (1524)

relied heavily on developing the connection between an historical understanding of culture and society, and successful political action. Gramsci some forty years prior to Havel revived the concept of ‘philosophy as praxis’ as a concept of philosophy understood as a “critico-practical activity” that is central to moral and political awakening; a concept that Gramsci promotes among a class of new intellectuals who must be actively involved in practical life and whose job it is politically to help develop independent responsibility in each individual. This conclusion, clearly felt across the work of Vico, the Italian Antifascists and Havel emphasizes the necessity to focus not just on society, but also on the individual and the importance of understanding philosophy as a practical work, as politics. For Havel the true dissident embodied this figure.

Havel described the struggle of life under post-totalitarianism as marked by a “profound crisis of human identity” and as “a deep moral crisis in society” and refers to post-totalitarianism as “a record of the people’s own failure as individuals.”⁴⁹⁵ It is a language that we should find immediately familiar as Gobetti and Rosselli both spoke in similar terms about totalitarianism amounting to a moral crisis and especially as the “autobiography of the nation”. This recognition of the problems of totalitarianism and even post-totalitarianism as a moral crisis and a failure of the people collectively and especially as individuals profoundly shifts the role of the individual as a political actor?

Havel explains that:

A person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than

⁴⁹⁵ Havel, *Open Letters*, 153,145.

his own personal survival, is a demoralized person. The system depends on this demoralization, deepens it, is in fact a projection of it into society.⁴⁹⁶

Havel, like Vico and the antifascists before him, was interested in the rootedness of human life and ultimately the political significance of this. Kolakowski puts a fine point on this concern regarding rootedness when he argues in 'The Idolatry of Politics' that one of the fundamental conclusions stemming from the Cartesian Enlightenment is the belief that "historical knowledge would be useful only if it provided us with technical guidance we could subsequently apply in governing, in vying for power, or in warfare, as if we were consulting a manual to repair a broken vacuum cleaner."⁴⁹⁷ He laments this instrumental and technical approach to history as fundamental to the rationalist perspective and also terribly pernicious. Havel agrees and like Kolakowski sees the communist or post-totalitarian system as contributing to the demoralization of human life and positions the demoralized person as a central figure in propagating the post-totalitarian system. This contributes to the destruction of political life understood in the traditional sense and politics is replaced with ideological ritual.

People have no opportunity to express themselves politically in public, let alone to organize politically. The gap that results is filled by ideological ritual. In such a situation, people's interest in political matters naturally dwindles and independent political thought, insofar as it exists at all, is seen by the majority as unrealistic, far-fetched, a kind of self-indulgent game, hopelessly distant from their everyday concerns; something admirable, perhaps, but quite pointless, because it is on the one hand entirely utopian and on the other hand extraordinarily dangerous, in view of the unusual vigor with which any move in that direction is persecuted by the regime.⁴⁹⁸

496 Ibid., 153.

497 Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, 158.

498 Havel, *Open Letters*, 158.

Gramsci illustrates this point clearly in 'The Southern Question' when he laments the lack of local publishing houses from which to disseminate the work of southern intellectuals, especially what he calls small and medium reviews “around which average groups of intellectuals gather.”⁴⁹⁹ This, argues Gramsci, compels southern intellectuals who wish to circulate their ideas to leave the south and rely on publisher outside the south. Consequently, the southern agrarian bloc “have seen to it that the presentation of the southern question should not exceed certain limits, should not become revolutionary.”⁵⁰⁰ Gramsci also notes the complicated relationship that he has with Croce, from whom he both derived considerable influence, but also criticized for having “detached the radical intellectuals of the South from the peasant masses, making them share in a national and European culture, and by means of this culture he has caused them to be absorbed by the national bourgeoisie.”⁵⁰¹ In both instances he is describing conditions by which the would-be radical intellectuals are de-radicalized and effectively brought to heel. The Polish dissident Adam Michnik also voices similar concerns in his essays “Why you are not signing...”(1982) and “Why You Are Not Emigrating...: A Letter from Bialoleka”(1982). In the latter essay especially, he explored the “eternal Polish question: here or there, real emigration or internal emigration, compromise and grass-roots work or a firm stand and silence, work within the official structures or construction of independent ones?”⁵⁰² While Michnik approached this as a practical problem that needed to be solved by the members of Solidarity, Havel took something of a more

499 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 47.

500 Ibid., 47–48.

501 Ibid., 48.

502 Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, 19.

philosophical turn, but they all understood philosophy as more than a mere abstraction but rather as a political and even revolutionary tool.

“What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural "levels": the one that can be called "civil society", that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called "private", and that of "political society" or "the State". These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of "hegemony" which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of "direct domination" or command exercised through the State and "juridical" government. The functions in question are precisely organisational and connective. The intellectuals are the dominant group's "deputies" exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government.”⁵⁰³

Thus Havel is clearly something more than merely an idealistic playwright, or, in the case of Gobetti an idealistic student activist and publisher. In both cases, their movement outside of existing politics should not be looked at as “an idealistic hypostatization of politics.”⁵⁰⁴ It is not the case that either Havel or Gobetti are looking to retreat from politics or to separate political life from the life of society, but rather to remain mindful of the deterministic relationship that exists between the two. And it is on this matter that Gramsci's analysis of hegemony and Havel's own analysis of post-totalitarianism best develop an understanding of this relationship.

Vico's analysis of culture and Gramsci's analysis of hegemony under bourgeois liberalism and Italian fascism reflect Havel's own analysis of Czechoslovak life under communism and post-totalitarianism. This was especially so during the period of “normalization” that followed the defeat of the Prague Spring and contributes to Havel's development of a political theory that explains the unique character of post-totalitarianism. He then

503 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 12.

504 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, xlv.

transforms this analysis into an analytic lens through which a broader critique of modernity and the enlightenment can be understood, and from which western democracy is not exempted. In *Disturbing the Peace* Havel writes about how the crisis of modernity as experienced through communism is not so different as that under western capitalism, an idea alluded to in his most famous work ‘Power of the Powerless’. Here, he describes the crisis as being a function of the organization of society and economy, whether it be through Soviet-style communism or the laissez-faire capitalism of America. "The reasons for the crisis in which the world now finds itself are lodged in something deeper than a particular way of organizing the economy or a particular political system. The West and the East, though different in so many ways, are going through a single, common crisis."⁵⁰⁵ Havel points to specific tendencies within western democracy—namely a shared legacy of enlightened rationalism and scientism—that leads towards a highly evolved western consumerism and the cultivation of what Popescu calls the “silenced citizen, the timid disengaged witness of society.”⁵⁰⁶ It was a fear eluded to by Vico. Gobetti also offers a similar critique of a domesticated citizenry when he describes the problem with the “apolitical ones”.⁵⁰⁷ It is the ‘ideological veil’ of ‘automatism’ that accompanies the “silenced citizen” that helps the individual “preserve the illusion of dignity.”⁵⁰⁸ This is achieved by providing a “bridge of excuses” that enable the individual “to turn away from public life” and encourages “a social orientation towards private needs and desires.”⁵⁰⁹ It is for this reason that Havel’s post-totalitarianism enlists the power of

⁵⁰⁵ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 10.

⁵⁰⁶ Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel’s Thought*, 41.

⁵⁰⁷ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 129–130.

⁵⁰⁸ Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel’s Thought*, 43.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 43–35.

‘consumerism’ in the effort to divorce the individual from public life. “This rift between private and public life led to an ethical decoupling from the larger concerns of humanity.”⁵¹⁰ And man is reduced from the status of autonomous citizen to that of a mere consumer. Gobetti had voiced concern over this as well, pointing out that, “economists and politicians have always preferred to concentrate on the figure of the consumer, a mere logical construct, vulgar, parasitic, and apolitical.”⁵¹¹ It reduces the individual to one incapable of acting politically, incapable of political consciousness. At best it reduces individuals to abstractions much as the Party does making political actors consumers of a political product sold to them as voters. Gobetti felt that in the long run, “the efforts of the free-marketeers to create a consumer consciousness were bound to come to nothing, because the consumer is not a cipher, not an individual capable as such of political consciousness.”⁵¹² History has shown, as Havel is clear to demonstrate that the consumer identity, far from coming to nothing, rests at the center of the post-totalitarian system it reinforces.

II

In her analysis of Havel's theory of political action, Popescu cites Jeffrey Isaac's popular essay on the “silence of political theory” regarding the revolutions of 1989.⁵¹³ This struck Isaac as a shocking indictment of the condition of a field (political theory) which seemed unwilling to welcome into the fold of philosophy “the writings of the principal Soviet

510 Ibid., 47.

511 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 128.

512 Ibid.

513 Isaac, “The Strange Silence of Political Theory.”

bloc democratic oppositionists.”⁵¹⁴ Consequently, philosophy was inviting a 'blind spot' which would render it powerless to come to terms with either the development of East-European communism or its complex relationship with the west as its inverted reflection.⁵¹⁵ Isaac identified one of the primary arguments standing against these figures as the perception that their analysis were historically narrow or limited in scope. This was a criticism popularly made of Italian antifascist thinkers like Gobetti and Rosselli, whose contributions are only just now being acknowledged beyond Italy, and only lifted with regards to Gramsci in recent decades. Like Isaac, Popescu was unconvinced by those who would say that while the dissidents of 1989 may have been gifted writers and otherwise politically or historically significant figures, they were “not especially innovative or genuinely theoretical.”⁵¹⁶ Here Gramsci's own analysis of the ideological nature of intellectualism is evoked, recalling his criticism of the “widespread” method of identifying intellectuals by having “having looked for this criterion of distinction in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations.”⁵¹⁷ Just as an intellectual may not look the same in every context, neither will political theory itself, but it is no less revealing or important and perhaps even more illuminating. Picking up on Isaac's critique, Popescu presents a compelling argument that Havel was indeed a “serious” philosopher and I believe she she is correct. However, where Popescu is

514 Ibid., 639.

515 Havel, *Open Letters*.

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516 Isaac, “The Strange Silence of Political Theory,” 639.

517 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 8.

committed to persuading the reader of this point through an intimate analysis of his political theory, this dissertation has endeavored to locate Havel in a wider alternative tradition that can be traced back at least as far as Vico. One that has been obscured, at least in part for the reasons identified by Isaac and Popescu. For those who are familiar with the long legacy of Italian antifascism, Havel reads as a remarkable second, or even a third or fourth act that builds on concepts such as Gramsci's concept of ideology, 'philosophy as praxis' and the role of the revolutionary role of the 'organic' intellectual.⁵¹⁸ Havel and his like-minded "democratic oppositionists" evoke not just the experience, but the principal orientation of those Italian Antifascists who followed Vico's philosophical outlook with theories of action built on them. They too have fallen prey to the kind of arguments made in Aviezer Tucker's interpretation of Havel as a "blindly optimistic" revolutionary.⁵¹⁹ In his book on *the philosophy and politics of czech dissidence from patocka to havel* (2000) Tucker argues that Havel "anticipated an existential revolution" and that such a revolution "should restructure society" and "Havel, like Marx, left most of the details of the postrevolutionary period out of his analysis."⁵²⁰ A Popescu rightly points out, Tucker is confusing the hope associated with anticipation for a kind of naive expectation that doesn't take seriously Havel's deeper critique of society writ large. In *To the Castle and Back* (2007) Havel is clear, "I don't think I ever had any great illusions... I think that even during the revolution, I was sober, down to earth, and cautious, and did not try to achieve the impossible. That does not mean that I never succumbed to the heady atmosphere of the time. But when I did, it was fortunately not in any basic political

⁵¹⁸ Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel's Thought*, 23.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁵²⁰ Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, 163, 164.

decision-making, only in my rhetoric.”⁵²¹ What Tucker misses is a principle of political realism that can be traced as far back as at least Machiavelli who, in the *Prince* spoke of aiming one's arrows high so that you might hit your target. Havel—as skilled a dramatist as there ever was—understood perhaps better than anyone save Machiavelli—a dramatist as well it must be noted—the deep connection between “theater”, “drama” and “politics”. In his 1996 speech before the Academy of Performing Arts, Havel made this connection explicit, “political action cannot serve as a symbol or play an important role unless it is know about.”⁵²² In this sense, cultivating the anticipation of “an existential revolution”, whether through speech-making or theater, is a necessary first step towards its realization, especially where such a position might be otherwise understood as blind optimism. And it is such an “art of the impossible” that makes authentic politics, rather than political monologue possible. While Havel has long been recognized as an exceptional critic of twentieth-century political life, Havel the playwright and dissent is a model of what Popescu calls “applied political theory” and so it must account as much for lived experience as it does an anticipated one.⁵²³ To those familiar with the long dialogue between Adam Michnik and Havel this is not a surprising argument, though it is an argument that is well made and perhaps necessary if only to secure his legacy as philosopher of political action. Adam Michnik, once described Havel as “the conscience of his time” or as “a man of witness” to his time.⁵²⁴ Political theorist Nadia Urbinati held a similar opinion of Piero Gobetti whose essays she described as “witness to a liberalism

521 Václav Havel, Karel Hvíždala, and Paul R Wilson, *To the Castle and Back* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 58–59.

522 Václav Havel, *The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice : Speeches and Writings, 1990-1996* (New York: Fromm International, 1998), 254.

523 Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel's Thought*, 23.

524 Havel, Michnik, and Matynia, *An Uncanny Era*, 210.

conscious of its imminent and perhaps long-lasting twilight.”⁵²⁵ Just as Urbinati felt that Gobetti “fills a gap on the shelves of Anglo-American scholars, who already have books by the main intellectual companions of Gobetti: Antonio Gramsci, Benedetto Croce, and Carlo Rosselli”, it is important to fill the gaps in our understanding of the wider struggle for liberal politics itself. Havel is a critical part of an historical struggle that lies at the heart of our understanding of modernity and the enlightenment itself, in particular how we have come to understand and accept the very terms upon which liberal modernity has been built. While I agree with Popescu then when she argues that it is not essential that Havel is the “new” or “novel” thinker that his critics insist he must be if we are to take him seriously, I would add that it is precisely this lack of “newness” that makes him all the more important. In this reading, Havel’s greatest contribution can therefore be said to lie in his ability to make fresh and relevant a current of dissident political thought that has persisted alongside history’s dominant course, but has been routinely marginalized, dismissed or silenced. Philosophy understood in this way—be it Gobetti, Gramsci or Havel—is critical not because it is necessarily ‘original’ or represents some as yet untold ‘truth’, but only insofar as it can be applied to support political action.⁵²⁶ Havel is representative of a radical departure from what we have come to expect as the norm for political philosophy and politics itself, which is precisely why scholars have faced such a significant challenge in categorizing him. Like many of his fellow dissidents, he has escaped general categorization and as such neither requires nor can be expected to provide a defense wholly within the terms of traditional categories. Havel’s experience of

⁵²⁵ Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, xv.

⁵²⁶ Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel’s Thought*, 23.

post-totalitarianism represents a cautionary tale for western democracies who similarly maintain their societies on the basis of an escapist consumerism that facilitates the abandonment of the public sphere and the political. For Havel this could be achieved through breadlines and state issued ration books just as easily as lines for Target's next 'capsule collection' or designer collaboration, Apple's latest iPhone, the newest 'artistic' effort musical or otherwise produced by some hit reality show's popular new act, or even the latest pop-up restaurant. "By fixing a person's whole attention on his mere consumer interests, it is hoped to render him incapable of realizing the increased extent to which he has been spiritually, politically, and morally violated."⁵²⁷ "Modernity," argues Popescu, "is the child of European Enlightenment and the burden that the entire Western world has to handle. This assessment naturally calls for a re-evaluation not only of Eastern European society but also of Western democracy."⁵²⁸ And this dissertation is nothing if not an effort towards just this kind of re-evaluation.

In this 1984 essay, "Politics and Conscience", Havel argues that both communism and capitalism constitute a mutual threat in that they represent "the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal, and inhuman power—the power of ideologies, systems, apparatus, bureaucracy, artificial languages, and political slogans."⁵²⁹ It is an idea that finds expression in *automatism*—a concept introduced in "The Power of the Powerless" and one that gains momentum and further expression through the bureaucratic society satirized in Havel's first and most famous play *The Garden Party*.⁵³⁰ Havel traces the

⁵²⁷ Havel, *Open Letters*, 59.

⁵²⁸ Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel's Thought*, 55.

⁵²⁹ Havel, *Open Letters*, 267.

⁵³⁰ Václav Havel, *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, 1st Grove Press ed (New York: Grove Press, 1993).

origin of this threat to what he calls the “scientific model of the world”, which has alienated mankind from the “world of their actual experience.”⁵³¹ Vico voiced similar concerns regarding the transfer of Descartes “new critical method” beyond the natural sciences to the “sphere of practical wisdom” or the sphere of human life, which he had considered a “great fault” that “has sometimes been the cause of great damage and evil”.⁵³² In “The Southern Question” Gramsci was similarly cautious regarding the application of “science” as a frequent instrument used to crush the wretched and exploited, pointing to a dehumanizing *southernist* perspective by which a whole society—bourgeois liberals and working class socialists alike—were conditioned to accept the idea that “the Southerners are biologically inferior beings, semi-barbarians or total barbarians, by natural destiny; if the South is backward, the fault does not lie with the capitalist system or with any other historical cause, but with Nature, which has made the Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric.”⁵³³ It has become a means by which “science” was made to serve the ideological interests of the ruling bourgeois class and according to Gramsci, it had even poisoned the socialists themselves. Havel recognizes—as did Vico and Gramsci—that it represented more than just a localized problem particular to either an Italy that had somehow been bypassed by the northern enlightenment, or an Italy suffering the trauma of fascism. For Havel it was,

...the symbol of an age which seeks to transcend the boundaries of the natural world and its norms and to make it into a merely private concern, a matter of subjective preference and private feeling, of the illusions, prejudices, and whims of a “mere” individual. It is a symbol of an epoch which denies the binding importance of personal experience including the experience of mystery and of the

⁵³¹ Havel, *Open Letters*, 250.

⁵³² Vico, *Vico*, 43.

⁵³³ Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 31.

absolute and displaces the personally experienced absolute as the measure of the world with a new, man-made absolute, devoid of mystery, free of the "whims" of subjectivity and, as such, impersonal and inhuman. It is the absolute of so-called objectivity: the objective, rational cognition of the scientific model of the world.⁵³⁴

When Havel says that it “denies the binding importance of personal experience” he is drawing attention to what were Vico's earliest concerns, that “were you to try to apply the geometric method to life, 'you would succeed only in trying to be a rational lunatic', steering in a straight line amid life's curves, as though caprice, rashness, chance and fortune held no sway in human affairs.”⁵³⁵ This is to say that to accept the universal authority of the scientific model of the world would deny the reality of all that we consider essentially human and is fundamentally dehumanizing. Vico cautioned against the intellectual monopoly of geometric method of life, arguing that “those who transfer this method to the sphere of practical wisdom” and are satisfied with the singular truth of reason, “fail altogether to consider what men feel in common about this one truth or whether the probabilities appear true to them.”⁵³⁶ This constituted a problem that had the potential to cause “great damage and evil”⁵³⁷ However, in Havel's own time and our own, some three centuries later, it has risen to the level of crisis and borne bitter fruit socially, politically, and environmentally. Like Vico, Havel's politics is centered on the need to recapture humanity's freedom from the domination of “the power of “megamachinery”” in the form of ideology.⁵³⁸ Vico finds a bulwark against this threat in a careful interpretation of divine providence, which he understood as a manifestation of both a

⁵³⁴ Havel, *Open Letters*, 251.

⁵³⁵ Vico, *Vico*, 71.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 10.

transcendent [moral] authority and individual autonomy.⁵³⁹ Like Vico, Havel is concerned with the manner in which scientism has affected a shift in the way that we understand power in modernity; not as derived from personal lived experience or history, but rather as a function of a “new, man-made absolute... the absolute of so-called objectivity.” This understanding of power is seen as “free of the “whims” of subjectivity” and is therefore ahistorical, or even anti-historical, and “inhuman”—rooted in the “rational cognition of the scientific model of the world.”⁵⁴⁰ However, like Vico, Havel is “not proposing that humans abolish smokestacks or prohibit science or generally return to the Middle Ages.”⁵⁴¹ By fixing this “objective” construction of truth as universal, a scientific conception of the world then sees all other truths as a barrier or obstacle to its confirmation as “reality”. The Vician “world of nations”, a historically constructed world of diverse languages and cultures, appears to be a remnant of “backward ancestors, a fantasy of their childish immaturity.”⁵⁴² In this manner Descartes and all who follow in this scientific view of the world would come to see themselves as destroyers of the “prejudices” of history and the arbiters of “objectively verified truth”. Havel takes specific issue with this as did Vico, not because science was unable to provide certain valuable truth. To both men this was an established “fact”, however, to assert its authority at the expense of humanities “personal “pre-objective” experience of the lived world”

539 Giambattista Vico, ed. *Leon Pompa, Vico: Selected Writings*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), para. 310

Here I am inclined to think of divine providence in the same manner that we might think of the sphere of social media. Collectively it represents a force that guides, shapes, and influences the decisions and lives of its composite parts. However, social media does not exist as an independent force itself that externally influences humanity, rather is *is* humanity, or construct of humanity itself that in turn influences it. Vico's “divine providence” bears a striking similarity to the concept of the “inversion of praxis” explored by Gramsci and Gobetti.

540 Havel, *Open Letters*, 251–252.

541 *Ibid.*, 252.

542 *Ibid.*

was dangerous.⁵⁴³ Havel was interested in reinserting transcendent mystery to human life not because such “pre-objective” conceptions of truth could or should be understood as themselves universal, but rather the personal dimension of its morality would act as a protective agent against the hegemonic domination of society by scientism. The fear here is that as humanity submits more and more to this “objective truth” it increasingly separates itself from the lived history of humanity, it separates itself from the “memory of being”, which for Havel represented a record of the historical development of human life and is imprinted on all people. The idea of a collective consciousness or in Vico and Gramsci's terms a “common sense” comes to mind, and it represents a kind of transcendent truth—made by men—that helps to shield the individual from being diminished, but neither Havel, nor Vico were advocating for the re-establishment of revealed truths of a dogmatic Church. “To begin with,” adds Havel, “I have never created, or accepted, any comprehensive “worldview,” let alone any complete, unified, integrated and self-contained philosophical, ideological or other system of beliefs which would provide answers to all my questions.”⁵⁴⁴ This perspective was also central to the philosophy of Kolakowski expressed in the essays “The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture” and “The Idolatry of Politics”.⁵⁴⁵ And it forms the core of Vico's project as he tries to reinsert the sacred in his *New Science*, particularly through his novel interpretation of providence.

543 Ibid., 255.

544 Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga: June 1979-September 1982* (New York: H. Holt, 1989), 190.

545 Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*.

III

To Havel, the post-totalitarian system was something much more than just a model for the political and philosophic structure of the communist state, or means by which that state imposed a way of life. It represented a new and dangerous means by which the individual within society—fascist, post-totalitarian, or otherwise—could be manipulated and systematically structured, or re-structured as the case may be. This was best observed as a consequence of the surveillance culture that dominated post-totalitarian society and its effect on the shaping social interactions—particularly the introduction of corruption, layered identities, social paranoia, and managed language—and Czechoslovak society in general, especially during the Soviet occupation beginning in 1968. Society was quickly infiltrated by the surveillance state and this began to shape the reality of social relations. Like Bentham's panopticon, people became keenly aware of a constant monitoring presence, and the possibility that even friends and family were agents of this system. This became a central feature of communist “normalization” regime and the relationships that existed under such a regime. It was an experience captured in films like the black comedy *Brazil* (1985) and more recently in the German drama *The Lives of Others* (2006) and it led to a kind of heightened awareness and caution clouding and distorting all social interactions, even with family and close friends.

This is clearly expressed in works like *The Garden Party* (1969) and *The Beggar's Opera* (1975) where relationships are dominated by distrust, self-deception, lies and the need to “wear two faces.”⁵⁴⁶ For Havel the constant need for people to “wear two faces” is

⁵⁴⁶ Václav Havel, *The Beggar's Opera* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 66.

morally and psychologically crippling and this brings about a profound crisis in society. Havel argues that first and foremost this is a “crisis of human identity”, which is to say that it is not merely superficial but strikes at the core of our 'self' and is therefore crippling in its capacity to influence society; and it is “brought on by living within a lie.”⁵⁴⁷ This is because the values of one “face” don’t work in the sphere of the other, and must therefore be kept separate. They cannot be transferred “mechanistically... without undermining the very foundations on which the world stands.”⁵⁴⁸ In the *The Garden Party* (1963) we see Hugo undergo a dramatic loss of identity as he becomes increasingly enmeshed within the bureaucracies of the Liquidation and Inauguration offices, until in the final scene in which he has lost himself so completely that neither he nor his family recognize him any longer.⁵⁴⁹ While Hugo's loss of identity is an example of the kind of profound loss of identity experienced under post-totalitarianism, Havel offers up a more subtle critique in his portrayal of the relationship between the Secretary and the Clerk in the Liquidation Office. Hugo's experience demonstrates the system's dependency upon an alienated humanity to exist, however, in a brief exchange between the secretary and the clerk we can see just how deep this alienation goes. At one point the Clerk points out a flying sparrow to the Secretary, but he is unable to convey clearly how beautiful he thinks the bird is as he fumbles over the kind of evasive techno-speak of the bureaucracy. For her part, the Secretary is only able to muster a flat, “Oh, I see – nature!”, in response. It quickly become clear to the reader that what the Clerk is trying to do here is flirt with the Secretary. The Clerk then turns to the Secretary, and in the same awkward speech offers

⁵⁴⁷ Havel, *Open Letters*, 153.

⁵⁴⁸ Havel, *The Beggar's Opera*, 66.

⁵⁴⁹ Havel, *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, 45–51.

her incoherent compliments and passing references to her anatomy. At first it seems clear that the Secretary is receptive, “I see, you're not married!”⁵⁵⁰ Muttering a mix of references to the bird they had observed together, herself, and the well rehearsed verses of the bureaucracy, the exchange quickly breaks down in mutual frustration. Consequently, the Clerk and Secretary return to work and the relative comfort of the office environment, a comfort that is not merely physical, but primarily psychological. Read in contrast with the other relationship referenced in the play, Amanda and Peter, the choice seems clear. One either embraces the lie, finding relative comfort, “peace”, and what the system insists on calling “freedom”, within society, or, one rejects it in the effort to find themselves and consequently others in possession of their dignity, capable of love. Having been relegated to margins of the play and branded a failure in light of Hugo's apparent success, Amanda and Peter run off. “Peter and I are in love with each other. He's moving out of here and coming to live with me!”⁵⁵¹ Just as Havel coached his reader in the “Power of the Powerless”, Amanda and Peter have opted to live withing the truth and take part in “the independent life of society”.⁵⁵² We can only conclude that Havel wishes them well and would urge us to similarly embrace our raw emotion as a means of rediscovering our humanity and as a means of emancipation. However, this is not an easy task and not without serious consequence, namely personal alienation from the wider society which remains in the lie. A social and psychological burden many are unwilling to bear.

550 Ibid., 18.

551 Ibid., 49.

552 Havel, *Open Letters*, 178.

In the *Beggar's Opera*, Jenny a prostitute and love interest of the lead protagonist, puts a finer point on the issue declaring to Macheath that “you can't exist as two people—one who does the will of others, and one who looks on in disgust.”⁵⁵³ Havel is drawing a parallel to those in society who—like the greengrocer in the *Power of the Powerless*—do the things they must, are obedient to the regime and the system, and therefore “have the right to be left in peace”.⁵⁵⁴ The price of such obedience is high, but cheaply bought argues Havel. And so too did Gobetti, who in his time observed that the fascist regime also welcomed “skeptics” and “those in the middle” whom he criticized as neither “independent nor disinterested.”⁵⁵⁵ The regime welcomed all these types, from the greengrocer to the skeptic and the so-called independent. “All it asks of the citizens is to surrender their dignity and their political rights”.⁵⁵⁶ For Havel, it is ideology—an illusion of identity—that is offered up in exchange for ones dignity and morality.⁵⁵⁷ This stripping of ones dignity and its replacement with the illusion of identity through ideology represents a profound social crisis precisely because through a brutal act of dehumanization it subjects all of society to domination of ideology masquerading as Truth. The problem, as Jenny points out, is that “we all need—to a certain extent, anyway—to belong to ourselves, because not belonging to ourselves means not having an identity, and therefore, de facto, not to *be* at all.”⁵⁵⁸

“A person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accouterments of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher

553 Havel, *The Beggar's Opera*, 74.

554 Havel, *Open Letters*, 132–133.

555 Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution*, 129.

556 Ibid.

557 Havel, *Open Letters*, 133.

558 Havel, *The Beggar's Opera*, 74.

than his own personal survival, is a demoralized person. The system depends on this demoralization, deepens it, is in fact a projection of it into society.”⁵⁵⁹

In Havel’s plays, he draws attention to one such projection through his characters participation in absurd, but structured language games and what he calls ‘evasive thinking’. The games represent a kind of coded language that must be learned to succeed within the system. When the hero of Havel’s play *The Garden Party* first arrives at said party he confronted with a problem regarding “the events organized within the framework of the Liquidation Office Garden Party.” Full of confidence in himself he proposes a solution to the problem, confident in its correctness. It is immediately dismissed on the grounds that while “there’s a logic in it... this kind of logic is merely formal.”⁵⁶⁰ Havel is illustrating—much as Michnik did in his essay “Why you are not signing...” —that the logic of the system doesn’t correspond to “formal” reality rather it seeks to induce “agreement” with the lie. In Michnik’s case this was by signing the loyalty agreement. In the case of Havel’s hero, it was “trust [in] the resolutions of the Organizing Committee.”⁵⁶¹ It describes a system based on the “coherence theory of truth” criticized by Kolakowski whereby “knowledge – that is, particular propositions – are acceptable insofar as they fit into the whole.”⁵⁶² The logic governing the Liquidation Office in Havel’s play is “true”, rather than “merely formal” because it is consistent with the self-contained nature of the system, whereas Hugo’s logic is orientated towards a conception of truth that does not reference the system itself. The successive adoption of the systemic language begins a process of steadily breaking down the individual, who is

559 Havel, *Open Letters*, 153.

560 Havel, *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, 12.

561 Ibid., 13.

562 Kolakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 290.

compelled to move deeper and deeper within this self-contained logic and farther away from their self. This results in the loss of individual identity that corresponds with the degree to which they commit themselves to the system. Havel is clear that this influences and effects everyone from the highest political offices to greengrocer. This leads to a kind of thoughtlessness as they increasingly adapt to their environment, which leads Havel's characters to become incorporated into the system. It is in this way that individuals, by adapting to the game help to perpetuate it as reality, so that each becomes a collaborator with the lie upon which the system is built.⁵⁶³ The danger of this system lies in its "unmediated perception of facts."⁵⁶⁴ The mediator in this case is a truth that exists beyond the reach of the "system", but also one that does not simply turn itself over to another doctrine or ideology.

This is precisely why Vico had been careful in his construction of divine providence to locate it within history, a history made by man, and thus preserving autonomy. Havel evokes this reading of the divine and providence when he describes God as "a horizon" and all of human existence, which we make ourselves, being captured in the "memory of being", which points to this absolute horizon.⁵⁶⁵

The "memory of being" is perhaps one of Havel's most under-theorized concepts, but it is vital to understanding how it is that human autonomy can be preserved through the pursuit of an "absolute horizon" that is non-determinist. It is the means by which Havel distinguishes the lived truth of the "independent life of society" from the lies of the post-

563 Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel's Thought*, 75.

564 Kořakowski, *Is God Happy?*, 290.

565 Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 101–102, 140.

totalitarian state. It is an idea that is intimately connected to humanist historicism and points to memory of being as kind of record of the historical development of human life and this record is imprinted on all humans and thus represents a kind of transcendent truth of their existence or being. This truth as Havel understands it is both an expression of a god as the “absolute horizon”, as well as the repository of collective human historical development which man has made. “Everything remains in the “memory of being”—and I too remain there—condemned to be with myself till the end of time—just as I am and just as *I make myself*.”⁵⁶⁶ Thus for Havel, human existence is on the one hand the responsibility of the individual who has a hand in its making, but it also “extends beyond the physical existence of its bearer” as it become permanently absorbed into the “memory of being”.⁵⁶⁷ In a speech that Havel gave at Stanford University in 1994 he refers to “man’s relationship to that which transcend him, without which he would not be, and of which he is an integral part.”⁵⁶⁸ This is revealing because it simultaneously defends the idea of the existence of transcendent truth, but locates that transcendence not in a world external to man, but one in which man is an operative part. It is an understanding of the contingent and yet knowable nature of human life that in many way evokes Vico’s ‘divine providence’. Havel evokes Kolakowski who argued that rational animals want to know about the world and their purpose, want to know the Truth. For Havel, this truth is captured in a historical and knowable “memory of being” that we all have a hand in creating. Therefore, for Havel if liberty and democracy are to be understood as universal concepts, they cannot simply be the result of any single expression of those those

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 102. [emphasis my own]

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁶⁸ Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 180.

concepts. This would be, by definition totalitarian and deterministic, but rather as the result of an effort to find a genuinely universal expression of those concepts. This, argues Havel, “presupposes a critical self-examination”, it presupposes ‘living within the truth’.⁵⁶⁹ This process of self-examination also rests at the core of Vico and Italian antifascist thought, much for the same reasons. Havel believes that by living in truth it is possible to both recover ones authentic identity as a human, and in doing so discover “the forgotten dimension of democracy that could give it universal resonance.”⁵⁷⁰ Not unlike Tocqueville's concept of “self-interest well-understood”, Havel is arguing that through the process of self-examination and turning away from the lies and the constructed “panorama” of the system the individual simultaneously extends themselves into the “life of society”. Popescu notes that in this way the act of living within the truth is “apolitical” or “antipolitical” insofar as it is an attempt to “shake off the blinding veil of ideology” that is deeply connected to a political system that “encloses life in an abstractly defined ideal model.”⁵⁷¹ This understanding of “apolitical” varies considerably from Gobetti's use of the term.

For Gobetti the apolitical referred to those who refuse to confront the system, the essential element of politics as he conceived of it. Havel is referring not to Gobetti's “authentic” politics, but rather politics as participation within the dominant ideological order. If people fear retaliation or punitive actions in response to their actions, or believe their own actions to be futile, to the extent that they do not engage, then there is no

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁷¹ Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel's Thought*, 101.

politics. If people are merely parroting the ideology of the state or system, masked as their own, there is no true politics. Politics under such conditions is replaced with ideological ritual and “automatism”.

Experience has taught us again and again that this automatism is far more powerful than the will of any individual; and should someone possess a more independent will, he must conceal it behind a ritually anonymous mask in order to have an opportunity to enter the power hierarchy at all.⁵⁷²

This is precisely what happens to Hugo during the course of the garden party.

And when the individual finally gains a place there and tries to make his will felt within it, that automatism, with its enormous inertia, will triumph sooner or later, and either the individual will be ejected by the power structure like a foreign organism, or he will be compelled to resign his individuality gradually, once again blending with the automatism and becoming its servant, almost indistinguishable from those who preceded him and those who will follow.⁵⁷³

Those politicians or apparatchiks who exist within the system were “bound by traditional [conformist] political habits” and it was for this reason that Havel turned to “those who are not politicians” because they “are also not so bound by traditional political thinking and political habits and therefore, paradoxically, they are more aware of genuine political reality and more sensitive to what can and should be done under the circumstances.”⁵⁷⁴

The suggestion here is that the “politics” practiced within the system is inauthentic and instead represents a societal paradigm in which ideological domination—conditions under which there is an absence of politics in the Gobettian sense—and no “public competition for power”, forces the citizens to “live within a lie”.⁵⁷⁵ It evokes the position that we have discussed at length from Gobetti through Gramsci, the idea that under the social conditions imposed by hegemony, we are living in an environment in which

⁵⁷² Havel, *Open Letters*, 140.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 160–161.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 137.

political life and politics in general does not exist and must be restored. The parallel life that Havel—and especially Gramsci—seek to create in opposition to this ideological system is one that tries to reconnect humanity to the source of its autonomy and its emancipation from ideological domination: the thinking historical individual. This turning in on the individual—a focusing on the process of self-examination, personal responsibility and the construction of ‘apolitical’ spaces parallel to the established political sphere of government—is a process of reevaluating politics itself and discovering new forms of political action in service to society. This returns us to Vico and especially his original concept of providence by which he challenges a deterministic and ideological science as a similarly closed system while simultaneously asserting a universal moral and ethical order rooted in individual autonomy. For Havel, post-totalitarianism is something much more than the dangers of life under communism, it is representative of a crisis of modernity in which western democracies are equally vulnerable and Havel’s plays represent something far more than irony and humor. They represent an attempt to break this restructuring mechanism and draw to the surface the dehumanizing elements of post-totalitarianism. Havel’s theater read alongside his more directly philosophical work is itself political, not because “it has political content but because it constitutes political action.”⁵⁷⁶ It was an attempt, rooted in Gobetti and Gramsci’s own efforts, to find a new strategy of revolutionary engagement and particularly one that revealed the possibility of preserving hope and dignity where previously there was none. The solution to the moral crisis that Havel observed was to be found in the reintroduction of morality and personal responsibility made possible through

⁵⁷⁶ Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel’s Thought*, 78.

the kind of self-examination provoked by theater. “What else is theater but an attempt to grasp the world in a focused way”, the effort to comprehend and articulate a 'world-view' in the Gramscian sense, and in this manner an act that is inherently philosophical.⁵⁷⁷ Theater “possess a special ability to allude to, and to convey, multiple meanings” and this is precisely what is necessary if philosophy is to become political action.⁵⁷⁸

Gyorgy Konrad, *Antipolitics*

Lastly, I would like to turn to Gyorgy “George” Konrad, the Hungarian novelist, essayist and dissident who, along with Kolakowski, Michnik and Havel stood as central figures in the liberal anticommunist movement. Konrad's two best known collections of essays are *Intellectuals and the Road to Class Power* (1974) and the more widely read *Antipolitics* (1984) in which he developed a form of dissident politics known as *antipolitics*. However, antipolitics did not develop in a vacuum. Through the publication of his dramatic works Havel had hoped to prompt in his audience a rigorous self-examination of those who were trapped “beneath a thick crust of lies.”⁵⁷⁹ Gramsci had also recognized as central the task of ridding oneself of all “prejudices and incrustations” imparted by the system.⁵⁸⁰ In many ways Havel's more overtly political essays had only acted as further expositions on that purpose. In Konrad's work this process of self-examination took the shape of a kind of moral individualism, which formed the basis for Konrad's concept of “spiritual authority” achieved not on theological or religious terms, but rather by showing

577 Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 250–251.

578 Ibid., 252.

579 Havel, *Open Letters*, 150.

580 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 36.

ones “own face—every aspect of it.”⁵⁸¹ It is a concept intimately connected to Havel's own concept of “living in truth”. However, since it relies more heavily on the intellectuals as a revolutionary catalyst, it remains in direct dialogue with Gramsci. Such a task was, for Konrad, the obligation of all intellectuals and central to the reclamation of history from ideological domination. In the context of Konrad's own experience this was especially true of Marxist-Leninism,⁵⁸² but he is clear to point out that the West itself had not escaped a similar threat. “God and democracy”, he argues, “there you have America's Marxism-Leninism” and that this ideology is every bit as powerful and totalizing.⁵⁸³ “The philosophy of history”, he argues, “is not an “objective truth” but a common agreement.”⁵⁸⁴

The problem that was basic to Gramsci and a primary concern of his fellow antifascists, as well as Havel and the East-European dissidents, was how to get a 'subaltern class', that is the masses of people in society, to 'come to know itself' and, as Gramsci argued, to position itself to develop beyond the economic-corporate stage and rise “to the phase of ethical-political hegemony in civil society, and of domination in the State.”⁵⁸⁵ That is, how is it that the proletariat are to become conscious of itself and “of its strength, its possibilities, of how it is to develop” to such an extent as to seize state power for themselves?⁵⁸⁶ This becomes a very critical question as it represents a cross-roads of sorts in which the 'antipolitical' position held by significant segments of the dissident

581 Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 223.

582 Ibid., 191.

583 Ibid., 22.

584 Ibid., 192.

585 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 160.

586 Ibid., 159.

movement argued against the formal seizure of state power, fearing its corrupting influence. Hungarian writer and activist Gyorgy Konrad addressed this concern when he asks: “Is there, can there be, a political philosophy—a set of proposals for winning and holding power—that renounces a priori any physical guarantees of power?”⁵⁸⁷ The focus on internal emancipation and the force of moral resistance displays a reticence shared by those who actively resist domination by the state to take up the reigns of power themselves, fearful of its corrupting influence. Gramsci was no less concerned about the infectious potential of state power as captured in his concept of hegemony, but he recognized the need to achieve state power nonetheless. The key for Gramsci was how to do so in the name of an ideology of the masses rather than that of the minority bourgeoisie. To achieve this he leaned heavily on the idea of the possibility of cultivating a leadership structure that is organic to the working class. Through the development of its own intellectuals the working class could then assume state power under its own organic leadership, rather than depend on the intellectual leadership of “traditional intellectuals” and risk succumbing to state domination as illustrated in his analysis of *political blocs* in ‘The Southern Question’.⁵⁸⁸ This suggests that Gramsci has a far more dynamic understanding of leadership and intellectuals than that of a mere politician, general, or bureaucratic apparatchik. It is a rejection of political leaders as party representatives and embraces the role they must play both in achieving state power, but perhaps more importantly as “transmitter” between civil society and the state.⁵⁸⁹ This was critical

587 Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 92.

588 Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, 37–38, 44–48.

589 Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution*, 143.

Walter Adamson provide a useful and succinct analysis of Gramsci's definition of intellectual focusing primarily on their social function as “a transmitter of ideas within civil society and between government and civil society”.

because unlike the working class achieving state power under the guidance of a Leninist vanguard party or some other externally imposed force, under the direction of organic intellectuals they would achieve state power in a manner that remain committed to their own “authentic” class interests as opposed to the interests of the party. Autonomy is preserved. Konrad recognizes the authority and even necessity of the state in the public sphere, but remains reluctant regarding the possibility of achieving state power while avoiding its corrupting influence, demanding instead a constant suspicion of “everything organized, yet [he] knows that organization is unavoidable.”⁵⁹⁰ Still, Konrad's conception of antipolitics builds on Gramsci's interpretation of the intellectual as the key to authentic politics, especially in this age of consolidated socialist planned economies, 'state-monopoly capitalism' and what were in 1979 “the first signs of the technocratic global hegemony of multinational economic organizations.”⁵⁹¹ Such an environment was, by his understanding, thoroughly dominated by ideology and “calls into being societies that are half-informed, banal, accustomed to thinking in clichés” and this represented an essential threat to what Konrad considered the “greatest good”, “a permanently open democracy.”⁵⁹²

Konrad concluded that the only way to preserve an open politics under such conditions was the preservation the public/private distinction and he saw ideological domination as the primary threat to the maintenance of the this distinction. Preserving the private sphere was recognized as essential to preventing the encroachment of ideological domination

⁵⁹⁰ Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 116.

⁵⁹¹ György Konrád, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 9.

⁵⁹² Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 34–35.

and Konrad sought to preserve it by placing it in the context of an independent world culture, free from the controls and influence of any particular state. He hoped to achieve this by first turning to Gramsci's interpretation of the intellectual as intermediary between civil society and the state as primary agent of this struggle. However, he was not just interested in intellectuals as an agent of competing state ideologies—which would have reduced this struggle to a mere propaganda war—but rather as representatives of an independent class populated by *antipoliticians*, whose task it is to keep 'politics' in check. This antipolitical struggle provides an answer to the question Konrad poses at the beginning of this section.⁵⁹³ It is, of course, a fundamentally liberal project and liberalism understood in this manner is quickly tied to Vico's effort to recover both the authenticity of human experience as well as history itself in the face of Cartesianism, and Croce's later effort to recover these same elements from Hegel in the form of a critique of Hegel's "absolute idealism" in favor of his own "absolute historicism" and his later critique of historical materialism and the Marxist system. In both cases it is an effort that centered on preserving human autonomy and personal moral responsibility. Without it one cannot maintain the liberal ideals of plurality and political antagonism necessary for democracy. And this was best secured through the moral and social emancipation of separate individuals. Economic liberalism, market economics, and constitutional design in itself are not adequate if they do not provide protection from moral, cultural and social domination. And this it largely depends on a category of people with the ability to see beyond their own horizons, a class that Konrad identifies with the international

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 92.

"Is there, can there be, a political philosophy—a set of proposals for winning and holding power—that renounces a priori any physical guarantees of power?"

intelligentsia. In Konrad, we can see a movement centered on the individual, and what the activism of an autonomous individual in concert with a community network can do to act as a check on power. To achieve this Konrad advances a theory of political action he calls *antipolitics*. At its core, antipolitics seeks to preserve political conflict by establishing itself as countermeasure to the ideological domination of civil society. Politics is used here to describe the action of the state alone, which are seen as critically flawed and as inherently corrupting. The anti-politician or anti-political intellectual acts as a social and moral counter weight to the domination of the state. The key was for such a counterweight to exist, it had to exist as a new horizon beyond the reach of the “system”. On the level of a system that commanded control over all of modernity, as Vico observed was quickly becoming the case with Cartesianism, such a counterweight would have to effectively transcend the reach of Descartes new rational method. Vico believed that he had identified human life itself as just such an area and that history, properly understood, could provide that horizon. Through the proper study of history that horizon could be discovered in what Vico called divine providence and it would provide truths and knowledge just as valid as Descartes' methods. Moreover, it was these truths that existed beyond the reach of Cartesian scientism that would mediate its dominance and the “great damage and evil” that it had already demonstrated itself capable of in the hands of “princes and rulers”.⁵⁹⁴ When faced with ideological domination at the hands of the post-totalitarian state, Havel famously turned to 'living in truth' and Patocka's parallel structures and civil society as the path of resistance. However, for Havel the problem of ideological domination was not limited to the post-totalitarian state, which he he

⁵⁹⁴ Vico, *Vico*, 43.

ultimately saw as a warning of “something far more serious than Western rationalism is willing to admit.”⁵⁹⁵ It was for him the “avant-garde of a global crisis” the only solution to which was a decidedly Vician turn to God-as-absolute-horizon.⁵⁹⁶ It is in this manner that Konrad shared Vico and Havel's concerns around the danger of an an unmediated ideological system. Where Vico had earlier turned to divine providence, Havel had turned to 'living in truth' and God-as-absolute-horizon as the ultimate counterweight. Konrad's analysis, perhaps measured by his academic training in sociology, turned to a more limited, though perhaps more conceptually manageable proposal.

In *Antipolitics* (1984), Konrad puts forth the idea of civil society as the source of transformative energy in shaking loose the shackles of an oppressive Communist, or, post-totalitarian government. His theory largely hinges on his explicit structural distrust of politicians and state politics in general, the medium of which he describes simply as “power over people—power backed by weapons.”⁵⁹⁷ In *Liberalism after Communism* (1994) Jerzey Szacki expresses his doubts about the viability and formative power of civil society referencing Michael Walzer. “I believe that Michael Walzer expressed not only his own personal disappointment when, after rereading G. Konrad's *Antipolitics*, he wrote: ‘His argument seemed right to me when I first read his book. Looking back...it was easy to see how much it was a product of his time – and how short that time was!’”⁵⁹⁸

This would appear to have been not only a premature condemnation since—though it was

⁵⁹⁵ Havel, *Open Letters*, 260.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.; Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 101.

⁵⁹⁷ Konrad, *Antipolitics*, 16.

⁵⁹⁸ Jerzy Szacki, *Liberalism after Communism* (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 1994), 104.

most certainly a work of particular resonance in its time—its arguments appear to remain relevant and were, in fact, very much part of a broader historical perspective that I have traced to at least Vico. Fundamental to Konrad’s antipolitical program is the idea that “we ought to encourage the internal emancipation of all those whom we meet.”⁵⁹⁹ That is, we ought to resist self-censorship in the effort to balance our individual autonomy and social conscience. “The goal – freedom – is absolute; the road that leads to it is relative. It is each and every individual’s personal road. It leads through a network of communities, linked with one another by ties of spiritual sympathy.”⁶⁰⁰ Individual autonomy, solidarity among citizens, and an active civil society are seen as vital to an effective opposition to the state and its politics. Konrad further argues that one should be suspicious of “anything organized” and of politicians in particular who, if they are any good, are by definition concerned only with power.⁶⁰¹ This then necessitates a form of opposition or pressure that can exert influence on the machine of the state, but without become immersed in its politics. Here Konrad invokes Vico and Havel’s analysis recognizing that “the most effective way to influence policy is by changing a society’s customary thinking patterns and tacit compacts.”⁶⁰² And this could only be achieved “by bringing the pace-setters to think differently”, which required an external reference point or, in Havel’s terms, a new horizon.⁶⁰³ It is in this manner that the ideals of moral individualism and civil society give birth to the central concept of ‘international culture’ in Konrad’s antipolitics. He recognizes that “the influence of international culture can become a counterweight to the

⁵⁹⁹ Konrád, *Antipolitics*.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁰¹ Konrád, *Antipolitics*.

⁶⁰² Ibid., 224.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

state's cultural dictatorship.”⁶⁰⁴ By influencing the culture of the state one can effectively block the encroachment of ideological domination. “Antipolitics strives to put politics in its place and make sure it stays there, never overstepping its proper office of defending and refining the rules of the game of civil society.”⁶⁰⁵ Communism, and in fact all forms of ideological domination, effectively represent an attack on civil society and liberalism itself, or rather liberal autonomy, in that they seek to dominate both the public and private spheres in pursuit of a perfect unity. Konrad believed that it was an “international culture” cultivated by the “personal network of sympathy” that would act as the necessary mediator existing beyond the influence and reach of the system. Furthermore, because it was, at least in principle, free from the controls and influence of any particular state it would not readily turn itself over to another ideology. Thus, he saw it as “a global culture with its own institutions.”⁶⁰⁶ In this manner Konrad's 'network of sympathy' while not perhaps reaching the level of Havel's God-as-absolute-horizon, would function as a similarly autonomous horizon located outside the reach of the state and within a history made by man. It speaks to the same concerns pointed to by Havel's 'memory of being' as well as Vico's concept of divine providence. International culture becomes the repository of Havel's 'memory of being' and Vico's 'divine providence' of which intellectuals become an integral part, but that also extends beyond any individual.

David Ost, in his important work on *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics* (1990), argues that “Konrad's words are just another way of saying that the goal of “anti-politics”

604 Ibid., 215.

605 Ibid., 92.

606 Ibid., 209.

is some radically new kind of society... that elusive “third road”.⁶⁰⁷ However, while Ost is indeed careful to point out the frustrations that the Solidarity movement had “being pigeonholed in western categories of “right” and “left””, he still sees the movement in context of modernity as we know it.⁶⁰⁸ To this end he refers to their position as representative of a “postmodern left”. Vico too has been considered in light of this postmodern interpretation, with Isaiah Berlin seeing in him something of a forerunner to postmodern radical theory. However, in both cases this would appear to miss the truly radical aspect of their theories. Like Vico, the goals of Solidarity—as are Konrad's own goals—are very much part of the early-modern project of human emancipation and a movement away from the kind of truth used to understand and circumscribe human autonomy. The truly “radical” aspect of antipolitics was that it called into question the very basis of that paradigm, but not in the escapist nihilism begun with Nietzsche. The prefixes “post-” and “anti-” as they are used in “postmodern” or “anti-modern” both suggest an antagonistic relationship with modernity as such. Whereas the project begun by Vico and continued by the Italian antifascists and the East-European dissident movements must be understood as an effort to fulfill that promise rather than dismiss or sidestep it, and as the critique of a modernity that has as failed to live up to its promise. It is for this reason that Konrad follows Croce, Gobetti, Gramsci and his fellow anti-communist dissents in advancing a permanently open politics.

607 David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 14–15.

608 Ibid., 15.

Conclusion

This dissertation argues that the political theory that emerges from 1989 is representative of a larger established philosophical critique of modernity. Such a critique began with the displacement of the authority of the natural world with reformulation of truth and knowledge by Descartes new rational method. The development of human technological capacities, particularly in the hands of regimes committed to their own “scientific” truths, brought into sharp relief dangers and evils anticipated by Vico in his essay *On method in contemporary fields of study*. The concerns of Vico would come to be shared by generations of activists and intellectuals who confronted the modern ideological state and the “politics” that defined it. While confronting such dangers has become an increasingly visible and vocal component of the political life of modernity, conditions are such that such opposition has often been understood on the same terms. Whatever the ideological perspective, each is drawn to the intoxicating promise of the Cartesian revolution, access to a universal truth. This dissertation focused on the work of Vico, Croce, the Italian antifascists and the theorists of 1989. Theorists that I argue stand as evidence of another liberal modern tradition that avoids the illusion of Cartesian modernity. They will be positioned as key figures in the shaping of an unconventional critical perspective of the two great ideologies that have come to dominate our modernity: liberalism and communism. By bringing the varied and not often clearly related perspectives of Vico, Croce, the Italian antifascists and the theorists of 1989 together in a coherent way (here I am thinking especially perhaps of a liberally-oriented Gramsci for example), this dissertation engages the foundations of liberal modernity from a new angle and in doing

so, enlarges the scope of our understanding of liberal and democratic theory. The dissident politics of the revolutions of 1989 characterized by Kolakowski, Michnik, Havel and Konrad represented something beyond an important localized contribution to our understanding of the political theory of democracy. The challenge issued by 1989 dissidents wasn't merely to an oppressive and in some instances even genocidal communist regime, but rather to a widespread interpretation of modernity that has come to dominate contemporary social and political life and of which communism or post-totalitarianism were merely a particularly crude and violent manifestation. Vico and the Italian antifascists issue similar challenges in their own time regarding the challenges posed by fascism and in particular an Italian society that facilitated fascism's development. Both groups are representative of a critical approach to understanding both the meaning and trajectory of modernity itself—evoking Berman's modernism of antimodernism—which is to say they are representative of an alternative approach to understanding modernity. It is an interpretation rooted in an entirely different conceptual understanding of knowledge and truth, laid out by Vico and developed much later by Havel and Kolakowski. Understanding the full scope of these connections makes the argument for their contributions to political theory that much more compelling. And perhaps most importantly, our world remains populated with the unresolved ideological threats they identified, and so remains desperately in need of the tools they provide.

The headline of the last ever edition of the newspaper *L'Unità*, founded in 1924 by Antonio Gramsci, spoke volumes: "End of the line. After three months of battles, they've

managed it: they have killed l'Unità."⁶⁰⁹ *L'Unità's* readers would know very well who 'they' were and to read the headline was a stark reminder of the persistent enemy that Gramsci had identified in the "industrialists" who had no party of their own, but rather "utilise all the existing parties turn by turn" exploiting their resources to strengthen their position and interests and "balance" power in their favor.⁶¹⁰ So it was that the demise of the journal the Italian Communist Party (PCI) founded ninety years ago was announced. It had been created to act as the mouthpiece of the party that Gramsci led and be a newspaper that would appeal to both the workers and peasants, bridging the divide that he had identified in 1921 as "the central problem of national life in Italy".⁶¹¹ Gramsci believed that it was the task of the working class to unify the people as the bourgeoisie had unified the territory.⁶¹² It was an effort to bring attention to the crisis of class politics that faced Italy and a revolution that stalled at the defense of bourgeois privilege. *L'Unità* sought to introduce to its cross-class readership a new critical world-view around which a new organic politics could form, one that challenged the efforts on the part of the industrialists to control intellectual activity and so control "public opinion", cultural life and society on the whole. It was so effective that following a scathing attack on the regime as little more than a facade for a dictatorship,⁶¹³ it had come under fire and in 1925 its publication was threatened by Milan city officials. Shortly thereafter there was

609 Lizzy Davies and Rome correspondent, "Italian Newspaper Stops Publication as Shareholders Fail to Agree Rescue Deal," *The Guardian*, July 30, 2014, sec. Media, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jul/30/italy-lunita-newspaper-stop-publication>.

610 Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 155–156.

611 Adam David Morton, *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy* (London ; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007), 87.

612 Antonio Gramsci and Quintin Hoare, *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Political Writings, 1910-1920 : With Additional Texts by Bordiga and Tasca* (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 375.

613 Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution*, 87.

an attempt on Benito Mussolini's life, and consequently in late 1926 publication of *L'Unità* was completely suppressed. Still, the journal survived, first as an underground journal and later revived completely after the war. More recently, *L'Unità* was threatened by the former Italian conservative Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who brought legal action against it for their criticism of his administration. It seems that powerful market forces finally achieved what Mussolini and Berlusconi could not. With *L'Unità's* closure Italy loses a leading journal of the left and a powerful symbol of Gramsci's struggle to unify the Italian people against the power and hegemony of industrial (bourgeois) elites; against, in the words of Czech playwright and philosopher Vaclav Havel, the power of the “megamachinery” and “automatism” of modern industrial-consumer society.⁶¹⁴ “They”, it was implied, had finally won.

Such a turn of events following so closely in the wake of the financial and economic crisis of 2008 that turned Europe upside-down, and the bitter political conflicts over the austerity policies imposed as a result—some as recently as last year⁶¹⁵—is nothing short of remarkable. It was a crisis whose persistent effects in the form of deepening economic and political inequality demonstrated clearly, in the eyes of many, that liberalism (especially neoliberalism and the politics of advanced capitalism) was dying, much as socialism and the politics of the Marxist *System* had done a generation ago in the wake of the Revolutions of 1989. And as the world once again becomes disillusioned by the false

614 Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 10; Havel, *Open Letters*, 207–208.

615 Carmelo Carmilli, Roberto Mignucci, and Reuters, “Thousands Rally in Italy to Oppose Austerity Measures,” *NBC News*, accessed September 22, 2014, http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/05/18/18343111-thousands-rally-in-italy-to-oppose-austerity-measures.

promises of the agents of ideology, the old idols are brought out, among them religious fundamentalism and ethno-nationalism. A recently translated conversation between Adam Michnik and Vaclav Havel from shortly after the economic crisis reveals their own keen insight to this startling manner of political inversion. Even Solzhenitsyn, says Michnik, “went through a peculiar evolution. In his later years he became famous for his tribute to the czarist regime, his demand for a reinstatement of the death penalty, and his support for Putin.”⁶¹⁶ Havel adds, “he's not the only one.”⁶¹⁷ In the vacuum left by the disillusionment with both socialist and capitalist utopianism, we see the return of the old idols of blood, territory, and paternalism. And yet, this story is not new. Somehow, voices go unheard and lessons go unlearned. Where Mussolini had once campaigned to reclaim the lost national patrimony of Corsica and Savoy in the west and the Dalmatian coast including Albania in the east, we now have Putin and his nationalist adventure to reclaim “Russian lands” in Crimea and Eastern-Ukraine, as well as China's own territorial ambitions in the South China Sea and along the Indian border, not to mention its recent efforts in Hong Kong to suppress a democracy movement that Beijing claims threatens “social tranquility”.⁶¹⁸ This paternalistic attitude, while serving to unite some against a Schmittian *other*, brings the people themselves no closer to political power or liberal freedom because it cuts off the organic will of the people, submitting them instead to paternal guardianship. The power of the state is used to reinforce not an autonomous individual identity or the organic identity and will of the people, but rather the ideological will of power itself—of the paternalistic regime. It was for this reason that Mussolini in

616 Havel, Michnik, and Matynia, *An Uncanny Era*, 151.

617 Ibid.

618 “Protesters Defiant amid HK Stand-Off,” *BBC News*, accessed September 29, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-29405195>.

the “Doctrine of Fascism” would declare that the fascist state “interprets, develops and gives strength to the whole life of the people” and that “the nation is created by the State, which gives to the people, conscious of its own moral unity, a will and therefore an effective existence” and not the other way around.⁶¹⁹ While Mussolini rejected any association with the communists, such a conception of the state is captured completely in Havel's own concept of post-totalitarianism which characterized advanced communist society. Furthermore, the relationship of the fascist and post-totalitarian “citizen” and the state is nearly identical. The fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile describes,

“the relationship between the State and the individual [as] not between it and one or the other citizen, but with every citizen. Every citizen shares a relationship with the State that is so intimate that the State exists only in so far as it is made to exist by the citizen. This, its formation is a product of the consciousness of each individual, and thus of the masses, in which the power of the State consists. That explains the necessity of the Fascist Party and of all the institutions of propaganda and education that foster the political and moral ideals of Fascism, so that the thought and will of the solitary person, the Duce, becomes the thought and will of the masses. Out of that arises the enormous difficulty in which it is involved, to bring into the Party, all the people—commencing from their most tender years.”⁶²⁰

For Havel such paternalism no longer rested in a state embodied in the will of a solitary Duce, but in that of the anonymous power of the system itself, which was perpetually maintained by the very people subject to it, what Havel calls “the auto-totality of society”.⁶²¹ In each instance the object was not merely the subordination of the people to the system, but rather the “complete degradation of the individual” and this was often “presented as his ultimate liberation”.⁶²² On this point both the totalitarian government of Italy and the post-totalitarian government of Czechoslovakia were in agreement. And

619 Pugliese, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and the Resistance in Italy*, 88.

620 Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Fascism*, 28.

621 Havel, *Open Letters*, 143–144.

622 Ibid., 135.

both the antifascists and the liberal anticommunists understood that this wasn't merely a phenomena of these particular states, but rather the necessary product of the modern era “dominated by the culminating belief...that the world—and being as such—is a wholly knowable system”.⁶²³ And the west would not be immune. Vico had anticipated the “great damage and evil” that would emerge from the convergence of a popular faith in this understanding of truth and the ambitions of the powerful in dominating society.⁶²⁴ It was for this reason that Vico proposed a *new science* by which he would try to preserve the achievements of Cartesianism, while simultaneously protecting human autonomy, thereby retaining in humanity itself the capacity to dictate the terms of its own social and political existence. The untimely demise of *L'Unità* signals the incomplete nature of this task, begun by Vico and carried by way of Benedetto Croce to the antifascists Piero Gobetti and Antonio Gramsci, and further developed in the liberal anticommunist “antipolitics” of Leszek Kolakowski, Adam Michnik, Vaclav Havel and Gyorgy Konrad. It indicates a movement away from the open politics pursued by Gramsci and consequently illustrates the need to once again find the tools necessary to recover history, politics and especially “truth” in the effort to fortify ourselves against the great damage and evil that Vico anticipated and that the twentieth-century and our own brief twenty-first has amply demonstrated.

If a pathway to open politics is the enduring legacy of the tradition outlined in this dissertation then the return to an era dominated by just the opposite ought to provoke

623 Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 89.

624 Vico, *Vico*, 43.

increasing concern. The proliferation of liberal conservative economism, having emerged dominant from the ideological war that marked the better part of the previous five decades, preached the strategies and tactics that were seen to have won the day. They were, in many ways, carried forward by the force of their own inertia, fueled by an unflinching faith in the potential of 'free-markets' and 'free-trade zones'. Yet almost immediately, underlying tensions endemic to perceived hegemonic triumph were revealing themselves in painful fissures around the world—in the Balkans, Seattle and Genoa to name a few—that indicated that 'victory' was perhaps much farther from complete than anticipated.⁶²⁵ In fact, it would seem that barring a selective reading of the historical record, the experience of liberal conservative hegemony has been anything but assured. Consequently, this new dominant order engaged in a powerfully armed culture war, honing their instruments of propaganda and rhetoric. The better part of the 1990s, if not the whole of the Cold War, was marked largely by a Gramscian 'war of position' waged in full and around the globe by those who had everything to lose with the ascendancy of the neoliberal enthusiasms that followed the Soviet collapse and the Revolutions of 1989. The quiet murmur of this global war was finally brought loudly and violently to our doorstep on September 11th and yet it wasn't until America's centers of finance collapsed of their own accord that the simmer—domestically at least—began to bubble over and people of all walks of life turned to the temples they had built and then

⁶²⁵ 'Victory' is a strange word. Its use as an exclamation indicating the final seizure of advantage from your competition and a necessary end to the 'the contest' suggests a simultaneous reversion of initiative to the 'loser' should they decide for themselves that the contest is not yet over. Aesop casts light on this negation in the telling of the story of the 'Tortoise and the Hare', a war of position if ever there was one. The Hare for all his dominance never anticipated an opponent whose native value system rejected his premises.

to each other and began asking themselves in earnest the question that Lenin asked himself a century before—what is to be done?⁶²⁶

Despite the increasingly pervasive and explosive pockets of frustration characterized by “the new global revolutions” there are indications pointing towards relapse rather than revolution.⁶²⁷ Though they remain powerful expressions of global frustration with the narrative that has unfolded since Lehman Brothers' historic demise tipped off the economic collapse that followed in 2008, there has been scant movement towards the reconstitution of a truly liberal politics. And there is good reason for this. The strand of liberalism, so closely tied with the great achievements of modernity has also been powerfully linked with its greatest atrocities. The two—welded together and having sprung from a unified historical trajectory in social, economic, and political theory—naturally culminated in an 'end of history' claim that declared that there was only a single truth capable of fulfilling the scientific enlightenment promise of achieving perfect unity in the form of a pervasive global free-market. However, what was true for the utopias of Marx, Lenin and Stalin is also true for the utopias of Hayek, Friedman and Reagan. Under classical totalitarian regimes individuals are often manipulated directly by the State and frequently through the direct application of power—in the case of Stalin, with genocidal results—with the clear purpose of reinforcing state power in the hands of the political elite. Havel indicates that under post-totalitarianism there is a shift in the

626 To be sure there were a great many incidents that brought Americans into contact with this next 'great war'—the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993 and the USS Cole bombing in 2000 to name a couple—these events never really seemed to penetrate the American consciousness.

627 Mason, *Why It's Still Kicking off Everywhere*. [This book was first published in 2011 and later revised in this edition.]

“technique of exercising power” away from these direct forms (though not absent of them) to more indirect methods resulting in what he calls “the auto-totality of society”.⁶²⁸ This shift is critical because Havel recognizes it as coinciding with the emerging global dominance of consumer and industrial society. Such techniques of societal manipulation in the West have, in the words of Havel, become “infinitely more refined and subtle than the brutal methods used in the post-totalitarian societies”.⁶²⁹ Though perhaps not originating from the same centers of power, the manipulation accompanying modern democratic societies may be indicative of new forms of emerging totalitarianism.⁶³⁰ While the commitment to fulfilling a utopian promise is an indication of the hope that lies deep in the recesses of an otherwise cynical world, it is also one that is coupled with a great danger that springs from our willingness at great cost to throw ourselves again and again against those ancient walls that we see as standing between man and our accepted Truth. And when finally we fail, exhausted by our Sisyphean task to knock them down, we return to those very same idols believing ourselves to have sinned grievously against them, many of us swearing to defend them once again only this time without mercy or compassion.

On October 15, 2008—shortly after the collapse of Lehman Brothers had begun a cascade of failure that revealed that the emperors' indeed had no clothes—the *The Economist* asked rather dryly: “What would Marx say?”⁶³¹ Not long after, *The Socialist*

628 Havel, *Open Letters*, 130, 143.

629 Ibid., 208.

630 Sheldon S Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

631 “What Would Marx Say?,” *The Economist*, October 15, 2008, http://www.economist.com/blogs/certainideasofeurope/2008/10/what_marx_say.

Worker, announced 'The return of Marx'.⁶³² And since that time the literature has exploded advancing arguments seeking to reintroduce Marx—if not Lenin or Communism itself—as both academically and politically relevant. Among the more strident works is Jodie Dean's *The Communist Horizon* inviting its readers to set aside the lived history of communism in favor of its uncompromising promise of universal egalitarianism. In this manner speaks to the frustrations of many who see the egalitarian promise of democracy betrayed by compromise with dominant neoliberal ideologies. Born from the legitimate and widespread frustrations with contemporary “democratic” politics Dean readily attacks the lefts' “struggle for democracy” as “strange,” reading it as “a defense of the status quo, a call for more of the same.”⁶³³ Yet, even as an increasingly large body of literature emerges equally critical of the authenticity of our democracies, few claim the need to forgo democracy itself as the “hegemonic form of contemporary politics”.⁶³⁴ This dissertation should have made it clear why such effort that ought to be resisted or at least approached with considerable caution. While times of economic crisis and social disruption often invite the temptation to run into the arms of Marx or in Dean's case Communism itself, it is important to recognize the manner in which the path is laid out. The Marxist-Leninist path to salvation is laid before you concretely and 'scientifically' in the form of one great universal concept: historical materialism. I don't propose to re-fight the old battles over communism and capitalism, but rather an understanding of the reality described in this dissertation of the premise of a scientifically constructed liberalism as the dominant feature of modernity and establish that neoliberalism and communism sit at

632 Brian Jones, “The Return of Marx,” *SocialistWorker.org*, February 16, 2009, <http://socialistworker.org/2009/02/16/return-of-marx>.

633 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 57.

634 Ibid.

the extreme ideological poles of a modernity thus defined. They are *both* deeply tied to a particular understanding of the individual, political authority, and the state, as established by the innovation in methodological tools of the Cartesian revolution and the concept of truth that emerges from it. And to this end, one cannot escape the dominance of neoliberal realism by running into the arms of fascism or communism anymore than the dangers of post-totalitarianism could be escaped by running into the arms of western consumerism. Just as it was in Italy following the First World War, both of these ideological poles have been shaken to their foundations over the last two decades. Both have lost the interest and support of all but their most committed ideologues. However, as Piero Gobetti aptly points out with tongue firmly in cheek, “with what do you intend to replace it? Theocracy?” This is the problem that we currently face. Unable to provide a compelling alternative to this question we are either left perpetually rebounding between ideological poles, with Dean's *Communist Horizon* and Zizek's various revivals of Lenin represent one such rebound. Otherwise we dust off the old idols of blood, territory and religious dogma. With the painful memories of the former still so fresh in the mind's eye the old idols of a century before are returning in increasingly painful and tragic ways. We need only look towards the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, Putin's nationalist adventurism, or the nativist politics of fundamentalist conservatism here in the United States to recognize it.

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