The importance of the concept of hegemony in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* is so widely acknowledged that no justification is necessary for making it the central element in any study of that work.¹ Indeed, such is its centrality in Gramsci’s lexicon that no study of his thought, whether in its totality or considered according to what are only inaccurately regarded as its component parts (sociological surveys, historiographical writings, political theory, literary criticism etc) can avoid confronting its architectonic status. However, there is need for caution before proceeding to assume that it has a foundational priority in terms of the development of Gramsci’s project, or that it could function as a ‘key’ by means of which we could decipher the supposedly coded message. For, although the concept of hegemony is indeed absolutely central to all of Gramsci’s research, it is not an origin from which his other concepts proceed, or a bud that later blossomed into the bloom of the *Prison Notebooks*. Neither is it an end towards which his research tend, figuring as the ‘truth’ that reveals their (epistemological) error, still less a ‘quasi-absent centre’ around which Gramsci’s *aporiai* gravitate, their lack resolved.

¹ Cf. the online Gramsci Bibliography (Cammett et al.) for a list of studies dealing with the concept.
by its intermittently appearing plenitude. Its centrality is of another order: it is a moment of rupture with the conceptuality of the bourgeois epoch analysed in the *Prison Notebooks*. It points to the possibility of breaking out of this conceptuality’s self-referential and contradictory circularity, but it does not itself enact such a liberation; it remains prospective, tentative, exploratory. Rather, it is a ‘practico-indicative’ or ‘practical’ concept, emerging from within a *Konstellation* of concepts as a provisional solution to the problems posed within it. In terms borrowed from *Reading Capital*, hegemony has its own ‘temporality’ distinct from the temporalities of the other concepts in the *Prison Notebooks*; whereas the latter are analysed, the concept of hegemony is deployed. It thus cannot be analysed independently, but only after delineating the constellation of concepts to which, in its ‘integral’ meaning (that is, the meaning that it progressively assumes within the immanent dynamic of Gramsci’s thought), it was designed as a response.

We can thus say that, if the concept of hegemony is the ‘truth’ of Gramsci’s thought, it is only so in the sense in which Althusser argued that ‘the truth of a philosophy lies entirely in its effects’. That is, it does not produce Gramsci’s discourse, but is produced by it (and in turn redefines the status of that productive discourse itself). In this sense, hegemony provides us with a key with which to read the other concepts of the *Prison Notebooks* in the same non-teleological way as ‘human anatomy’, Marx argues in the *Grundrisse*, ‘contains a key to the anatomy of the ape’. It permits us to understand the analyses of the *Prison Notebooks* from the determinant perspective of the overcoming of the conjuncture they describe and of which they are an integral dimension. Before enquiring into the meaning of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, therefore, we must first ask another question: what is this *Konstellation* of concepts as a response to which Gramsci deploys the concept of hegemony?

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2 ‘Practico-indicative’ in the sense in which ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’ characterised the concept of ‘civil society’ (Anderson 1976a, p. 35), as designating a dispositif of problems requiring further research; ‘practical’ in the sense in which Althusser defined ‘the equivalent of a signal, of a noticeboard that “points out” what movement is to be put into effect and in what direction, to what place, must there be displacement to reach the real earth rather than the heaven of abstraction’ (Althusser 1969, p. 243).

3 Althusser 1997, p. 4.