In early 1932, over 2 years after beginning his carceral writing project, Gramsci wrote what were to become some of the most famous lines of the *Prison Notebooks*. ‘The Modern Prince’, he argued,

the myth-Prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can be only an organism, a social element in which the becoming concrete of a collective will, partially recognised and affirmed in action, has already begun. This organism is already given by historical development; it is the political party, the modern form in which the partial, collective wills that tend to become universal and total are gathered together. [...] The Modern Prince, as it develops, overturns the whole system of intellectual and moral relations, in that its development means precisely that any given act is useful or harmful, virtuous or wicked, in so far as it has as its concrete point of reference the Modern Prince itself, and helps to strengthen or to oppose it. In people’s consciences, the Prince takes the place of the divinity or the categorical imperative, and becomes the basis for a modern laicism and for a complete laicisation of all aspects of life and of all customary relationships.  

It is on the basis of citations such as this that it has often been argued, from the early years of the reception of the *Prison Notebooks* until today, that the metaphor of the Modern Prince should be understood as a merely a ‘codeword’ for a Communist Party, conceived either in continuation with a supposedly ‘Leninist’, democratic-centralist conception of the party, or as a ‘Western Marxist’

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1 Q 8, §21, pp. 951–3 (January–February 1932). References to Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* [*Quaderni del carcere*] follow the internationally established standard of notebook number (Q), number of note (§), followed by page reference to the Italian critical edition (Gramsci 1975).
alternative to it, depending upon the particular interpreters’ predispositions.² Sometimes the Modern Prince has been ‘deciphered’ in a more expansive sense, as a generic description of the modern political party as such, representing a distinctive synthesis of the normative, motivational and executive sources of the democratic ethos that underwrites modern mass societies.³ More recently, and increasingly, it has been suggested that the Modern Prince should be understood as representing a paradigmatic embodiment of the novel conception of political power as self-foundational that emerged in the twentieth century, from Weber’s theorisation of charismatic domination to its formalisation in the Schmittian notion of the self-referential decision.⁴ Just as Machiavelli called for his new prince to be the ‘redeemer’ of the ‘leaderless, lawless, crushed, despoiled, torn, overrun’ Italian nation,⁵ Gramsci’s Modern Prince is conceived as a proletarian kairós, uniquely capable of resolving the antinomies of political modernity.

The Prison Notebooks do indeed contain extensive notes on the political party as a necessary protagonist of modern political life. Gramsci develops a novel tripartite theory of the ‘fundamental elements’ required for the existence of a political party: ‘a mass element’; a ‘principal cohesive element’; and ‘an intermediate element, which articulates the first [mass] element with the second [cohesive element] and maintains contact between them, not only physically but also morally and intellectually’.⁶ He distinguishes between democratic and bureaucratic centralism, in a polemic against not only the anti-Stalinist Bordiga’s programmism, but against the consolidating Stalinist orthodoxy itself.⁷ He also identifies the specific nature of the type of leadership of the Modern Prince, which tends to puts itself out of business, progressively reducing the distance between leaders and the led, in a relation of ‘dialectical pedagogy’. It is in this dynamic that we find the distinctiveness of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony (that is, of leadership) translated into the terms of a theory of political organisation.

Such is the richness of Gramsci’s reflections on theme of political organisation that there is a great temptation to synthesise his disparate notes on the art

³ See White and Ypi 2010.
⁴ For representative readings that tend in this direction, see Kalyvas 2000 and Morfino 2099, p. 99. See Farris 2013 for a suggestive discussion of the novelty of Weber’s conception of the foundations of political power.
⁵ Machiavelli 1961, p. 81
⁶ Q 14, §70, p. 1733 (February 1933); see Sassoon 1987, pp. 150–79.
⁷ Q 13, §36, pp. 1632–5; see Cospito 2011, pp. 228–44.