

Gramsci



*between
Marxism
and
Idealism*

Onorato Damen

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**GRAMSCI:
BETWEEN MARXISM AND IDEALISM**

by

ONORATO DAMEN

An analysis by a revolutionary who was part
of the earliest opposition to Stalinism

Prometheus Publications

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Foreword

Myths about Antonio Gramsci are endless. The biggest myth of all is that the hero of the factory occupation movement and founder of *L'Ordine Nuovo* was also the founder of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I) in 1921. On the basis of this myth, ideologues for the post-war reformist *Italian* Communist Party (PCI) used Gramscian theoretical notions and categories to justify 'Euro-communism' or the turn away from allegiance to the Russian bloc in a failed attempt to win electoral success. Yet, far from being confined to Italy or fading with the collapse of the USSR and disappearance of Euro-communism, Gramsci's voluminous writings are now the basis of academic studies throughout the world. From linguistics through anthropology to politics, sociology and 'subaltern studies' Gramscian ideas on 'hegemony', 'passive revolution', the 'modern Prince', the 'war of positions', 'philosophy of praxis', are flourishing in the post-truth epoch which denies the existence of an objective social reality and reduces society to a collection of individuals. In the wake of the destruction of the industrial working class in the old capitalist heartlands all these ideas have been used to rationalise the reshaping of previously class-based political organisations like the Labour Party as well as contribute to new populist movements of the capitalist left, such as Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece. No matter how the latter are dressed up, they share a common perspective: that a mass working class revolution is not possible and socialism will need to be brought about gradually through a series of manoeuvres and alliances within the existing political set-up supported by electoral support and even mass protests which aim for a role in the state not to overthrow it.

In an earlier epoch – during the first phase of capitalism's present accumulation crisis when the working class was stirred to resist the bosses' attacks – it was another Gramsci who became something of an icon on capitalism's left political scene. In the late 1960s and through the '70s it was the Gramsci of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, the mouthpiece of the factory occupations in Turin in 1920, who fired the enthusiasm of anarchists and Trotskyists alike as a spate of factory occupations and workers' co-operatives appeared to suggest a way forward for the working class. Even before we were familiar with the tradition of the Italian Left, one of the first tasks of the Communist Workers Organisation, and its forerunner Revolutionary Perspectives [the early 1970s], was to counter the illusion that the working class can create communism by taking over the workplaces and simply ignore the state that is run by and for the capitalist class.

Round about the same time Onorato Damen, a contemporary of Gramsci who in his own words, "had shared the revolutionary times that were sparked by the fire of the October revolution" must have been thinking about the legacy of Gramsci, myth or otherwise, on the contemporary working class: the undermining of Marxism and blurring of ideas about what communism is and the nature of the political class struggle. When Mussolini's regime collapsed and 'Il duce' was reduced to a Nazi puppet in chaotic northern Italy towards the end of 1943, Damen had been a key figure in reconstructing a revolutionary political organisation of the working class. The *Internationalist* Communist Party (PCInt) was formed on the understanding that state capitalist Russia had proved itself part of capitalism's competing imperialist powers. It immediately came up against Palmiro Togliatti's *Italian* Communist Party, established courtesy of US imperialism in return for its enrolling thousands of workers into the US-backed partisans to fight "German Nazis" for a "democratic Italy". (Although he does not mention it, Damen himself had been targeted by Togliatti's hit squads, managing to survive, unlike his comrades, Mario Acquaviva and Fausto Atti.) By this time, of course, Gramsci was dead but it was principally his ideas and an increasingly mythical life story which the PCI used to rationalise its complete acceptance of the Italian national capitalist political and economic structure. (Indeed, Togliatti's 'Salerno Turn' on his return to Italy from exile in Russia in 1944 committed the PCI to a government of national unity, support for 'progressive democracy' and abandonment of the 'armed struggle for socialism', which meant disarming PCI partisans. This suited Anglo-American imperialism because it prevented armed workers rejoining the class struggle in Turin, Milan, Genoa, where workers were once again occupying the factories and demanding something more than a return to the status quo ante.)

As the PCI settled into its post-war role as part of Italian capital's political establishment, Damen was reflecting on its claim to be rooted in the same revolutionary tradition as the Marxist 'Communist Party of Italy' that had been founded at Livorno in 1921 – a claim that increasingly boiled down to the role of Gramsci. The present volume is the product of Damen's considerations on Gramsci's shortcomings as an analytical and practical Marxist which he evidently wrote over a period of years. The structure is loose because he died before he completed it and the draft chapters were only discovered posthumously and eventually published in 1982. Some of the themes – such as the role of intellectuals, the influence of Croce on Gramsci's view of history and so on – will be familiar to contemporary readers. "In Gramsci's writing, classes: those tragic protagonists of history, their economic interests, the complexity of their social relations, the dynamics of their progress and their decline only appear in the shadows, while individuality, learning and individual will predominate." Damen's perspective, though, always recognises that the advance of Marxist theory is not

simply the product of a particularly clever individual's abstract critique, but is part of an ongoing inter-relationship with the experience of the working class often made by someone who has changed their class allegiance. [*"The same person who wrote Capital also wrote The Communist Manifesto and the Address to the First Workers' International."*]

As for Gramsci's early *L'Ordine Nuovo* period (from May 1919 through the autumn of 1920) and his enthusiasm for the mass factory occupations which he lauded as the incarnation of the proletarian dictatorship, Damen is typically generous about Gramsci's illusions whilst having no sympathy with them. He ironically notes that the sight of a communist, Giovanni Parodi (member of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI)'s abstentionist fraction, i.e. against participating in elections) sitting in the managing director's chair whilst the *"State's structures remained intact and the industrialist Agnelli remained the owner of Fiat ... does not really amount to a hegemonic role for the industrial proletariat"*. At the same time, however, he credits Gramsci with at least envisaging the factory committees as a function of the conquest of power by the working class – unlike the post-war PCI picture of workers' control within the existing state set up. By the time of the Imola Convention at the end of November 1920 the *Ordine Nuovo* group had disintegrated but he generously asserts that the current attended this pre-Livorno political orientation meeting on equal terms. The now politically isolated Gramsci supported Amadeo Bordiga's call for a fundamental break with social democratic 'maximalism', not the creation of a bridge between them by creating a 'communist-socialist' fraction. But Gramsci played no part during almost a week of debate at the Livorno Congress. Of the old Turin group only Terracini spoke from the platform: for the communist fraction, not for factory councils. (Other leading members of the group such as Tasca and Togliatti did not attend.) Formally the split with the PSI occurred over how strictly the discipline of the Communist International (the 'Comintern', founded 1919) should apply to the Italian party. More fundamentally, the issue being debated was what kind of organisation constituted a revolutionary party and the very nature of proletarian revolution. It was down to Bordiga to elaborate a revolutionary Marxist framework for the new communist party. By the time that party was formed, domination of the Comintern by an isolated Bolshevik Party was already presaging counter-revolution.

Damen does not go into how Gramsci became the Russians' first choice as implement to redress the 'split too far to the Left of Livorno'; how he stayed behind in Moscow after the 4th ComIntern Congress in 1922 and eventually, in May 1924, returned to Italy to become effective leader of the Party after Bordiga had refused to retake up his role in the Executive once he was released from prison in 1923 – an Executive which now also included Togliatti, one of the four new members who owed their post to Moscow's manoeuvrings. Nevertheless, the

question of Gramsci's role as 'bolsheviser' of the original Communist Party is a key concern for Damen, especially as his own personal and political life was affected by the disastrous results of the policy. The episode is critical to any revolutionary today who wants to understand how Gramsci's weaknesses hastened and aided the process of counter-revolution and the demise of the PCd'I as a revolutionary party inside the working class. In fact the CWO has already published an English translation of the two chapters on Gramsci's leadership of the PCd'I during the Matteotti crisis and the *Platform of the Committee of Intesa*, which put the case of the Left majority of the membership who were fighting a losing battle against the manipulations of Gramsci and his Moscow backers in the run-up to the Lyons Congress in 1926. [With an explanatory overview, this pamphlet is still available from the CWO address.]

This is hardly the stuff for academic circles or popular entertainment but it's now possible to view a YouTube movie of the 44 days Gramsci spent in his first political exile on the island of Ustica after Mussolini's clampdown on all political opposition towards the end of 1926. With Peppino Mazzotta, widely known as Fazio in the television series *"Inspector Montalbano"*, playing Antonio Gramsci, the movie is designed to be an 'opinion shaper'. Portentous political discussions with fellow-exile Bordiga are skirted around. Damen, who was there before either of them and whose dwelling – a 'Saracen tower' known as Villa Damen – became the venue of the improvised party school, gets no mention. This is a trivial example but it is a sign of how Gramsci's image is continually being shaped in line with the changing intellectual climate in a digital world. But, as Damen reminds us, *"A class political movement never arises simply as part of a general intellectual climate"* and *"Every re-reading of Gramsci must be done critically, in the light of what is being done today in the name of his teaching."* Contemporary Gramscism is a global intellectual preoccupation whose net effect is to add to individual and political confusion. Revolutionaries of the 21st century need to know how to recognise false friends and redirect the desire for an end to capitalism onto internationalist working class ground. This overview, by someone who played a major part in keeping alive and reviving the internationalist communist Left as a political current inside the working class, is a starting point. And nobody says it is an easy read!

E. Rayner

July 2019

Preface

Gramsci's Time

Whether or not he deserved it, Gramsci's fate certainly cannot be envied by anyone who shared the revolutionary times that were sparked by the fire of the October revolution. His personal life has been appropriated by a party apparatus that has turned it into a vehicle of political and ideological deception amongst new generations of militants who want to take up the cause of the proletariat and to understand revolutionary theory.

It is one thing for his life to be remembered as part of an exceptionally serious and painful situation for the proletariat as a whole, but especially for the communist party activists who were at the forefront of the fight against fascist capitalism, trying to find a revolutionary solution to the economic and political crisis of the initial post-war period. It is an entirely different matter to systematically and self-interestedly use the sacrifices made by Gramsci as cover for a policy of betrayal and capitulation.

The Gramsci promoted by politicians has been tailored to suit their political image and their need for a name and a cause to give them kudos amongst the pack of gullible minds ready to absorb any old drivel. Such a need, which ought to evoke repugnance, has instead occupied biographers and commentators, historiographers and hagiographers, literary critics and even poets who together have saturated the book market for the last twenty years. This gradual reshaping of Gramsci has given him one of the most detrimental of ideological profiles, but a profile which works to the benefit of the party that has prompted the writings.

Yet, as someone who knew Gramsci very well, who shared the epoch where he reached his greatest political maturity and who has since gone on to study his later writings, we can only reach one conclusion: that is to say that Gramsci's work is not based on Marxism nor framed with the mind of a Marxist, whether in the instruments offered by his method of interpretation or in terms of his own goals.

While contingent problems and the urgency of finding immediate and concrete solutions prevailed in him, he nevertheless loved to idealise all this with fervent creativity, almost as if he wanted to make up for for his physical disability by finding a serious and constant practical way forward.

Between dialectical materialism and philosophy generated by myth, Gramsci was apparently for the first but really, in terms of education, taste and tendency he was inclined towards the second. Maybe this debate over Gramsci's personality and its imperfections, the shortcomings of his theoretical method and the empiricism of his political schemes is how opportunism can continue to justify itself? In any case this macabre vivisection of Gramsci on the anatomical table of "left" intellectualism has uncovered a vast set of assumptions and perspectives that are irreconcilable with Marxism. Here a quick clarification is required. In the face of the 1st World War, not only was Gramsci undecided about the road to take and failed to see the real nature of the war but, unlike Lenin and Luxemburg who made contributions of fundamental importance to the development of revolutionary theory on the problem of war, he was unable to sense and understand the very phenomenon of imperialism from a class standpoint and in terms of revolutionary strategy.

Thus, in his first article on the problem of the war which appeared in *Il Grido Del Popolo* [*The Cry of the People*] (October 1914), Gramsci wrote:

... Revolutionaries who conceive of history as the creation of one's own willpower, made up of sort of uninterrupted slashes on the other active and passive forces of society, and who are preparing for the most favourable conditions for the final break (the revolution), must not content themselves with the provisional formula "absolute neutrality" but must transform it into "active and effective neutrality".

It was this "active and effective" neutrality which would lead Mussolini to the theory of revolutionary war, the logical prelude to fascism, but it led Gramsci neither to the theory nor the practice of revolutionary defeatism.

Moreover, it is no secret that Gramsci could not conceive of Marxism in anything other than idealistic terms since he remained anchored to Croce's historicism (history as a creation of the spirit) as well as his concept of freedom. In fact, in his analysis of the October Revolution (*L'Avanti!* (*Forward*) July 25, 1918), Gramsci wrote that "*historical development is governed by the rhythm of freedom*" which "*is the immanent force of history that blows apart every established configuration.*"

The same idealist bent led him to see the councils as having within them the objective basis for starting to build up socialist society on the trunk of capitalism itself, even as he remained blind and deaf to the historical necessity for the formation of the revolutionary party.

The later Gramsci, the man we knew first at the Congress of Livorno and then Lyons, who was the party leader from the murder of Matteotti to the exceptional

laws, is much less original and of little consequence.

Spontaneism and the Role of Personality

To clarify the distinction between party and class as moments of the same process, it's worth remembering Lenin's well-known reference to Kautsky's thinking, around the time of *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), where he justifies the sharp polemic against the economists and spontaneist tendencies. Kautsky denied that "*socialist consciousness would necessarily be the direct outcome of the proletarian class struggle*" and argued that,

*socialism and class struggle arise alongside each other, but not one out of the other since they start from different premises. Contemporary socialist consciousness can only be based on a profound scientific understanding. In fact contemporary economic science is, along with modern technology, one of the conditions for socialist production and the proletariat, whatever it desires, can create neither the one nor the other. Both science and technology arise out of the contemporary social process. It is not the proletariat who disparages science but bourgeois intellectuals, even if contemporary socialism did come from the minds of some members of this social strata who then communicated it to some of the most intellectually advanced member of the proletariat, who in turn introduced it into the proletarian class struggle wherever conditions allowed. Thus socialist consciousness is an element imported into the proletarian class from outside and not something which arises spontaneously.*¹

This is confirmed by Lenin:

*The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass the necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. From the standpoint of their social status the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, were from the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the same way, in Russia the theoretical doctrine of social democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.*²

Clearly the question has been posed in an extremely sweeping and unilateral way, as is typical in polemics. But a polemical truth is always only a partial truth

and thus neither excludes, nor denies, but poses the necessity of a consequent more general truth. We would be committing a serious error if we reduced the terms of the question to the rigid distinction between those who, because their "ultimate consciousness" has not yet matured, are only capable of elaborating a trade unionist consciousness, and people – bourgeois intellectuals familiar with science and technology – who are the transmitters of socialist consciousness. This would end up falling into a fundamentally dualistic scholastic conclusion, far removed from a dialectical approach to the problem. Even though they spring from different premises, socialism and class struggle are still the outcome of two intertwining moments of a single process: the existence of the class.

And more clearly: it is true that science and technology spring from the social process, yet there would be no social process if human forces were not intrinsic to it. Social conflict and struggle situations stem from the activity of human beings who are propelled by divergent interests. This is the context in which a sense of division between the various social categories emerges and eventually crystallises into class antagonisms.

The accumulation of theoretical and scientific knowledge is part of a wider increase in human knowledge, refining taste, sensitivity and the need for a more acute curiosity towards the new and the unknown and all as an index of an increasingly higher manifestation of life. In a word: the nexus of things is intertwined with the nexus of human events. Socialism does not spring out of the discovery of a formula, no matter how clever that is. It is not the product of laboratory research. It is not just science, it is also a new way of addressing the problem of life: a new vision of the world that has emerged with the development of modern capitalism and which has gradually grown under the weight of its own contradictions.

If the dialectic of capitalism's own economic organisation tends towards a socialist outcome, this is also the goal of human beings with their irrepressible yearning for equality and freedom. For example, when men of science like Marx and Engels were deepening their critique of the world of capitalist production, these sons of the bourgeoisie made use of the tools of inquiry that the bourgeoisie had shaped over decades of technical transformations and scientific achievements. One can only wonder whether this prodigious rise, which is particularly dynamic under the auspices of capitalist production, should be regarded as simply due to capitalism alone or rather to human labour where the bourgeois class is apparently not so decisive a factor as the proletariat. But this is not enough. Even if we considered Marx and Engels' contribution as a work of scholars from the bourgeoisie, we would have posed a problem of extreme banality if we failed to historically situate their stinging criticism and demolition of the capitalist system they placed under examination.

And 'situate historically' means understanding the critical work of these masters, not only in terms of science but as the work of men who were protagonists in historical events, who regarded the cause of the class whose destiny would potentially decide the future of all humanity as their own.

These are people who conducted the sharpest polemics against conservative conformism, who recognised in the historical development of capitalism, the *raison d'être* for the historical development of the proletariat. They explained the significance of class and advanced the theory of revolutionary subversion as a natural result of the irrepressible struggle between the two fundamental classes in modern history. The same person who wrote *Capital* also wrote *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Address to the First Workers' International*. The one is inseparable from the other. Basically we are talking about deserters of the bourgeoisie who have ceased to think and act according to the canons of bourgeois culture but think and act in the same way as people who are subject to alienated labour, with a view to building a socialist society where work is no longer a burden for man but the free expression of his personality.

In this respect – and the problem defies any other hypothesis – Marx, Engels and later Lenin and with them and after them an army of thinkers, politicians and intellectuals linked to Marxism, all had the task of "*introducing into the proletariat the consciousness of its situation and its mission*". But the formative elements of this consciousness have their historical matrix in the working class, in turn mirrored in the brains of some individuals as in a laboratory of scientific systemisation, and so return this knowledge to the class to help it become "conscious of the goal" in an increasingly clear and distinct way.

And from the standpoint of dialectical Marxism it seems to us this is also the way to define the role of personality. As well as recognising the proletarian revolution as the historical outcome of the inbuilt contradictions maturing within capitalist production and distribution, their uncompromising scientific analysis led Marx and Engels to stress the antagonistic role of the proletarian class. Above all, they themselves worked according to their own convictions, sticking with the class whose fundamental interests they identified with and in line with their own teaching which assumes a tendency for political militants amongst the working class to become revolutionary.

We repeat, the initial thesis of materialism says that history is made by human beings. So if in fact this is the case, then it is clear that it is made, among other things, by great men. It only remains to understand how precisely the actions of these men are determined. In this respect Engels says:

*That a particular man emerges at a definite time in a given country is naturally pure chance. But even if he was eliminated it would be necessary to find a substitute that was more good than bad [tant bien que mal]; in the long run he is sure to be found. That Napoleon – this particular Corsican – should have become the military dictator demanded by the exhausting wars of the French Republic – that was a matter of chance. But if Napoleon hadn't existed, someone else would have filled his place. This is proved by the fact that whenever such a man has been needed he has always been found: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc. Marx, to be sure, discovered the materialistic conception of history – but the examples of Thierry, Mignet, Guizot, the whole school of English historians up to 1850 show they were working towards it; and the discovery of the same conception by Morgan serves as proof that the time was ripe for it, and that it had to be discovered. So with all other accidents and apparent accidents in history. The further removed the field we happen to be investigating is from the economic, and the closer it comes to the domain of pure, abstract ideology, the more we will find that it reveals accidents in its development, the more does the course of its curve run in zig-zag fashion. But fit a trend to the curve and you will find that the longer the period taken, the more inclusive the field treated, the more closely will this trend run parallel to the trend of economic development.*³

*The 'personality' of anyone who has won distinction in the spiritual or social sphere can be classified as one of those accidents whose appearance does not prevent the 'average' line of humanity's intellectual development running in parallel with its economic development.*⁴

In this respect Lenin's position takes on even more precise shape and meaning. We have already seen how Lenin, in disagreement with the economism and spontaneism of his time, warned against trade unionism and the fundamentally corporatist danger inherent in the struggle the working class conducts with its own strength alone against the bosses; and how he entrusted social democracy and its more prepared cadres with the task of bringing socialist consciousness from outside into the class struggle of the proletariat. And to rule out a unilateral and limited interpretation, i.e. a non-dialectical one, his general approach is described as follows, again from *What Is to Be Done?*

... the fundamental error committed by the "new trend" in Russian Social Democracy is its bowing to spontaneity and its failure to understand that the spontaneity of the masses demands a high degree of consciousness from us Social Democrats. The greater the spontaneous upsurge of the masses and the more widespread the movement, the more rapid, incomparably so, the demand for greater consciousness in the theoretical, political, and organisational work of Social Democracy.

*The spontaneous upsurge of the masses in Russia proceeded (and continues) with such rapidity that the young Social Democrats proved unprepared to meet these gigantic tasks. This unpreparedness is our common misfortune, the misfortune of **all** Russian Social Democrats. The upsurge of the masses proceeded and spread with uninterrupted continuity; it not only continued in the places where it began, but spread to new localities and to new strata of the population (under the influence of the working class movement, there was a renewed ferment among the student youth, among the intellectuals generally, and even among the peasantry). Revolutionaries, however, **lagged behind** this upsurge, both in their “theories” and in their activity; they failed to establish a constant and continuous organisation capable of **leading** the whole movement.⁵*

All of Lenin is here, in this clear vision of the tasks of a truly socialist and revolutionary advance guard. It is not only the theoretical Lenin, the man of science, in contact with the reality of his country and its working masses – which by necessity and instinct push Russian civilisation to break with the last vestiges of economic and political medievalism whilst facing the new enslavement of machines imposed by the invading monopoly capitalism – but it is also the revolutionary fighter who identifies with the cause of the proletariat and who wants to find the proof of the theoretical accuracy of Marxism in the day to day struggle. In a word, this is the fighter who does not want to **remain behind** the masses in their struggle even if it comes from blind instinct and irrationality. In this case Lenin, as the embodiment of a collective aspiration, is as one with the party which he has helped to form in terms of theory, programme and structure. Above all they are both as one with the class they stand for, with the party expressing the highest and most complete “consciousness of the final aim” to which the working class in various ways and from different experiences strives towards.

Thus, whatever the level of development the working class has reached, its consciousness of itself and of its revolutionary mission are articulated by such individuals who above all are recognised as spokespersons of a permanent organisation capable of **directing** the whole movement .

Notes

1. See Lenin *What is to Be Done?*
2. *ibid*
3. Engels, *Der Sozialistische Akademiker*, 1895
4. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*
5. Lenin *op.cit.* (p.53 of English version: 9th ed. Progress publishers.)

Marxism and Gramscism

PART ONE

Premarxist Philosophy

It may seem inappropriate, and it is not easy to talk about Gramsci's philosophical and political ideas while the priests of neo-humanism are reacting to his distressing life story with disingenuous praise and the most irrational and uncritical veneration of his ideas. This is even more true in the present situation where his thinking appears to be historically justified.

Yet, however justifiable our feelings at a human level, we embark on this criticism of Gramscism as a duty that goes beyond all personal sentiment.

It's almost as if a sort of blind fury, at times verging on madness, were behind the patching together and jumbling of Gramsci's writings as they come to light. One of these, namely *The Historical Materialism and Philosophy of Benedict Croce*, is particularly interesting because it allows us to draw some clear conclusions about how and why Gramsci dealt with the philosophy of praxis.

In truth, the work is fragmentary and eclectic: it does not indicate a true body of philosophical doctrine, but it nevertheless offers enough guidance to trace the real spirit of Gramsci, at least the Gramsci we were pleased to know, to admire and even sometimes criticise and disagree with during the time we shared as political militants. Thus, even if it lacks an overview, the flame is still alive; as are the indications of the spiritual state which animate the book: and that, in Gramsci – a man of culture and sensitivity – is everything.

If we had to locate Gramsci's doctrinal position, we would undoubtedly place it in that field of European thought which has moved from Hegelian idealism and reached its logical continuity in neo-idealist historicism. It is the outcome of a powerful belief in the philosophy of praxis which, since it stems from this same source, appears to be a dialectical negation of all philosophy and thus its superseding.

In fact, after Marx it is unthinkable that any philosopher who reflects on historical necessity and holds to a vision of the world where material interests and the social and political forces associated with them predominate, would not also accept the welling up of a revolutionary explosion.

The Marxist conception of history puts an end to philosophy in the field of history just as the dialectic of nature renders every philosophy of nature both useless and impossible. Everywhere now it is no longer a matter of thinking up concepts in the head but of discovering them in fact. For philosophy, which has been chased out of nature and from history, there only remains the reign of pure thought.¹

In this sense Gramsci's thinking does not diverge from Marxism or revert to traditional philosophy. He does not try to break with it, but assumes its premises are valid and uses them to somehow orient himself towards a particular interpretation of Marxism. As we will see later, the true matrix of his thinking is not to be found in Marx-Engels's revolutionary dialectics, but in the anti-intellectualist currents and reactions to positivist scientism which emerged after Marx in thousands of varieties of pre-Marxist idealism. Philosophical and political neo-realism went on to nourish, very effectively, schools of thought from Bergson to Croce, who had set themselves the problem of rehabilitating the role of reason and in this context to find the connection between thought and life.

Gramsci himself defines and locates almost his whole thinking when he states that:

*... only the philosophy of praxis is thus the "immanentist" conception. Especially under review and to be criticised are all the speculative historicist theories. You could write a new **Anti-Dühring** that would be an "Anti-Croce" from this point of view, summarising not only the controversy against speculative philosophy, but also the argument against positivism and mechanicism and the unhelpful forms of philosophy of praxis.²*

In other words, he argues that the philosophy of praxis is not only the consequence of all immanentist philosophy but serves as a bridgehead in a battle on two fronts: against speculative philosophy on the one hand and against any formulation of positivism and determinist materialism on the other. He also points out the derivation of the philosophy of praxis from the immanentist conception,

but purified from any speculative aroma and reduced to pure history or historicity and pure humanism [...]. Not only is the philosophy of practice related to immanentism but also to the subjective conception of reality, since in fact it overcomes it, explaining it as a historical fact.³

But then all the philosophy inherited from the Renaissance is equally immanentist and subjective: the infinity of Bruno's worlds, Descartes' rationalism and empiricism, Leibniz's monad, classical German enlightenment and philosophy; all these currents of thought are pervaded by the immanentist and subjective

conception because the interests of the modern bourgeoisie in the historical era of the formation of modern nations have been expressed immanentistically and subjectively. Likewise, the formal dialectic of historicism that conceives history as a development, as a current, a perennial flow within which the activity of providence circulates or – which is the same – of the spirit, and which therefore is always so full with humanist immanentism.

On the other hand, how can the revolutionary dialectic be considered immanentist and subjective when the singular is annulled by merging it into the collective, when continuity and progress are counter-posed by collision, collapse and a violent overcoming?

The formal dialectic of historicism is basically a concept based on the bourgeoisie's own history, while the revolutionary dialectic – the concept of a new society whose appearance as a hegemonic force will be the result of a profound radical breach in the world of things even before the human world – asserts that in human history there is no reconciliation of opposites terms, but rather a clash in which one term must necessarily negate the other since it is out of this that there comes a further affirmation of life. "Contradiction is what drives us forward," Hegel wrote, and that's correct.

The book has a host of definitions of the philosophy of praxis: "*It is materialism (the French of the eighteenth century) enhanced by work based on the same speculative philosophy and fused with humanism*"; more flexibly "*... it is more like Hegel than David Ricardo*"; and with more philosophical precision: "*... it is the relationship between human will (superstructure) and economic structure*". Here the immanentist conception could not be made any clearer.

Where did Gramsci get his philosophy of praxis? Maybe from the appearance of the proletariat as a class and its becoming a revolutionary force in opposition to the capitalist class which had brought it into existence and then strengthened it as part of its own development? Maybe because he had recognised the terms of this historical reality in Marx and Engels who had drawn up the principles of this theory which became the most accurate and valuable tool, not only of human thought and understanding but of the revolutionary conquest of power itself?

And did the rest come from Engels, the offspring of classical German philosophy and really the German workers' movement?

But his formative education was rather different. According to Gramsci, the philosophy of praxis was entirely born ... *from a cultural past whose most famous and salient terms are Renaissance and Reformation, German philosophy and the*

French Revolution, Calvinism and classical English economy, secular liberalism and historicism which underlies the whole modern conception of life.

And he gave this philosophy two tasks; that of combating the most sophisticated forms of modern ideology in order to form a group of independent intellectuals who would educate the masses whose culture was medieval. This vision of praxis in Gramsci as both a dearth of culture and as a modern social reform is expanded and defined by the Ricardian intuitive method which “postulates that”, from a premise which leads to a certain consequence, the terms of a new theory of knowledge are posed. The concept of “historical necessity” is closely related to that of “rationality”. Necessity exists when there is an efficient and active premise, one which has become operative in men’s awareness, thus posing concrete goals for the collective consciousness. He clarifies further:

*The premise must contain within it, already developed or on the way to development, the necessary and sufficient material conditions to realise the impulse of the collective will; but it is clear that from this material premise, calculable quantitatively, there cannot be **dissociated** [the italics are ours] a certain level of culture, i.e. a complex of intellectual acts and from these a certain set of compelling passions and feelings, that is to say they have the strength to induce action at all costs.⁴*

The word ‘dissociated’ is not there by accident: Gramsci had too great a sense of the meaning and value of vocabulary and the word clearly expresses the basis of Gramscian thought more than any dissertation. Thus the concept of the whole complex of individual acts, passions and feelings is not divorced from a material premise. This, however, is based on an immanentist approach, never a dialectical, let alone determinist one.

In this way the sense of history does not proceed from below, from the structure, from the world of things and the technology and material interests associated with this world, and ultimately from the class relations which describe social, political and cultural life. Instead, whatever is really alive in history, what matters, even when referring to the material and quantifiable, what permits a historical conception of rationality, must come from the complex and fluid world of culture: intellectual stimuli, feelings and passions which sustain the will, and which is ultimately the only factor capable of inducing action at “all costs”. Here it is quite clear that Gramsci was influenced by the new metaphysics born from French philosophical thought during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

In Gramsci’s writing classes: those tragic protagonists of history, their economic interests, the complexity of their social relations, the dynamics of their progress and their decline only appear in the shadows, while individuality, learning and

individual will predominate.

Even when he examines the human being in relation to other humans, this note of individuality does not diminish, but rather he finds reason to strengthen it.

He conceives 'man' as a series of relations which in turn are seen as active and conscious, i.e. in proportion to the greater or lesser degree of intelligence that each individual has: "*Hence one can say that each one changes himself, changes, in so far as the complex of relationships of which **he is the focal point [il centro di annodamento]** modify and change.*" [the emphasis is ours]

Further on, and more clearly:

Every individual is not only the synthesis of existing relationships, but also of the history of these relationships, that is, the summary of the whole past. It will be said that each individual can change very little, given their relative lack of strength.

This is true up to a point. Yet the individual can associate with all those who want the same change and if this is rational, the individual can multiply an impressive number of times and obtain change, etc.⁵

Here the 'cathartic' moment – the passage from necessity to freedom – is seen and felt, not as a function of society and class, but always in terms of the individual. There is no doubt that society is formed by individuals and that every social phenomenon is the result of individual wills, actions, feelings. In this sense every social phenomenon is the outcome of individual phenomena. For example, when the market price of a commodity is decided, we are faced with a social phenomenon resulting from the encounter of particular wills, those of the sellers and those of the buyers. But as a generalised social phenomenon this no longer simply expresses the desires and motivations of this or that seller, or this or that buyer. In the same way, Marx argues that all social phenomena occur independently of consciousness, of feelings and the will of men; and there is no focal point that can limit or undo this independence!

Gramsci, on the other hand, idealises his concept of the individual:

One has to elaborate a doctrine [This is very true, since Marx has another, very different doctrine. OD] where all these relationships are active and moving, clearly pointing out that the seat of this activity is the consciousness of the individual who understands, desires, admires, creates in so much as he already understands, admires, creates, etc. and this is not in isolation but rich in the possibilities offered by other men and by things in society which he may not have any knowledge about.⁶

There could not be more evidence of just how misleading this thinking is in its characterisation of Marxism. Let us now refer to Marx's well-known formulation:

*In the social production of their existence, human beings enter into relationships that are determined, necessary, independent of their will, into relations of production that correspond to a certain degree of development of their material productive forces. Together, all of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society, or rather, the real basis on which a juridical and political superstructure arises and to which certain forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the process of social, political and spiritual life in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness.*⁷

In response to this extremely precise formulation of Marx, which has become the guideline to a true philosophy of praxis, Gramsci gives this comment:

*The proposition contained in the **Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy** that men are aware of structural conflicts in the field of ideology must be considered as an epistemological assertion and not a purely psychological and moral one.*⁸

Thus Marx's thinking is deprived of its underlying and essential motive force, i.e. the *a priori* determinant role of the structure, which Gramsci throws back onto the pile of rubbish of traditional immanentist philosophy. Once the key idea of determination is eliminated, it only remains for Gramsci to refer to the reciprocity of the factors of history. Listen to him:

The structure and the superstructure form a "historical bloc": that is, the complex, contradictory and discordant complexity of the superstructure is the reflection of the whole of the social relations of production.

And he demonstrates:

*If a 100% homogeneous social group is formed from ideology, this means that the basis for its overthrow is 100%, i.e. that the "rational" is real in the here and now. [Blessed be the memory of Hegel!, author's note.] Reasoning is based on the necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure [reciprocity: this is precisely the real dialectical process – OD].*⁹

This idea of the "historical bloc" assumes for Gramsci almost the importance of a philosophical discovery, so much so that he returns to it to point out that

material forces are the “content” and ideologies the “form”. Whether this is a valuable new discovery we really could not say.

Too often, too passionately, though not always correctly, Gramsci hides from Lenin’s healthy realism.

Against the idea of the “historical bloc” which logically follows from seeing individual conscience as the key to social relations, we remember the whipping that, via Bogdanov, Lenin gave the immanentists, the empirio-criticists and the empirio-monists:

First we reject – he wrote – all the philosophical premises common to this trinity. And in refuting the idealistic assumption by which “existence is consciousness”, he illustrates:

[...] the peasant farmer who sells his grain, enters into “relations” with the world’s wheat producers on the world market but without being conscious of it; without being aware of the relationships that are established following these exchanges. Social consciousness reflects social existence, this is Marx’s thinking.¹⁰

Gramsci, on the other hand, presents us with an economic individual who at the same time is an ethical one. Moreover, in so far as someone understands and believes and works, they are also part of history. In the same way as he describes the vast process of variability of social relations he returns with the obsessive idea of the individual, always the individual as their focal point. Croce speaks of the nexus of the discrete in circular fashion, but the meaning is the same. Yet who is there beyond the individual?

*Both **societas hominum** and **societas rerum** are abstract terms at the time of the maximum and sometimes terrible affirmation of the collective. Today, we think in terms of social relations and class. The fact that you live, that you have an economic life, that you procreate, that you manufacture products and trade them, determines a necessary objective concatenation of events, developments, a concatenation independent of your **social** consciousness that can never embrace it in its entirety. The most noble goal of humanity is to embrace this objective logic of the general economic process and its main features, in order to adapt as clearly and distinctly as possible, with the greatest critical spirit, its social consciousness and the class consciousness expressed in all capitalist countries.¹¹*

There is therefore a social consciousness that must be transformed into the desire for its social realisation; i.e. which evokes a rejoinder which impacts on the entire structure that initially provoked it.

The class’ consciousness of its historical goal is determined, it is true, by the precise way in which it is part of the material conditions that constitute the premises; but

if this class consciousness does not translate into practical resolve, the dialectical moment of the overthrow does not happen, it remains deferred by history. For example, we cannot say that today the premises are lacking for revolution; it can only be noted that the proletariat demonstrates itself to be incapable of translating the more or less complete consciousness of its existence as a class into a desire for revolutionary realisation. And this is the reason for the crisis of our time.

In a word, the rhythm of revolutionary dialectics is missing from Gramsci's thinking, the profound sense of the *"disconnection between the whole and the consciousness of its contradictory parts"*.¹² Above all, he lacks the dramatic idea of the clash, of the inevitable break-up, of the overcoming (superseding) that is in the philosophy of praxis, as it is in class divided human society and thus in history itself.

And we can add, with Lenin that:

*None of the fundamental premises can be omitted from this philosophy of Marxism, fused in steel, all in one piece, without departing from objective truth, without falling into the reactionary bourgeois lie [...]. Either the resulting materialism through and through or the fiction and the confusion of philosophical idealism.*¹³

Lenin's sharp invective is directed at all those who, like Gramsci, instead of materialising the domain of social phenomena, aim to turn the material conditions which produce these phenomena into metaphysical questions.

Clearly, the divergence between Gramscism and Marxism is fundamental. The doctrinal reasons can be found in the contrast between historicist neo-idealism and dialectical materialism, which for us expresses the irremediable conflict between the two fundamental classes of history in the times we are living through.

Theoretical Underpinning of Gramscism

Gramsci's underlying scheme: intellectuals, organisation of consensus, hegemony" which directly influences the current neo-revisionism of so many of the communist parties of western Europe, does not have a theoretical base in any Marxist school worthy of the name, but is taken wholesale from the methodology and some philosophical principles of Croce. Gramsci himself acknowledges this, specifying:

*In February 1917, in a short course that preceded the reproduction of Croce's work, **Religion and Serenity**, then recently released in the **Critique**, I wrote that just as Hegelianism had been the premise for a revival of the philosophy of praxis in the nineteenth century, the origins of contemporary civilisation,*

so Crocean philosophy could be the premise for a revival of the philosophy of praxis in our day, for our generations [...].

It is important that the inheritance of classical German philosophy is not only recorded, but made to become active life, and for this reason we must deal with Croce's philosophy. In other words, in order for us Italians to be inheritors of classical German philosophy this also means inheriting Crocean philosophy, which represents today's world episode of classical German philosophy. [our brackets]¹⁴

We conclude this outline of Gramsci's thinking by reflecting on the point that Gramsci himself made, i.e. that his scheme had already been elaborated by Croce and that he makes the Crocean conception of history, as ethical-political history, the nodal point of his philosophical thought. By contrast with the over-hyped originality of Gramsci, this highlights how much he had inherited and assimilated from Croce.

*For the philosophy of praxis – this is Gramsci again – the speculative method is not futility, but has yielded many “instrumental” values of thinking on the development of culture, instrumental values that the philosophy of praxis has incorporated (dialectics, for example). Croce's thinking must therefore, at least, be appreciated as an instrumental value, and hence it can be said that he has vigorously drawn attention to the importance of the facts of culture and thinking in the development of history, **on the role of the great intellectuals in the organic life of civil society and of the State, on the significance of hegemony and consensus as the necessary form of the concrete historical bloc.***

That this is not “futile” is shown by the fact that at the same time as Croce, the greatest modern theorist of the philosophy of praxis in terms of struggle and political organisation [the allusion to Lenin is evident, OD], using political terminology, has, in opposition to the various “economistic” tendencies, re-evaluated the front of the cultural struggle and constructed the doctrine of hegemony [in this case ‘hegemony’ is that of the proletariat, OD] as a complement to the theory of the State power [i.e. the dictatorship of the proletariat, OD] and as the current form of the 1848 doctrine of the “permanent revolution” [hypothesised by Marx, OD].¹⁵

We wanted Gramsci himself to explain about his cultural and historical-philosophical background with its assortment of contradictory currents eclectically gathered together. It's now possible to draw together the essential aspects of the theoretical nucleus around which he modelled his general political approach in the 1920s, in particular the role of the revolutionary party. At its core is a composite formation: you'll find there the original Croce with its three fundamental canons of the historical bloc; intellectuals and the organisation of consensus and hegemony, which become fundamental ingredients of the Gramscian theme, combined with a pinch of some French neo-idealism, especially of Sorel.

Lenin's contribution to Marxism comes into view almost by accident and always as a moment of intellectual curiosity, something ever-present in Gramsci who loved every form of speculative inquiry.

This explains the completely cavalier attempt to set the experience of the October revolution inside the framework of Crocean thought. As if the dictatorship of the proletariat, despite its transitory nature, with its "disruptive effects" on the old "historical bloc" which is still not completely disrupted, was compatible with the Crocean idea of history as a history of liberty where every form of dictatorship is regarded as anti-history and thus historically irrelevant. It is not just that Gramsci ignores Marx's argument on the necessity of a period of transition, the lesson from the Paris Commune and which Lenin put into effect in the October revolution. But he also needed to get away from his largely cultural intellectual pursuits and take up a class standpoint, something that is not always present and never predominant in the Gramscian ideological-political world.

The most disconcerting part of Gramsci's amalgamation of Lenin and Croce certainly cannot be considered trivial in that he deduces that Croce and therefore ... Lenin "has, in opposition to the various economic tendencies, re-evaluated the terms of the cultural struggle" and thus broken the link between the two terms of the contradiction, the objective economic facts, [the prius or starting point of determination] and the world of the superstructure, thus creating an unbridgeable gulf between the revolutionary dialectic of Marxism and the formal dialectic of all the "innovatory" transformisms.

At this point we should not really be asking ourselves how many more developments there would have been in Gramsci's philosophical and political thought if a premature and dramatic end had not broken the whole process. A more important question is "How far was Gramsci responsible (to his merit or otherwise) for the new course imposed on the PCd'I and implemented, more or less faithfully, in his name?" This can only be answered by an impartial examination of the writings and the behaviour of the political leader.

If it is true, as Gramsci stated, that for us Italians to be heirs of classical German philosophy means "*inheriting Crocean philosophy which represents today's world episode of German classical philosophy*", we must credit Gramsci that later events vividly confirm the accuracy of his forecast. Only that while it is certainly true in an idealistic-liberal sense, i.e. Croce-Gramscian, it is certainly not true in a Marxist sense. The former indicates liberal-reformist solutions, the latter points to a revolutionary solution.

Marx explained the theory of the overthrow of the Hegelian left's praxis in a

systematic way. He indicated the primary and determining role of the “material” over the “ideal”: of the structural world of the economy over the super-structural one of ideas and human will as part of an interdependent process. This is an achievement of fundamental importance because of its revolutionary content which assigns the proletariat the task of bringing it to completion. This is something the theoretical eclecticism of Gramsci can neither obscure nor distort. We said eclecticism because ultimately in Gramsci the *“problem of the re-composition of Marxism”* was never anything more than an intelligent re-appropriation of other schools and tendencies which are never completely unified. So it is vital to untangle the interpretative knot in which Gramsci’s thought has become entangled and refer to the origins of dialectical materialism in order to grasp the fundamental role attributed to the *economic* (world of structure) and the dialectical interlock with *human thought* (the world of superstructure). And we begin with an aphorism of Feuerbach *“the truth is not what has been thought but what has equally been, at the same time as that thought, seen, understood and felt”*.

Thus Feuerbach conceptually posed the terms of the overthrow even if he went on to commit the error of materialist determination: an absolute materialistic conception made sterile by the absence of a living dialectical relationship. This was exactly the same kind of error as the reverse one made by his teacher Hegel. It would be up to Marx to put the overthrow in historical context by specifying, in comparison with the Hegelian conception, the difference between the materialistic dialectic and the idealist dialectic.

*... My dialectic method is not only essentially different from the Hegelian, but it is its direct opposite. For Hegel the process of thinking, which – under the name of “the Idea” – he transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurge (creator) of reality which itself is only the external manifestation of the “Idea”. However, for me it is exactly the opposite: the **ideal** is nothing other than the **material** translated and reflected in the human brain. ...*

*In its rational form, the dialectic is nothing less than a scandal and a mistake to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinal defenders because, as well as the positive understanding of what already exists, the dialectic adds the understanding of its negation, of the **necessary** ruin of the existing state of things.*

And Marx again clarifies:

*The mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands by no means prevents him from being the first to comprehensibly and widely present the general forms of the movement of the dialectic itself. **With him this is upside down. In order to discover the rational kernel it needs to be turned right side up.***¹⁶

The question of how the revolutionary party should deal with intellectuals in general and the middle classes from which the intellectuals generally come, has engaged the leadership of political parties throughout the various stages of the proletarian struggle in Italy. Of course the manifold solutions have disappeared in the mist of countless experiences but they have never gone beyond the most pragmatic and contingent political utilitarianism: more or less “historical” blocs and compromises as befits a socio-political culture where muddle, intrigue, the love of the most sterile and opportunistic recruitment practices are the norm.

In terms of more recent history, the years 1919-26 encompass a particularly vivid and significant period which allows us to make a concrete analysis of the dual process of splits and expansion with regard to the role of intellectuals. For Gramsci these are the years of indecision, of the search for a mature ideological-political approach that was at the heart of his tormented anxiety. Yes, in one sense he did have this, but on a different level and for the most part his was a distorted vision of revolutionary Marxist doctrine. He certainly had a singular approach, albeit partial and inadequate to the demands of the workers’ struggle that was about to come out of the confines of the war.

Having concluded the first phase of *Ordinovism* and undecided on the fundamental problem of the party, Gramsci passed unnoticed during the preliminary work of forming the revolutionary party. At both Imola and Livorno¹⁷ he succumbed, in good or bad faith, to the powerful and dominant personality of Bordiga. But the joint work and responsibility at the centre of the party was short-lived and could not have been otherwise. Unlike Bordiga – the multifaceted and well-versed extrovert whose arguments rigidly followed Marxist methodology with the axiomatic certainty of the mathematician who does not expect objections but only to be listened to – Gramsci was by nature much less talkative, very passive, but with a prodigious capacity for inner life. Behind an outward appearance of extreme modesty and shyness there was an intense and varied mental activity as well as an unspoken will for personal power. These are incidental, but certainly not accidental characteristics of someone who later acknowledged he had learned the art of politics in terms of the modern state from the pages of Machiavelli’s *Prince*.

Class Struggle and Theory of the “Spirit Of Splitting Up”

Gramsci’s analysis of history, that is of the course of human events, involves the observation of molecular processes which develop inside society in the form of successive thrusts of movement that cause an uninterrupted series of aggregations

and disaggregations, an immanentist vision that he defines as “spirit of splitting”. Evidently we are not dealing with a new way of analysing history which would give us a different and original vision of the world. Still, Gramsci’s writings constantly emphasise the particular, the anecdote, the episodic, as active and characteristic aspects which flow together to influence the formation of every significant splitting movement. This could be a valid method to analyse the particular, not as an end in itself but to get a deeper understanding of the role played by secondary forces and the process of their polarisation alongside one or other of the two historical classes that compete for supremacy:

... the spirit of splitting – Gramsci specifies – must tend to expand from the principal class to the potentially allied classes; all this demands a complex ideological work, the first condition of which is the exact knowledge of the field which is to be emptied of the elements of its human mass.¹⁸

The error lies in focussing on the role of marginal strata, middle classes and the petty bourgeoisie, who by their nature lack a precise class identity. As such they can only be considered as socio-political elements whose behaviour is episodic and secondary. In other words, their actions are shaped by the wider context of the ruling class acting solely in terms of parliamentary solutions, as part of a strategy to consolidate the system and its organs of power. So Gramsci’s real error is to underrate the permanent and constant conflict between the two fundamental classes which predominates in this phase of profound crisis of decadent capitalism. Furthermore, he does not envisage the ‘centres of disintegration’ splitting away from the orbit of the class which is in decline and combining with the opposing class, which has become a pole of attraction and focus for total liberation; which is then the revolutionary overcoming and starting point to socialism. In a word, it is about taking the opposite road to the parliamentary one – a route which reduces the scope for splits and divisions within the class which are only encouraged by the idea of transforming the system, of staying within its scope in the illusion of getting something different. This is the road indicated by history: the road that does not transform but revolutionises, the road of the clash of class against class.

The Gramscian theory of the *spirit of splitting up* implies a very different political line for the Communist Party of Italy from the principles, organisational structures, or the strategy and tactics of the party that was formed at Livorno. Now there was a clear demarcation line between revolutionary Marxism whose practice is based on a permanent struggle against the political organisations and institutions of the class enemy and the politics of the revisionists who want to move the axis of political work into the frame of the existing democratic set-up. From here it

was a short step to the political line that the party could expand by drawing in middle class elements who are being fragmented and split up by the impact of the cyclical crises of the system: an overview from which the tactic of alliances and the united front are born. All the theoretical premises which were prized by the original Ordiovism are now made more precise, including adaptations to the new situation and highlighted by the clash over the initiative of the Committee of Intesa which reached its climax with the Congress of Lyons (1926).¹⁹ Thus the factors that would give life to the degenerative process were present and operative. The stages of this process would be something more and worse, at least in its initial phase, than a simple watering down of the Marxist analysis.

What is extremely clear is that instead of a theory of history based on the clash of two opposing forces, proper to Marxism, Gramsci presents a pluralistic conception of the successive movement, almost by physical law, of molecular social groupings which are historically of minor importance. In other words, instead of the earth-shaking vision of the dialectical overcoming which presupposes the surgery of an inevitable revolutionary act, he presents a series of stages, idealistically *ad infinitum*, of various social and political groups progressively disintegrating and re-aligning.

Another key consideration is that Marxism gives priority to the economic factor which impacts on the world of superstructure. By contrast, in the Gramscian methodology everything is carried out on the superstructural level through a molecular process involving social, economic and political-cultural factors, all converging, without distinction, to bring about the historical event. This is the process Gramsci likes to define, in a contradictory way, as the phase of "*passive revolution*". At most this modifies and transforms, in a good or a bad sense, but does not break the economic and political fabric of a system, to create another opposing and different one. In short, the sense of passivity gives the revolution a permanent character: though it's the opposite of Trotsky's version since Gramsci starts from paths within the current system that can never be the starting point for the active revolution. It is no coincidence that the historical references for this type of passive revolution are mainly to the sterile revolution (neither active nor passive) of the Italian Risorgimento.

One can apply the concept of molecular change which in reality progressively alters the previous composition of [social] forces, which in turn become the framework for new modifications to the passive revolution (and it can be documented in the Italian Risorgimento). Thus, in the Italian Risorgimento the gradual transition of elements of the Action Party to Cavourism (after 1848) progressively changed the composition of moderate forces, liquidating neo-Guelphism on the one hand and, on the other, impoverishing the Mazzinian movement (the oscillations of Garibaldi,

etc. belong to this process). This is the original period of the phenomenon which was later called “*trasformismo*” and whose importance as a form of historical development it seems has not been recognised until now.²⁰

The fact that *trasformismo* has been part of the history of parliamentary parties, not excluding those speaking for the working masses, is a basic characteristic of every parliamentary regime and we leave today’s Gramscians to regret the late recognition of this political practice in historical development.

Given such a theoretical premise (i.e. *trasformismo* considered as a basic part of the political life of parties), one wonders how much Gramsci is responsible for the future events of the party that was born in Livorno. What began as a party of the revolutionary proletariat ended up in the muddy political waters of the most despicable and devious parliamentary ‘*trasformismo*’ whose aim is to gain entry to the corridors of power as the last bulwark of defence for the current system of capitalist production.

In this context what is the function and the real influence of intellectuals? What are the social forces that impact on them? We must bear in mind that Gramsci devoted much space, perhaps too much, to historical research and with his usual passion and one-sidedness paid particular critical attention to the role of the intellectual. Whether in his examination of the southern question or in his account on the functioning of the Councils in the predominantly working class industrial sphere, we can say that the role of the intellectual, organic or not, is the underlying theme of the whole Gramscian project. Once deprived of this wily and treacherous protagonist, even the theory of “the splitting spirit” would be without its major pillar of support and would be reduced to a simple *flatus vocis* that is to say, a simple literary exercise.

Notes

1. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*
2. Gramsci, *Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of B. Croce*
3. *ibid*
4. *ibid*
5. *ibid*
6. *ibid*
7. Marx, Preface to the Critique of Political Economy. [as in the Italian] Editori Riuniti, Rome 1957
8. Gramsci *ibid*
9. *ibid*
10. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*
11. *ibid*

12. *ibid*
13. *ibid*
14. Gramsci, *op.cit.*
15. *ibid*
16. Marx, *Capital*, postscript to 2nd edition, Riuniti, Rome 1968
17. The Imola Convention, November 1920 of the would-be communists who were preparing to split from the PSI with the support of the Communist International. The split finally occurred at the PSI's Livorno Congress in January 1921 where, after days of debate with Bordiga speaking for hours in favour of a split 'to the left', the minority communist fraction, representing 58,783 members dramatically walked out of the Teatro Goldoni to form the Communist Party of Italy.
18. Gramsci, *Past and Present*, Einaudi, Turin 1952
19. See the CWO pamphlet, *Platform of the Committee of Intesa 1925*
20. Gramsci, *Notes on Machiavelli*, Einaudi, Turin 1952

Marxism and Gramscism:

PART TWO

On the Council Movement

We have already mentioned the fragmentary nature of Gramsci's work, but it is important to recognise that there is an overall vision with a cardinal idea running through it which is the concept of hegemony. Aside from all its contingent implications and contradictory aspects, this has to be unequivocally acknowledged as an idealist concept which has nothing to do with either Marxist methodology or the revolutionary goal of the class. If we are to consider Gramsci as he really is, without all the mystification, it is this central node which must be dissolved once and for all.

For Gramsci the key problem is to find a way out of the long series of splits resulting from the molecular process of combining and disintegration of social groupings, by the sequence of passive revolutions and wars of position. This is the focal point of the whole Gramscian theme which is supposed to result in the hegemony of these various social elements in the shape of a new dynamic class, which will give way to the new order. But which elements, and above all, how? There is a spiritual restlessness about Gramsci: an obsession with finding a definitive answer, constantly unfulfilled, and a deep anxiety about power: about the problem of the State. It was just after the war. The situation was one of growing disintegration; institutions that were partly broken and those that remained standing were unable to come up with a plan for the future, let alone put it into action; a pile of contradictions, impotence and desperation where everything and the opposite of everything was possible.

The impact of the October Revolution loomed over everything and everyone; a huge psychological boost for those who had everything to claim and to conquer, a negative and terrifying fact for those who feared losing their privileged positions.

The centres of production were disorganised places of permanent conflict and disturbance. There were plenty of union initiatives but the credibility of the unions themselves was undermined as the old parties became extremely confused and they struggled to rediscover their own ideological and political identity. Like the unions, the parties were discredited on all fronts with the prevailing tendency to extremism on both the right and the left. Significant new experiences were developing, even inside the old structures of the traditional parties such as the Italian Socialist Party. Here the two most important ideological poles, the ones

with the most developed and deepest understanding of Marxism, found fertile ground for a distinct area of action: the group of *Il Soviet* belonging to the Italian Left current and the group of the *L'Ordine Nuovo (New Order)* of the councilist current. It is this experience of the Councils which interests us here.

During the first imperialist war, above all in the events opened up by the October Revolution, the Councils (soviets) demonstrated that they were the organs of real power. The Council organisations within the great industrial complex of Turin had a very different form and origin. They were more the result of proposals for a new political formula than an objective thrust towards revolutionary action which had not occurred. This was due to the insipid nature of the leading organs of the Socialist Party – who should have understood the situation and guided the masses to action – rather than the immaturity of the objective conditions. In this framework, where the experience of the Turin Councils was not bonded to a revolutionary movement, they could never have been anything other than short-lived bodies based on fictitious power.

The fact that the internal Commissions in the major industrial centres were not against an anti-reformist policy, and were thus inclined to tolerate initiatives of the Left, is neither a sufficient nor a valid reason for these bodies – which arose out of their trade union role – to pretend they were organs of workers' power such as Councils, when this power neither existed in potential nor in fact.

The revolution is not a matter of some sort of legalistic change, at the trivial level of changing one company name for another, whilst remaining within the union framework. The revolutionary act springs from an upsurge of immense social forces: the colossal suffering of the exploited, the destructive power of anger too long repressed, even hatred, all coalescing in the precise resolve that will no longer be denied of breaking once and for all with the structures and institutions of a corrupt class, the capitalist class, because it is historically finished.

To anticipate the city of the future before the revolutionary overthrow and operate on this level of unreality does not fall within the logic of socialism, either in terms of principles, nor in the context of political practice. It's like re-proposing a return to utopian socialism at the very moment when the revolutionary proletariat is experiencing historical confirmation of the actual truth of scientific socialism. It is no wonder that after every defeat in the class struggle, when the proletariat is prostrate and no longer capable of either defensive or offensive action against the class enemy, space is given to fantastic deeds, to the political fantasies of dreamers, to the chasers of rainbows, most of them acting in perfectly good faith. This is the inevitable and extremely dangerous period when spontaneous and bewildering tendencies suddenly change course, a time of strange contortions

and of frightening collapses; a period of a constant hybrid nihilism – sometimes destructive, sometimes in the shape of pathological myths which last no longer than the space of a morning.

Gramsci's best scholarly and political work can be found in his depiction of the future city. However, it has also inspired ideas which sometimes diverge from his own premises, ideas which predominate today in the party that was once both his and ours.

Gramsci must have thought of the aphorism "*optimism of the will*", derived from French neo-spiritual philosophy,¹ after an introspective reappraisal of his own experience during the period from 1919 to 1926: From the period of the Councils to the promulgation of the Exceptional Laws which condemned the party and its leadership to prisons and concentration camps, save for those who went underground or into clandestine exile abroad. This is when the second period of history begins, the one which will be linked to the other, more realistic and painfully-lived aphorism of "*pessimism of the intellect*".

We note that a feature of this 'will' is that it aims to 'realise itself', not from the objective facts of a given moment in the crisis of capitalist society, but from the power of emotions stemming from a certain degree of optimism. 'Will' and 'optimism' echo through the pages of *L'Ordine Nuovo*. Its basic argument: the Councils are the living cells of a new society. Let's allow Gramsci to speak for himself:

The proletarian dictatorship can be embodied in a type of organisation that is specific to the activities of producers and not of wage earners, the slaves of capital. The factory Council is the basic element of this organisation [...] its raison d'être is in work, in industrial production, that is in a fact which is permanent unlike wages and class divisions which are a transitory fact that precisely, we want to overcome [...]

The factory Council is the model for the proletarian State. All the problems inherent to the organisation of the proletarian State are inherent to the organisation of the Councils [...].The workers' solidarity which in the union develops into the struggle against capitalism, in the suffering and the sacrifice, in the Council, is positive, permanent, it is embodied even in the most negligible moments of industrial production, it is contained in the joyous consciousness of being an organic whole, a homogeneous and compact system which, by doing useful work, disinterestedly producing social wealth, affirms its sovereignty, implements its power and its freedom [...].The existence of the Council gives the workers direct responsibility for production, leads them to improve their work, establishes a conscious and voluntary discipline, creates the psychology of the producer, the creator of history [...].The organisation by factory shapes

the class (all the class) into a homogeneous and cohesive unit which adheres flexibly to the process of industrial production and dominates it in order to master it definitively. Thus the proletarian dictatorship is incarnated in the factory organisation, the communist State which destroys class domination in the political superstructures and its general components.²

The Council experience, more theoretical than practical, was clearly ditched by Gramsci at the Imola Convention of the Communist fraction (1920) and he would no longer speak of them in the *Ordinovisti* terms as organs of proletarian power. It would be up to future disciples, those who worked to debase the party born in Livorno, to further diminish the role of the Councils by reducing them to permanent arms of the trade unions. By its nature this does not go beyond the frame of making demands from the bosses (objectively corporatism), altogether outside the frame of any revolutionary practice and perspective.

At the climax of the crisis of factory occupations the industrial proletariat was still not the hegemonic power. Despite the powerful subjective motive force, this would always be the situation so long as the workers did not come out from the occupied factories to attack the state head-on and thus strike capitalism at its heart. The fact that Fiat was occupied by skilled men who kept on working – without knowing for whom or for what (despite the simple satisfaction of knowing that a good comrade, the metalworker Parodi³, sat in Agnelli's chair) does not really amount to a hegemonic role for the industrial proletariat when the State's structures remained intact and the industrialist Agnelli remained the owner of Fiat. The events of this historical period add weight to the line of the Italian Left which, through the voice of Bordiga, recognised that the crucial point was not to occupy the factory just to remain prisoners if the State structures were not conquered and broken.

Gramsci did not believe this role could be entrusted to the PSI but he did not see the immediate necessity for the revolutionary party even if he saw the urgent need for a body to steer the multiple, contradictory and partly irrational drives that emerged from below. Thus he gave the ideologically and politically immature councils, with all their negative and mixed-up craft ideas which were basically corporatist, the immense task of completing the revolutionary overthrow; something which is not simply an act of violence, but entails the construction of a new society: and all of this in a single city, albeit an industrial one like Turin.

The defeat of the workers' factory occupations effectively and miserably closed the experience of the Councils. And then came fascism.

Such a sequence of mistaken tactics and strategic errors would be unthinkable without Gramsci's increasingly obsessive idea that the Councils prefigured

the wider hegemony of the class over the institutional organs of the capitalist state itself. The progressive and the regressive coexist and grow in the State as two moments of the same reality. In this story of growth and decline, the consequences are seen in the greater or lesser influence over the organs of the State, the material setting for the conflict between the hegemonic forces of history.

Hence the problem of how Gramsci views the State.

Ideological Tightrope Walking

Even the statement we are about to make appears to imply a strange contradiction which, however, is only apparent. Marxism, as a doctrine, is a universally felt need and an inevitable end point for the whole philosophical and political culture of our time. However, never before has 'Marxism' been interpreted so loosely and arbitrarily, including in terms of the language used. Thus a designer Marxism has emerged, that is to say one to suit all purposes, even the most illegitimate and aberrant.

If, on one hand, this can be explained in terms of certain low political trade-offs, on the other it indicates a certain absence of integrity and the degraded role which culture now plays. This might be obvious when it is a matter of the bourgeois democratic mind-set, but it should not be for those, like the theorists of the PCI, who claim that revolutionary Marxism is the best source to draw on for the development of their own beliefs and political practice.

Throughout the history – the real one – of the past fifty years of *l'Unità*,⁴ there has been a visible tendency to look backwards towards pre-Marxist ideologies in the effort to replace every Marxist line of reasoning with an ever-wider inclusion of the proletariat into the capitalist frame, such as turning it into the progressive spearhead of a combined bourgeois front. This is what is happening, more or less blatantly, before our eyes. It is worth noting that even the path of opportunism has followed the tactical path of progressivism.

Let's remind ourselves of the most significant steps.

Unquestionably the honour is due to Gramsci for preparing the way. The complexity and vastness of his philosophical groundwork matured in the corrupting climate of Bergson's French neo-spiritualism, Sorel and Croce the Italian, led to a predisposition and intellectual inclination to value the contingent, the sense of the concrete and to other games of experimentation which were not always in the real, true interests of the proletariat: that is, in the big centres like Turin, where the advanced points of modern capitalism were active and operating.

Anyone who knew the living Gramsci, his human intellect and personality, knows how much of his world, which he believed was firmly anchored in the hearts of the working masses in the factories, was really a fantasy, the product of his faculty for personalising everything, his ideas, his feelings, the events of the workers' struggle and of militant politics. The essence of "ordinovism" cannot be grasped without understanding this side of Gramsci's intellect and political personality – whether it be the few positive aspects of this brief experience, or, above all, its negative aspects which, unfortunately, have become lodged amongst the crowd of disciples.

As a result he tended to think and act as though there were a will which could be realised practically at any cost. When very young he entrusted an almost miraculous power, in any case a decisive role, to the theory and practice of the "councils". As he became more adult and reached the leadership of the Communist Party, he regarded the tactic of getting involved in the political struggle as a dip into everyday reality in order to draw in human material along the party's political line and gather suggestions that might in turn influence political action itself.

These kind of theoretical premises, which inspired Gramsci's organisational initiatives, were completely unconnected from a dialectical view of class conflict: i.e. the law which says that the economic substratum has a pre-eminent role in determining the events of the superstructure, including the human will which in turn also becomes a determining factor when it responds to the initial determinant. In a word, the essence of the Marxist theme was almost entirely foreign, if not abhorrent, to him.

The events of the factory Councils in Turin bear clear signs of this ideology based on mystical intuition, on a voluntarist "creator" rather than the iron laws of Marxist dialectical materialism.

Dialectics are replaced by eclecticism – Lenin states – this is the most usual, the most widespread practice to be met with in contemporary official Social-Democratic literature in relation to Marxism. This sort of substitution is, of course, nothing new; it was observed even in the history of classical Greek philosophy. By falsifying Marxism in opportunist fashion, substituting eclecticism for dialectics is the easiest way of deceiving the people. It gives an illusory satisfaction; it seems to take into account all sides of the process, all trends of development, all the conflicting influences, and so forth, whereas in reality it provides no integral and revolutionary conception of the process of social development at all.⁵

With no relationship to traditional socialist values of the working class as a whole,

with no connection to any of the Socialist Party organs – the only ones at the time who, in a feeble way, stood for the aspirations and organised strength of the Italian workers – “*ordinovism*” had to rule itself out of any possibility of serious revolutionary leadership. Instead it ended up as an ideological-political episode, valuable only to the future right-wing revisionists of the workers’ movement.

With this background and given his considerable political status, Gramsci must have appeared to the Bolshevik leaders of the post-Lenin period as the man they could profitably entrust with the task of leading the party through the period of bolshevisation. In this highly complex and delicate process the Party that was formed in Livorno by the Italian Left would have to adapt, even structurally, to the changed needs of the Russian state which the new course of its economy and its politics required. Bolshevising the party meant splitting it, breaking the bonds between its various social components and categories, depersonalising it and fragmenting it in the factories and workplaces. The unacknowledged objective was to establish a strong network of functionaries to dominate the party from above and so extinguish any capacity for critical vision, every bit of initiative and any groundswell of the class.

It was Togliatti, first amongst the ill-fated assembly of the epigones, who carried certain theoretical formulations to their extreme consequences, often deforming them in the process. Fate did not allow Gramsci to see the practical political and organisational outcome.

The embryonic form of the “anti-fascist front” stems from the Gramsci period. However, Togliatti went on to make his own additions. During the second imperialist war he turned this anti-fascist policy into his own instrument, channelling the fight into a national liberation war with the partisan movement, calling for a popular revolutionary war to accomplish the second Italian Risorgimento.

Nonetheless, Togliatti owed his tactical and strategic masterpiece to the second and definitive experiment of the Gramscian “historical bloc”: that of power, where the multi-hued parliamentary left clambered into the government of the Republic.

Whether or not this plan succeeded is not so important, but it did have a positive effect: the end of Togliatti’s party as a party “par excellence” of the working class; the end of any propaganda which can still influence class ideology, revolutionary Marxism or the dictatorship of the proletariat. In future this “new party” would be the party that most concretely articulated the interests of neo-capitalism and state capitalism. Thus the PCI used its position within various government advisory bodies to promote the interests of this advanced sector of monopoly capitalism and its social matrix, which is the top bourgeoisie. If nothing else, Gramsci’s idea of a bloc has been historically verified by this re-connection to the federative spirit

that was such a lively and turbulent feature of the politics of the Risorgimento, in line with the regionalism of the people. Nevertheless it certainly does not lead us to consider the workers' party as a federation of parties, ranging from the secular to Christian democrats.

In this regard, we recall Gramsci's impassioned insistence on what he considered the failure of the bourgeoisie and thus the historical necessity for its guiding role to be passed on to the proletariat without delay. This theoretical framework is in sharp contrast to the extreme banality of Togliatti yesterday and Berlinguer⁶ and his followers today, whose every action gives more credit to the bourgeoisie. A party composed of such a variety will be without principles, a patchwork of conflicting ideologies, sewn together with the black thread of opportunism and the mirage of power.

It has to be said that thirty years of parliamentary cretinism and democracy have served to turn the PCI into a true adult if it considers itself capable of acting as a bulwark against the dreaded onslaught of the revolutionary proletariat under the leadership of a Leninist party. (His is the only name which upsets the conscience of opportunists and puts their democratic values and parliamentary institutions, their imperishable pillars of bourgeois and Western Christian civilisation, in the contempt they deserve.)

Hegemony and Democracy

Among the many meanings of democracy, the most realistic and concrete I think can be drawn in connection with the concept of "hegemony". In the hegemonic system, democracy exists between the ruling group and groups who are being ruled over, to the extent that the development of the economy and therefore legislation, which expresses this development, favours the (molecular) transition from the groups being supervised to the executive group.⁷

The multiple notes and fragments on hegemony in Gramsci's work illustrate how much the topic was the focus of the author's attention. Undoubtedly this influenced his *theoretical method and practical decision-making*, in clear contrast with the Marxism he acknowledged in his political activity. Here we will focus on *hegemony* and *democracy*, concepts he uses which we consider more significant and more complete, despite his schematic use of them.

Perhaps the single greatest theoretical innovation in the whole of Gramsci's work, the focal point of his doctrine, is this attempt to deepen the concept of hegemony, that whirlwind molecular process which makes it possible for subordinate groups or classes to pass to a ruling position. It is within this nucleus of thought that the idea of "hegemony" gradually takes shape and which ends up finding its true place,

even if never complete: first in the Councils, seen as a foreshadow of the future communist society; then in the party, organised on the basis of factory cells; and finally in the “priority” role entrusted to intellectuals and in general to the middle classes in his vision of the historical bloc.

Let’s start with the Councils. In truth we have repeatedly challenged the key points, especially Gramsci’s idea that organisations which are a structural part of the society we want to destroy are pre-figurations of the future communist society.

Thus our polemic with Gramsci is directed against an opportunist view of the Councils. For us the Councils (soviets) arose and arise historically as organs of worker power **in perfect harmony with the revolutionary party**, in that they are the upshot of a revolutionary break and never the outcome of a reformist process of reconciliation between classes. It is precisely this clear theoretical watershed which makes our dispute from long ago still relevant today. Every re-reading of Gramsci must be done critically, in the light of what is being done today in the name of his teaching.

The factory Council – writes Gramsci – is the model of the proletarian State. All the problems inherent in the organisation of the proletarian State are inherent in the organisation of the Council. In the one as in the other, the concept of citizen gives way to the concept of comrade: by working together to produce well and usefully, solidarity is strengthened and the bonds of affection and fraternity grow. Everyone is indispensable, everyone is at his post, and everyone has a function and a post. Even the most ignorant and backward of workers, even the most vain and “civil” of engineers, will eventually convince himself of this truth in the experience of factory organisation. Everyone eventually acquires a communist consciousness which allows them to understand what a great step forward the communist economy is over the capitalist economy.⁸

This could be a passage taken from a page of any writer from the period of utopian socialism. The subject group’s increasing consciousness is attributed to “*working together to produce well*” as “*solidarity is strengthened and the bonds of affection and fraternity grow*”, whilst the molecular passage into the ruling group is so obviously painless.

Gramsci concludes his thoughts in these terms:

The Council is the most suitable organ for mutual education and for developing the new social spirit that the proletariat has created from the rich and living experience of the community of labour. Whereas in the union, workers’ solidarity was developed in the struggle against capitalism, in suffering and sacrifice, in the Council this solidarity is positive and permanent as embodied in even the

most trivial moments of industrial production. It is a joyous awareness of being an organic whole, a homogenous and compact system which, through useful work and the disinterested production of social wealth, asserts its sovereignty and realises its power and its freedom to create history. [...]

The existence of the Council gives the workers direct responsibility for production, it leads them to improve their work, instils a conscious and voluntary discipline, creates the mentality of the producer, of the creator of history.⁹

Overlooking here what Gramsci did not overlook at all – i.e. the search for effect from the use or abuse of a certain means of expression – what is striking in his account is the extraordinary absence of the functioning of the Councils, of a minimum understanding of the terms of a class struggle which, in the two years from 1919-20, had reached its break point with the October Revolution in Russia and with the defeat of the Spartacist movement in Germany.

But let's take a closer look at the problem of the Councils in Gramsci's personal experience. It is in Turin that he experienced his greatest theoretical-practical episode: Stimulated by the events of the Russian Revolution, there was a rapid flowering of Councils in the most advanced sector of the engineering industry which lent their practical and organisational support to the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group which then became the nub of theoretical clarification.

The Councils in Turin were not really a reflection of the wider national situation, where there was no immediate prospect of revolution, but echoed an international situation where there was still the possibility of revolutionary developments. Inevitably, therefore, the initial view of the role of the Councils, especially that of the intellectuals involved, with their ill-concealed romantic approach rather than a careful analysis of the objective facts, ended with theoretical-tactical somersaults that were not easy to justify.

Although revolution was not on the immediate agenda in Italy, there was mounting optimism about the eventual possibility of a revolutionary solution which gave the Councils sufficient oxygen to keep going. But did the Councils have a structure, a national organisation, an efficient network of intermediate cadres and, most of all, had they achieved real unity between theory and practice? *L'Ordine Nuovo* began in Turin where the first Councils appeared. In fact they did not extend beyond the limits of the province, a sad Italian experience.

Between 1917 and 1919 Gramsci continued to search for a hegemony that could live up to the demands of the situation, which was still full of unknowns, but he had to settle for false hegemonies, or at any rate imperfect hegemonies.

The underlying error of the whole Gramscian experiment is its completely idealistic assumption that the role of the factory organisations – by their nature uncertain, changeable bodies anchored to particular interests – is the same as the party which is a permanent body which functions in the interests of the whole class.

The factory organisations – writes Gramsci, towards the end of the same article – *shape the class (the whole class) into a homogeneous and cohesive unit which adheres plastically to the industrial production process and dominates it in order to master it definitively.*¹⁰

The fact that during the years of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* experience (1917-20) the Councils did not succeed in *shaping the class (the whole class) into a homogeneous and cohesive unit*, highlights their fundamental inability to act as a political hegemon even against a party like the Socialist Party which was certainly no competitor in terms of revolutionary struggle. In due course the asphyxiated Councils achieved an honourable end to their period as hypothetical organs of proletarian power at the Convention of Imola (1920). Besides laying the foundations of the class party, Imola was also the natural destination and occasion for the self-liquidation of the two main hegemonies which had matured inside the vital space of the Socialist Party: that of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, with the end of the Councils and that of *Il Soviet*, with the end of abstentionism.¹¹

Yet, given his councilist mindset, it was inevitable that Gramsci would bring his concept of hegemony based on a factory cell structure to the party soon to be formed in Livorno. At first this was regarded as of little political consequence. The significance only became clear later, when the latent conflict between some fundamental positions of the “Italian Left” and the conditions the Russians were trying to impose at the heart of the International prompted the molecular changes in the party which before long led to a new leadership.

When the clash eventually occurred it was over the false and opportunistic problem of a split (Committee of Intesa, 1925).¹² The real issues, though, were the momentous and sometimes violent debate over the policy of the united front and the transformation of the Party organisation from its territorial base to factory cells.

For the Left, introducing the factory aspects of the Councils into the party structure meant compromising the nature of what should be a unifying body where the various and sometimes contradictory demands that rise up from the class to the party undergo a process of slow social-political decanting. Under the constant force of the wide range of demands in the struggle between capital and labour, the party's guideline of framing policy over and above sub-categories of the working class confirms that it is genuinely revolutionary.

In the factory workplace interests dominate. By their nature these do not go beyond the corporate issues which hold sway over the workers there. For us, basing the Party in the factory meant breaking the dialectical relation which must always run between the party and the class. By bringing the Party into the factories the initial intention was to expose any corporate tendency, but the move ended up impoverishing the Party by forcing it along the opposite track of pursuing a corporate policy (e.g. management committees, etc.).

The new leadership which personified the Gramscian line that would guide the Party up to the Exceptional Laws (November 1926) was still a pale example of hegemony, given the inability of those at the top to broaden their influence through the Party's rank and file. Even though the apparatus was strengthened and the number of officials expanded, the leadership lost more and more credit with the vast majority of the membership who, despite the unscrupulous and shameful manoeuvres and the international protection enjoyed by the expert political horse-traders, remained loyal to the Left.

However, it must be acknowledged that Gramsci was able to follow very closely, and with acute and unscrupulous political sense, this particular phase of the Party's internal molecular process. By his perfidious administrative blackmail he practically demonstrated that he knew how to handle power and showed that he had learned more from the pages of Machiavelli than he had from Marx or Lenin. Moreover, he did not hesitate to acknowledge this when he replied to our bitter comments about it.

Gramsci would return to the Councils when discussing the history of the workers' movement but in a more modest and less exalted way, emptied of the original content he had given them and which in fact they had never had, that of ... *being an organic whole, a homogenous and compact system which, through useful work and the disinterested production of social wealth, asserts its sovereignty and realises its power and its freedom to create history.*¹³

In fact the Councils never achieved this hegemony, not when Gramsci wrote these lines, much less afterwards. Today Gramsci's disciples have reduced the Councils to the rank of permanent union organs in the factory, a sort of substitute – perhaps a more representative one – for the old internal commissions. Nobody denies that there has been a growth of hegemonic power, but to the benefit of the union and not to the Council delegates, even if they are elected from the base in full accordance with the democratic rules. In any case, this is a hegemony developed in terms of trade union hierarchy. Only the enthusiasm of certain epigones and a certain cultural sloppiness (fashionable today), can consider this to be the original Gramscian framework.

Our point is not that these recent experiences are a practical demonstration of the errors in Gramsci's thought, or more exactly of its fragmentary nature. What we want to emphasise is that before the conquest of power the proletariat and its organs of struggle, including the Councils, are in the condition – to use Gramsci's terminology – of being the 'directed' group (we would say the subject class, or subordinate class) and all are part of the dynamic of the class struggle. But during the period of deep crisis in which they will arise, the hypothesis of the molecular movement of the Councils and their organic development on the rotten trunk of a capitalist system which the revolution will have to destroy, is at least a questionable formulation, given the fact that it has no connection with socio-economic reality. Two different situations where tactics and strategy cannot be confused.

On methodology, we recall what Lenin wrote about Marx:

There is no trace of an attempt on Marx's part to make up a utopia, to indulge in idle guess-work about what cannot be known. Marx treated the question of communism in the same way as a naturalist would treat the question of the development of, say, a new biological variety, once he knew that it had originated in such and such a way and was changing in such and such a definite direction.¹⁴

Councils and Workers Control

After the Second World War an even worse revisionism emerged. Inevitably it claimed sole historical possession of the Councils by drawing on the *Ordinovism* of the post-World War One period and Gramsci's theoretical and political overview of the experience. However, the original defect – of considering the factory as the "cell of an organism" where "the economy and politics converge", where "the exercise of sovereignty is one with the act of production" and where "embryonically all the principles that inform the constitution of the council state" are realised – is present in this reworking of the councils and consequently, as in Gramsci, there is an underestimation, or even rejection, of the historical function of the class party. But there is a fundamental difference: during the period of the first *Ordine Nuovo* (1919/20) the construction of the Councils, their insertion into the production process, their technical skills, the productivist policy itself, were seen by Gramsci as a function of the conquest of power, as the initial and formative moment in the exercise of the dictatorship of the proletarian class. For the revisionists, on the other hand, everything is seen as a natural, peaceful, democratic insertion of the labour force into the State. The question of power will thus materialise as working class bodies gradually learn how to manage power in association with the existing capitalist bodies which in fact wield power by virtue of their position as a

hegemonic force. The latter are ready to accept any collaboration which ultimately serves to preserve and strengthen their existing economic power, but do not intend to share it with those who aim to encroach on the acquired rights of their class hegemony. It is in this context that today's policy of so-called workers' control has to be seen, with the results that everyone knows. By means of management committees and hypothetical claims of co-management, workers were encouraged to make the greatest effort to increase production in a most fragile and difficult phase of expansion of capitalism's economic potential. In fact the committees ended up being ridiculed, swept away by the production process as soon as the bosses felt that their mutual work had been brought to completion and when they could therefore feel truly masters again.

It is interesting to follow the attempt to theorise the problem of workers' control which

must be exercised through institutions that have arisen in the economic sphere, where the real source of power lies [...] Its function should be to oppose the corporate democracy of the employer, the claim of workers' democracy [to] increasingly shift the centre of the struggle onto the ground of real and delegated power, by developing and advancing the institutions born from below, whose nature is already the affirmation of socialism.

The struggle of the proletariat would thus function as a means *"to acquire additional quotas of power day by day, in the sense of opposing bourgeois power with the demand, the acknowledgment and the forms of a new power which comes directly and without representation from below."*

The influence of Gramsci's thinking is very evident in this stance taken by some young people of the PSI apparatus ("Seven Theses on the Question of Workers' Control", *Mondo Operaio* no.2, 1958). But even more evident is the gulf that separates this scheme, both academic and amateurish, from the concluding vision and the revolutionary overcoming of the early Gramsci.

These young people are full of idealist commitment which leads them to consider the question of workers' control in the abstract, without taking into account their own, negative experience as active militants in political organisations which claim to stand for the proletariat. In fact they think in terms of ideal factories and ideal organisational links of factories on a national level. They think in terms of institutions entrusted with the task of delving deep into the socio-economic heart of capitalism: something that should lead to a clear undermining of its property rights and the assurance of new rights, based on workers' conquests that will increase in material power in proportion to the increase in practical knowledge. In short, they envisage a capitalist reality of well-defined economic interests which

becomes socialist reality as a result of the inherent quality of the production process, especially the perennial life force that is felt inside the single factory as well as the whole factory complex, right up to the top of the state. By a molecule process of a socialist nature, the factory expands to become socialist reality in the state. Thus:

... the peaceful passage to socialism, rather than occurring through parliament, is happening every day, in this maturing of the class [without violent shocks, in a word without revolution, OD] through the work of these new factory institutions.

It is almost as if these comrades have never been inside a factory and do not know, even by hearsay, about the restrictive conditions and atmosphere of fear that workers are obliged to live under today. This is not so much about the use of “detention units”¹⁵ which the large industrial complexes have set up to discipline workers – although this practice really reveals the soul of capitalism. It is about the fact that capital freely dislocates, when and how it wants, the very social character of its workforce: replacing skilled workers who have a proletarian outlook with workers recruited from the many depressed areas of the Italian economy, where there are more workers prepared to break strikes than are capable of operating a machine.

Clearly, this idea – of a perpetual series of workers’ conquests, plus reformist logic which, devoid of Marxist method, excludes dialectics and any idea of what a revolutionary assault on power means – reduces the role of the party to no more than a political echo of the class movement. (In other words, instead of giving an overall political lead, the party is reduced to soliciting for the support of the class-wide organisations.) But theories which bear no relation to reality are “fake” theories. So let’s get back to reality.

Councils and workers’ control have made an appearance recently. They have experienced days of power and glory in the heated atmosphere of uprisings in Hungary and Poland. In Hungary they were struck down by the violent response of the regime which they had risen up against or shrewdly emptied of any class and revolutionary content and bent to the needs of the ruling regime, as in Poland under Gomulka, as well as in Tito’s Yugoslavia. (It would have been the same in Hungary, if Imre Nagy had had the material opportunity to establish his regime). So, whether the councils are simply an exercise in workers’ control or whether they are used as a battle weapon during a revolutionary assault they end up as a banal means of conciliation to set up the usual reformist scam.

Leaving aside our criticism of his theoretical approach, we recognise that Gramsci conceived of these factory bodies in the context of a revolutionary perspective.

Nevertheless, Gramsci's disciples saw them, and still conceive them, within the framework of a reformist and avowedly counter-revolutionary perspective.

We conclude this investigation by stating that the Councils are the organs of power and will operate as such when the question of proletarian power is placed on the agenda of history. But even then they cannot advance on their own and no amount of theoretical underpinning can make them become self-sufficient. That is to say, they will not achieve the purpose for which they have arisen if they do not channel the disordered and instinctive impulse of the great masses in movement during the revolutionary wave. However, they cannot do this if they are unaware of the wider historical goal and without a collective vision of the revolution, both of which are the province of the working class party.

In Russia the October revolution was possible because there was a Bolshevik Party plus the Councils.

In Hungary the October revolution failed because there were Councils without a Bolshevik party.

The crisis of the Fourth Republic in France has led to the re-emergence of De Gaulle because the French proletariat had neither a Bolshevik party nor Councils.

Intellectual Fashion and the New Metaphysics

Intellectual positions which deliberately avoid any reference to contemporary economic, social and political events may lead to an interesting problem in the world of pure culture, but they will be short-lived and irrelevant to the real world. It is legitimate to speak of metaphysics whenever theory does not relate to human affairs, when it is based on abstract ideas, geometrically ordered, with plenty of carefully selected references to Marxist classics and a thick slice of highly up-to-date statistical data. In other words, a political current which stands on principle outside events and does not test the validity of its theory in the fire of the daily struggle, excludes itself from any possibility of becoming an effective minority. For ever catching up with events, such ideologues are unable to see what is needed at a class level or relate this to the revolutionary struggle. Even when they refer to Marxism, such political currents cannot be considered "tendentally" Marxist because they empty the doctrine of its most important content. Dialectics are turned into a simple abstraction, purely a game of formal ideas, where the postulate that all the social contradictions of the capitalist mode of production are reflected in the minds of human beings is forgotten about.

During the early years of the (20th) century such a tendency emerged in the form of an empiricist *ouvrierism* that was sick of the political passivity and parliamentarism of the existing parties. It ended up lost amongst the haze of corporatist categories: as, for example, with the barricade syndicalism of Corridoni and De Ambris which followed the thread of anarchism, or Labriola and Enrico Leone's extreme voluntarism.¹⁶

Closer to us is the *Ordinovist* experience of the factory Councils, centred in Turin, more particularly in the Fiat industrial complex. Here there was a practical attempt to go beyond and against the Socialist Party, considered structurally obsolete and incapable of revolutionary initiative. The illusion was that it is the workplace at the heart of the industrial masses which automatically fosters the modern proletariat's self-consciousness and develops its subversive revolutionary power, without party militants, or the party form of organisation.

The *Ordinovist* mistake was to elevate what was only a single category experience into a general theory and to make the factory the microcosm of the economy as a whole.

Moving from the factory – Gramsci wrote – seen as a unit, as the creator of a given product, the worker rises to an understanding of ever larger units, up to the nation as a whole which is a gigantic apparatus of production [...].

But greater awareness of the bodies involved in managing capitalism's development helps to link the worker more closely to the process of production rather than to foster liberation. In fact Gramsci saw unity where he should have been able to see the nerve point of class conflict; where he should have found the objective reasons to understand why the alienated labour which comes up against those who are imposing such alienation tends to reject and break such a false unity.

Instead, there is an implicit invitation to workers to consider the factory *as if it were their home*. This mistaken perspective would later be geared towards the 'socio-communist' policy of the anti-fascist liberation war which required workers to fight for direct control over production (management committees) and, what is worse, to defend factories, machines and rebuild those destroyed by the violence of war.

The fact that *Ordinovism* has been reduced to such a simple proposition – in the context of the insurgent neo-realism now in fashion – without any serious reference to the need for a new proletarian strategy, is something that needs to be studied in the light of a more rigorous Marxist critique. However, it is symptomatic that *Ordinovism*, which came to sit easily at the top of the Communist Party formed at Livorno, served as a conscious vehicle of the bolshevisation which began to bury

the October revolution and barred the road to any serious class recovery on an international scale.

In contrast to the *Ordinovism* of Turin lies the experience around *Il Soviet* in Naples.¹⁷ Here the infallible panacea was abstention: a reaction to the kind of corrupt, and corrupting, parliamentary scene that dominated Italian politics, particularly its southern backwater.

The belief that abstentionism would preserve the mass of workers and the Socialist Party from any parliamentary contamination was the most arbitrary, abstract and sadly intellectualist idea that could befall the Italian proletariat. This is another example of how a modest and conditional, albeit necessary, tactic – abstentionism – was turned into a political canon valid for all time, thus committing the unforgivable error of seeing the problems of the party and of the revolution through the narrow lens of abstaining from voting and not the other way round.

By dealing with matters of greater weight, both *Ordinovism* and Abstentionism relegated the question of a wider class policy to the theoretical filing cabinet. In that key historical period, each in their own way ended up delaying the formation of the party that should have been acting as the indispensable engine of socialist revolution.

Since then and for these reasons, the course of the Italian workers' movement has been laborious, distorted and contradictory, right up to the present serious situation of stagnation. A class political movement never arises simply as part of a general climate of opinion. The party of the class exists not because of what it thinks and says about thinking, but because of its demonstrated willingness and ability to move from theory to practice: turning the theory into concrete terms of action for the class within the objective limits of what is possible.

Marxism, as we know, has never been a body of enlightenment-style doctrines; it has never pretended to embody the absolute truth and has never claimed a blanket universality, but its analysis is closely linked to the conditional circumstances, dialectically expressed, of the capitalist moment. There is something compelling, organic, structurally unavoidable and unmistakable in the act of insurrection – whatever the exact historical moment in which it occurs – of a movement of the whole class which is aware as a class that it has its own needs, methods and objectives.

In this regard, an examination of our movement is particularly noteworthy and significant.¹⁸ Ours is the only one that still holds – in the painful and shifting process of Italian politics, and sometimes with a sense of desolation – to the historical cause of the proletariat and to the revolutionary ideology of Marxism.

This statement is all the more significant once it is understood what happened in the midst of the violence of World War II and how this was then followed by the current subservience of the working masses by means of the bourgeois ideology of parliamentary democracy. Now the so-called workers' parties want the masses to accept that this democracy is a historically necessary phase. Out of it socialism will spontaneously mature as the ripe fruit of the most vigorous plant of freedom grown on the soil of capitalism and fertilised with the sweat and blood of the proletariat.

The State

The myth of the Councils was short-lived since they were inherently incapable of extending through the country as a whole and remained confined to the industrial sector. Instead the hegemonic role was handed over to the party through a process which Gramsci does not find in the history of the workers' movement or in terms of Marxism, but in dispassionate intuition – not lyrical, not artistic, but simply political intuition, drawn from French neo-idealism (Bergson).

*Political intuition does not belong to the artist but to the “head” and “intuition” must be understood, not as an “individual’s knowledge”, but in terms of the rapidity of connecting apparently unrelated facts to each other and conceiving the appropriate means to do so, in order to establish the vested interests at stake and thus arouse passions and direct them to a specific action [...] On the other hand, although the “head” in politics can be an individual, it can also be a more or less numerous political body [...] . If the concept of “prince” as it is used in Machiavelli’s book were to be translated into modern political language “the prince” could be a head of state, a head of government but also a political leader who wants to conquer a state or establish a new type of state: **in this sense the prince could translate into modern language as “political party”.**¹⁹*

As he continues with this argument, Gramsci plays down the role of the “leader” and emphasises the “organism”. Perhaps he is worried about the precarious role of the kind of individual who is more prone to action, aware maybe of how the erosion of red-hot passions and fanaticism can destroy the “charismatic” character of the leader, as history widely demonstrates. He writes:

The modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. History has already produced this organism, and it is the political party: the first cell in which the germs of the collective will come together and tend to become universal and total.²⁰

This process of formation and identifying with the state gradually becomes the centre of Gramsci's thought while his political vision of the party-state is even more precise:

The political party has "de facto power", exercising the hegemonic function and thus balancing different interests in civil society which, however, is so intertwined with political society that all citizens feel that it instead reigns and governs. In this reality, which is in constant motion, one cannot create the traditional sort of constitutional right, but only a system of principles which affirms the ending of the state as its own end, its own disappearance, that is the re-absorption of political society into civil society.²¹

The similarity between the two conceptions of power is significant. Machiavelli's *prince* was entrusted with the task of freeing Italy from foreign domination, thus enabling the rise of the modern state, whose norms he specified – no matter whether lawful or otherwise, so long as they operated to maintain the state's existence. Likewise, Gramsci entrusts the new *prince* – the political party, not the class it stands for, with the task of transforming society. The one thing the old and the new *prince* have in common is that in both cases power is based on dictatorship from above: one in the shape of a leader and the other by means of a political party. This concept extends through the whole theoretical construct of the political prince-party and the Leninist principle of the proletarian dictatorship which functions as a class 'hegemony' gradually disappears into a "*hegemonic and therefore balancing of different interests*": A piece of true mystification worthy of any statement about the rule of law in the bourgeois democratic tradition.

For a deeper understanding of how Gramsci sees the problem of the state we need to go back to his idea of the "historical bloc" where political science and economics take on a social function. In his *Letters From Prison* he attempts to clarify the role of intellectuals as mediators of the consensus that is essential for hegemony to work. He writes,

I very much expand the notion of intellectual and I do not limit myself to the current notion that refers to the great intellectuals. This study also leads to certain conclusions about the concept of the State which is usually understood as political society (or dictatorship or coercive apparatus to get the popular masses to conform to a particular type of production and economy) and not as a balance between political society and civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the entire nation exercised through so-called private bodies, such as the Church, the unions, schools, etc.). Moreover it is particularly through civil society that intellectuals operate (Benedetto Croce, for example, is a sort of lay pope and is a very effective instrument of hegemony even if from time to time he finds himself in conflict with this or that government, etc.). I think this

*conception of the role of intellectuals is the reason, or one of the reasons, for the fall of the medieval communes. That is, they were governed by an economic class which did not know how to create its own category of intellectuals and therefore was unable to **exercise a hegemony beyond dictatorship** [emphasis is ours].²²*

Before examining the Gramscian distinction between hegemony and dictatorship, we would like to explain our highlight in the passage quoted above and do so in the words of Lenin who defines in a lapidary and definitive way, the real nature of the State:

*According to Marx, the state is an organ of class **rule**, an organ for the **oppression** of one class by another; it is the creation of an **order**, which legalises and consolidates this oppression by moderating the conflict between classes. In the opinion of petty bourgeois politicians, however, order means precisely the reconciliation of classes, not the oppression of one class by another; for them attenuation of the conflict means reconciling classes, not depriving the oppressed classes of precise instruments and means of struggle to overthrow the oppressors.²³*

From which we can in principle deduce that anyone who disagrees with this view of the state does not base themselves on Marxism and consequently cannot hope to operate within a Marxist historical perspective or according to the revolutionary theory and practice of Marxism which is based squarely on class.

Any study of Gramsci should start from a fundamental class perspective, something the myriad of intellectuals who have tried to examine the thousand faces of Gramscism have so far not done.

When it comes to the problem of the state, a subject which all political philosophies have to deal with, the true face of Gramscism is revealed to be shaped by the pervasive influence of neo-moderatism²⁴ mixed with pragmatism, which is basically academic. The logical outcome of such a difficult and at times perverse project which aimed, unsuccessfully, to describe a new vision of the world that will come about after another fruitful turn of history, is that the prophet himself, the living and creative one, must announce it. But not a prophet who would dress himself up in the liberal democratic remnants of an illustrious Croce or in the mythical and decadent spiritualism of the Bergsons and the Sorels.

Let's retrace the course of Gramsci's thinking. It begins with the idea that the Councils, as a prefiguration of the future society, are the driving force of the revolution. Then this idea/motive force shifts to the class party, regardless of how this is conceived by Gramsci. This phase ends with the collapse of the party

following the promulgation of the fascist exceptional laws. (Passed between 1925-6. The beginning of the process of transforming the legal framework of the Italian state from a constitutional monarchy to a fascist order.) The second phase begins in prison: a period of critical re-thinking sustained by the deepening of his already vast knowledge, all filtered through the mood swings of a grim and painful loneliness which influence the powerful thinking machine that was his brain, inside an organism increasingly worn-out by illness. This is his most prolific and wayward period, but it requires the most attentive reading to find any evidence of an overall vision, at any rate one which is not divorced from reality. Theories of splitting, molecular process, passive revolution, wars of manoeuvre, consensus, hegemony and the historical bloc as a synthesis of the long process of democratic development which ends up encompassed in the absolute spirit. Then finally, this whole political philosophy ushers in the transition from the realm of necessity and compulsion to the realm of freedom which is embodied in the government of the producers. Some have dared to define this scheme as the “new, original and organic way to socialism”. Yet on the doctrinal level it cannot even be called a revision of scientific Marxism. It is not even theoretically parallel to it, but is fundamentally at odds with Marxism.

Unsurprisingly then, in the *Prison Notebooks* Marx and Lenin assume roughly the same importance as a certain abbot from Brescia.²⁵

The question of the state is vital to ascertaining the validity or otherwise of a philosophical-political doctrine. In contrast to Marx and Lenin, Gramsci writes:

*The State's educational and training role, which always aims to create new and higher types of civilisation [even the capitalist state? we note], to adapt the “civilisation” and the morality of the broader mass of the people to the necessity of the continuous development of the economic apparatus of production, and thus also of physically fostering new types of humanity. But how will each individual be able to incorporate himself into the collective man and how will educational pressure achieve the consent and collaboration of individuals, creating “freedom” out of necessity and coercion?*²⁶

In another passage he addresses the question of by what right and by which means the state expresses the vital essence of its being:

*Since every state tends to create and maintain a certain type of civilisation and citizen (and therefore of coexistence and individual relationships), [...] the law will be the instrument for this undertaking (alongside schools and other institutions and activities) and must be drawn up in accordance with this purpose [...].*²⁷

And he keeps on hammering these same concepts, centred on the state whose first task he considers to be pedagogical:

In reality, the state must be conceived as an “educator”, since it tends to create a new type or level of civilisation [...] and, given that it operates above all on the “economic forces” and on those of the superstructure, in this field too, it is also an instrument of “rationalisation, acceleration and Taylorisation” [as a result] the law is therefore repressive and negative (to the extent that it urges, incites, solicits and ‘punishes’) along with all the positive civilising activity carried out by the state.²⁸

But this is a lesson in constitutional law which is deemed to be valid for all time and which we must not only believe in but also submit to, on the basis of personal respect for the author and an entire historiography. Never mind the glaring contrast between this partial and episodic reality and the real world which denies such rights to the point that they are fictitious and totally non-existent.

When Gramsci, himself a victim of class struggle, was writing all these remarks on rights in a Fascist prison cell, was he aware that he was sacrificing himself, and many others, as part of a penance due to all the positive acts of civilisation carried out by the state? This sort of state idolatry, which keeps on recurring in Gramsci’s writings, is the result of theoretical bickering over how history should be considered: between an “integral” history that is universally understood, and a “polemical” and therefore a one-sided history. This latter is a criticism which Gramsci himself made of Salvemini’s volume on the French Revolution. Above all, though, it is his persistent tendency to see emerging new social forces (councils, party) in the positive frame of “civilising” activity which he attributes to the state that fosters their growth. In fact he wrote:

The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership”. A social group dominates over its adversaries that it tends to “liquidate” or subjugate, including by means of armed force and by engaging the leaders of allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, be a leader even before conquering governmental power (this is one of the principal conditions for the conquest of power itself); afterwards, when it exercises power and even if it holds it firmly in its hand and has become dominant, it must also continue to be the “director”.²⁹

This is Gramsci reiterating something that was already deep-seated in him at the time of the Councils – i.e. the fallacious idea that they would develop as a branch of the state.

But now it’s time for a pause in this journey through Gramsci’s thinking and draw

our first critical conclusions.

First we must consider Gramsci's preoccupation with an unfinished Risorgimento where capitalism hardly exists, with no serious class overtones, without a modern proletariat which has its own precise economic and political physiognomy. Where, therefore, the working class is generically subsumed under 'the people', always the people, even when the term refers to the plurality of middle classes and intellectuals. In a word, he was engrossed in the problem of a national Risorgimento without a real national consciousness and above all without the objective ability to generate the ideas and therefore the means to make a bourgeois democratic revolution. Gramsci himself pointed to the influence of Gobetti.³⁰ But there is a difference: Gobetti's political intuition was much bolder, more direct and consequential than that of Gramsci. While Gobetti assigned the proletariat the role of key protagonist in the liberal revolution, Gramsci was culturally enmeshed in the permanence of a passive revolution and a war of position, characteristic of the Italian Risorgimento. At most this could end up with a Republican Constituent Assembly – always, therefore, within a bourgeois institutional framework. These kinds of political motives and ideals would re-emerge during World War II, with different players but with the same conclusion.

Despite its incoherence and incompleteness, Gramsci's work conjures up of an impressive array of philosophical problems, of politics, of literature, and a little less on economics where he preferred to examine super-structural aspects rather than draw more precise lessons. In fact the years we are now living through are a reminder of his personality: perhaps because, more than anyone else, he became entangled in the cultural network of capitalist decadence, unable to recognise the signs of what makes a revolutionary situation possible.

Still, above all else, the two concepts of "hegemony" and the "war of position" distinguish his ideological and political world. They remain the pillars on which his most significant political conclusions stand, more or less validly.

Gramsci spent a long time studying the Risorgimento which is largely regarded as a passive revolution but which has a corollary. In "military terms" this is the war of positions where the proletariat is in the position of a subject class which historically tends towards hegemony but in reality it is not, nor can it be hegemonic. Rather, its position as a class adversary exposes it to class conflict where it needs to defend the right to survive. In this context the long series of demand struggles have more of a corporate character than a truly genuine class struggle. Thus, they are equally susceptible to violent outbursts which provoke ferocious repression as they are to every form of traditional ideological, political and religious contamination used by intellectuals and the clergy in defence of the class adversary.

There is no doubt that, in this relentless class conflict, the proletariat is as essential as capitalism is. Nevertheless, it is not hegemonic from the point of view of real power and the state that wields it because it is outside and against this state in the position of adversary to the ruling class, a class, however, which it tends to overwhelm until it becomes the ruler itself.

The perennial molecular process of breaking up and combining, which at times stagnates, at times seethes against the walls of the passive revolution; which on the one hand is apparently at an historical standstill, where on the other hand it is scarcely possible to comprehend what is going on: progressive aspects and regressive ones, all in this *mare magnum* of Italian politics that stretches from the Risorgimento to today. So, for example, if Gramsci poses the fascist experience in terms of the progressive aspects of the passive revolution and not in terms of the counter-revolution, it is simply because he had glimpsed an embryo of large scale monopoly within the ambit of state industries.

Throughout this extensive period the molecular process continues in a disorderly succession of small splits, none of which comes to a real break, the kind that changes the course of history and which would give new meaning and new content to the elements in play. In a word, for Gramsci we are still imprisoned in a war of position where tactics are everything and the strategy is nothing.

This completely formal game of tiny splits that might belong to a stage in a passive revolution has nothing to do with the Marxist theory of relentless conflict between the two fundamental class protagonists that has continued throughout the history of capitalism, from its ascendant phase to the current period of decay and the irreconcilable crisis which Gramsci did not foresee, at least in recognisable Marxist terms.

In the Gramscian formulation 'hegemony' itself gives rise to various and contradictory interpretations: sometimes the fundamental class benefits from hegemony even before the conquest of power; another time the fundamental class is seen to be exercising state power although it is not a dictatorship; and in any case there is silence about how and by what means we pass from the passive revolution to the active revolution which destroys and creates, from the war of position to that of movement.

Will the transition take place by peaceful and parliamentary means, with votes, by a sort of slow political osmosis and without a shot or will the historical clash between the two hegemonic classes, one in a declining phase and the other in the ascending phase, end in an armed insurrection and then the violent seizure of power which will lead to the destruction of the state and the establishment of a new order? Gramsci hints at these basic problems and avoids any obligation to

deepening them. Above all, he deliberately avoids tackling the theoretical problem of how the fundamental class, which can only be **single** (phase of the councils and the party), asserts its hegemony over the historical bloc of various social groups and ideologies which, by its nature, is **multiple**. It really is reminiscent of the religious mystique about unity and the trinity, and more generally a reminder of the irreconcilability between unity and multiplicity: the single unit can merge and dissolve itself in the multiple but not inversely if one does not want to return to scholasticism.

In political terms, assuming the single unit can be identified as the fundamental class: the proletariat, then once its transient class hegemony gets underway (dictatorship of the proletariat) this will tend to supersede itself by virtue of all the structures, superstructures which are the instruments it employs to apply its own dictatorship. But there is no place for this hypothesis in the Gramscian theme since his historical bloc is composed not of a single class, even with all its various elements, but of an alliance of multiple socio-economic groups, each with their own agenda, which is nothing other than the dynamics of pluralism.

Enclosed in this tangle of contradictions, Gramsci is the classical intellectual who gets carried away with what is going on inside his head until he becomes infatuated with what he sees as his original creation. This is certainly not a political analysis: he does not use his investigations to indicate the way forward towards the realisation of a political goal. In any case, his work never focuses on class, or at any rate on the class with the historical motive force and the underlying strength to achieve the revolutionary overthrow.

For Gramsci this world of indistinct molecular movements which interweave, appear and disappear, *ad infinitum* is the phase of passive revolution when everyone is mired in the deep trenches of the war of position. The result is an endless succession of small splits that never reach a terminal point of synthesis, not even as a working hypothesis, which would trigger the surgical act of revolutionary violence. Translated into terms of active politics, this all boils down to a linear process of progressive democracy, possibly finding its cathartic moment in the shape of the constitutional Republic which appeases any Crocean anxiety about absolute Historicism; all within the institutional framework of capitalism, outside and beyond any trauma that a revolution would inevitably bring with it.

Even Nicola Badaloni, who worked so passionately and laboriously to politically reconstitute the supposed Marxism of Gramsci, found it difficult to interpret the double meaning of "historicism" in his works. After first defining "historicism" as the political emergence of a new civilisation (socialism), he ends by identifying the most obvious and consequential meaning by writing:

*In the second sense, historicism, which from the point of view of the ruling classes is the theory of the passive revolution, risks – from standpoint of the new fundamental class – repeating itself as a **linear evolutionary process** [emphasis is ours] [...]. This second sense of historicism is actually present in Gramsci only because in every historical situation (that is, every new configuration of the relations of power) the problem of how it is manifested is posed in a correspondingly specific way. Here, it is particularly useful to employ Leninist tools **whose end result is not at odds with the conclusion of the late Togliatti that the process of emergence requires a theory of the historical prolongation of “democratic situations”, thus allowing the transition to the new civilisation.***³¹

So, which is it to be? A painless, democratic, parliamentary passage to socialism or recourse to the use of revolutionary violence? Let's look at certain moments in the history of the conflict between classes and the lessons that the greatest Marxist scholars have drawn.

*If bourgeois ideology, reflecting the tendency towards capitalist unification, has proclaimed the progress of humankind, historical materialism, inverting and without proclamations, has discovered that in the antithesis it was until now the cause and the motive of every historical event. And therefore the motion of history, taken in general, reveals itself to us as oscillating, or rather it seems to take place on top of a broken line, which often changes direction and then breaks again [...] a real zig-zag. For people blinded by subjectivism history proceeds in a straight line, with the gait of a marionette and without deviation, according to routine; here is the procedure and ideological approach of idealism.*³²

And Plekhanov:

History is constantly busy preparing “jumps” and “overturns”. It does this work assiduously and imperturbably; it works slowly, but the results of its efforts (leaps and political catastrophes) are inescapable and inevitable.

*Slowly the “transformation of the type” of the French bourgeoisie takes place, the citizen of the Regency epoch does not resemble the citizen of the time of Louis XI [...] He has become richer, more educated, more demanding, but has not ceased to be a plebeian who must always give way to the aristocracy. But then comes the year 1789, the bourgeois proudly raises his head. After a few more years they become the master of the situation, but how! “With torrents of blood, to the sound of the drums” accompanied by “detonations of dust” if not the dynamite that had yet to be invented. It obliges France to go through a real “period of destruction” [...].*³³

During the July days in 1830 the same citizen will have to go to the barricades to defend the rights of his class against the absolutist power of the old regime.

Again on the Parisian barricades in 1848 the equivalent citizen, now an industrial worker – the first manifestation of the modern proletariat – will defend his own existence. The growing international proletariat is now faced with the offensive of the bourgeoisie itself, which has now found its political-social essence and is at the height of its power which it seeks to conserve in alliance with the nobility and the clergy. All these forces are now set against the proletariat.

Next he will fight in the Paris Commune (1871), now an adult in the school of scientific socialism, of the First International and of civil war. Then, in keeping with the permanent demands of the revolution, he will continue to fight in the great Russian Revolution which from 1905 to 1917 has articulated the basic characteristics of the international revolution of the proletariat, placing it definitively on the agenda of world history.

This outline of events may seem to be drawing an ascending line of evolution towards a higher type of social and political life. In reality, this line includes a series of violent clashes where the transition from one phase to another is not the result of harmonious reconciliation between the opposing terms, but is the product of their dialectical overcoming, which each time involves laceration and every laceration involves violence. In every case there is a growing surge of waves, all converging in an immense, irrepressible wave on whose crest the violent force of all the contradictions of any given period of history are condensed.

Quantitative changes – warns Plekhanov – which accumulate gradually, finally become qualitative changes. These transitions are made by leaps and can not be accomplished otherwise [...] Economic evolution necessarily leads to political revolution and the latter will in turn be the source of important changes in the economic regime of society.³⁴

The transformation of the mode of production will be the result of an overthrow accomplished with violence. There is no historical epoch where violence has not appeared as the unavoidable midwife of history. And above all this change can only mean the destruction of the foundations of a society that has reached the limit of its existence and which has nothing more to say in the history of human progress. The fact is that no class is willing to give up its ruling position in society. Hence torrents of blood, hence the violence that inevitably calls for more violence.

It is up to the revisionists to demonstrate a different path for human affairs. They particularly need to provide historical precedents to demonstrate the objective possibility of a peaceful and competitive coexistence between capitalism and the

proletariat which makes the use of revolutionary violence superfluous, useless, and above all impossible.

The thesis of these gentlemen, who believe that a broad and consolidated “field” of socialist economy in the heart of the capitalist economy is sufficient to avoid wars and revolutions – assuming, but not granted, that this field exists – should, if anything, confirm the prospect of a catastrophic solution to this dualism. The irreconcilable interests of these two regimes would push them to a deadly mutual cancelling out and in no case to the placid sunsets dear to reformist politicians.

So we have reached the practical consequences of the overturning of the doctrine of revolutionary Marxism. This consists of winning a solid majority in parliament and then transforming this body from a creature of bourgeois democracy into one of the popular will: a struggle using the weapons of the ballot and the voting card. To justify this for the umpteenth time, an appeal is made to no less than Marx, and more precisely to his speech at the Hague Conference of the Second International on 8 September 1872, where he stated that: *“revolution is useless where the proletariat has the means to assert its voice through democratic means”*, citing the example of some countries (United States, England and probably others). This writer is fully aware of how such a sleight of hand has trivialised Marxist doctrine and clouded how it is interpreted.

They play with words and construct syllogisms in place of dialectics. They deliberate over episodic events rather than look at the experience of the whole working class. They ignore the range of defensive and offensive weapons employed by the ruling class as it exercises its power based on a huge potential for violence.

Out of all the vast and complex work of Marx, out of all the lessons we can draw from his entire thinking in which, as Lenin said, no fundamental premise can be removed without distorting the validity of the conclusion, the neo-revisionists turn to the Hague Congress to credit the name of Marx with their shoddy “multiplicity of the ways to socialism” – which for them, in the final analysis, is only the parliamentary way.

It does not matter that the reference to Marx takes us back to 1872, in evident and fundamental contrast with the current historical period. It does not matter that Marx himself provided us with the method to make a more precise explanation. It does not even matter that all the philosophical, historical-political thought of Marx before 1872 and after, or his own activity as a political and revolutionary man, violently contrast with the picture they draw of the parliamentarism of the Second International, never mind their much-worse parliamentarian followers today, who are even more corrupt and corrupting.

We know how Lenin saw this:

At the time when Marx made this remark, in England and America in particular, and precisely in the decade 1870-1880, those institutions [militarism and bureaucracy, OD] did not exist (nowadays they exist in both England and America).³⁵

And it is curious to say the least that Lenin made this observation in a polemic with Kautsky, when Kautsky himself, wrote in the preface to the fifth German edition (1904) of his *Socialist Programme*:

When the Erfurt programme was born, the possibility that the proletariat would conquer political power without catastrophe appeared in many countries, for example in England, where it is much more likely than not today.

That was in 1904, when imperialist politics were beginning to dominate the world.

But for those who know little of Marxism, it's worth emphasising that the Marx who gave us the *Manifesto*, the dialectical vision of history and revolutionary praxis, who critically analysed the *Civil War in France*, nowhere posits the peaceful and competitive coexistence of capitalism and the proletariat. Neither does he argue that there are numerous paths to socialism, or envisage the advent of socialism as the upshot of respect for the constitution and democratic legality, whether in opposition or with a parliamentary majority. Such theories are part of the stench given off by putrid capitalism in its period of decay, either in the form of Russian state capitalism or of American capitalism.

Our 'ignoramuses' have demonstrated that they are prone to the same opportunism as Kautsky. Yet it is worth pointing out that, not even in the famous speech given at the Hague Congress of the International, did Marx intend his words to have the meaning that international opportunism attributed to them.

Lets look at the historical evidence that the neo-revisionists try to ignore. On 8 September, the day after the closure of the Hague Congress, a regional section meeting took place in Amsterdam. Marx, Engels, Lafargue, Sorge and others took the floor. In his speech, Marx summarised the results of the Congress:

It proclaimed the need for the working classes to fight the old society that is collapsing on both the political and social terrain. [...]The workers must one day conquer supreme political power to guarantee the new organisation of labour, they must overthrow the old politics which support the old institutions.

The International decided on political struggle, it definitively rejected pseudo-revolutionary abstentionism.³⁶

*But we do not at all pretend that to achieve this goal the means must be identical. We know the part that the institutions, customs, traditions of different countries must play and we cannot deny that there are countries, like America and England, where workers can achieve their goal by peaceful means. If this is true, we must also recognise that in most of the countries of the **continent it is force that must instead be the lever of our revolutions**; it is precisely to force that, for a certain time, it will be necessary to appeal to, in order to establish the sovereignty of labour.*³⁷

In 1881 Marx clarified his thoughts to Hyndman with these words:

*If you say that you do not share my party's views on England, I can only answer that this party does not consider the revolution in England necessary, but by virtue of historical precedents, it is possible. If the inevitable evolution takes the form of a revolution, this will happen not only because of the ruling classes but also because of the working class. All the peaceful conceptions of the ruling class have been torn away as a result of "external pressures"; their action has been in response to these pressures, and if these have been gradually weakening, this has happened only because the British working class does not know how to use either its strength or the freedom which is lawfully in its possession. In Germany the working class were fully aware from the beginning of their movement that you cannot get rid of a military despotism except by a Revolution. England is one of the countries in which a peaceful revolution is possible, **but – added after a moment of silence – history does not tell us which.** [emphasis is ours].³⁸*

Engels took up the same theme a few years after Marx's death in the preface to the English translation of *Capital*.

*Surely at such a moment, the voice ought to be heard of a man whose whole theory is the result of a lifelong study of the economic history and condition of England, and whom that study led to the conclusion that, at least in Europe, England is the only country where the inevitable social revolution might be effected entirely by peaceful and legal means. **He certainly never forgot to add that he hardly expected the English ruling classes to submit, without a "pro-slavery rebellion", to this peaceful and legal revolution.** [emphasis is ours].³⁹*

Notes

1. Usually associated with Bergson – who had an acknowledged influence on Gramsci – and his emphasis on intuition for understanding the concrete world. However, the phrase comes from the French humanist/idealist, Romain Rolland who liked to use it, for example in his review of a book, *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, by Raymond-Louis Lefebvre. It describes the author's wartime experiences which turned him into a revolutionary communist and a short-lived member of the Communist International. (He drowned in the Barents Sea when returning from the 2nd World Congress in 1920.) Rolland's words are: *What I especially love ... is this intimate alliance—which for me makes the true man—of pessimism of the intellect, which penetrates every illusion, and optimism of the will.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Lefebvre
2. Gramsci *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 1919-1920, Einaudi, Turin 1954. The article appeared in no. 21, October 1919.
3. Giovanni Parodi was a member of Bordiga's Abstentionist communist fraction inside the PSI. They were aiming for revolutionaries to split from of the PSI and form a coherent communist party that could lead the working class in a revolutionary direction. By making non-participation in capitalist elections their central sticking point, the essentials of a revolutionary programme became obscured and the break with social democracy delayed.
4. *L'Unità* was established in 1924 as the newspaper for “workers and peasants”, of the Communist Party of Italy under Gramsci's bolshevisation period. The post-war party had nothing in common with even the declining, opportunist pre-war party. In 1944 Togliatti returned to Italy, and led the now **Italian Communist Party (PCI)** to the so-called *Svolta di Salerno*, the “[Salerno](#) Turn”. “... a compromise between antifascist parties, the monarchy and prime minister, [Pietro Badoglio](#) to set up a government of national unity and to postpone institutional questions.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmiro_Togliatti#Secretary_of_the_Italian_Communist_Party]
In other words, the abandonment of any prospect of a working class revolution either in Italy or beyond.
5. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, from Ch.1, section 4 on the withering away of the state. Work cited: Lenin *Collected Works* vol 2. Foreign Language editions, Moscow 1948.
6. See footnote 16 of Chapter 7.
7. Gramsci, *Notes on Machiavelli* op.cit.
8. Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo* loc.cit.
9. *ibid*
10. *ibid*
11. Although the two publications continued, with the formation of the Communist fraction after the 2nd Congress of the Third International, the Councilists (Gramsci) and Absentionists (Bordiga) joined forces and collaborated in editing a new publication, *Il Comunista*, for the newly formed fraction which in November 1920 at the Imola Convention finally called for a “clean break” with Social Democracy.
12. For more information in English, see *Platform of the Committee of Intesa*

available from the CWO address.

13. Gramsci, loc. cit.

14. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*.

15. These units – ‘*reparti confino*’ – are where workers considered to be “troublemakers”, “ungovernable”, “unmanageable” are relegated, often after being demoted. They are typically dilapidated buildings, empty warehouses or offices where the workers being punished have to report, sometimes in total isolation and with no or very little work to do. This practice of banishment is still in use today and has led to the suicide of numerous people. During the bitter struggle of Fiat workers at the Pomigliano plant in southern Italy at the beginning of this decade, over 300 militants were notoriously relegated in this way. The practice is still being used today, for example amongst warehouse workers to undermine workers’ attempts to organise for better conditions.

16. Filippo Corridoni, 1887-1915. Militant syndicalist, imprisoned several times for his activities. Supported Italy’s entry into the 1st World War; killed shortly after volunteering for the army in 1915.

Alceste De Ambris, 1874-1934. Another syndicalist supporter of Italy’s entry into the 1st World War. After provoking a split in the *Unione Sindacale Italiana*, formed the *Fasci d’Azione rivoluzionaria internazionalista* which later merged with Mussolini’s *Fasci autonomi d’azione rivoluzionaria*. Fell out with Mussolini and in 1926 left Italy for France where he died in 1934.

Arturo Labriola, 1873-1959. Enjoyed a long political life starting as a Republican/socialist and ending almost full circle as senator in the 1948 Italian republic. After political exile in France, became a revolutionary syndicalist inside the PSI where he established Socialist Vanguard, to counter Turati’s reformism with Sorelian ideas – presented as following revolutionary Marxism. However, he himself became a ‘Marxist reformist’, supported Italy’s participation in the first world war and afterwards was Minister of Labour in Giolitti’s final government. Against Mussolini, lived in France until 1935. 1946, elected to the Constituent Assembly as a National Democratic Union candidate.

Enrico Leone, 1875-1940. Together with Labriola, early twentieth century spokesman for revolutionary syndicalism inside the PSI. Resigned as editor of the party’s paper, *l’Avanti*, after becoming a revolutionary syndicalist following the general strike of 1904. In 1905 founded the theoretical magazine *Il Divenire Sociale* (roughly translates as *Future Society*) which included articles by Georges Sorel and was published until 1910. After 1907 when the syndicalists decided to abandon the PSI in favour of union work, Leone became more of a liberal, becoming a professor of economics in Bologna. Opposed the war in 1914 and initially was enthusiastic about the Russian Revolution, siding with the maximalists in the PSI, until concluding that a third revolution would be required against Bolshevik ‘Jacobinism’. Became mentally ill and spent the last 15 years of his life in an asylum.

17. *Il Soviet*, founded by Amadeo Bordiga in Naples towards the end of 1918, calling for the expulsion of reformists from the PSI and the formation of a Communist Party. By February 1919 *Il Soviet* was emphasising abstention from parliamentary elections as the basis for a split with reformism.

18. We refer here to the birth of the Internationalist Communist Party in 1943, the unique response to the degeneration of the PCd'I and to the 2nd World War.
19. Gramsci, *Notes on Machiavelli*, op.cit.
20. ibid
21. ibid
22. Gramsci, *Letters From Prison*, Einaudi, Turin 1952.
23. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* op. cit.
24. The moderate movement of the Italian Risorgimento can be traced back to 1794 in Naples when the Patriotic Society dissolved and the club "Lomo" (Liberty or death) arose in opposition to the radical "Romo" (Republic or death).
25. Arnold of Brescia (c.1090 –1155), was a religious and political and reformer. He called for the Church to renounce property ownership and played a prominent role in an early attempt to re-found a Roman republic against the papacy based on democratic rights. This led to his being hanged, with his body burned posthumously. His teachings were later taken up by various strands of Church reformists, putting him amongst the precursors of the Reformation.
26. Gramsci, *Notes on Machiavelli*, op.cit.
27. ibid
28. ibid
29. Gramsci, *Il Risorgimento*, Einaudi, Turin 1953.
30. Piero Gobetti, 1901-1926. Contemporary of Gramsci and native of Turin. Although a liberal, he was inspired by both the Russian Revolution and the Turin factory occupations. In 1922, began publishing *La Rivoluzione Liberale* where he presented the working class as the leading protagonist in a liberal revolution that could renew Italy. Opposed Mussolini, argued that Italians should adopt liberal anti-fascism, for which he was beaten up by fascist thugs and obliged to leave the country. Died in Paris soon afterwards; buried in Pere Lachaise cemetery.
31. Badaloni, *Il marxismo di Gramsci*, Einaudi, Turin 1975.
32. Labriola, Antonio, *Del materialismo storico*, Editori Riuniti, Rome 1963.
33. Plekhanov, op. cit.
34. ibid
35. Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and The Renegade Kautsky*, Selected Works Vol. 2
36. See Marx's Speech on the Hague Congress, given in Amsterdam, 8 September, 1872. In David Fernbach, ed. Karl Marx, *The First International and After*, Volume 3, p.324, Penguin Classics: 'A group had formed in our midst which commended the abstention of the workers from political activity. We saw it as our duty to point out how dangerous and fateful such principles seemed for the task in hand.'
37. loc.cit. p.325.
38. Marx-Engels, Selected Works, Editori Riuniti, Rome 1952.
39. See Marx, *Capital* Volume 1, Preface to the English Edition, p.17 Lawrence and Wishart edition.

From Imola to Livorno: Building the New Communist Party

With its clear theoretical platform and a well-organised network of groups on a national scale, the Abstentionist fraction of the Socialist Party was undoubtedly the most active and effective opposition to the policies of the Party leadership. It could already be considered as an embryo party within the party. At the crucial point when the first proletarian state emerged out of the October revolution Bordiga was aware more than anyone else of the necessity for a revolutionary party. Yet he was also aware of the limitations of the Abstentionist fraction. Even if the split had taken place at the Bologna Congress (1919), the fraction itself was objectively incapable of shaping a political party that was up to the tasks of the impending revolution. Otherwise, not splitting from the PSI in 1919 would have been such a big mistake as to compromise forever the theoretical standing of the fraction, its organisation and the reputation of its major animator.

This is why Imola came to be essentially the compromise conference, a practical anticipation of the Gramscian “historical bloc” by virtue of the left forces in the Socialist Party. In sum, Imola was a convergence point for various currents who were at odds with each other on many issues, some of fundamental importance. In truth, however, the convergence point was not the Abstentionist fraction, even if this was the most prominent tendency. Really it was Lenin’s ideas, the fascination of the October revolution and the need to organise the Communist International which drew them together. Nevertheless, all this was in perfect harmony with the ideas and positions of the Abstentionist fraction. In this regard, bear in mind the final motion of the National Conference of the fraction held in Florence (8-9 May 1920) point 3, which gave the Central Committee a mandate:

to convoke immediately after the international congress, the constituent congress of the Communist Party, inviting every group which supports the communist programme, from both inside and outside the Italian Socialist Party, to join.

Except that soon after Imola and Livorno this tactical directive would be given a much worse interpretation.

Here are the groups and currents which attended the Imola Congress on equal terms and who went on to form the backbone of the party at Livorno:

1. The Abstentionist fraction, referred to above, and whose negative aspects during this period of organising the basis for the party need to be understood alongside the positive. The fraction's eclecticism, both in terms of formulating and practically applying its theses, worked against the project as a whole. In the pre-Livorno phase the key issue was the formation of the revolutionary party, not abstentionism. It was impossible to establish such a party round a programme which focussed so much on abstentionist ideology.

2. The *Ordine Nuovo* group. Given its social and, above all, intellectual composition this group was the immediate forerunner of a tendency which gave intellectuals a key role; or else – in connection with that – confined workers to the factories rather than envisaging a wider frame for revolutionary action. Influenced by the neo-idealism then prevalent in the world of bourgeois culture, the group tended towards Marxism, but a Marxism filtered through the sieve of idealism, in contrast with traditional concepts of socialism and the socialist left itself.

In fact, while the Left fraction believed the revolution depended on the existence of the party and, following the traditional line on the class party, aimed to conquer its ruling organs to give them a revolutionary will and direction, the Ordinevisti did not place so much importance on this fundamental task of the party and shifted their attention to the capitalist factory which they regarded: *“as a necessary form of the working class, as a political body, as a “national territory” of worker antagonism.”*

For these comrades, unlike the party and the union, the Council:

“develops not arithmetically, but morphologically and, in its highest manifestations, tends to highlight the proletariat in the apparatus of production and exchange created by capitalism for the pursuit of profit. The pressure created by this newly awakened power (the councils, OD) which springs irresistibly from the working masses, will lead to violent collision between the two classes and thus to the proletarian dictatorship. If the foundations of the revolutionary process are not laid well within productive life the revolution will remain a sterile appeal to the will [...].”¹

Thus the key difference between the two fractions was over the party and councils. While the party's historical background lay in its territorial structure and in the political-administrative organisms which had arisen with the development of capitalism, the Councils embodied the vital impulse, the rhythm of progress towards communist society. On one hand the highest level of proletarian consciousness is condensed in the party's doctrine and theory of class revolution, on the other, workers' solidarity is expressed by the councils.

Thus, embodied in the most negligible moments of industrial production[...], there is an organic whole, a homogeneous and compact system which [...] affirms its sovereignty, implements its power and its freedom to create history.²

It might be concluded that the two major currents which went on to form the Communist Party had a common vision of the eventual outcome of revolutionary action. However, their underlying rationale, their general approach and their understanding of Marxism were very different. Whilst one professed orthodoxy and fundamentalism, the other inclined towards the revolutionary syndicalist ideas of De Leon which are upheld by workerist tendencies today.

The web of theoretical and tactical confusion at the Imola Conference was even more complicated by minor currents and individual adherents, from the motions of Graziadei-Marabini, to the electoral maximalism of many of the deputies who attended, or the views of aspiring young revolutionary militants firmly anchored to Marxism but not in any particular school or tendency. We will need to reconsider the experience of Imola when we go further into the problem of the reconstruction of the party in a context where parliamentary opportunism, careerism and the prevailing interests of the ruling class have undermined the vitality of the struggle and corrupted or obscured its original objectives. From this starting point we will also be able to understand the shortcomings and the contradictions which accompanied the formation of the Communist Party of Italy.

We remain convinced that, beyond organisational measures and statutory provisions, or the formal dissolution of the participating groups, we must focus on getting rid of anything that is alien to Marxism in each group's ideologies and the necessity of unifying beyond completely formal aspects of organisation (dissolution of groups, individual adhesions, candidacy, etc.). Thus: unconditional acceptance of a theoretical-practical platform from which the conscious discipline that strengthens the organisation arises; which gradually reduces the differences and guarantees the continuity of the revolutionary struggle.

The Party

We have already mentioned the central problem of the party but we need to say more about the significance and the precise role played by the *Ordine Nuovo* current, an entirely Gramscian creation, in 1919 and 1920.

By late 1920 it was evident, even to those suffering from chronic myopia, that there was no organisation of the proletariat capable of collectively responding to its immediate aspirations, let alone its revolutionary historical tasks. The 1917 Turin workers' revolt against the war (which Gramsci saw as a valid attempt to

penetrate the hitherto secure defences of the class enemy) had been crushed and was followed by deepening economic-social hardship. Then, in 1920, came the disastrous outcome of the struggle unleashed by the occupation of the factories where workers used every means at their disposal short of revolution, but which ended with the unions and the PSI capitulating to the government of Giolitti (that master of political chicanery in the very difficult period after the war). This was due especially to the open or secret connivance of the Socialist parliamentary group where Turatian reformism prevailed.

In the insurrectionary period after the war the proletariat did not have a revolutionary party to call its own, much less a leadership capable of adopting such a perspective. Nor was the opposition, which was very much alive in the PSI, able to take on this task since the groups headed by *Il Soviet* of Naples had exhausted their capacity for initiative by fruitless activity based exclusively on abstentionism, and were scarcely noticed by the masses. Meanwhile the Ordinovist groups in Turin, enclosed in the city of big industry, had fallen into a period of indecision and doubt. While the Councils had failed their great test as self-sufficient organs of the proletariat, the Ordinovisti still tended to believe, despite everything, in the Socialist Party and not in the historical necessity for the formation of the revolutionary party.

It was only when it was too late, after the Bologna Congress, that the necessity of joining forces for the creation of the revolutionary party became a priority.

Gramsci's all-encompassing focus on the Councils had already declined and he returned to supporting the Socialist Party as the political body which would catalyse the revolutionary elements, particularly after its resounding electoral success in 1919 which brought an encouraging array of Socialist deputies to the parliamentary chamber, at least from the point of view of numbers.

For Gramsci, getting involved in the capitalist production process, especially in the most advanced engineering sector meant entering the machinery of the whole system and therefore becoming part of the fabric of the state, hence the vision of an organisation of the Councils rooted in the state and certainly not limited to a single area of production.

When eventually Gramsci rose to the leadership of the Party, under Moscow's tutelage, this is what led to a fall in its credibility, authority and prestige. With his inability to recognise the objective reality of reflux and retreat — not only of the working masses but of the party itself — he took on the task of radically remodelling the organisation whilst engaging in unrealistic frontist exploits, all the time blinded by the illusion of being in the ascendant phase with sufficient

space in front of him to put flesh on the organisation and gain a *de facto* majority.

The political blindness was so great that when the Party was forced to dissolve under the Exceptional Laws, this caricature of a leadership, with its eye always vigilant on everything and everyone and ready for illegal work, was incapable of preparing for anything. Thus, the whole organisation was at the mercy of the class adversary, up to the point that even Gramsci, the party leader, fell into the hands of the Fascist police.

Given such a misguided perspective, the collapse of the organisation was the inevitable end point of the curve of the Gramscian political experience. Starting from the corrosive clampdown against the Left, the cave in of the Party was the outcome of the leadership's complete turnaround over the nature and significance of the split that occurred in Livorno. It provoked a crisis inside the Party and open dissent over tactics and strategy stemming from the fundamental points on which the party was formed, a crisis that would last until the explosion of the Committee of Intesa.

This was not Gramsci's position at the Imola Convention, the Livorno Congress (1921) or even the Rome Congress (1922). The new line only emerged in the light of the Russian and Viennese experience. Its starting point was a re-assessment of the Livorno split, now considered the "*greatest triumph of reaction*" because it had meant "*the separation of the majority of the Italian proletariat from the Communist International*". (Gramsci, *The Southern Question* ed. Franco De Felice and V. Parlato). In *L'Ordine Nuovo* III, Series 2, March 2-15, 1924.) Gramsci returned to this argument with an article, *Against Pessimism* whose content has all the air of a heartfelt *mea culpa* and a sense of guilt for having supinely accepted the politics of the Left and the authority and competence of Bordiga. Above all, though, the article announces the intention to launch a first salvo against Bordiga himself, which is to say against the "Italian Left" which represented the overwhelming majority of the party.

Thus:

... going back to the 2nd Congress and its 21 conditions which were presented as a necessary conclusion to the "formal" deliberations of the Congress. This was a mistake and today we can evaluate its full extent by what happened subsequently. In truth the deliberations of the 2nd Congress reflected the Italian situation, as well as the whole world situation, but we, for various reasons, restricted the basis for our action to what happened in Italy. So Italian facts drove the Congress, and largely defined the political substance behind the decisions and organisational measures that were taken. We, however, simply dwelt upon formal matters, of pure logic, of simple coherence, and we were

defeated because the majority of the politically organised proletariat said we were wrong, did not come with us, even though we had the great authority and prestige of the International on our side. We weren't able to conduct a systematic campaign, one which would reach and oblige all the nuclei and constructive elements of the PSI to reflect; we were unable to translate the meaning of events in Italy during 1919-20 into the Italian language; after Livorno we did not understand how to pose the problem of why the Congress reached the conclusion it did; we were unable to pose the problem practically, in order to find the solution, in order to continue with our specific mission which was to conquer the majority of the proletariat. We – it must be said – were overwhelmed by events. We were, unwittingly, an aspect of the general dissolution of Italian society, which became an incandescent melting pot where all traditions, all political formations, all prevailing ideas were merging together, sometimes without trace. We had our consolation, to which we have tenaciously clung, that no one was saved, that we could say we predicted the cataclysm mathematically, at a time when others clung to the most blissful and idiotic of illusions. After the Livorno split we entered into a state of necessity, where, to put it, bluntly we faced the dilemma of life or death.

As can be seen, in assuming responsibility for the leadership of the party, Gramsci was tormented by a double concern: first, how to open the doors of the party to more elements from the PSI and so reduce the significance of the "terzini"³ (some corporals and a few soldiers) who had not really assimilated the ideas, methods and especially the strict discipline of the organisation. The other, so far unspoken aim, was to uproot the system of territorial organisation which prevented his policy from penetrating the party's grassroots which were still politically and emotionally with the Left.

Breaking the political solidity and centralised structure of the proletarian class party meant reducing it to a collection of cells vulnerable to the molecular process of reduction to socio-economic categories. The situation confirms the deep contradiction at the heart of the whole Gramscian question and its concept of hegemony which includes, contradictorily, tendencies to pluralism. In practice this meant alliances and compromises out of the childish fear of feeling alone in the face of an overrated class enemy. In short, a tactical Gramsci harnessed between hegemony and its opposite, where:

The factory Council is the prime cell of this organisation [the dictatorship of the proletariat, author] which expresses the unity of the working class, gives the masses a cohesion and a form which are of the same nature as the cohesion and form which the masses assume in the general organisation of society [...] an organic whole, a homogeneous and compact system that [...] affirms its sovereignty, implements

*its power and its creative freedom of history. [?] Thus the proletarian dictatorship is incarnated in the factory organisation, the communist state which destroys class rule in the political super-structures and its machinery in general.*⁴

This reference to the ideological and political hegemony of the Councils, or rather to a future State of the Councils, does not bow to any tactical conditions. It is from the first series of *L'Ordine Nuovo* (1919-1920), when it was at its most original and had its highest circulation. Despite his hesitations and the Sorelian influences which clouded his revolutionary Marxism, this was undoubtedly Gramsci's best period.

Notes

1. Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo no.18*, September 1919. Reprinted by, Editori Riuniti 1954.
2. Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo, no. 21* October 1919.
3. See section on the *Terzini* in the next chapter.
4. Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo, no. 21 October, 1919*

Gramsci's Leadership of the Party

The situation sparked by the murder of Matteotti¹ became the acid political test for the two major strands in the Party (Left and Centre) with their diametrically opposed positions about what it meant and what course of action the Party should take. The following chapter, originally entitled *After Matteotti*, appeared in the Party newspaper, *L'Unità* (Unity) in January 1926, signed O. Damen.

The Matteotti Crisis

At the moment it seems that the political parties are better at solving the most complex theoretical questions than they are at finding a constructive course of action in the real political world. When a party and its members have lost sight of the goals which are part of their original *raison d'être*, then they are almost always reduced to theorising the reasons for defeat. All of a sudden previous shortcomings become reasons to be cautious, grounds for common sense, or even the way to victory.

This is what happened after Matteotti, first with the fictitious duel between dictatorship and democracy, between dictatorship and liberalism; then with the constant real duel between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat which was becoming more acute.

Let us try to explain how and why a period of intense struggle between these two true and natural antagonists of history has been transformed – not in terms of real power relations, but according to the ruminations of the philosophers of pessimism and impotence – into a “democratic” period where the masses are fixated on the parties of democracy.

No matter how they justify themselves and whatever the Centrale (Party Executive) says, there have been countless blunders and miscalculations. In the wake of the Matteotti affair the Executive did not even attempt to have an autonomous line of action for the Party, much less offer any revolutionary proletarian solution to the crisis, opting instead for a middle-class, bourgeois, anti-fascist response.

The crux of the tactical problem is exactly here, as is the essential reason for our

strong opposition. For us, the Matteotti crime clearly broke the existing balance of power. The episode was so serious and happened at such an intense and acute moment in Italian political life that everyone indiscriminately: politicians, political parties and the masses, was overwhelmed by a very deep sense of loss and panic.

In a situation like this the party must give some kind of direction and not simply follow events. As it was, crystal ball gazing and a bit more nerve might have conjured up a better policy. At least that would have been less irresponsible than reducing a revolutionary party to simply accepting the existing political situation between the various classes. Anyone who reasons like this shows they are better at formulating syllogisms than directing the class towards revolution.

Be that as it may, what are the factors determining relations amongst the organised classes? Let's take a closer look. When the crime is committed the fascist party is paralysed by the unexpected event and its authority is undermined. Public opinion, which until then had been solid or passively sympathetic to it, distances itself, is almost hostile; the fascist leadership is incapable of mobilising support; the government loses authority.

Throughout the country as a whole, the initial loss provoked a vague sense of expectation. The press, a particular obsession in the mind of Comrade Gramsci, took up the scandal and unwittingly fed a spirit of revolt. At this stage we cannot speak in terms of any specific political influence really predominating in the country, nor even of political guidelines. Yet anti-fascism was in the air and a widespread movement of people ready to struggle was beginning to emerge. Who would be the first to shape these forces? What direction would they take?

Thus far, no party had dared launch a slogan for action. Our Party Executive issued a vague encouragement to act, made for polemical purposes, but did not even attempt to begin a real mass mobilisation. Apart from a few sporadic successes, inspired more by the local situation and by the greater willingness of the masses in some areas to follow the call from above, the Party leadership clearly revealed it was out of touch. It neither understood the situation of the masses, nor did it have any idea what the categorical imperative of the hour was. In essence it showed itself to be detached from the majority of the membership.

Has there ever been such a hamstrung communist party? What is certain is that we were in a period of recovery and reorganisation. Yet a key element of

organisation was missing. The most damning criticism made about the comrades of the Central Committee is not that the party was absent – it existed as a more or less solidly organised numerical entity – but that there was a shortage of the intermediary bodies essential for a communist organisation to carry out its historical role as a revolutionary party. In the last analysis the Centre-Right explained the lack of any serious action in the country immediately after the Matteotti murder by the absence of a strongly organised revolutionary party, and they assumed the traditional parties were stronger than the party of the revolution.

By starting from this seriously mistaken premise the whole situation became the occasion for a U-turn in policy and justification for a manoeuvre which proved to be opportunist. On this assumption of the Party's weakness, the situation was declared to be "democratic" and so the immediate problem for the Party was defined as a question of organisation and not of action.

From a superficial and very cerebral reading of the political situation it is quite easy to deduce a certain pacifism amongst the masses, and it's difficult to see the difference between the proletarian insurrection and the bourgeoisie's Anti-parliament, between the immediate tasks of the single class party and a simple organisational problem and ... easy to aim for the usual mythical conquest of the majority.

On the other hand could, or rather, should, our party have posed the question of an immediate insurrection for the conquest of power? This is what we have been asked. Yet nobody on the Left has ever thought of reproving the leadership for not having — made the revolution. On the other hand, this is not the way to pose the problem and we repeat: somewhere between the insurrection and the political manoeuvre that was actually carried out the Central Committee could, and should, have developed an independent party activity which would have permitted the two political groupings who are really at odds with each other (the conservative bourgeoisie and the revolutionary proletariat) to be clearly demarcated. This would have opened the possibility of a polarisation between these two single politico-economic entities of modern society, those forces which are active and operating in the country and which have been pushed into action and exasperated to the maximum by the Matteotti affair.

Instead we've followed the tortuous tactics of the Central Committee which has been particularly good at dividing the bourgeoisie into species and sub-species, into good, less good, and wicked, thus reducing the Marxist method of investigation to a model example of a page of — natural history.

In fact our party's Central Committee also wanted the inertia of the masses – something which would allow it to manoeuvre with the bourgeois centre parties on parliamentary ground and act independently of the country as a whole.

Yet again, in such a crisis situation, it was not mass action which determined the final outcome, but the political parties, or rather their executives, directors, officials, etc. (social democratic practice) who used the chessboard of Montecitorio² as a base for manoeuvring to limit or totally paralyse the influence of the masses.

And – we repeat – our leaders also tumbled onto this typical social-democratic ground. A crime occurred and, *“the popular anti-fascist wave found its political shape in the secession of the opposition parties from the parliamentary chamber”*.²

So the Central Committee decided the parliamentary group should go along with the bourgeois-social democratic opposition movement. Why did they tacitly comply with the Aventine manoeuvre? Listen to why: it's a very important political reason:

In fact the gathering together of the opposition became a national political focus around which the majority of the country was organised; the crisis that broke out in the emotional and moral field thus acquired a marked institutional character; a State was created within the State: an anti-fascist Government against the fascist Government.

And further on:

*The opposition parties still remain the focus of the popular anti-fascist movement; they are the political manifestation of the wave of democracy that is characteristic of the current phase of the Italian social crisis. At the outset the vast majority of the proletariat was also with the opposition.*⁴

Is there a communist worker today who thinks this is anything but exaggeration, a sleight of hand and a serious and unpardonable error of political judgment?

In September Antonio Gramsci – starting from the mind-set of someone who is afraid of serious social malaise – analysed the Italian situation and diagnosed that a remedy cannot be found unless it is framed within the resurgent democratic ambitions of the petty bourgeoisie. It would be good if the Executive reprinted this report and placed it among the documents being distributed in preparation for the Party Congress.⁵

For its part, the Left has already said what it thought and what it still thinks about our exit from parliament, our entry into the opposition committee and the by now “tedious” proposal of the Anti-parliament.

For us it is an indisputable fact, as it should be for all non-degenerate Marxists, that in a really serious situation, where its very existence as a ruling and privileged class is threatened, the bourgeoisie plays on differences in order to maintain its existence.

And in this case the political diversion of the endangered ruling class involves making concessions which apparently benefit (only apparently) layers of masses as distinct from the very class that actually directs the manoeuvre. Specifically, the fascist bourgeoisie, recognising the serious danger that the proletariat will intervene in the struggle, manoeuvred itself sideways. Its own petty bourgeois elements thus ended up standing on a new political platform (parliamentary secession, the *Aventino*), brazenly acting out a democratic masquerade and throwing out the sop of the ‘moral question’. This was even before the proletarian masses might have been able to find their political bearings behind a clear slogan and precise political line drawn by the revolutionary Party of the class. But there was no slogan launched, no political line indicated, because the Party leadership did not believe in, or rather did not see the necessity for intervention by the third factor — the proletariat. Instead of a class initiative it preferred to sit and criticise on the opposition committees and work there to unfreeze the situation.

Thus, at the most propitious moment and armed with such an agenda, the Party deployed its troops, not to the struggle, but onto the very comfortable ground offered by the bourgeoisie. And for us this is opportunism; an opportunism not dissimilar from that of the Maximalist Party.

Let’s now turn to the proposal for an anti-Parliament.

The parliamentary secession occurred over a moral question. Morality was the *raison d’être* of the whole *Aventine* policy. The Communist proposal for an Anti-parliament was thus inserted into this moral frame. The *Aventine* certainly did not, and could not have, started a fight against fascism from a class basis. Moreover, it was not from a class standpoint that the Central Committee of the Communist Party manoeuvred in and out of the opposition committee.

Gramsci even stated in a group meeting that the Party should only return to the opposition bloc if it was accepted that the *Aventine* parties would be responsible

for the basic running of the Chamber of Deputies. This is madness, but it is perfectly logical for Gramsci: did he not see the Aventine as the decisive episode in the institutional crisis? The state within the state? The anti-fascist government against the fascist government? As a result, the Party leadership's highest revolutionary objective came to be how to make the 'Anti-parliament' work.

It is our modest belief that communists never start from moral prejudices in the fight against the bourgeoisie. In the specific case of the Matteotti crime, the Communists had to start from a class basis and not try to make the moral question their own, let alone put themselves on the same emotive political ground.

However, it was this erroneous political evaluation which led the Communists into the Opposition Committee only to leave it without even defending a true and healthy question of principle, eventually proposing and insisting on the scheme for an Anti-Parliament.

The Aventine was the political outcome of an entirely conservative manoeuvre based on the specific interests of the counter-revolution. It is a typical bourgeois strategy to make use of an overt internal dispute to create a scandal, in this case abandoning the legal parliament for a while, for the sake of a "castle in the air" and not for any democratic "victory". It is a safety valve for resolving the crisis in a bourgeois sense. Can you imagine then, that a walk-out from parliament could be transformed by our Central Committee into an Anti-parliament with insurrectional objectives? Either by participating directly in the Aventine or working around it to attract new layers of the masses to us?

The first part of this article fully answers the question. The Trojan horse is a good mythical figure for literary exercises; but are we supposed to imagine some of the party "leaders", desperately clinging on to a fairly plodding horse, returning, then marching back into the enemy camp with the perfect likeness of the Bolshevik revolution in its womb? Irony aside, it is fanciful at least to attribute the fact that new layers of the proletariat were coming towards our party to the "wise" manoeuvre which culminated in the proposal for the Anti-Parliament. It was simply the exceptional nature of the political moment which prompted layers of masses to shift towards the only proletarian party there was. And if this palpable shift was not followed by any concrete experience, by any workers' achievement, it is due exclusively to the very serious tactical error of the leadership which looked more towards parliament than to the wider world.

The leadership's over-emphasis on a bourgeois anti-fascist solution required, if not the elimination, then certainly a reduction in the immediate and autonomous

actions of the proletariat. This is indeed what happened.
And it is one of the reasons for our profound disagreement.⁶

Look how Togliatti – who lived through these events and was one of the party leaders – summarises them: certainly not as a politician but as a reporter, typically viewed from the outside, without getting bound up in what was happening, and not as a protagonist:

The intelligent and audacious tactics of the Communist Party after the killing of Matteotti, tactics dictated by Gramsci in every detail; the exit from parliament together with the groups of the democratic opposition immediately after the crime, the intervention in the opposition's assembly with the proposal to proclaim the general strike to expel fascism from power [A proposal rejected with horror by the democratic leaders who wanted to overthrow fascism by abstaining from parliamentary work and with a press campaign! Author's comment]; the subsequent proposals for the organisation of an "anti-parliament" of the opposition and a tax strike by the peasants and, finally, the most important part of this political action was the return of the communists into the parliamentary chamber to denounce the crimes of fascism from the gallery which demonstrated the impotence of the democratic and liberal anti-fascists.

This tactic, based on the Leninist and Stalinist principle, by which the masses must be directed through their experience while placing the Communists at the forefront of the struggle to avenge the crimes of fascism and overthrow the fascist dictatorship, facilitated the separation of broad strata of workers from the democratic parties and the social democracy, laid the foundations of the alliance between the proletariat and the peasants, brought the party out of isolation and pushed it onto the path of transformation into a mass party.

Truly intelligent and audacious tactics, especially audacious.

The truth is that the leadership was so mollified by the semi-legality granted by the regime, by its magnanimity, that they had not noticed it was sitting on a huge powder keg of popular resentment, formed over time by the spontaneous accumulation of outrages, arrogance, insults to human dignity beyond the political scene with its array of humiliating violence. This had reached the point where it was enough to strike a match for everything to go up in the air, but no one dared to light it or even thought that it could be struck. Gramsci, in particular, thought that once combustible materials were in place they would explode spontaneously. If this did not happen, it was not the party leadership that was to blame.

Worsening Tactics

We have now reached the 1924-25 period, two eventful years of particular importance in the history of the workers' movement. With the removal, imposed from above,⁷ of the Left from leadership of the Italian communist movement, a new more flexible Executive, one more willing to compromise, came forward in the shape of Gramsci, Togliatti, Terracini, Scoccimarro, all of whom had also been with the Left in the formative phase of the Communist Party of Italy. As for the Party's new direction, this entirely stemmed from Gramsci's work and thought. Again, this is not about a mythologised Gramsci, but Gramsci the man, a man who in personal terms lived through the same events as this writer. But this does not save Gramsci from the precise accusation of having yoked the Party, not to the needs of an authentic revolutionary International, but to policies contingent on the Russian State, even supposing it to be a 'workers' state.

The first sign of the new Gramscian orientation appeared in the first editorial of the second series of *L'Ordine Nuovo*. Here Gramsci, critically reviewing the work of Imola and Livorno, concludes that the Livorno split had been made too far to the Left, a conclusion quite unthinkable for a man who had participated responsibly at Imola and Livorno and in the work on *The Rome Theses*. The conclusion, therefore, must be that this is fundamentally opportunistic since it involves neither a serious critical re-interpretation nor a serious re-examination of the events preceding Livorno. And whilst on the subject of the split, it must be remembered that the Left believed at the time that it had been too far to the Right. This new verdict already implies a tactical-strategic vision at variance with the party Centre right from the beginning.

Perhaps this is a pure and simple return to the wretched tactics of the social democratic parties, or more exactly a tactical departure dictated by a corresponding theoretical change imposed by the Comintern under the impulse of changing objective circumstances where the immediate objective was now united front politics?

The "Terzini"

For the new Party leadership and thus for the Executive of the International, the problem of the hour was how to gain political ground to the Right of the Party. First of all, how to widen the Party's political influence over the nebulous politics of the Third-Internationalist fraction which was still inside the Socialist Party. The *Terzini's* aim was to build a bridge towards the Communist International

and, consequently, towards our Party. This was in line with the Gramscian goal of redressing the “too far to the Left” split which had been endorsed by the Party membership when the Left were predominant. Why are we talking about the nebulous policies of the fraction headed by Serrati, Maffi, Riboldi, Malatesta, etc., that prized group of generals without soldiers, with no serious organisation able to act as a real fraction?

The “*terzini*” did not, and could not, convey their particular theoretical overview of the problems of the revolution. Without any appreciable support at the base, they were reduced to a few parliamentary cadres and the political and trade union apparatus of the Socialist Party. On the whole it was a grouping without history, of little ideological importance, above all of scant organisational importance. Nevertheless, it is significant that the major concern of the *terzini* was to claim the right to be represented on the governing bodies of the Party.

Here the zeal and secretive manoeuvring employed by Fabrizio Maffi, one of the members of the movement, to launch Malatesta's candidacy for the Party's secretariat is significant. Evidently they aimed very high, and went on to secure a place on the federal bodies of the Party as a whole as well as in the leadership of the trade union movement.

When organisational splits like this one of the *terzini* are neither the result of deep, irreconcilable ideological differences, nor a response to changed objective circumstances; and especially when they do not involve a head-on confrontation over how to approach basic theoretical and tactical problems, then they almost always reveal themselves as sterile breaks and inevitably weigh down, when they do not contaminate, the organism which the splitting groups latch on to. This incident of the exit of the Third-Internationalists from the Socialist Party and their entry into the Communist Party is still important today. It confirms that the Left's approach to the wider question of admission to a revolutionary party is the right one. This can be summarised as follows: the need for a thorough process; decanting of residual ideological encrustations; absolute adherence to revolutionary discipline, above all the need to dissolve the previous organisational base of any particular grouping that is interested in joining the revolutionary party.

In fact Gramsci became a faithful executor of a policy that was either inspired or dictated by the Comintern. This must be acknowledged, and not in order to praise his political qualities or his manoeuvring flexibility. The fact is that Gramsci adopted the new course and assumed responsibility for imposing it on the Party. Here it should be noted that in the two-year period under review the Communist

Party did indeed have an Executive body, even if by artificial installation, but the most important point is that it was disconnected from the Party base. The grassroots did not understand the reason for the new course imposed at the top of the movement. It was a grassroots still linked, in the main, to the tradition of the Left.

The Apparatus

Let us now examine the problem of the apparatus. It is a standard political strategy for groups and currents to try to gain control of a party's apparatus and thereby the organisation as a whole. Thus for Gramsci and the new leadership the immediate and fundamental problem was how to take over the Party's apparatus in order to reach down to the base of the organisation. However, the decisions taken at the Conference of Pian del Tivano (Como) and the ideological-political stance of our statement in the 1924 elections indicated that the Party was still acting in line with its original structure, i.e. on the platform developed by the Italian Left. Gramsci, who was very much alive to the reality of the situation, understood this exactly and realised the urgent need to conquer the apparatus. So, how to bring about such a conquest? Either the ideological weapon is used, and this must entail a very long process of persuasion, an open political debate with those you are against, and finally, gaining trust; or there is another method: the administrative one, which involves making the men in the party apparatus bear the weight of their own political responsibility. This not only ensures administrative continuity, it removes the professional revolutionary from the danger of suddenly having to find a different economic arrangement for his own life.

So the apparatus gradually becomes more anonymous and takes on a mythological aspect; an elusive economic-political organisation, almost always hidden behind the smokescreen of caste privilege; a guild of faceless political drones spreading its tentacles like an octopus which eventually assumes its own existence separate from the bulk of the Party organisation itself.

The apparatus that we recognise today in the shape of an omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent force, originated precisely then, in 1924. More often than not the professional revolutionary is a comrade who has experienced a tough struggle, forged by a rigorous theoretical and political discipline, a comrade who has personal experience about what it means to make sacrifices. Yet it is he who is destined to become the man of the apparatus and, as such, forced to obey professionally and therefore blindly all the orders from above, whatever they may be. Thus the party headquarters takes advantage of this powerful instrument, born from the "coalescing" of "certain" men and "certain" interests, and uses it to

make contact with the base and move it according to the subjective and objective requirements of its policies.

Meanwhile, the new leadership continued dismantling the existing party organisation. At this juncture, in the middle of 1924, the Matteotti episode exploded. The violent elimination of Matteotti reflects the deep crisis in key areas of Italian capitalism. Given that there was no possibility of operating openly in the country and political activity was restricted solely to the parliamentary arena, it is on this level that we must observe and judge the action of the political elements who were troubled by the crisis. It is a crisis that stems from below, welling up from the broad masses where aversion to fascism, deep economic hardship and anxiety for a general and radical reversal of the situation were reaching breaking point. The snake of reaction was beginning to rebel against the charmer, lashing out against the top echelons of fascism itself so that Mussolini believed operation Dumini⁸ was inspired by elements within the regime who aimed to eliminate him. In fact, there was such a state of confusion and insecurity among the various organs of the regime that incidents like the Matteotti affair could occur at any time and to the detriment of anyone who was not a fascist.

The Aventino

It was entirely logical that at this point the anti-Fascist, democratic, liberal, socialist parties, which in fact were more active in the parliamentary struggle than in the country as a whole, opted for the Aventine secession.⁹ They were actively conspiring together about how to force a solution and opted for the Aventino, arguing that they could no longer remain in a parliament whose government was identified with the person of Mussolini, and which bore the moral responsibility for the assassination of Matteotti. Thus the secession created, at least on the constitutional level, a state within the state; a kind of political separatism followed by a power vacuum which the party could have made use of to develop a class initiative, if first a partiality towards the Aventinians and then indecision about what to do had not prevented it.

But the Aventino proved to be true to its nature as an amalgam of protesting bodies. They met, discussed, decided on fierce denunciation but deliberately refused to go out to the streets because this could potentially pass the protest into the hands of the communists. Thus, there was no appeal to the working masses, but instead to the military and police. The strategists of the Aventino put the Crown at the centre of their politics; if the Crown had moved then the police and army would have followed. But the Crown did not move and neither did the army or the police. Still, the Aventino maintained the pretence that there was a

hypothetical liberal state somewhere outside the harsh reality of the fascist state. Meanwhile what did the Communist Party do? At first the parliamentary group followed the party leadership and also withdrew from the parliamentary chamber. When they were suddenly faced with an unforeseen situation the leaders chose the standard tactical solution: let's join the secessionists as we would go to a united front meeting; for them it was a united front policy.

But, even here the diverging viewpoints could not fail to cause an explosion. The Social-Democratic, Liberal and Socialist Aventino could not stand the Communists working in its midst because the latter did not really share their approach and constitutional aims.

During this rapid succession of events the majority of the secessionist parties had at least realised that their political future resided solely in the use of the legal methods available to them to try and simultaneously preserve the liberal-democratic parties and the monarchical tradition, which was the basis of their subsequent action. The Communist Party, however, was floundering between parliamentary legalism and Maximalist phraseology. While the Gramscian leadership was posing the question in moral terms – implying that the Aventine secession was sufficient to liquidate Mussolini and fascism itself – the Left of the Party, which dissociated itself from the policy of participation in the secession, found itself passively enduring the initiative. This, despite the fact that the moral issue argument was set straight in a speech made by Ruggero Grieco, not with the backing of the party leadership, but in the house of Bordiga where the explicit aim was to try and motivate Bordiga himself.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the pressure from the masses below intensified. The Party especially felt the pressure, as demands were raised for a trustworthy policy. Inside the parliamentary group the anti-parliament idea gained ground: promoted above all by good old Riboldi¹¹ who was struggling to defend the legal and political legitimacy of an anti-parliament, intending to make it a platform for organising the parliamentary opposition.

To repeat, the fixation on parliamentary solutions showed there was no awareness of the groundswell coming from the country as a whole. By contrast, both in the parliamentary group and in the enlarged Central Committee, the Left had a diametrically opposed tactical and strategic vision which involved moving the axis of party action away from the parliament to the working masses. Such a perspective for struggle was greeted with indifference and misunderstanding, if not disdain.

According to the comrades of the new leadership and within the parliamentary

group itself, the comrades of the Left were overconfident barricaders, always deluding themselves that they could shift the axis of politics without any concrete perspective and with no understanding of the objective possibilities.

At a meeting of the enlarged Central Committee, Gramsci concluded a broad and detailed review by saying that the situation was not immediately revolutionary and that if the Left had launched a slogan for revolutionary action, even the healthiest part of the proletariat would not have listened to it. To prove his thesis he recalled that in the aftermath of the war millions of rifles had remained in the hands of Italians and if the guns were not being fired this showed there was no prospect of revolution. Oh if only the guns could fire themselves!

Anyone in the organisation who had contact with the Party base during this period knows that from every part of the country, particularly from the southern areas, news was coming of a situation that was worsening from day to day and there were enormous opportunities for the Party's activity to take on a perspective of an imminent revolutionary class solution. But no-one had the insight or courage to recognise that a crisis of such severity demanded that the Party live up to the situation and act in concert with the Italian masses.

Eventually it was decided that the parliamentary group would re-enter the parliamentary chamber with another "original" tactic: that of sending Repossi¹² to read out a quite provocative, demagogic-style statement, even though the authors of the document knew very well that in such a situation it would be madness to assume responsibility for a second Matteotti episode. When the Party raised the call for a general strike in the midst of polemics with the CGIL, with the Aventine secessionists and in particular with the Socialist Party, it was obvious that failure was inevitable.

Gramsci and the United Front Policy

Thus the much vaunted tactic of the united front from below came under threat. The tens of thousands of workers who remained in the traditional trade unions and their associated political party (the PSI), were generally unwilling to accept invitations to direct action from another organisation until it was obvious that these bodies had openly acted against workers' class interests and were fundamentally at odds with the final objectives of their struggle. Yet no work had been done to convince, no deeper analysis had been seriously undertaken by the Communist Party amongst the mass of the union membership and the most politicised workers of the Socialist Party. Above all, no slogan had been launched to spell out the true face of the crisis that had practically frozen the regime into a

state of impotence. This, at a time when the regime would have found it difficult to mobilise its own armed forces if there had been any scheme for an armed assault somewhere in the country.

Situations like this do not get very far on the back of agreements made from on high, as is typical of the united front policy. The grassroots should be equipped to respond promptly with clarity of purpose, regardless of solely numerical calculations, which almost always lead to delays and clip the wings of revolutionary action. With these kind of initiatives made part of revolutionary strategy, the way can open up for broadening the front of the struggle, bringing forward new layers of fighters and sparking new resolve, something that does not enter into the calculation of parliamentary strategists and certain party leaders who await ... for the guns to fire themselves.

Clearly there is a big methodological gulf between the way the very homogeneous Left current in the Party examined the situation and the rather extemporaneous manner, devoid of any serious ideological unity, employed by the current that was forming around Gramsci. Their tactical manoeuvres, devoid of both head and tail, had more theoretical basis in the law of spontaneity than in a consistent Marxist methodology.

In this context the basic problem takes on shape and substance in the different interpretations of how to apply revolutionary strategy to the phenomenon of fascism. Whether, that is, fascism should be considered as an excrescence on capitalism which must be eliminated by making use of all the means that capitalism itself offered, including the political struggle conducted by antifascism as a whole, despite the diversity of its components (Gramsci and company); or, as the Left thought, fascism should be considered as the most reliable ideological-political cover, in the specific Italian situation, for guaranteeing the preservation of capitalism itself, so that to strike out against fascism, to break its structures violently, meant hitting capitalism in the heart and sweeping away its economic and political structures.

Translated into concrete political terms, for Gramsci and company this meant breaking with the fixed and over-rigid formulations of the revolutionary theme of class against class; bending this strategy by employing tactics for short-term and particular ends in the anti-fascist struggle which was part of the wider capitalist experience. Gramsci's theory considered fascism an episode of "*peasant folklore*" to be eradicated as a harmful weed which had accidentally germinated on the ground of capitalism itself. Only thus, together with these little-known aspects which have been deliberately silenced, is it possible to follow the common thread of the politics of the united front: from the inconclusive and contradictory tactic

of approaching the Aventine secessionists and subsequent distancing from them; with the exit from parliament and subsequent return; and finally with the solitary appearance of Repossi to test the ground, devised especially to save the face of a weak and discouraging policy that was bereft even of imagination.

Here Gramsci's tactical line is essentially the same as the approach of Togliatti when he returned to Italy and which still guides the fate of the PCI today. However, there is a huge fundamental difference. Gramsci, who in his capacity as head of the Party had more or less openly and opportunely abandoned the ideological and political role of the Councils, nevertheless came to revive his original perspective alongside the new tactical direction he pressed on the Party. This typically indicated a civilisation based on the Councils which would come into being on the body of capitalist civilisation itself. In any case, even if Gramsci's theoretical arguments were idealist and therefore based on very questionable Marxism, they were in a different league to the aberrant monarchical, national-communist and clerical rubbish that would draw the Party of Livorno into the parliamentary swamp to follow a chimera of the Italian democratic, peaceful, electoral way to socialism.

In this regard, half a century away from the events, it is really time to rediscover a more authentic Gramsci, closer to reality than historiography – or rather the Party hagiography and today's fashionable culture – has so disgracefully distorted, exploiting for their own purposes the emotional and sentimental aspect of his painful human existence.

Eventually Mussolini's speech on 3rd January 1925 signalled the policy of 'de-Matteottisation' and the return to semi-illegality, but the gravity of the situation and of the experience lived through requires critical re-examination. When situations such as the Matteotti crisis lead to an obvious opportunity for the party to develop a revolutionary strategy yet it fails to become part of the rising movement that the crisis brings about, to meet the expectations of the masses and to follow the logic that every deep crisis of society brings with it, a rethink is inevitable. In this case it must be openly acknowledged that the organisation was not up to the task. Instead of being the leading force in a favourable situation, it trailed behind. In the most serious phase of the crisis which befell the fascist regime and threatened capitalism itself, the party's policy ended up being ridiculed.

Meanwhile, the Gramscian leadership was deaf to it all and carried on its work of penetration and conquest of the party apparatus. In fact, those who don't understand or who do not want to act in the fire of struggle, are always masters of political intrigue. The physiognomy of the party during the Matteotti phase and

immediately afterwards hardly changed. The central bodies were increasingly detached from the base, increasingly openly linked to Moscow and the International, while the party's grassroots remained under the ideological and political influence of the Left. Even though the political apparatus was partially paralysed the central Executive continued with the defenestration of some comrades of the Left. All this coincided with the opening of the debate for the Lyons congress.

But even in our case, even in the case of the Italian Left there is something that must be critically reviewed and excluded as an option. You do not leave an organisational base such as the Left, and above all comprising politically solid cadres, at the mercy of events without any direction, with no-one taking organisational responsibility.

Comrade Bordiga, removed from authority by the party leadership, had also practically removed himself from active political life and assumed no official responsibility, not even within his own current.

And so we get to Lyons. Lyons confirmed the "electoral" defeat of the Left, but the Italian Left would have to defend itself. Above all, it had to defend its patrimony of ideas and experience, its organisational base and the distinctive political strength the movement had after Imola and Livorno until 1924.

The Committee of Intesa¹³ was born in this serious situation and with the precise task of saving what was still salvageable of the party of Livorno.

Once Again on Tactics

A chronological account based entirely on abstract formal logic can be very misleading. Such an analysis does not address the real historical process where each split leads to further disintegration but also involves a molecular process of unification where the initial, determining element must be sought in the economic sphere which underlies the tiny shifts in the class struggle.

The whole history of capitalism is a succession of splits, passive revolutions and wars of position; but splits that do not break the institutional ties with the old world and do not set down the material and human conditions to transform it into its opposite, so we remain in the progressive or regressive epoch – depending on our original starting point – firmly inside the framework of preservation of capitalism.

Any split that does not involve a clean break is not only of dubious significance

but on the wider socio-political level it is just a surface ripple which is absorbed into the normality of the movement. Thus, revolutions continue to be passive and wars of position continue as if there were no longer openings for wars of all-out attack. In these terms, and using the same method, Gramsci's study of our Risorgimento provides him with a huge number of references and examples to support his definition of passive revolution: something made all the easier by the scant existence of deep class conflict in that historical period.

The validity of our critique of the so-called passive revolution becomes more relevant and significant when we examine events so recent that we ourselves have intense experience of them. We list them in chronological order. In the early post-war period the occupation of the factories (1920) opened up a vast and powerful deployment of masses of workers in the class struggle which, owing to well-known historical events, remained trapped inside the factories, thus nipping a revolutionary solution in the bud. Hence a war of positions and a passive revolution followed by a return to conservative normality; a split following a process of disintegration rather than aggregation, even if revolutionary elements were gathering around a party, the PSI, which was not revolutionary.

The kidnap and murder of Giacomo Matteotti opened and highlighted the profound crisis that troubled the fascist regime. It was the most dramatic episode and revealed the true nature of the regime, deeply stirring the consciousness of the masses and creating the condition for a split which did not happen at a political level. On the one hand, the regime saw the invincible hatred that the incident generated from all over the country and from all walks of life. This was coupled with a will, albeit repressed, to do away with fascism and its institutions and in fact the regime felt incapable of mobilising its armed militia. On the other, a chaotic anti-fascist party miserably stranded and made to feel like cowards on the Aventine; plus, a Communist Party leadership paralysed by the situation, unable to implement a class strategy and tactics, undecided whether to exit or remain inside the parliament, whether or not to support the anti-parliament, whether or not to pose the issue as a moral question – aimed not so much against the regime as a whole as against the person of Mussolini himself.

There was too much emphasis on what was happening on the parliamentary political scene; too much time spent waiting for the turning point that did not happen and no attention paid to the very acute tensions that were stirring the masses in the poorer areas; a revolt based simply on moral outrage, which in itself could not become political. Our criticism of Gramsci, as the chief executive officer, was that he was passively waiting for some kind of initiative from below. In the torrid atmosphere following Matteotti's assassination, he acted as if it were not

up to the revolutionary party to keep a close eye on the mood of the masses, to evaluate the extent of their real will to fight, even if this was not openly expressed. Yes, there were interregional reports. Yet how many of the warning signs – especially in reports from the hottest areas in the south – were ignored because they were regarded as the product of the harebrained thinking of the Left, if not a complete provocation; because the official who compiled the report did not quite have the odour of Centrist sanctity.

And to think that when he wrote about the *Southern Question* Gramsci himself said that “the south can be defined as a great social disintegration”. Yet, when this great social disintegration entered into a phase of upheaval and the organic bloc of the three hegemonic social strata began to dissolve as a result of the desertion of the intellectuals from the small and middle rural bourgeoisie, surely it was the task of the Gramscian leadership to pay closer attention to this enormous human potential for the class revolution.

In exceptional crisis situations like this, where there is an underlying feeling for complete change, the central problem for revolutionaries is how to get involved and help the latent state unfold, to become real and take on the best possible form to begin the work of change.

It was from this perspective – the need to maintain a class focus and give organisational strength and inspiration – that the Left stressed the need for the axis of the Party’s activity to shift from what was happening between the parliamentary groups to the workers and peasants who were demanding that the Party work with them. By the time it was decided to take the first steps in this direction it was too late: the magic moment when the class enemy was visibly crushed under the weight of an infamous crime of economic-political bankruptcy, which left it isolated and almost completely defenceless, had objectively passed.

Whereas the original Party tactic involved the more or less uncertain expectation of immediate solutions, the new tactic aimed to regain contact with the masses in the large industrial complexes by using fellow deputies who were covered, so to speak, by parliamentary immunity. This writer had the task and pleasure of acting as a guinea pig, embarking on a series of flying meetings that, to be honest, did not have, and indeed could not have had, the merit of preparation in proportion to the risk that everyone was taking. The guinea pig experiment worked very well: an improvised rally in Piazza Mastai, in the densely populated district of Trastevere in the heart of Rome, at the workers’ exit of the *Manifattura*

Tabacchi [Tobacco Manufacturer], in front of a more amazed than frightened audience, the speaker examined the crisis of the regime and the necessity for a class revival, which got signs of agreement, especially when he declared that he had spoken as a representative of the Communist Party. The ice of fear, and above all of mistrust, became so broken that the workers – men and women – could once again start to look at their Party with the hope of a revival. In reality, at that moment it was fascism which, after the danger, was able to reorganise its forces.

From passively doing nothing in the hope that everything would be solved by a sudden and providential policy of reprisal by the Crown, the Party passed to the most reckless and irresponsible activism, leaving comrades without a minimum of protection or personal defence, perhaps hoping that, as deputies, they would be protected against any injury; at this point, after Matteotti!

The fact is, however, that the comrades who were appointed to this mission undertook it with a profound sense of duty. The risk faced was a risk taken by the whole Party, so it became a necessity for everyone.

Among the various episodes that are worth remembering: the rally in front of the Marelli works in Sesto San Giovanni (Milan), which ended with a violent provocation by fascist squads and the subsequent skirmish with quite a lot wounded on both sides; the imposing rally held outside the workers' exit at Fiat Diatto, in Turin, where the speaker was interrupted by a fascist firing a revolver which seriously injured one of the workers at the rally; a crowded meeting outside a large textile complex in the Biella area (Piedmont) was going as normal when word got out that a truckload of fascists – who had been alerted by the plant management – was on its way. The fact that the comrade who held the rally was able to return to Biella to speak was entirely due to the initiative and big heart of a very young comrade who was willing to rescue him and take him back on the same day, along the route already travelled by the fascist squads who'd been unleashed to search out the 'disruptive elements' who had dared to defy the authorities and upset the 'quiet' politics which had been imposed on the city.

In a similar way, flying rallies occurred almost everywhere outside the factories, with speakers all aiming to re-open the class dialogue with the workers. Then as always under capitalism, theirs was really the only valid voice insofar as they were articulating the demands of the revolutionary class projected into the more or less distant future.

The recollection of these episodes, and also others of no less significance, raises the question of whether there were viable alternatives to the tactical direction given by the Party's Central Executive. Further, how does Gramsci's thinking at the time he was Party leader square with the Gramsci who later rethinks and, when he is locked in prison, enlarges on the theory which, after all, is not his, of the passive revolution and war of positions?

The question requires a preliminary clarification on how to define fascism, its real nature and its role as the driving force of a twenty-year experience.

Here, the striking thing is the ostentatious nonchalance and extremely superficial way the phenomenon is presented by the leading exponents of the Party. For example, while he was in Moscow for the "Enlarged Executive", Bordiga believed that an attempt to march on Rome by the black shirts was impossible, just when this march was in full swing. Gramsci came out with the declaration that "completely episodic and village folklore", was now facing the problem of "Caesarism in history".

There may be, he wrote, a progressive Caesarism and a regressive [...] Caesarism is progressive when its intervention helps the progressive force to triumph [...], it is regressive when its intervention helps the regressive force to triumph [...] Caesar and Napoleon I are examples of progressive Caesarism. Napoleon III and Bismarck of regressive Caesarism.

And Mussolini, where to place him? Gramsci gives an indication but it is disappointing and at the same time surprising. In fact, he writes:

Thus in Italy in October 1922, until the rift in the Popolari⁴ and then gradually until January 3, 1925 and again until November 8, 1926, there was a political-historical movement in which different degrees of Caesarism succeeded one another until [it reached] a purer and more permanent form, even if it is not immobile and static.¹³

But, we ask ourselves, are we going forward or backwards? It's a mystery!

Notes

1. Giacomo Matteotti, social democrat politician, on the Right of the PSI. Along with Filippo Turati, founded the Unitary Socialist Party in November 1922 after the Right were expelled from the PSI as part of Serrati and the Comintern's manoeuvres to redress the Livorno split (now deemed 'too far to the Left') by overseeing the 'fusion' of the PSI with the PCd'I and the International. On 30 May 1924, he spoke up in Parliament against the fraud and violence used by the Fascists in the recent

elections. He disappeared on 10 June and his body was found in a grave outside Rome on 18 August. Everyone knew that he'd been kidnapped and killed by a Fascist hit-squad and the ensuing political crisis – including widespread working class strikes and protests – almost dethroned Mussolini.

2. Montecitorio, the baroque palace which houses the Italian Chamber of Deputies, or parliament, in Rome.

3. From Gramsci's Report to the Central Committee, August 1924.

4. *ibid.*

5. By the time of the 3rd Congress the PCd'I was outlawed in Italy. The Congress, which was packed with followers of the Executive's 'party line' was held in Lyons, France from 21-26 January 1926.

6. This passage appeared as an article in *Prometeo* 9, Series 3, 1967 and was re-published in *Battaglia Comunista* nos. 3,4,5, 1980; also under the title *Observations on Togliatti* in the issue of *l'Unita*, quoted above.

7. In other words, by the Russian-dominated Comintern. See the Preface to the CWO pamphlet, Platform of the Committee of Intesa 1925, for more details on how Gramsci et al became the tools for the Comintern's bolshevisation strategy.

8. Mussolini's secret police employed former Milanese *arditi* (Italian assault soldiers from the First World War). They were headed by two loyal followers of Mussolini, Amerigo Dumini and Albino Volpi. (Dumini had been a key organiser of the punitive expeditions of the Florentine Fascists in Tuscany. It was during an interrogation with him that Damen refused his advice to "disappear for the entire period of the electoral campaign...".

9. The withdrawal by some 150 Left and Centre deputies from the Chamber of Deputies in June 1924. The classical allusion is to the hill where Gaius Gracchus led the Roman plebs for their last protest against patrician control in the 2nd century BCE.

10. Grieco had been a close comrade of Bordiga. Part of the Abstentionist Communist fraction, he had helped to draft the splitting statement read out by Bordiga at the Livorno Congress in 1921. Member of the original Party Executive, he was arrested several times in 1922-23 and when released from prison refused to return to a leadership role, in opposition to the policies being imposed by Moscow, in particular the pursuit of accommodation with the PSI. Whilst Bordiga chose to isolate himself in Naples, Grieco remained politically active and, possibly disillusioned by Bordiga's passivity, gradually accepted the Gramscian line the Party was taking. (He presented theses on the agrarian question at the Lyons Congress and was once again elected to the Central Committee.)

11. Ezio Riboldi, Socialist Party member at the Livorno Congress but although a 'Maximalist' did not join the Communist fraction. Member of the Terzini, became a PCd'I deputy in 1924 when Serrati finally took the Third Internationalist fraction of the PSI into the Communist Party. Arrested in November 1926, he was eventually pardoned by the regime in 1933, apparently on the request of his wife, an event

which led to his expulsion from the PCd'I.

12. Luigi Reossi, member of the PSI's intransigent revolutionary fraction prior to the Livorno split; took a leading role in the workers' movement in Milan during the Red Two Years; elected onto the Executive Committee of the PCd'I at Livorno, went on to join the Committee of Intesa. (See below).

13. Committee of Intesa. Difficult to translate: the concept is of a getting-together of those who are aware, who understand what is going on. See also footnote 7.

14. Partito Popolare Italiano, the Italian People's Party, forerunner of the post-war Christian Democratic Party. Founded with the backing of the Pope in 1919 by Luigi Sturzo a Catholic priest. The idea was to split the vote for the PSI. The PPI itself crumbled after some of its members joined Mussolini's first government in 1922 and went on to join the Fascists.

15. Gramsci, *Notes on Machiavelli*, loc. cit.

The Committee of Intesa Raises the Alarm

History Reduced to Farce

It appears that the PCI has got its sizeable publishing company – the *People's Calendar (Calendario del Popolo)* – to recruit the most servile lovers of history it could find to work on a most excellent weekly comic entitled *Communists in Italian History*.

The hallmark of the PCI stable which trains these intellectuals who grew up under fascism or in its shadow, is to draft a document which:

a) is hagiographic, i.e. restricted to major PCI gurus such as Gramsci, Togliatti and some underling with no real political experience or learning beyond being a useful political body who has not fallen into disgrace;

b) is either completely silent about the criticisms made by people who were in opposition at the time; or,

c) for matters which it is almost impossible not to mention in any historical reconstruction, ridicules the whole matter and everyone involved.

This is exactly what happened with the Committee of Intesa whose history involves this writer.

When – in the middle of a deep crisis – the group in charge of the left wing of the Communist Party of Italy openly raised political criticisms and initiated a practical response, its significance went far beyond the immediate Italian experience and extended to the whole array of communist parties, right up to the top of the International.

Absurdly, the first to respond to the Committee of Intesa's initiatives were precisely those at the top of the Party. We list them here for the sake of the history of this period which has to be written without the support of big publishing houses such as those of the PCI.

The first to make contact with the secretariat of the Committee of Intesa was Secchia¹ on behalf of the Biella federation, habitually in the van of the left wing in Piedmont. Luigi Longo brought the solidarity of the Youth Federation and its organisers to the comrades of the Committee of Intesa; then Dozza, Grieco and with them the interregional federations of the principle economic zones in both

the North and the South.

Evidently, whoever compiled the PCI's reconstruction has no direct knowledge and has not bothered to check out the facts, either by consulting the documents or interviewing anyone who took part in the actual political event. So there is silence about the only serious political response, the one based firmly on a precise Marxist approach to the "moral question" of Matteotti's murder which the Aventine opposition wanted to use to get rid of Mussolini. This statement, read out in parliament by Grieco, not only was not in line with the slippery, contradictory and frighteningly weak politics of the Gramsci-Togliatti Party Executive, but had even been compiled in Bordiga's house in Naples. Even though Bordiga himself was absent,² his presence was always felt by a leadership which proved inept and helpless in the face of events much larger than the two major players who were already beset by mutual distrust.

This helps to explain the deliberate omission. So, we come to Bordiga's role in the Committee of Intesa which the historian (so to speak) of *The People's Calendar* explains in these terms:

As soon as Gramsci announced the convocation of the III Congress, the "Leftists" pulled the strings of their underground network and on June 1, 1925 set up a "Committee of Intesa" in which Bordiga, for the time being, considered it prudent not to appear even if it was he who suggested the manoeuvre. The Committee of Intesa was formed by three parliamentary deputies: Onorato Damen, Bruno Fortichiari and Luigi Repossi and then joined by Carlo Venegoni, Mario Lanfranchi, Fausto Gullo and Ottorino Perrone.

The truth is very different.

a) Ever since his exclusion from the Party Executive Bordiga had made no personal initiatives under the name of the "Left" so what was written and done in that period must be considered a collective expression of the "Left" as a whole.

b) The Committee of Intesa was set up in Milan on the initiative of a small group of comrades of the Left outside and without Bordiga. Even though comrade Bordiga would go on to draft most of the documents published and disseminated in the name of the Committee of Intesa, it was an initiative which he only associated with after it was formed and without too much enthusiasm.

c) The so-called "Bordiga tour" of the major sections throughout the country aimed at strengthening the old ties was a complete invention for provocative purposes. *"The goal" – comments the historian – was the same as in 1918: to form a fraction which once again would allow him to start to conquer the party leadership.*

Evidently, the bogus journey was to serve as a pretext for the phantom

“fraction” which disturbed the sleepless nights of the men on the Party’s new Central Committee. The truth is that Bordiga at that time was in such low spirits that he would not have moved from Naples even if a bomb had dropped.

The first, true conference of the “Left” was held in Naples, attended by the most experienced organisers of the Party. And again, with regard to the fraction and the poisonous fangs of Stalinist centrism, it was the Party bureaucrats who proposed the use of Party funds – which they administered – for the Committee of Intesa so that it could be used for their own purposes, a proposal that was rejected by comrades Damen and Bordiga with the statement that the funds must remain where they were. The official task assigned to the Committee of Intesa was simply to liaise with the Left current as a whole so that a suitable reminder of the principles of the Left could be made during the pre-Congressional campaign.³ Hardly anyone knows that immediately after the Naples meeting Gramsci summoned the party officials who had attended and presented them with a typical administrative ultimatum: either you carry out and defend the politics of the Party that pays you or you will be fired. And on the basis of this age-old but very effective trade-off, there was the subsequent shameful capitulation of everyone, we say everyone, as if the militancy of revolutionaries in their class party had suddenly become a commodity to haggle over.

The personal lives of these comrades who broke with the Left for fear of administrative measures shows how they assumed they had the right to benefit personally from belonging to the party apparatus.

For his part, the mild-mannered Gramsci had become – following Guicciardini – a sort of salesman loyal to the interests of the business and to the prestige of its brand name.⁴ Nevertheless, it is the standpoint of the Committee of Intesa which remains valid today. This perspective recognises bolshevisation and the politics of the International as the beginning of the process of structural, ideological and political degeneration of the Communist Party of Italy which was now in thrall to Stalinism and to the shifting course of the Soviet state.

Notes

1. Pietro Secchia, 1903-73. Joined the PCd’I at Livorno. After initially aligning himself with the Left prior to the Third Congress (Lyons) he succumbed to party ‘discipline’ and rose to the Central Committee by 1928. For a short time, in 1930 he was leader of the Party’s underground network until his arrest in 1931. Released in August 1943, he went to Milan and, as ‘political commissar’ helped organise anti-fascist partisans, which drew many would-be communist fighters away from working class internationalism and onto the ground of Italian nationalism (suitably democratised). Much of the kudos of the post-war ‘Italian Communist Party’ which

allowed it a presence on the parliamentary scene was due to the role its militants had played in the partisans. Despite the political origins of many of its members, the post-war PCI had nothing in common with the internationalists of Prometeo and Battaglia Comunista who came together to re-establish an internationalist communist party in Italy in 1943. As for Secchia in the post-war PCI, although vice-Secretary until 1955 and a parliamentary deputy, later Senator, he talked about the importance of working-class mobilisation rather than parliamentary action and came to be regarded as a bit of a Left opponent to Togliatti. (A prolific writer on anti-fascism, national liberation, etc., Italian Wikipedia presents him as “a convinced internationalist”.)

2. Elected to the Executive Committee of the Pcd'I at Livorno, Bordiga remained on it until his arrest in 1923. In June he and the other arrested leaders were replaced on the orders of Moscow. After he was acquitted at a trial in October the same year, he refused to re-join the Executive.

3. The Platform of the Committee of Intesa was published on 7 June, 1925 in *l'Unità* the Party's daily paper founded by Gramsci in February 1924 and published in Milan as the “newspaper of workers and peasants”. The subsequent ‘debate’ with the Left in the newspaper – part of the run-up to the Party's 3rd Congress – became part of the Comintern's policy of bolshevisation, where the Left were depicted as having “anti-Leninist deviations” and being against the “proletarian spirit of the Party”.

4. Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540), aristocratic friend of Machiavelli and fellow-historian; involved in political intrigue in Florence and though supposedly in favour of a republic was closely involved with the Medici and the Papacy, notably in the punishment he meted out after his property was seized by the short-lived Florentine Republic. Amongst his many writings, his *History of Italy* (1490-1534) is credited as showing “the first traces of a critical historical method” (Wikipedia).

DOCUMENTS

The little that has been said of the Committee of Intesa has always been poor. Official historiography in general, and social-democratic histories in particular, generally dismiss the episode as an example of factionism or leftism. All of them portray it as having unrealistic aims and criticise its extreme political infantilism, very harmful to the life of the Party and ineffective in terms of day-to-day political practice. In fact by June 1925 the Third International had already vastly degenerated since the political stance of its Second Congress. At the same time the Gramscian leadership was extremely committed to incorporating its political directives into the body of the Party.

The documents we present here show that the Committee of Intesa was not a simple accident of history, inspired and organised by a handful of incurable “Leftists”, but a responsible attempt to safeguard the entire political legacy of the Party whose revolutionary content was being debased by the new management. It is no accident that the initiative of the Committee of Intesa came at a particularly critical moment marked by the radical change in policy of the Third International, by the ousting of the “Left” from the Party leadership and its replacement – at the behest of the centre in Moscow – with the Centrism of Gramsci and Togliatti, followed by the “Matteotti crisis” and the Aventine secession episode.

A simple reading of the documents, whether those of the Secretariat or of the opposition, shows how the appearance of the Committee of Intesa was not just an annoying political outburst which got in the way of Moscow’s plans and their pedestrian implementation by the Italian leadership. On the contrary, this was the most serious attempt to oppose the “tactical” degeneration of the Communist International, and thus the whole international communist movement. Subsequent history only confirms and increases the significance of these documents.

Against factional splintering for the unity of the Communist Party of Italy (Section of the Communist International)¹

Communique of the Executive Committee

For some time now the Executive Committee has been aware of a certain factional activity which has arisen inside the ranks of the Party on the part of some elements who are impervious to revolutionary consciousness and to international discipline and who like to define themselves as “left” or better still, as the “Italian Left”. The EC knew about this, was monitoring and keeping watch: It has previously condemned this situation to the whole party membership — before the recent meeting of the Enlarged Executive of the International in Moscow — a situation which has come about as a consequence of the disguised factionalism of comrade Amadeo Bordiga after the Vth World Congress. At that time the mass of the party reacted energetically against the disintegrators but the warning was not understood by those for whom the bloody experience of these years of fascist reaction mean nothing: They still believe in reviving the period of “1920”; they have retained the organisational conceptions of social democracy; they maintain that the working class and our party — which is the vanguard of the class and which is struggling daily against the government’s fascism and the semi-fascism of the opposition parties — should allow itself to be distracted by their activity in order to follow them in their miserable and criminal factional and splitting manoeuvres against the International.

The documents which the EC believes it has to communicate to the mass of the party are themselves clear enough. A group has been formed inside the party which regards the period of preparation and discussion prior to the Congress as a kind of parenthesis in the revolutionary struggle:- disciplinary constraints should be loosened or directly abolished; the iron unity of the organisation should disintegrate into a whole series of factions according to whatever number of currents are discussing inside the party and in step with the likely presence of agents provocateur of the government who would be pleased to see them created. The Central Committee which represents this unity should be reduced to an administrative office which registers and catalogues the opinions, proposals and initiatives of the various committees of the various factions.

This mode of thought is a sequel to the deviations which have to be fought against with the greatest energy. If it turns into action, if it tries to become a concrete faction, if it develops into illegal and conspiratorial activity inside the party, then it becomes a crime against the party, against the proletariat, against the revolution. Whatever the reason, disruptions to the iron will of

the party, to the absolute discipline and loyalty of all the membership to the responsible party bodies, cannot be tolerated. Does this mean that there is no freedom to discuss before the Congress, that all the comrades are deprived of the means and opportunity to express their opinions and contribute to the life and administration of their party? Certainly not. They can develop themselves through the debates inside the party and measure themselves against the currents of opinion which they will find in the federal Congresses and in the National Congress. What they cannot do is form organised factions which have open or secret committees to direct them, which work to permanently split the ranks of the party, which counter-pose their directives to the directives of the CC and of the International, their discipline to the discipline of the party of the International, in order to create an irresponsible masonry against the Italian CC and against the International Executive.

The vast majority of party members have already understood that the iron unity of the organisation is a necessary presupposition for the very existence of the party and for its revolutionary efficacy. They have already reacted and will react even more energetically against all the manoeuvres of the various groups and grouplets comprising irresponsible elements who are demoralised by the objective difficulty of the Italian situation and who have lost all sense of political direction, believing that everything can be resolved by extremist postures and phrases. That such is the situation in the party is demonstrated by the fact that all the factional documents have come into the hands of the Centrale, that the Centrale has been informed of the meetings which have been held in several cities, that numerous comrades — even though they claim to belong to the so-called ‘Italian Left’ — have recently refused to make common cause with the wreckers.

By far the majority of the party supports the EC for the most thorough struggle against whoever in 1925 wants to repeat the manoeuvres against the Communist International that were made by the maximalists in 1920 after the occupation of the factories and which at the Livorno split carried the majority of revolutionary workers outside the ranks of the Communist International.

Starting from these considerations the EC has unanimously concluded that the members of the Committee of Intesa, comrades Damen, Repossi, Lanfranchi, Venegoni, Fortichiari, are responsible for an attempt against the party which could be punished by their expulsion and has decided to refer them to the judgement of the next session of the Central Committee, in the meantime suspending them from all organisational work or responsibilities.

The Executive Committee

(undated)

The letter below, by a group of comrades who are informing the Executive Committee of their proposals, does not appear to be anything out of the ordinary but it acquires meaning and value in the light of the two other documents which follow. Even if their proposals on organisation here were contrary to the general directives of the International it was nevertheless legitimate for them to raise the issues, regardless of the fact that if they were not accepted they would be left to fall into oblivion.

To the EC of the Communist Party of Italy

1st June 1925

Dear comrades

Among the deliberations of the Central Committee's last meeting which were published in the party organ, *L'Unità*, on 26th May, are the preparations for an event of major importance inside the party, the congress. It is said that this will be held shortly, i.e. after a deep and thorough discussion which, however, is to be considered practically open however necessary it is for all the documents relating to the work of the last session of the Enlarged Executive Committee to be published beforehand.

It is superfluous to declare how genuinely the necessity for a serious and wide pre-congress debate is being felt. The situation inside the party — which you yourselves recognise is one of continuing ideological confusion — where, despite everything, fairly wide layers of the party are affected, demonstrates the complete urgency for this.

But, dear comrades, will there be this process of clarification in the interest of the party as a whole if comrades from the various currents of thought are in no position to actively participate and do not have equal conditions of debate, whether verbally or in the press?

In this regard, the responsible bodies will undoubtedly have taken account of the exceptional and precarious life of our press. Will a brief campaign of clarification actually be permitted, and up to what point? In our view the columns of the daily paper, *L'Unità*, should be opened for the discussion.

On the other hand, what can a congress which is aiming at bolshevisation be worth if is attended by delegates from the various federations where there has been no previous discussion, of a serious and

informed nature, with the recognised representatives of the various currents about the “fundamental problems of national life on which basis the general programme of the party must be drawn”?

We believe there would be no value, at least if the links of formal discipline amongst the comrades are valued less than the links of so-called conviction.

The undersigned comrades who are sending you this are linked together by their identical views and their critical appreciation of the most pressing problems facing the party. They think that the various ideological confusions will only be overcome through unrestricted debate without any sort of interference. Towards this aim they propose:

a) that, given the lack of preparation of the mass of the party and the importance of the questions, the discussion must be given as much time as required;

b) that the provincial congresses are given the means to speak against the acknowledged comrades of the various tendencies.

c) that the respective federal congresses nominate delegates for the Party Congress;

d) that in the case of other systems of nomination being used, anyone eventually called to serve on committees should be able to choose to sit with adherents of the various currents;

e) that, finally, the right to name and to discipline the speakers who are voicing the opinions of this or that current be recognised.

It is obvious that the amount of work required to prepare for the Congress requires active participation and discipline from everybody.

The undersigned comrades are therefore bringing to the attention of the comrades of the Executive Committee that a ‘Committee of Intesa’ has been constituted amongst the elements of the left.

Signed:

Onorato Damen, Luigi Repossi, Mario Lanfranchi, Carlo Venegoni, Mario Manfredi, Bruno Fortichiari.

To Comrade X

22nd May 1925

Dear Comrade

Comrade Y passed us your address which we are using to launch this Committee with the comrades of [...] and the province. Let us know if your present address can still be used by us or if it needs to be changed.

And here are the actual reasons: the Party Congress, which is due to be held shortly, prompts us to make an organisational and propagandist effort which, in essence, goes beyond the fact of the Congress itself and aims to create a sort of community of spirit between the comrades of the Left throughout the party as a whole, one that is capable of developing an independent critical course, which is necessary at this moment in the life of our party.

We hereby enclose a copy of the personal and secret circular distributed by this Committee of Intesa, from which you will learn in detail the reasons outlined above and the need to start the serious and effective work of connecting up with all the discussions, groups, cells, etc., etc., of your province, choosing the most trusted and politically most experienced comrades in our current of thought.

It would be good if you could get here to Milan to discuss with the comrades in charge of this work. You will also be asked about this by Comrade Y, who will write to you today. If you decide to come to Milan, please notify us of the day so that we can organise and notify you of the time and place.

Our provisional address is [...]

Communist greetings.

Circular No.1
(personal)

April 1925

Dear Comrade

When the comrades currently leading the Party keep repeating that the bulk of the membership now supports the tactics of the International and seriously holds to the thinking and the method of the leaders, it must mean they are convinced that the Italian Left of the Communist Party is nothing but a group of more or less numerous intellectuals incapable of nothing beyond adopting an abstract doctrinaire intransigence.

Similarly, the leading comrades of the International play on this form of mental narrowness and pretend to ignore the existence of an Italian Left when they aim to target Comrade Bordiga. In the recent meeting of the Enlarged Executive,² Comrade Zinoviev's considered opinion was that comrade Bordiga had definitely gone over to the far Right. When we begin to restrict the necessary and inevitable debate between different currents of thought and the activity of some of the most well-known members of the International itself, we have the right to ask ourselves whether partisan passion is already so strong that level-headed judgment and common sense have been lost.

It is in this situation and with this state of mind, both nationally and internationally, that the convening of the National Congress of the Party is being proposed. The comrades of the Left are called upon to defend, with all the energy that distinguishes the old communist fighters, the ideas and thinking, the tactics and a whole tradition of revolutionary capacity and struggle. We must get ready to demonstrate once again how it is incorrect and opportunist to pretend to ignore the existence of an entire, very substantial, current in the communist movement of our country by **restricting the struggle to the single target of "Bordiga"**.

While fully sympathetic to comrade Bordiga, the Italian Left must be able to demonstrate how any attempt at dissolution or divergence is in vain and, on the other hand, that the ideas and tactical legacy of the Italian Left are the logical outcome of the extensive historical experience of the international revolutionary movement as a whole. We believe it is time to speak clearly to the comrades.

Likewise, the political situation in the country demands that the comrades of the Left **immediately take up a critical stance that fully invests the very activity of our party and reflects the theoretical position behind it.**

To this end, a group of tried and tested comrades who have come together in the “Committee of Intesa” undertakes not only to keep the comrades on the periphery informed, but ***as quickly as possible to establish a wide-enough network to make this work unified and homogeneous.*** We therefore recommend that comrades who have party positions and comrades in general from the various centres to immediately contact the “Committee of Intesa” and to provide us as soon as possible with secure addresses for the delivery of correspondence.

The present circular is strictly reserved for the comrades to whom it is addressed: we reserve the right to send a second circular to indicate to the comrades how the propaganda and the work of preparation for the Congress should be organised.

Fraternal greetings.



Communique of the Executive Committee (undated)

The party will vigorously fight against any return to social democratic conceptions of organisation

When, after the 5th Congress of the Communist International, the party C.C. stated that the attitude taken by the comrades of the extreme left towards the decisions of that Congress – particularly their refusal to be part of the governing bodies of the party, not only of the Executive Committee but even of the Central Committee, within which it would always be possible to explain one's political responsibility on the general questions and on each political problem in particular – was essentially factional in its conception and in the political method underlying this attitude, as well as in terms of its practical consequences, many comrades of the extreme left responded by sharply denying this judgment, even protesting against such statements which they said had been made purely for polemical purposes.

And when, in the Congresses convened by the federations after the 5th World Congress, the Party C.C. posed this question and affirmed the need for members of the extreme left tendency to join the CC, the overwhelming majority of the party agreed to this solution, some comrades reacted violently, defining this proposal as a provocation and an act of hostility.

Now we find the names of those who spoke a few months ago, in the so-called “Committee of Intesa” which is nothing other, as is clear from the documents we publish here, than the Central Committee of a fraction which is secretly trying to create and organise within the party. After “verbally” rejecting this a few months ago, today, as we said, they confirm our statements with the “facts”.

For the sake of truth and accuracy we must also say that some comrades, although they agreed at first with the position taken by the extreme left, without doubt because they did not clearly see its content and political meaning, today are clearly against such an unhealthy initiative and every attempt to diminish the ideological discussion that is about to begin in the party and which we all consider useful and necessary, in an extremely harmful and dangerous factional struggle.

The facts that we are documenting here are of such gravity that they demand the most severe attention of all the comrades. We have never seen in our party the most daring flouting of the most basic rules of organisation and discipline of a Communist Party. We must look at reality in the face and not be afraid to call things by their real name: the initiative of the “Committee of Intesa” carries within it the germ of a split in the party. Just read the documents and the

“secret” circular that this committee has illegally sent to some of its trustees in our organisation to be convinced of this.

All comrades must react with the utmost energy to this attack on the unity and structure of our party. At a time when the reaction against our movement worsens, the dangers increase and the situation is increasingly fraught with threats, any attempt to compromise and weaken the internal cohesion and organisational solidarity of the revolutionary vanguard organised in the Communist Party is a criminal act which deserves the most severe sanctions and the most severe blame. We are sure that every factional attempt is doomed to failure; the germs of factional infection, which here and there tend to provide manifestation of life, will be inexorably crushed and eliminated. The party organism is healthy and vigorous and will be able to resist excellently.

Beyond any psychological reaction and every cry of indignation, which rise spontaneously in the conscience of every revolutionary militant who has not lost the sense of duty imposed by revolutionary militancy; we must put this question on the ideological ground in order to discover and make clear the error of principle from which it derives. All the comrades will have to realise the practical errors and aberrations which can be reached by starting from theoretically flawed and largely erroneous conceptions. Anyone who puts themselves on the same road as the members of the self-styled “Committee of Intesa”, goes straight out of the Party and of the Communist International. And to put oneself outside the Party and the International means to stand against the Party and the Communist International, that means strengthening the elements of the counter-revolution.

It is good to speak clearly to avoid creating illusions.

Regarding the documents that we publish here, it will be necessary to talk about them again. They deserve a close examination, both for what they say and for the double game that they reveal in the action of the members of the Committee of Intesa, from some of whom, at least, we expected more loyalty and a greater sense of responsibility. And it will also be necessary to shed light on the manoeuvre that is hidden in the absence of the name of Comrade Bordiga, with whom the initiative of the “Committee of Intesa” is certainly agreed. It is painful to have to make such observations when amongst the signatories we find the name of comrades who were with us amid the founders of the party and fought and worked for it.

But reality is what it is, and any weakness at this moment would be serious fault. The interests of the party, for which we must be ready at every moment to face every sacrifice, must be put above all else. Friendships, personal bonds and the most tenacious and deepest bonds of affection cannot and must not limit the duty that the revolutionary militia imposes on us. If we did not have

the strength to do this, we would not be militant revolutionaries and we would therefore have a duty to stand aside.

All comrades must make this rule their own. We say this because up to now sentimentality has had too much influence in our party. This is a weakness from which we must know how to recover, if we really want to bring our party up to a true Bolshevik Party.

Notes

1. The first two documents here were originally published by the CWO alongside our translation of the Platform of the Committee of Intesa 1925. See our pamphlet of that name which gives more on the background to this period.
2. The "Italian Question" was discussed by a special committee of the Communist International in June 1922. See Appendix B of our pamphlet on the Committee of Intesa, The Italian Question... (wrongly titled at the 2nd Congress!) for documents in English.

The Platform of the Committee of Intesa

A. Party and Mass

It is mistaken to think that in every situation expedients and tactical manoeuvres can widen the Party base since relations between the Party and the masses depend in large part on the objective situation.

The disagreement between the left and other currents stems from our view that changes in the objective situation should neither affect the party's fundamental programme nor its tactics and modus operandi. For us the party's influence over the masses depends on a sharpening revolutionary situation and the extent to which it has remained true to its revolutionary task, firmly maintaining its organisational postulates and tactics. The other currents apparently consider the problem of conquering the "masses" as a problem of will. However, little by little they are adapting themselves to circumstances and are essentially lapsing into opportunism. They are deforming the very nature and function of the party to the point where it is incapable of conquering the masses and unfit for its supreme task.

One of the points set against our tactical concerns is that we in our turn alienate ourselves from the masses, neglecting them out of principle, and ignoring the real situation for the pleasure of maintaining our intransigence intact. But this is only the appearance. In reality we are the only ones who are taking account of concrete circumstances in the revolutionary sense because we are incorporating the work of the moment into the general action plan of the party so that it develops with the dialectical unfolding of the situation.

B. The Party's Organisational Practice

The party is the body which unifies the outbursts of individuals and groups provoked by the class struggle. As such, party organisations must be able to put themselves above particular categories and synthesise the various elements emanating from the disparate categories of the proletariat, the peasantry, deserters from the bourgeois class, etc.

For the other tendencies the model form of party organisation is the cell. They think this has already resolved the revolutionary problem of tactics by the fact that it means having the organisational base of the party in the factory, that is amongst the workers. We should remember that this is precisely the form

adopted by counter-revolutionary organisations (unions, Labour Party) where the division of the working class into professional groups results in a loss of vision of the class' final goal. It is therefore mistaken to believe that organisation on a territorial basis is appropriate for electoralist parties, while the cell system is the cornerstone of a correct revolutionary tactic.

In the West it is simply not enough to go back to Russian organisational experience. Neither is it useful because in Russia from 1905 to 1917 capitalism was just beginning whilst the Tsarist terror was well developed and in full reign. Hence the party's organisational apparatus, comprising factory groups and the ranks or' functionaries (professional revolutionaries), responded to the objective conditions of capitalism's initial development and likewise to the concentration of the proletariat in a few industrial centres where it was necessary for the masses to take union action though they still lacked strong enough bodies for this. On the other hand counter-revolutionary deviations were avoided because the work of the cells even when it was for immediate demands posed the general problem of revolution since not only were peaceful and partial victories impossible but the very rigour of Tsarist reaction ensured that only a certain sort of leader was selected. Ultimately the Tsarist police left a lot more room for activity inside the factories than outside. However, in countries where there is not the same sort of exceptional situation as in Russia from 1905 to 1917, the cell system easily lends itself to the dictatorship of bureaucratic officialdom whose counter-revolutionary deviations are brilliantly demonstrated by the experience of the social democratic parties.

For us the cell system equals a federative system which is the negation of Communist Party and by 'centralisation' we mean the maximum strengthening of the revolutionary energies of the periphery¹ as coordinated and reflected in the executive apparatus.

Similarly, the question of discipline should be posed in terms of channelling and utilising emerging elements which the organisation must be able to harmonise together. In such cases new experiences become the patrimony of the party which is interpreting and assimilating them, not a discovery of a few officials imposed on an inert party with explanations which have more than once proved mistaken. Disciplinary sanctions are for the suppression of isolated instances, not for a general clamp down on the whole party. They must therefore be reserved for use against single aberrations.

The appearance and development of fractions indicates a general malaise inside the party. Fractions are a symptom of the failure of key party functions to meet the party's wider purpose. They are being identified as the root of the trouble and are being fought against in order to get rid of it but disciplinary powers are not being used to resolve the situation, even if this would necessarily be formal and provisional.

In general the Left is clear that the only yardstick for eliminating the conditions which give life to fractions is to guarantee a firm but conscious discipline. In fact we have always been opposed to organisational manoeuvres, double party organisations (fusions, fractions in other parties, etc., etc.) because they break the rational continuity of party development and undermine the very rules of the party's existence and operation amongst which is principally that of discipline.

C. Tactical Problems

For the united front and Workers' Government we refer in general to the criticisms of the Left and in particular the Theses on Tactics put forward by the Left at the IVth World Congress which were published in *Lo Stato Operaio* in the first half of 1924 in preparation for the Party's national conference.

The others talk of the united front mainly as a manoeuvre to unmask the non-communist parties. By contrast, we insist on the well-known conception of the Left by which the party, by posing economic and political demands that are common to the whole working class, encourages a tendency to struggle inside the class and attempts to gain the sole leadership of it and not hybrid coalitions with other parties.

On the 'Workers' Government', we reaffirm that this is a synonym for the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' and that it is a so-called agitational slogan. We are against formulating slogans which do not have any real meaning. On the other hand, if what is meant is something different from the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' we oppose it all the more fiercely since this is a sign of the most dangerous parliamentary divergences, if not the direct denial of the elementary principles of revolutionary marxism.

We are equally averse to the policy of open letters and proposals to other parties all of which would have the revolutionary struggle reduced to a manoeuvre amongst leaders. With the inertia of the masses as an alibi, they divert the struggle from the real target, ignore its difficulties and reduce it to a sterile and ridiculous tactic.

D. Union Questions

We reaffirm our acceptance of the theses of the IIInd Congress of the Communist International. Our opposition to splitting with the unions is the necessity for the party to have a permanent network inside the trades unions which will be transformed into a leading union body when the situation inevitably drives the masses towards us. However, we are not in favour of the present manoeuvres to fuse the two trades union Internationals: Since the International

had already resolved the problem of the necessity to concentrate the strength of communist trade unions into a single centre by creating the Red Trade Union International (as opposed to a trade union section of the CI) we do not see the revolutionary reasoning behind such a radical revision of tactic. Since we repeat, Amsterdam operates as an agency of the bourgeoisie, as has also been shown recently over the Dawes Plan. Since, still under the pretext of strengthening the Amsterdam left — a physiological necessity for preserving the activity and life of the International itself — the Red Trade Union International is being effectively liquidated. Nevertheless, although we are opposed to the organisational fusion of the two Internationals, we are in favour of united front action over concrete issues taken up by both Internationals which emanate from below.

E. The National and Agrarian Questions

We reaffirm our full approval of the theses put forward by Lenin at the IInd Congress of the Communist International, despite having some reservations on the practical application of them in many cases.

F. The Trotsky Question

We reject the way the question is being posed by the CI and by our Party Centrale. The question raised in the preface of 1917 applies to the behaviour of the various groups of the Russian Communist Party in October 1917 and to the CI's criteria for formulating policy, above all during events in Germany and Bulgaria, and not to problems of the permanent revolution, the role of the peasantry, etc. etc. The first point of supreme revolutionary importance has been side stepped and the Trotsky question cunningly created as we are reminded of his old disagreement with Lenin and his conduct over these questions before 1917, all of which Trotsky has repudiated and not only in words. The Left is with Lenin's position on the above-mentioned questions, while logically we are delighted by the fact that a revolutionary leader like Trotsky has made important criticisms and taken up a polemical stance with the Italian Left.

For the framing of the Trotsky question and an exhaustive treatment of it we refer to the article by Amadeo Bordiga which ought to be published in the party press.²

G. The New Tactic

The tactic followed by the CI in the German presidential elections (proposal to support Braun) as well as that announced by the German Party, which has provoked the formation of a left tendency inside the German

Communist Party (Rosenberg and a quarter of the party), and in the second ballot of the administrative elections in France (Clichy tactic), is further incontrovertible confirmation of the theoretical positions of the left and our judgement of the so-called left turn at the Vth Congress.³ The Left undertakes to defend the Leninist principle that social democracy is the left-wing of the bourgeoisie not the right-wing of the proletariat. The latter leads to compromises of the most dangerous counter-revolutionary and opportunist kind, that is of electoralism.

The idea that the Communist Parties can agitate for the formation of bourgeois governments of this or that tendency must be denied energetically. This is despite the fact that it is sometimes true that under a social democratic government the party's freedom of action is wider. The bourgeoisie regulates the fundamental questions of power according to its class needs and thus puts its trust in the government which best represents its own defence. For example, the Italian experience teaches that the democratism of the Nitti Government was essentially the best the bourgeoisie could have to defend it, and it was thus that much more reactionary.

H. Assessment of the Communist Party of Italy's Previous Activity

We refer to the theses, motions and articles of the Left for the national conference in May 1924 and published in *Lo Stato Operaio* at the time.

The Left reaffirms the soundness of the path the Central leadership showed the party at the Livorno and Rome Congresses and freely followed up until the general strike of August 1922.

The results of the subsequent policy followed at the behest of the International and those entrusted with the new central leadership —nominated by the Enlarged Executive of June '23 and confirmed at the Vth Congress — have confirmed our opinions and criticisms.

The tactic towards the Maximalist Party led to the difficult fusion with the small Third Internationalist fraction (*terzina*), out of all proportion with the total forces involved and which on balance shows that it would have been more useful to have assimilated them as individual members as proposed by the Left.

The Maximalist Party took advantage of this tactic to slow down its own dissolution under the gaze of the revolutionary masses. This has been all the more effective in so far as today there are signs of a flirtation with a new left of the party itself.

For a variety of reasons the present Central leadership is not up to its leadership tasks. It is always hesitating to act and when it does improvisation is the substitute for a clear and firm directive. Artificial attempts to balance the

fleeting opinions of heterogeneous groups are typical. Thus, in place of convincing initiatives and the firm party management necessary for revolutionary work there is recourse to a sterile and mechanical application of disciplinary procedures.

During the Matteotti crisis the Party hesitated and stepped back because it did not know how to exploit the favourable situation. This would certainly not have allowed the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, but the party could have advanced on to a better position for the autonomous struggle of the working class. During the decisive days it was a gross blunder to join up with the opposition parties and to participate in their parliamentary committee. The distinctive position of the party, the clear contrast between it and the moral and constitutional prejudices of the Aventine secessionists was only realised reluctantly and too late by the Centrale.

As for the subsequent parliamentary tactic, the Centrale was pushed back onto the proper path only by decisive pressure from the periphery and the left. For the same reasons it had chosen to participate in the elections, only making the mistake of substituting the unhappy formula 'proletarian unity' for 'Communist Party' on the electoral list. However, another error was committed with the proposal for the mini-Parliament of the opposition parties. It should have been acting to develop the political autonomy of the proletariat against the bourgeois groups as these were successively unmasked — not by the Communist Party's tactic or its various testing-outs — but by the living experience of recent years. It should also have been emphasising the anti-pacifist, anti-constitutional, anti-democratic, class aspects of any intervention by the third, proletarian factor.

The whole criticism of the opposition, and as often as not the criticism of fascism as well, has been inadequate and shows it owes little to communist ideology.

The Party press and the language used in all its publicity have not lived up to the expectations of the masses. The Party has been inadequate to its revolutionary task and unable to cope with the situations it has come up against. The link between principles and action has been relaxed and once again the effect of the artificial hegemony of a group, the ordinovista, is being felt. The recent origins of this group's political positions are outside of Marxism and have never been rectified by a correct position that went beyond the struggles of the Turin proletariat. Thus there are now many obstacles making the path to revolution more difficult: Instead of the theory and practice of revolutionary class consciousness there is an idealist view of revolution, or an individualist, liberal, literary approach. This latter path cannot be regained by maintaining an orthodoxy towards the Communist International which only involves formal allegiance to its deliberations, nothing more than an occasional and incidental defence that demands nothing substantial or systematic.

The shortcomings of this approach are demonstrated by the abuse of sterile, incomprehensible slogans which fall into the void. For ever anticipating new organisational and “constitutional” forms for the working class to improvise for itself, such slogans would have the class turned into the subject of so-called “campaigns” that disperse and fracture the activity of the party. A slogan is something which is born out of the real relations of social and political forces in struggle. It can only be based on an organisational formula if it relates to organisations which are already well-known to the masses; which have already been historically put to the test in other countries. This preliminary criticism holds for all the proposals about forming Worker and Peasant Committees, Factory Councils, Agitation Committees, etc., etc. These are not to be rejected out of hand but it should be asked, “What exactly are the functions of such organs in relation to the precise needs of the masses as they are roused by events?”. Any idea of replacing existing organs should be rejected, as should any idea of coalitions with other political parties. Given the absence of more vibrant and consistent policy guidelines for the Party, all these campaigns serve not to shift and conquer the masses, but only to weary and disillusion them.

In the metalworkers’ strike the Party let an opportunity slip.⁴ Without threatening trade union unity, it could and should have spoken directly to the proletariat even to the point of assuming and claiming responsibility for the leadership of the struggle. From what evidence there is of other political groupings, this would have been limited to Italy — and certainly not in order to conquer power but as a sign of a more important step in the revival of the proletariat.

All the defects in initiative and activity of the Party Centrale towards the outside world are reflected in the excessive amount of work and interventions it has to carry out inside the Party. From the time of the Vth Congress the Left has taken on the task of working on all fronts of the Party from its various work posts but without participating in the central political leadership, a place reserved for those who are convinced champions of the tactic of the International. We are doing so faithfully, out of loyalty, and not because the Centrale is superior to the periphery. This situation has been denounced by the Centrale which wanted to open an offensive against the Left but disguises its desire to eliminate any influence the Left has over comrades by inviting them to collaborate with the Central leadership.

With the latest circulars, with the unjustified removal of comrades of the Left from local bodies, with the thousand, hardly reputable, methods of internal work which can be defined not as a dictatorship but as Giolittismo,⁵ the Centrale has ceased to function as a Party Centre in order to function as a fraction Committee, and it deserves to be considered as such.

I. The Communist Party's Task in Italy

On the basis of its already-established opinions on general questions, its criticisms of the path currently being taken by the party, and of the action programmes presented at the IVth and Vth Congresses of the International, the Left intends to present a complete programme of party work. The Left is ready to work obediently with the party whatever the programme decided on at the Congress or even imposed — quite legitimately — by the International against the majority of the Italian Congress. The Left would take over inside the party once it was a matter of realising its programme as a whole and when there was a good prospect for its future development. In any event the Left refuses to consider the questions posed by the leading bodies as the central ones, just as it systematically rejects any personalisation of the issue and its reduction to a matter of support or otherwise for individual comrades.

The question of the composition of the Central leadership is subordinate to that of the future programme of action. This in turn is born out of the evaluation of past experience and out of the general question of method. The debate must not be shifted away from this ground by manoeuvres to surprise the comrades who at the moment are being kept in the dark and who, in the vast majority of cases, are only left with the one safe assumption — that the Party is badly led and that a remedy must be found for its mistakes and deficiencies.

Thus the Left firmly believes that a satisfactory solution to the question of the Italian Party is impossible without a solution to international questions. Further, it maintains that the latter are already so serious that, without questioning the right of the International to regulate the affairs of individual parties, a temporary empirical solution to relations between Party and International devised on the basis of compromises between groups and, worse, between individuals, must be recognised as insufficient.

Declaration By the Members of the Committee of Intesa

Whilst intervening in the situation which has arisen inside our party the Presidium of the International has commanded us, on pain of expulsion, to dissolve the Committee of Intesa which it views as the core of a faction within the party.

Even while it announces full liberty to debate in the run-up to the Congress, the Presidium says nothing about the formal accusation of factionalism and sectarianism we have made against the Central leadership of the Italian Party and has made no direct declarations or taken any other measure to eliminate the real cause of the Party's crisis.

This does not surprise us because we have to sadly say that this is another typical application of the methods of leadership of the International which we have already fought and will continue to fight. Simply supporting the viewpoint and actions of the comrades who are part of the leading international organs in Congresses and debates is to claim that every error and every fault in the struggle against the bourgeois adversary has been rectified. Every deficiency, even the most scandalous, is transformed into a hallmark of pure Bolshevik and Leninist revolutionism. Because we are opposed to various points of their policy, the splintering tactics of the Italian central leadership are being concealed by the leaders of the International.

The measures demanded to resolve the party's difficult situation and the internal tensions which have arisen as a result of the unfair campaign organised by the Central leadership against the Committee of Intesa are being reduced to the mechanical formula of a discipline which does not convince and which does not deserve respect. The grave problem of tendencies and factions in the party is a historical consequence of the political tactics adopted by the Centrale and only confirms what we are saying. At the same time this is a symptom of the failure to give any serious consideration to the situation whilst pretending that it can be overcome by intimidations and threats, by subjecting individual comrades to the usual sort of disciplinary pressures and letting them believe that the whole of the party's future development depends on their personal conduct.

According to this method — anti-marxist in substance and sterile in its results — we could, like so many of the treacherous and opportunist elements who manoeuvre on the margins of our glorious International, start negotiating and forming pacts with the central leadership; we could set down conditions and in turn make our own threats and reach a compromise by the same sort of transactions produced by despicable bourgeois parliamentarism. For sometime

now these more or less laborious and difficult agreements with more or less influential big shots and 'political men' have concealed and protracted the serious problems which have arisen in the way the International operates, inevitably exacerbating them and making them more difficult to solve. In our turn we too could threaten to split or to form a new party in the event of expulsions. This so-called communist 'policy' would be a measure of how much redress we could achieve — the more harm we could demonstrate ourselves capable of doing to the party and to the International the more satisfied we might become.

However, we will not act in such a manner. What we mean by discipline is something infinitely different. Just as we have not hesitated to give up the party leadership so the repeated provocations of the Centrale do not move us to construct a dissident little party (partitino) for the satisfaction of a group of sacked leaders. Despite the material constraints we do not forget that above all we are members of the communist party and the International. With a will of iron we are determined to remain so and will never give in to overtures but ceaselessly criticise the kind of methods which we believe are against the interests and the future of our cause.

In the face of a possible breach with the party and following a directive which we consider to be unjust and dangerous for the party, we who are accused of factionalism and splitting tactics will sacrifice our opinions to party unity. This will demonstrate how we of the Italian Left are perhaps the only ones for whom discipline is a serious and non-negotiable matter.

We re-endorse all previous examples of our way of thinking and all our actions. We deny that the Committee of Intesa was a manoeuvre designed to split the party and to build a faction inside it. Again, we protest at the campaign mounted on this basis without giving us the right of defence and which has scandalously deceived the party.

Nevertheless, since the Presidium believes that imposing the dissolution of the Committee of Intesa upon us will be a step towards removing factionalism, even though we think the contrary, we will obey. At the same time, however, we leave the Presidium with the entire responsibility for what happens inside the party and for any demonstrations which arise in response to the way the Centrale has administered internal Party life, demonstrations which the Committee of Intesa was directing and disciplining in a way that was useful for the party and for its future prospects. We believe that the much boasted crushing of the Committee of Intesa will only foment the factionalism that we did not desire and that the party will come with ours despite its vendettas. It is true that we have been confidently assured that all the disciplinary measures taken against comrades belonging to the Committee of Intesa — amongst which are the expulsion of comrade Girone⁶ and a whole series of removals from posts — will be annulled and that there will be absolute freedom of discussion for the Congress.

But freedom of discussion implies discussion with equal means and rights. If there was going to be a serious guarantee of this then the Centrale would have accepted the proposals we made at the time but there has been no further word of that. Federal congresses should not be held before there has been a debate in the press with published theses and motions of the various tendencies. Neither should a loyal representative of the Centrale be sent to the congresses themselves to put forward all the things which have recently been said in the press about the Left without a comrade who is equally familiar with the debate being able to counter this.

Nor should it be permitted to present in the party newspaper, that is in the paper of all the comrades, journalistic articles with declamatory headlines and more or less tendentious comments while we on our part are unable and certainly would not want to do likewise with the writings of other currents. But we are not haggling over these guarantees and even though we have no confidence that they will be granted we are giving up our work of trying to secure them by monitoring and checking, which was the only aim of the Committee of Intesa. The comrades should judge whether these demands were right and defend the party however they can from the employment of methods which we have been obliged to define as Giolittian, in that they tend to falsify the results of any consultations. With this last protest the Committee of Intesa is dissolved. We will desist from every attempt at liaison and distribution of our texts to Party members, as well as from holding meetings independently of those called by party bodies. It goes without saying that this is not to say we are renouncing the basic right of groups of comrades who regard themselves as on the Left to get together for the purely theoretical work of discussion and preparation for the conclusive theses which are destined to appear exclusively in the party press.

Despite the bitterness which has been added by the Centrale we feel obliged to carry the debate to the widest layers of the party and give the comrades a complete idea of the standpoint of the Left on all the various issues without personal insults and gossip. We hope that we will not have to continue indefinitely correcting inaccurate assertions about ourselves and reducing the debate on the Centrale's policies for the Italian situation to an unedifying account of its internal activity. However, if we have to keep on with this, we hope that the boycott of our letters of amendment and protest (which has made us find an alternative way of protesting to the comrades than via the party press) will stop. We have already clearly refused any responsibility for the consequences of continuing to abuse these means of communication.

The comrades will judge our actions. We are not concerned with getting their superficial sympathy or support in order to accumulate votes for the congress but rather to carry the debate and the consciousness of the party a little beyond the sort of superficial attitudes and pettiness which are exploited when

one wants to exert the least effort to get rid of the annoyance of seeing oneself discussed and criticised. If, on the other hand, the continuation of demagogic illusions and manufacture of confusion and bewilderment is preferred this can be done, but do not believe that anything stable will be established. The harm done to the party will remain but the position of groups and grouplets produced by artificial political scheming will not be saved. Such a tawdry scenario is destined to collapse very quickly leaving a clear way open to the dangers of opportunism and degeneration of the party. We would still conduct a relentless struggle against this, without any reservations or constraints, secure in the knowledge that the vast majority of Italian communists will rise as one man should the threat and danger become imminent, sweeping away the pathetic game of those who quibble and distract — not to divide the party but to lead it complete and intact on the way marked out for it.

July 1925

Signed:

A. Bordiga, O. Damen, B. Fortichiari, F. Grossi, U. Girone, La Camera, M. Lanfranchi, M. Manfredi, O. Perrone, L. Repossi, C.Venegoni.

Notes

1. 'Periphery' here is used in the sense of the grassroots or party rank and file.
2. With the publication of Trotsky's 'Lessons of October' in November 1924 (as a preface to his book, 1917) the power struggle within the Russian Party spilled over into the Comintern. Its argument that revolutionary leaders had to be able to judge when a situation was revolutionary (like Lenin in 1917 but not like Zinoviev in Germany in 1923) was Trotsky making a bid to undermine the current leadership and get back into a real position of power. (Zinoviev was leading the Comintern when it followed up the election of a 'workers' government' in Saxony and Thuringia — i.e. a few communists had joined mainly social democratic local governments — with the failed attempt to provoke an insurrection, the so-called German October, in 1923.) Since Trotsky had endorsed all the twists and turns of the united front policies of the Comintern his criticism is not very convincing but it provoked Stalin and Zinoviev to step up their campaign against him. In December Stalin attacked Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, counterposing it with the notion of socialism in one country and 'Trotskyism' was incarnated as the antithesis of 'Leninism'. Initially, though, this was not the main focus of the debate on the 'Trotsky Question' in the International where the controversy tended to hinge round the role of Trotsky prior to his joining the Bolsheviks in 1917. This was what Bordiga focuses on in the article mentioned where he says

that Trotsky's present arguments are not being answered and that "Trotsky must be judged by what he says and what he writes". The article was originally written in February 1925 but was suppressed until it eventually appeared in *L'Unita* in July alongside the text of a speech Scoccimarro had made at the 5th Enlarged Executive meeting of the Comintern in April (which Bordiga refused to attend). Here Scoccimarro argued there was an "ideological affinity" between Bordiga and Trotskyism and basically gave the back-up for the Commission on the Italian Question to pronounce that: "*The National Congress of the PCd'I will have to say whether it approves the policy applied by the Parry Central Committee in accordance with the Communist International after the Vth congress, but at the same time, will also have to choose between Leninism and the tactic of Bordiga.*" Henceforward the heresy of 'Bordigism' would be quite cynically equated with that of 'Trotskyism' by the Comintern and the Italian Party leadership as part of the campaign to undermine the influence of the Left. It was not so easy however, this was just the start of a process to exterminate all trace of what the PCd'I had been at its foundation. As late as 1938 the Central Committee of the Italian party was demanding that "*The Bordigo-Trotskyists must be pitilessly removed and without delay. They must be publicly denounced as enemy agents in a way which will make the masses reject them like the plague. Conciliatory elements who resist breaking off relations with these enemies must be expelled from the party.*" (Quoted in P. Robotti and G. Germanetto, *Trent' anni di lotte dei comunisti Italiani, Rome 1952.*)

3. Bordiga was present at this Congress which now turned to the left after the stupidity of expecting the Social Democrats in the Saxon and Thuringian 'workers' governments' to support an attempted communist insurrection. (In a muddled and contradictory speech Zinoviev now said that "the workers and peasant government slogan is nothing other than a method of agitation, of propaganda and mobilisation of the masses ... a pseudonym for the dictatorship of the proletariat".) Bordiga voiced serious reservations about how the Comintern reached its positions, arguing that it was consistency, not an ad hoc left turn that was needed. ("***At the present conjuncture it is not a deviation to the Left that we are calling for but the general rectification of the International!***") However, although he mooted the possibility of the decision-making bodies of Comintern being moved outside of Russia he also withdrew the theses on tactics he had initially presented in opposition to Zinoviev's, in recognition of the fact that the Comintern now appeared to be moving closer to the position of the Italian Left. Bordiga also accepted Zinoviev's offer of a 'vice-presidency' at this Congress — with the concession that he could stay in Italy if he so desired. Bordiga was clearly trying to ensure he could continue using the Comintern meeting as an international platform.

4. In late 1924 there were signs of mounting working class unrest with sporadic strikes of metalworkers and others such as textile workers, especially in Milan.

5. Giovanni Giolitti (1842–1928), five times Prime Minister of Italy between 1892 and 1921. A bourgeois liberal, he is famous for having no political programme

beyond political manoeuvring and application of trasformismo, to undermine the influence of any one party and oversee the development of Italian capitalism. Apart from brief interruptions, he was Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior from 1901 to 1914, a period often referred to as the “Giolittian Era”. Under his influence, the Italian Liberals were not a formally organised party but a network of personal groupings with no official links to political constituencies. He oversaw various progressive social reforms at the same time as imposing tariffs, nationalising the telephone system etc in a bid to hasten the development of Italian capitalism at the same time as prevent social ‘unrest’.

6. Girone, a member of the Committee of Intesa, had been on the editorial board of *L'Unità* in early 1925. Spriano mentions him, along with Onorato Damen, as one of the itinerant speakers for the Left whom the local secretaries should be on their guard against.

The Later Disciples

“Priests” Who Always Betray

It is a strange place this world of intellectualism whose priesthood desires to be in the realm of the spirit, of doctrine and of aesthetic sensibility. Instead, on a social and political level, theirs is typically a small, impoverished world of invertebrates who are constitutionally endowed with the skilful and inexhaustible capacity to adapt to the environment and changes in its climate.

Precisely due to this particular characteristic of only feeling secure when stuck as parasites on the body of a healthy organism whilst, conversely, becoming strangely restless, unstable and even rebellious if they are no longer certain of being able to secure sustenance from that same organism and stability of life, these clerics appear today to be more and more sensitive to the gloom and uncertainty of our bourgeoisie.

Maybe we did not pay enough attention to fascist symbols, *fascia littoria*¹ and “fascist mysticism”², being more concerned about Mussolini’s attitude towards *il mare nostrum*³ and the conquests beyond this sea as he proclaimed on the destiny of a revived empire. So perhaps we were unaware of their being stifled by the decline of the Duce and then transforming themselves into unparalleled bridge builders towards militant anti-fascism and particularly towards the safest militias of antifascism, those following Palmiro Togliatti?

They learned how to ride the tide of neo-humanism, encouraging proletarian efforts at national reconstruction. They embodied the manifold demands of socialist realism in art and philosophy, as well as in politics. And then ... came the collapse of this papier-mâché world constructed by these “partisans of peace” and collectors of signatures to promote goodwill towards the Soviet Union. Stalin died, then came Khrushchev’s speech. Now, in a new series of “Spartacus” there are the revolts – from Vorkuta⁴ to East Berlin, from Poznan to Hungary. In the streets of Budapest and the major industrial and mining districts of Hungary, Soviet tanks destroy the fortresses of the insurgent proletariat.

The priests sense the stormy sea, the treacherous wind, and set sail the boat of their ingenuity towards safer shores and sunnier beaches.

They give the impression of being pushed into their work for idealistic reasons yet

they always obey the call of individual self-interest, though this never presents in its true form of narrowness but in terms now of spiritual crisis, now of the offended human personality: their personality.

But if this melancholy observation exposes and discredits many generations of writers and artists who are still the highest expression of the world of culture and its human values, not everyone who has appeared or appears to be a true defector from the bourgeoisie, not everyone we argue, has ploughed back the furrow of the class divide.

Even when defectors from the bourgeoisie have crossed over to the side of the proletariat to join the historical drive towards socialist revolution, it is still important to divest them of many of the presumptions they bring with them, whether in the shape of doctrine and the most recent theoretical formulations of philosophy and economics; or in terms of the technical possibilities brought about by the second industrial revolution and the new historical phase opened by the nuclear age; or else the invention of a new type of revolution, a transformed neo-humanism which assures humanity a socialist renaissance without upheaval, without blood, without barricades; a revolution of the spirit which relegates Marx and Lenin to the attic and with them all the barricades and utopian paraphernalia of '48.

Intellectuals will become part of the class to the extent that they feel themselves to be workers alongside other workers, militants of the proletarian party animated by the same ideals and the capacity for struggle and sacrifice which bring them together with all the rest of the fighters in the revolutionary militia: in a word, to the extent that their consciousness is in harmony with the collective consciousness of the proletariat. Whilst so many intellectuals have been derailed because they remained discontented and ambitious petty bourgeois; many others of us have stayed firmly at our post.

When an intellectual who militates in the working class movement makes a personal contribution to the elaboration of class doctrine and the search for new spaces to spread the ideas, this must not be regarded as a personal desire. Rather it is a reflection of the collective consciousness of the masses as a whole which, by means of scientific inquiry, combined with ever-new experiences of workers' struggle, is always renewing, enriching, refining and perfecting revolutionary theory.

It is on these terms alone that revolutionary intellectuals take up their role and, by means of their own contribution, articulate the demands of the working class which has become their class of choice, the vital matrix of their consciousness

of humanity, of their beliefs, of their own life. Only on these terms can we speak of the intellectual who has deserted the class they were born in for the cause of socialism: in order to finally feel free from the bonds of the bourgeois world, like salt that adds to the flavour of life whatever the circumstances of its existence.

This reasoning is valid, not only for the people at the top, where the proletarian cause has seen whole lives dedicated to the study of modern capitalism and to workers' struggles – from Marx to Lenin, from Engels to Trotsky – but also for the army of intellectuals who have broken with the bourgeoisie to make their own modest, disinterested and mostly anonymous contribution to the same cause.

There is also the worker-intellectual who, after a hard day's work in the workshop, office or in the field, turns to books, magazines, etc., to find an explanation, a theoretical solution, a methodological discipline that can illuminate a particular practical problem; something which confirms the wider truth or not of an experience, gives the answer to problems/issues and identifies the common thread between theory and practice, between the real and changing world of objective determination and the reflected world of theoretical justification. They are usually unassuming workmates who open their hearts and minds to each other as they try to solve the problems that are typical of everyone who experiences the same daily fatigue, the same daily suffering. Together they open new horizons of understanding and come to share a true and living class identity: someone who now finally knows and therefore wants and dares. In these cases the intellectuals, whatever their social origin, may well be the daily salt of the revolution. Not intellectuals for the proletariat but of the proletariat, not in the service of their own ambition but as a tool, like the hoe for the peasant or the lathe for the metallurgist, since even writers, poets and scientists do not have the control they need over the means or instruments of their daily labour, which clearly indicates the state of subjection and exploitation to which art and science are in fact submitted.

The "organic" intellectual Gramsci idealised was integral to the party's functioning and for defining its political direction. Gramsci saw the intellectual as a mediator and at the same time the indispensable architect of every passage from one split to another in the social and political body during the passive revolution. Hence the intellectual becomes the prime political organiser in the party apparatus and affiliated bodies. It is due to him that the party's influence grows and with it the widening of its electoral support.

At this stage, besides their role in the party leadership, the organic intellectuals

who have arrived at the top of the party take on an additional leadership function: as executives in the state apparatus. As this process develops their role becomes the same one they have already been playing in the party: administering the state's conciliation mechanisms, mediating the transition from regressive to progressive. This is all part of an inevitable osmosis which will end up with them taking on the constitutionally repressive role of exercising the hegemony of an elite in the name of a class: the proletarian class, which is thus increasingly subjugated within the iron mesh of capitalist power.

And what of the broader masses? Electoral endorsement, aimed at enlarging the party's influence in parliament and the existing state power, is the practice of the most dirty parliamentary democracy where the whole electoral body is subject to changing moods and ephemeral policies. Even in the more advanced parliamentary democracies the masses are swayed by emotional forces, by patronage, always and abundantly fed by the bullying of financial capital. Even when they are opposed to each other, the various political parties, under whatever banners, are installed in the orbit of power. Thus they obey the logic of parliamentary regimes whose greatest concern is to cultivate, maintain and possibly extend their electoral base, all of which merits the derogatory term of 'parliamentary cretinism' something which has become part of the practice of the PCI in its mature stage.

In class terms, the only valid conclusion is that the proletariat is the active and decisive element, as long as its theory, practice and organisation are condensed into its party: the most suitable instrument for guiding the revolutionary violence of the whole working class, the true and healthy midwife of history. In conclusion, there are two different and contrasting paths: one, indicated by Gramsci, that goes no further than the passive revolution and the war of positions; and the other, the active revolution indicated by scientific Marxism, which brings the historical epoch of capitalism to an end.

Empiricism and Prevarication

What does it mean "to apply Marx"? This is the title of a symbolic article penned by Umberto Cerroni.⁵ We respond with the obvious aphorism: 'applying Marx' is precisely what those who are Marxist in terms of theory and practice do. Whoever does not 'apply Marx' is not a Marxist and cannot and must not be described as such. However, especially in the case of those who have such a blatant sense of contamination by Marxism, it is appropriate to ask why they have been brought to such a bizarre political condition. Is it because they are misinformed or have a strange intellectual desire to ride the paradoxical, to show off originality, to

overlook the difficulties of getting to grips with the Marxist doctrine, the only one that that can explain the capitalist economy, from its rise to its current decline? Or is it that they are simply following the logic of the situation? Are they detaching the party's political line from any particular theoretical assumption, given that the PCI is caught in the tentacles of the capitalist octopus from which it cannot, or does not, want to free itself?

Yet, unwittingly the article confirms the Marxist truth of the unity of theory and practice which its revisionist approach wants to deny. The author shoots himself in the foot when he uses his own theory to endorse the legitimacy of an ongoing political practice: that of the historic compromise⁶, which supposedly is consistent with the Marxist concept of the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, the source of the unity that the writer wants to deny. Once the interdependence between the two terms is denied, then there is a tendency to break the guiding principle of the dialectical interpretation of history, to open the way for an entirely empirical evaluation, and a crude materialism that leads straight to a reformist conception of history.

Does Marx not apply? And not even Gramsci! Having set out on the road towards the re-composition of Marxism and adapting it to the needs of the historical moment, regardless of any theoretical presuppositions, Gramsci's disciples proceed in the opposite direction, not only with regard to Marxism but with Gramsci's own teaching. (By an irony of history Umberto Cerroni is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Gramsci Institute whose task is to defend and disseminate the master's thought and how it is applied in the Party, inside parliament and among the mass of workers.)

Let's have a look at the exact argument. Returning to the problem of the relationship between theory and practice and specifically between Marxist theory and communist politics, Cerroni writes, "*that it is impossible to consider Marxism as a doctrinal tool which is purely and simply "applied"*".⁷ By posing the problem like this the link between theory and political praxis is broken. The two key formulations, in which the whole Gramsci theme is condensed: "historical bloc" and beyond that, "absolute historicism", are emptied of all serious content and credibility. What remains of Gramsci's thought is reduced to very little. Gramsci himself would have fiercely reacted against the re-emergence of empiricism based on positivism:

In short, the principle must always be that ideas are not born of other ideas, that philosophies are not born of other philosophies but that they are always renewed expressions of real historical development [...]. It follows from this [...] that every

*truth, if it is not expressible in a specific language, is a Byzantine and scholastic expression.*⁸

His absolute historicism cannot reach its culmination without the unity of history and philosophy. As a result *"history and philosophy are inseparable, they form a bloc"*.

What, then – in Gramscian language and with its immanentist overview – would the creation of the historical bloc be reduced to without the organic inclusion of various components which together would bring into being a life that *"is only a social force"*?

Linked to this is another theoretical "discovery", one that is typical of every revisionism in the history of socialism, from the utopian to the scientific, which asserts:

... the impossibility of considering Marxism as some kind of doctrinal apparatus, which is purely and simply "applied". Meanwhile, it appears that not everything in materialism is passive, nor that everything is conclusive.

*We have many and differing interpretations of Marx's thought, which have overlapped and divided in different eras and under diverse practical stimuli.*⁹

This is typical of the tendency to eclecticism which distinguishes the dominant culture today. By focussing on the contingent, the diversity and the manifold aspects of 'progressive' and pluralistic democracy, it is unable to present a doctrinal framework which can distinguish between what is essential and what is entirely secondary and marginal in terms of political practice.

With these neo-revisionists, like Cerroni, their empiricism puts episodes that have no class content and which have no revolutionary aims all in the same bracket of 'revolutionary experience'.

In a period when economics and politics tend to dominate the whole world, this is a return to an earlier concept of the nation, part of an attempt to rise above politics that do not go beyond the domestic scene. There is the particular in place of the universal, a journey backwards in history. To demonstrate his proposition, he refers to the greatest and original achievements of Marxist socialism whose common characteristic is that of *"breaking with the tradition of previous political practice"*. It is a glaring historical error and an example of political infantilism to consider events which occurred at the end of the imperialist war as revolutionary and, moreover, linked to the theoretical-political tradition of Marxism. The

post-war, imperialist, reorganisation imposed on the world was in line with the outlook and interests of capital, that is of financial capital, which had been the driving force of war and had to, by necessity, continue to be the driving force of peace. The antidote to the principles and political praxis of dictatorship could only be the principle of parliamentary democracy, the new face of the same imperialist domination under the worldwide aegis of the great banks. To speak of revolution and Marxist socialism when referring to institutional forms proper to state capitalism which sprang up in the period following the Second World War, in the advanced decadent phase of capitalism, is to daydream, it is to mystify reality. The most elementary Marxist critique of the Chinese, Yugoslavian and Cuban revolutions reveals they have neither the structure, nor the characteristics, nor the ideology that are historically part of a revolution initiated and carried out by the proletariat, one that is not polluted by nationalism or encumbered by the minute subdivisions of intellectuals.

The key aspect (*punctum saliens*) of Cerroni's reasoning, is the reference to the October Revolution which reveals a whole social-democratic theme:

... (a revolution) which was accomplished by "violating" two established principles of the "Marxist" tradition: that workers' revolution can only take place in the advanced capitalist countries and that a socialist society cannot be conceived in countries where capitalism has not yet fully developed.¹⁰

This is plainly the reasoning of Kautsky against Lenin, an argument for a nostalgic return to the ideology and political practice of the 2nd International; in a word, it is the fault of the Russian proletariat to have risen up and to have *prematurely* wiped out the power of Russian capitalism.

This raises the question whether the theoretical foundations of revolutionary strategy and tactics that Marx took from the Paris Commune and Lenin from the 1905 revolution and on which the Italian Communist Party arose in Livorno; whether Lenin's *Imperialism* and *State and Revolution*, or the theory of sharp turns and of attacking the weakest link in the imperialist line-up are to be considered the result of a sudden and hysterical hallucination or the outcome of a colossal con-trick devised by the diabolical mind of fighters of Lenin's and Trotsky's stature. It is also true, above all in the era of parliamentary democracy, that the pygmies make history.

Gramsci is not spared in this senseless iconoclastic fury.

The essence of Gramsci's teaching is not in his concrete political proposals. (Which are? Is it the modern Prince or the temporary democracy of a Constituent

Assembly?) But rather in the original overall analysis he makes of Stalinist society, [...]his historical-national reorientation of the general theory of capitalism as Lenin had already done, ... in the fact that he could conceive of the possibility, unknown to Marx, of a workers' hegemony in the bourgeois revolution in a backward (peasant) country, ... a global and analytical re-thinking of the history of one's own country and its critical reshaping within the perspective of workers' emancipation.¹¹

In a few lines, the complex, even if contradictory, practical-political content of Gramsci's theory is reduced to the single theme of historical-national reorganisation.

Moreover, since every critical examination must reach a conclusion, the attempt to combine Gramsci with Lenin – on the grounds that both were forced to think and act in a different way from the ideal model arising from Marx's doctrine – is spurious. The real and irrefutable facts of history say that Lenin's party indicated the way of armed insurrection to the working masses only when it considered the workers, soldiers and poor peasantry in the Councils were as one in their resolve for the exercise of the dictatorship (synthesis of theory and practice offered by the Paris Commune, 1871, and by the Russian Revolution of 1905).

This route may be repugnant to the intellectuals of the PCI, but it remains the only possible one and it leads to the devastating end of imperialist capitalism. Gramsci's "different way" has no conclusions because his whole world is an uninterrupted series of "different ways". Perhaps the true greatness of his work lies in this effort of searching for a "way" that always escaped him, in his anxiety, never placated, for change.

So what is the significance of Gramsci for Cerroni? By defining a completely different road from that indicated by Marx and having outlined the diagnosis

for an Italian capitalist society within whose history very different cultural deposits are stratified and intertwined and where the intellectual revolution takes on a peculiar political significance, namely the ability to mediate and transpose all those traditions whose thinking made, yes, for the political poverty of the state but also the potential universality of the civil conscience.¹²

Ultimately Gramsci's genius would require a scholar with some idea of the thread of history and with the ability to follow it through the various layers and intertwined cultural traditions which apparently constitute the underlying political support for a supposed intellectual revolution whose boundaries remain unspecified. This is before any explanation of how it is going to be realised

concretely in economic and political terms and who are going to be amongst the phantom social protagonists (perhaps even intellectuals?). In sum, there is clearly an attempt to fit Gramsci and his work, which is more intellectual than political, into the cramped framework of counterrevolutionary revisionism that is underway in the party which also belonged to Gramsci for at least as long as his name and his teaching have been the ideological and political matrix of the “new party”. Meanwhile, Gramsci’s role in the run-up to the Livorno party, created on a proletarian class basis from a theory and practice informed by revolutionary Marxism, cannot be denied. The Party’s central executive would be defined with bitterness by Togliatti as being like a military supplier but, we add, comprising strict Marxist and Leninist industriousness. This was the formative period of the October Revolution. With the Lyon Congress, the Party apparatus would be transformed into a forge of doctrinal and political degeneration, ultimately culminating in the historic compromise whose fundamental aim is to ally with those whose historical task is to save the system of production based on the exploitation of workers’ labour power.

This compendium of a half-century of Italian political life does not satisfy another intellectual, Alberto Asor Rosa, a man of many and varied political exploits who writes:

... the revival of the Labriola-Croce-Gramsci line [where, it should be noted, Gramsci is increasingly the “developer” of the ideological elements which the other two thinkers had actually founded] serves today, at most, to understand our history [that of the PCI] and therefore, what we are [fact, of course, always and very important but, we add, no longer sufficient] in order to define the terms of a relationship between the party and the young at a stage of profound change, hence the search for a different identity, of a third road that lies between radicalism (sectarianism, maximalism, extremism) and moderation, although of reformist inspiration.¹³

If the *Labriola-Croce-Gramsci line*, that theoretical farce of the PCI politics, is in crisis, what kind of different identity can the party be given? What third way to take a party already obsessed with gaining power through the parliamentary game and ready to ally with anyone, even the devil and his disciples, including those who are most prepared for the defence, even armed, of the current institutions of the capitalist system?

You just need to look around [cautiously concludes this former *Operaista*]¹⁴, who has returned to the fold with the elegant ease typical of the intellectual who likes to toy with innovations to Marxism which he considers too reformist, or too revolutionary, depending on the changing objective situation] *to realise that*

there is a growing need at the mass level to understand which path leads from a purely material perception of existence to a liberation project valid for everyone, or at least for as many as possible.

Certainly within this framework there is a problem of reaffirming and redefining **the identity of the working class as the fundamental subject of the political and vital struggle of our country.**¹⁵

It is true that there is a question of scruples, either entirely individual or of a group. They are expressing the unease of militants who have the courage to recognise – even if they say it through their teeth, or by veiled hints – the existence and the vastness of the crisis in the PCI's theoretical and political framework. For the time being Gramscism remains suitable for those who want to secure the hold of the party amongst the unconscious masses who remain open to suggestion because it is still a powerful force, firmly organised from its electoral base to parliament and in key areas beyond. Even if the PCI is for now in a subordinate position, it is inside the essential structures of the capitalist system and has the potential to grow and take on an integral and managerial role. That is, as manager of a putrescent capitalism, but nevertheless still capitalism as can be seen by anyone who puts the situation in perspective and who knows that capitalism is not out of the crisis that is breaking the foundations of the current system. And this is the historical task entrusted to the revolutionary proletariat. Meanwhile, if Gramscism has been essentially an experiment *in corpore vili* (in the vile body of capitalism), it has ended up with an objectively social-democratic practice, with Berlinguer's¹⁶ historic compromise brought to its extreme consequences, thus ensuring continuity of power by means of a managerial bureaucracy, of which the current PCI managers are incomparable masters.

There are plenty of signs of decay: weakening of central and peripheral authority, especially in local councils, municipalities, provinces and regions; growth in generalised poverty and youth unemployment, a legacy of bankrupt local finances bequeathed by previous Christian Democrat administrations who were able to promptly drain the coffers for the benefit of their party or even their own personal economic and political barony, aided by a secure patronage network.

No one can guarantee a build-up of support by the electorate until the 50% + 1 is reached and forthcoming parliamentary elections could demonstrate to the party of the "intellectual revolution" that consent is by its nature fragile, mobile, temporary and always open to sudden dissatisfaction and unsuspected changes in mood and direction.

The progress of intellectuals? Gramsci devoted the best part of his studies and his political hopes to this problem, but history had to undo it. At the heart of an

economic crisis which has no exit, intellectuals have not acted as an enlightening force in a new phase of world history. Rather, as a body, as intellectuals, they have associated themselves with the powers-that-be. They have become bearers of an intertwined culture of mystifying idealism and crude managerial empiricism that is the umbilical cord between the two major parties: Christian Democracy and the so-called Euro-Communism of the PCI, the two potential bodies that could play a hegemonic role in the hypothetical historic compromise. Perhaps these are suitable to administer the agony of capitalism, but under no circumstances can they be part of the revival of the class action of the revolutionary proletariat whose task will be to sweep them away from the political scene, inexorably and definitively, for the realisation of a socialist society.

Amongst this infighting of intellectuals and of various cultures, all intent on positioning themselves to the left or to the right of the international political grouping of the proletariat, few have taken the path of deepening and spreading the class culture of the proletariat with the instruments provided by Marxist doctrine, the only one that from within itself, by its teaching, encompasses the whole historical arc of capitalism.

Once again the intellectuals with their cultural questions are in disarray. As always their destiny is bearing out the Marxist deduction which anticipates that the middle classes, catapulted by the decomposition of capitalist structures as a result of violent internal contradictions, will be chaotically, but unavoidably, attracted to the two opposite poles of the class conflict: by conservation of the existing order on the one hand and by revolution on the other.

It is this reality that has put Gramscism into crisis. The latest proof of this, in a symbolic way, is Cerroni's presumption not to apply Marx because, it is said in the subtitle of the article in question and by way of conclusion, *"the experience of socialist revolutions [it is legitimate to ask oneself, which?, author's note] demonstrates the impossibility of a doctrinal interpretation of the thought of the classics"*.

The presumption of Cerroni is followed by that of Asor Rosa, intently in search of a new identity and a third way as if this were possible without the collapse of the Party itself. At least it is obvious that none of the Party's apparatchiks is willing to die by suicide.

So what is the real road? The one which gradually becomes clear, not so much through words, spoken or written, but by the lifting of the present gloom of the dominant system, from which only the intervention of revolutionary surgery can free humanity.

Notes

1. Fascist symbol of the bundle of rods and axe derived from ancient Rome.
2. *Mistica fascista* was a deliberate attempt to turn fascism into a mystical, semi-religious movement. A School of Fascist Mysticism was founded in Milan in 1930 and was active until 1943. Its main aim was to indoctrinate future leaders in the 'spiritual understanding' of Fascism.
3. The Roman name for the Mediterranean Sea.
4. A major uprising of the labour camp inmates at the Vorkuta Gulag in Russia in July–August 1953, after Stalin's death and following the East German Uprising and subsequent arrest of Beria, previously chief of police.
5. Umberto Cerroni, (1926-2007) graduate in political philosophy and lifetime university Marxist as well as member of the Central Committee of the PCI and the executive committee of the Gramsci Institute. Ultimately long-standing professor of Political Science at Rome's Sapienza University. Prolific writer and contributor to the PCI press on wide-ranging themes from the problems of agriculture in the Soviet Union (1953), through the political philosophy of Giovanni Gentile (1961), Marx and modern law (1962 ff), methodology of social science (1968), Marxism and the analysis of the present (1974) Crisis of Marxism (1978), The Civil Identity of the Italians (1992), globalisation and Democracy (2002), Left Heretics, Bruno Rizzi, democratic elitist (2004); Introduction to the Communist Manifesto (2005)... and so on and so forth.
6. See footnote 15 on Enrico Berlinguer, below.
7. Cerroni, in *l'Unità*, 14.1.1977.
8. Gramsci, *Il Materialismo Storico e la filosofia di B. Croce* [*Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of B. Croce*] Turin 1948.
9. Cerroni, op.cit.
10. ibid
11. ibid
12. ibid
13. Asor Rosa, in *l'Unità*, 19.4.1977.
14. After the USSR's invasion of Hungary in 1956 (he signed the protest *Manifesto 101*), Asor Rosa distanced himself from the PCI for a while. At one point he was close to Mario Tronti and Operaismo and contributed to magazines such as *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*. Rejoined the PCI and parliamentary deputy 1979-83. Literary critic, novelist ... still alive today.
15. *l'Unità* op.cit.
16. Leader of the PCI from 1972 until his death in 1984. Coined the term 'eurocommunism' and generally distanced the party from the USSR. During the mid-1970s the Party enjoyed its biggest electoral success and on the back of this Berlinguer entered into a pact with the Christian Democrats, the basis of the so-called "historic compromise". As the economic crisis kicked in with high inflation, growing unemployment and constant terrorist outrages, this pact broke down. In 1980, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he led the break of the "Eurocommunist" parties from the Russian orbit. He died before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent crumbling of the PCI.

Does Togliatti's Passing Away Signal the End of Stability?¹

If we are to grasp his political significance we need to go beyond the human story of Palmiro Togliatti whose life has just drawn to a close. Wherever it leads, his political path cannot and must not escape examination and judgment. Moreover, in order to have a clear idea about the immediate future of his party – which was once also our party – we need to calmly sketch a profile of the man and get beyond a whole heap of propaganda and contingent events in order to weigh up his political work.

Once the legend of Togliatti and Gramsci as founders of the Livorno party is debunked, their actual participation in this event is reduced to a secondary role. In fact the pre-eminent part was played by Bordiga and with him the left wing who, inside the Socialist Party, had already prepared the theoretical groundwork and defined the programmatic platform on which the first revolutionary party of the Italian proletariat was formed. In the case of Togliatti it is impossible to distinguish any distinctive political stance. He made his way on the back of more significant figures: first Gramsci and then Bordiga. It must be said that in the run-up to the formation of the party, during the Convention of Imola (1920) and in the Congress of Livorno (1921) itself, Togliatti had no political physiognomy of his own; he was already a Gramscian in crisis and a potential Bordigist.

So he made use of these two springboards without too much involvement in this or that current and without any particular ideological trait of his own. Instead, he moved cautiously through internal channels, without upsetting anyone, drawing on arguments which had a certain formal logic and with the accent on acceptable and non-controversial ideas. And I don't think that he did this through cunning or by calculation. He was probably obeying an innate and obscure inclination of his own character and a "*forma mentis*"² that would remain with him even when he was assured an eminent place in the political organisation which was then still only beginning.

In this phase, which could be described as one of growth and consolidation of the party, Togliatti neither adopted the demands of the Italian Left, nor dared to oppose them by putting forward the original positions of "*Ordinovism*". He knew that he must not compromise himself; he judged Gramsci's work to be a partial, intellectualist and practically finished experience and was influenced by the strong and dynamic personality of Bordiga, although he was far from accepting

certain theoretical formulas that are incompatible with his world view and with his own political temperament which is inclined to be less showy, more behind the scenes, and in any case more concrete and, in the long run, more profitable for the purpose of his career.

After the Left of the Party were ousted and with it Bordiga's contribution, then Gramsci's position at the head of the party was an accomplished fact – given that he had the undisputed support of the new political hierarchies camped at the summit of the Russian state and the Communist International – then Togliatti went back to being a Gramscian. He was well aware that he could now play the role of second in command of the party alongside "Antonio"; someone whose high intellectual value he was able to recognise whilst also being fully aware of Gramsci's limitations as a political leader, which would allow him to prepare the canvas for his future ambitions.

The Art of Juggling

Gramsci's brief and painful experience served as a springboard for more than one profiteer, but above all for Togliatti.

From 1924 to 1926, as a member of the Executive, he often participated in the meetings of the parliamentary group in order to keep up with issues of the day, especially relating to parliamentary activity. This he did in his careful and evasive manner, almost like a priest, without ever confronting the problems that came up but just touching on them, diluting them in a series of arguments that could demonstrate anything, good for any purpose, so great was his capacity to assimilate, smooth over and at the same time hold even the most contradictory positions.

In short, these were his first attempts at that art of juggling which would turn him into a master of parliamentary tactics and in negotiating his way back and forth between parties without distinction of creed or class interests. If Togliatti had been a magician the red and black balls would have immediately turned into white ones. And in fact 'flitting about' was his policy, whether the alternating political events rose to the brightest and most exciting red or fell headlong into the darkest and most disappointing black.

In the run-up to the Lyons Congress (1926), in the midst of the struggle against the "Left" (which also involved physical force) aimed at imposing the new policies of the International onto the Italian section – sadly passed into history under the name of "bolshevisation" – if there was someone in the party leadership who was involved in the editing of *l'Unità*, who was willing to assume the unenviable and

shameful task of making poisonous annotations and strangling the articles written by the comrades of the Left who were behind the initiative of the *Committee of Intesa*, who was able to do so with the full awareness of someone who knows he can stab comrades in the back since the material situation prevents them from defending themselves, then this someone was exactly Togliatti and not Gramsci, not Tasca and not Scoccimarro, who were repulsed by this low undertaking, even if it was requested by Moscow.

In November 1926 the organisational vicissitudes of our party ended with the promulgation of the fascist Exceptional Laws and the onset of the blind and unconditional repression which struck all of us communists in an extraordinary and very particular way. No great distinction was made between the communists at the top and those at the base of the apparatus, the sole objective being to break down and dissolve every possibility of organisation and continuity of struggle.

Very few were able to save themselves from the storm of reaction but amongst these, of course, was Togliatti, the incomparable escape artist.

The later period, from the Second World War to the Badoglio government³, is the story of Togliatti navigating between opposing tendencies, maintaining a precarious balance between the clashes and divisions over events in Russian politics from the Comintern to the Cominform, in a way that allowed him to remain not only afloat, but on the crest of the wave of international Stalinism.

Getting to Grips with the Course of the Revolution

In the long and dramatic duel between Stalin and Trotsky, he expressed sympathy first for one and then the other so as not to be prejudiced, but eventually it would be Stalin and his politics which tipped the balance for him. Who, then, can deny his sagacity and timing ?! But the serious point is that the dramatic choice to be made was not only between party and opposition, Stalin or Trotsky, but also between revolution and counter-revolution. More precisely, a choice between those who endured the politics of 'socialist construction' because they saw this as a pillar which a revived revolutionary struggle of the international proletariat could reconnect with, against the opposite tendency which aimed to develop socialism in a single country by the construction of state capitalism. It was this latter tendency which emerged victorious after World War II, which became stronger and which presented itself as a distinct economic and political entity. It extended its reach to all the countries of the Soviet bloc as well as among newly-formed nation states emerging from the tribulations of Afro-Asiatic revolutions and which have escaped, for reasons of geography and economic-financial

influence, from the control of the politics of domination of American financial capital and its diplomacy.

The political personality of Togliatti can only be understood within the historical setting created by the victory of Western democracies over Nazi-Fascism, where imperialist war, the rise of state capitalism and parliamentary democracy are the undisputed protagonists. Faced with these problems which dominate our epoch, a comrade who cut his teeth in the ranks of a revolutionary party and among workers' struggles could either remain anchored to the reality of doctrine, of criticism and continue the battle alongside the proletariat – even if in a position of weakness and in conditions that are anything but favourable and with a prospect of objective retreat – or else he could take the path of revisionism and ideological corruption which preferred the imperialist war to be called the war for democratic freedoms and socialism; which regarded state capitalism as the initial and socialist phase of the Workers' State and the "democratic and parliamentary path to socialism" as a way for the proletariat, through its parties, to share in the power of the capitalist State.

So it is this second road that Togliatti would take, the road that matched his possibilist temperament, his middle class culture and his interests as a man deeply anchored in national daily life. And it's not by accident that we use the word 'culture'.

Bourgeois Culture and Marxist ideology

It would simply be prejudice to argue that he was not a cultured person in the broader bourgeois sense. Let's say, instead, that he lacked the curiosity, the ability and the will to assimilate and deepen Marxism as a revolutionary conception of life and the world, as a critique of the capitalist system that is destined to be destroyed from its foundations. He did not have the real acuity of a revolutionary militant, especially from a theoretical perspective. He was constitutionally incapable of understanding its decisive role and thus discarded theory in favour of day-to-day politics where a rough outline of the doctrine served to reduce everything to concrete terms which could be employed with a disconcerting empiricism, whatever the situation happened to be.

In this respect we recall his presence in the first Badoglio government which for him was an infinitely more important fact than the dispute over monarchy and republic. And in order to keep hold of this slice of power offered by the bourgeoisie in recognition of his active support – even if his participation in the "war of liberation" was not active – he did not hesitate to collude with the

clergy and with the reactionary forces of traditional objectively fascist capitalism, by voting for Article 7, i.e. the Lateran pacts, which aimed to reconsolidate the enslavement of the values of the Italian people to the hierarchy of the church.

As a trusted man in one of the largest European states and as head of the strongest parliamentary opposition party, he now possessed untold instruments of propaganda and “persuasion” – let’s not say for those who were willing to follow him blindly – but for the man in the street who was able to discern how much of all this was tactical opportunity and how much simply banal opportunism.

But at this point in our analysis – which aims to show how Togliatti was a political being of our epoch, where the enormous centralised power of the imperialist state has bent masses, parties, ideologies and consciousness by virtue of its dictatorship – we must nevertheless acknowledge the coherence and success of the politics linked to the name of Togliatti over two decades of parliamentary democracy.

“Progressive democracy”, “the Italian road to socialism”, “the democratic and parliamentary way”, “peaceful coexistence”, “left turn”, “outstretched hand to the Catholics” these are the keywords that epitomise a broad political vision which aimed to draw the proletariat, and the world of work in general, into the State as a subordinate, supporting force until it is mature enough to take on a hegemonic role, as an essential producer of wealth. From the scientific and revolutionary insight of Marx and Lenin, we have plunged into the kind of narrowest, quietist and national progressivism which Lenin always regarded as a mark of shame amongst the Social Democrats of the Second International.

To confirm what we are arguing, we transcribe two statements made in different and separate epochs. They sum up Togliatti’s thinking which has been absorbed by the PCI and become a standard part of its politics. The first is taken from the speech given to the PCI’s Central Committee on April 12, 1954 entitled *“For an agreement between communists and Catholics to save human civilisation”* and starts from the premise:

... If we consider the situation in this way, we already see that there is a huge opportunity to bring into being something that I would not even call a front (because that is an ex-communicated word!) But a movement, a very diverse array of forces distinguished from each other by their nature, by their social and political character, and which in fact would be a movement for the preservation of human civilisation, for the preservation of humanity itself. This is the problem which confronts us today, and which stands above all others.

... The task facing all those who have feelings of humanity, who appreciate human life and the civilisation that men have created, all those who know that this is the only thing that has value in the world and that must at all costs be saved, the task is to be able to create this very large assemblage for the preservation of our civilisation, and give it a decisive weight in the situation of each country and in the international situation, to make it an irresistible force.

The second is part of the political testament he bequeathed to his party and concludes:

Within the organised Catholic world and among the Catholic masses there was an evident shift to the left at the time of Pope John. Now there is essentially a reflux of the right. However, conditions at the base remain the same and there is a push for a shift to the left that we must understand how to assist. For this purpose we do not need the old atheistic propaganda. The old problem of religious consciousness, its content, its roots among the masses, and how to overcome it, must be posed in a different way than in the past, if we want to have access to the Catholic masses and be understood by them. If this does not happen then our "outstretched hand" to the Catholics, will be understood as a pure expedient and almost a hypocrisy.

... ... For example, a deeper reflection on the issue of the possibility of a peaceful way to get to socialism leads us to clarify what we mean by democracy in a bourgeois state, how we can widen the boundaries of freedom and democratic instructions and what are the most effective forms of participation of working masses in economic and political life. Thus arises the question of the possibility of conquering positions of power by the working classes within the framework of a State that has not changed its nature as a bourgeois State and thus where the struggle for a progressive transformation from within is possible. In countries where the communist movement has become as strong as we are, this is the basic question that arises today in the political struggle.

Historic Bloc

As we can see, the language is the usual one, with an Enlightenment content and a form that goes beyond simplicity and verges on the slapdash. However, an idea does come to light – that of the "historic bloc" of the various social forces he considers suitable and useful for channelling into a common action towards the peaceful and democratic conquest of power. In truth, this is the idea Gramsci had originally envisioned as achievable on a higher plane, less compromised and more in keeping with the secular vision of the Risorgimento tradition. Togliatti makes it his own by translating it into municipal inter-classism, with a dollop of

papal blessing.

If we look at the results rather than the numerical strength of the PCI, the outcome of this vast political management over the last twenty years is certainly not great, due more to objective causes than to the capacity of leaders. Togliatti was burdened with enormous responsibility for a party which – no-one knew better than he did himself – he neither wanted to secure power by revolutionary means, nor lead it via democratic elections to government of the Republic in a bourgeois power set-up. This, despite his impeccable war of liberation and resistance credentials which put him in pole position to claim this right.

Even though the PCI has been gripped for years in this fundamental contradiction which has embarrassed every serious initiative and paralysed any capacity for momentum, the party essentially remained united around Togliatti precisely due to his combined qualities as a smart operator and braking force that everyone recognises.

But he has also left behind a party that is objectively completely right-wing, searching for government alternatives that nobody can take seriously, at least until the political geography imposed upon the world by the victorious forces of the imperialist war is overturned. The alignment of the major parliamentary parties is ultimately determined by the vertices of power that dominate the world. What is going to happen to the PCI after Togliatti's passing away, and especially as a direct result of his death?

It is no good reading horoscopes. For us there is only one way of examining this question, and that is in class terms. We cannot take seriously the sentimental argument that the pretenders to the 'throne' have been advised to appear more united than they really are. Neither are we inclined to endorse the thesis of those who predict an inevitable and immediate clash between the "soft" and "hard" factions, for the obvious reason that all contenders have shown that they know how to be hard or soft and vice versa, depending on the situation. Haven't they all come from the school of Togliatti?

Togliatti and Violence

These students know, as we do, how ruthlessly hard and resolutely inhuman the so-good, so-sensible Togliatti proved to be when he delivered up comrades in Russia and Spain to deportation and the purges; when he stood by as comrades who, out of the fascist hell, were deluded into believing that they would find asylum and respect for their political beliefs in the homeland of socialism.

These students of his know, as we do, that Togliatti had a very curious, but above

all convenient, way of considering the role of violence; he considered it valid and just if it was exercised against those who could endanger his position and his future as a politician; wicked and not in accordance with the laws of history when used by the proletariat to break the capitalist state and the exercise of its dictatorship.

This is what his pupils know and there is no doubt that if history repeated itself they would follow their own interests and would be **very worthy** of such schooling.

The real problem is quite different and it lies in the socio-economic make-up of the PCI which obliges it to reduce itself to the politics of slogans, of press festivals and electoral campaigns to collect votes: more and more votes. Beyond this line of administrative activity opens the precipice of nothingness, of the darkness of consciences, of the absence of any true and real perspective.

The various socio-economic divisions in the party are reflected in the diverse conditions of life and ways of thinking: industrial workers and poor peasantry cannot live and think in the same way as the intellectuals, the petty bourgeoisie and the exponents of the middle classes. Togliatti's greatest concern was always to unite these forces, divided by conflicting and sometimes even class interests. In order to preserve this unity, after the insurrection of the Hungarian proletariat he began to initiate the cautious policy of decentralisation of power and local party autonomy summarised in the theory of polycentrism. The same concern for unity at all costs was behind the tactic Togliatti recently adopted in the face of the danger of a split amongst the "socialist" countries with the escalation of the Russia-China dispute. Togliatti was certainly not troubled by the drama of this clash, but by the possible consequences inside the PCI if it became too damaged by internal conflicts. The emergence of a pro-Chinese opposition could have led to profound, irremediable splits in a party such as the PCI, which bases its strength on numbers of members and votes.

The Disciples

It would be a mistake to think that even disciples with the standing of Longo, of Ingrao (the beloved), of Paietta and of Amendola, who used to be considered as potential 'heirs' of the "Chief", can continue to guarantee the continuity and success of Togliatti's unifying policy as it was originally conceived and implemented.

Only strong class movements, on an international scale and as are already occurring in Italy, will trigger the centrifugal forces of the PCI: above all, the proletarians who have not forgotten that the emancipation of workers is the task

of the workers themselves.

The others inside the PCI, the bourgeois, the bourgeoisified, will find the solution to their problems elsewhere in the never-ending formations of the bourgeois left. The PCI will no longer be the party of yesterday and today. Maybe it will become the sought after “Labour Party”, maybe take on some other organisational form, but in any case the result will be the same.

All things considered, we are inclined to prefer the wall of silence, full of class hatred, by which the bourgeoisie surrounded Gramsci’s coffin, to the irreverent theatricality of Togliatti’s funeral. At least, though, this has served to remind us as well as others, that it is the Italian bourgeoisie not the proletariat who has lost its best son.

Notes

1. This chapter originally appeared as an article for *Battaglia Comunista*, September 1964. Togliatti died 21st August 1964.

2. Mind set.

3. Marshal Pietro Badoglio, 1871-1956. Military functionary of Italian imperialism during both world wars. Chief of Staff of the armed forces from 1925-40, until resigning in December 1940. Participant in the organisation of Mussolini’s downfall, Badoglio was named Prime Minister and went on to sign the armistice with the Allies on 8 September, 1943. Before Badoglio could inform the rest of Italy’s armed forces that they were now on the other side in the imperialist war, the Allies announced the armistice as the *Badoglio Proclamation*, triggering German disarmament of Italian troops (many of whom assumed this was the end of the war and went home) and obliging Badoglio, King Victor Emmanuel and other military chiefs to abandon Rome and run south for Allied protection. The upshot was Nazi occupation, Allied invasion and civil war. Badoglio held power precariously through Allied support, which ceased when they captured and occupied Rome in 1944. Badoglio was replaced by Ivanoe Bonomi of the *Partito Democratico del Lavoro*, PDL, successor to a 1912 reformist split in the PSI.

TIMELINE

1913 Antonio Gramsci, 22 years old, joins the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in Turin.

1914

August World War breaks out. Italy leaves the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, and declares itself neutral. Second International collapses.

October 18th: Mussolini, editor of the Socialist Party daily *Avanti*, moves towards interventionism in *From an Absolute To An Active and Operative Neutrality*.

22nd: Bordiga's *For An Active and Operating Anti-Militarism*, published in *Il Socialista*.

31st: Gramsci's article supporting Mussolini's call for intervention in the war published in *Il Grido del Popolo (The Cry of the People)*.

Nov Milan section of PSI exels Mussolini from the party. Gramsci leaves PSI and retires from political life until 1916.

1915

May Italy declares war on Austria and joins the imperialist world war. PSI adopts slogan of *Neither Support Nor Sabotage*.

Sept Zimmerwald Conference against the war, organised jointly by the PSI and Swiss social democrats. The PSI joins the centrist majority.

1916

April Kienthal Conference. Lenin, for the Zimmerwald Left, argues for turning the imperialist war into a civil war. PSI's single delegation remains with the centrists.

1917

February PSI conference in Rome. Bordiga's motion for revolutionary action against the war gets 14,000 votes (against 17,000 for the 'peace without annexations' majority).

March "February" Revolution in Russia: downfall of Tsar and installation of Kerensky's provisional government. April Lenin's *April Theses* call for all power to the soviets.

July Florence meeting confirms the Intransigent Revolutionary Fraction of

the PSI on Bordiga's initiative.

August Menshevik delegates from Petrograd Soviet visit Italy. In Turin they are greeted with cries of Viva Lenin! Workers' protests for "peace and bread" in Turin turn into an uprising against the war. After eight days of fighting and an official death toll of fifty, this is crushed by the military. Following the arrest of leading PSI and other political figures, Gramsci is appointed to the "provisional committee" of the local PSI section.

Nov Italian forces crushed at Caporetto. 40,000 dead or wounded. Gramsci attends clandestine meeting of Intransigent Revolutionary Fraction and meets Bordiga for first time.

1918

Sept Alliance between PSI and CGL, divides authority between 'economic' and 'political' issues.

Nov Armistice between Italy and Austria (4th).
Insurrection in Germany and proclamation of Republic. Social Democrats take power.

Dec Separate Turin edition of *Avanti!* containing Gramsci's article on 'The Revolution Against Capital'. *Il Soviet* founded in Naples by Bordiga, calling for expulsion of reformists from PSI.

1919 Spartacist uprising in Germany. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht murdered by Freikorps soldiers loyal to the Social Democratic Government.

February *Il Soviet* calls for a new party.

March Third International founded. PSI leadership votes to join Third International.

April *Avanti* offices in Milan burned down by nationalists and fascists.

May First edition of *L'Ordine Nuovo* ("a weekly review of socialist culture") published on May Day. Gramsci elected to Executive of Turin Socialist section.

July International strike in support of the Russian and Hungarian Soviet Republics. Food riots and protests against rising cost of living throughout Italy. Land occupations in the south.

October 16th PSI Congress approves admission to the Communist International and participation in forthcoming elections. Abstentionists demand change to Party programme but defer splitting. Russian representatives of the International push for inclusion of the PSI majority into the International.

Nov PSI wins 156 seats and over 2 million votes in general election.

Dec General strike against nationalist attacks on PSI deputies.

1920

- March Lock-out in Turin's engineering factories attempts to break the factory councils.
- April Eleven-day general strike throughout Piedmont.
- May Florence conference of Abstentionist fraction. Gramsci attends as observer.
- July Second Congress of the Communist International. Bordiga's suggestions for additional two points for conditions of admission accepted (after editing of no. 20). Gramsci breaks with Togliatti and Terracini, forming a 'communist education group' in opposition to their 'electionist communist fraction'.
Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder* published.
Bordiga drops abstentionism.
- Aug/Sept Milan lock-out leads to factory occupations through northern Italy.
- October Meeting in Milan to prepare a Communist fraction. Bordiga (Abstentionists); Gramsci and Terracini (various Ordinovisti); Bombacci and Misiano (left maximalists) and Repossi and Fortichiari for the Milanese left. Fascist attacks extend to peasant organisations in the north.
- Nov Imola convention of the united Communist fraction.
- Dec Weekly *L'Ordine Nuovo* closes down; the Turin edition of *Avanti!* becomes the daily *L'Ordine Nuovo*, with Gramsci as editor.
Massive lay-offs and wage cuts signal decline of factory occupations.

1921

- January PSI (17th) Livorno Congress; party splits when Serrati leadership, organised "unitary communist fraction", refuses to expel reformists. PCd'I founded. *L'Ordine Nuovo* becomes a daily organ of the new party.
- March March Action in Germany Tenth Congress of Bolshevik Party.
- April General elections: PCd'I wins 290,000 votes; PSI over 1,500,000. *Arditi del popolo* begin to form as fascist terror continues.
- June Giolitti government falls, Bonomi new Prime Minister. 3rd World Congress of the Communist International.
- August Conciliation Pact signed between PSI deputies and Fascists in parliament.
- Sept Fabrizio Maffi and Lazzari form a "Third Internationalist tendency" inside PSI.
- October PSI Milan Congress; Serrati wins majority for withdrawal from 3rd International.
- Nov PSI leaves the International.
- Dec Comintern Executive formulates the united front policy.

1922

- February *Alleanza del Lavoro* founded. (Union coalition initiated by railway workers' union.) First Enlarged Executive meeting of the Comintern; Italian delegates vote against the united front.
- March Second Congress of PCd'I at Rome; minority emerges, led by Tasca, for acceptance of Comintern line. *Rome Theses*, proposed by Bordiga accepted by large majority.
- April Conference of three Internationals in Berline attended by Bordiga. Growing rift with Russian delegates (Radek, Bukharin) over the 'Italian question'.
- May Gramsci goes to Moscow as delegate to Comintern. Stays in Moscow, including time in a sanatorium, until November 1923.
- June Second Enlarged Executive meeting of Comintern. Along with Gramsci, Bordiga, Ambrogi and Graziadei form Italian delegation. 2-week metalworkers' strike in northern Italy.
- July Facta government falls as fascist attacks on working class areas continue. PCd'I issues manifesto launching workers' government slogan at behest of ECCI.
- August *Alleanza del Lavoro* calls a 'legalitarian' general strike after initially opposing it. This fails as fascists issue 48 hour ultimatum and break the Alliance. Street fighting in working class zones. Decline in PCd'I membership.
- Sept PSI holds Rome Congress, expels reformists who form Unitary Socialist Party (PSU), led by Turati, Treves and Matteotti.
- Oct March on Rome. Mussolini administration formed with individuals from right-wing Popolari and Liberals.
- Nov Fourth World Congress of the Communist International; PCd'I delegates, under strong pressure from Russian Central Committee, accept principle of fusion with PSI. Bordiga proposes leaving the leadership of the party in Italy to the right-wing.

1923

- February Bordiga's arrest is followed by a massive round-up of Party militants.
- March Comintern convenes European anti-fascist conference in Frankfurt.
- April PSI congress in Milan produces a majority opposed to fusion.
- May 2nd and Two-and-a-half Internationals merge in Hamburg.
- June Third Enlarged Executive meeting of Comintern installs provisional "mixed" leadership of PCd'I, following Bordiga's arrest.
- October Platform of the Forty-Six issued in the Soviet Union. Trials of communists arrested in February. Bordiga acquitted.
- Nov Gramsci moves to Vienna.
- Dec In Russia, New Course discussion launched by Trotsky's articles in Pravda.

1924

- January Lenin dies.
- February *l'Unità* founded as official paper of the PCd'I.
- March *L'Ordine Nuovo* relaunched as a fortnightly.
- April General elections, in which the PCd'I wins 270,000 votes, the PSI 340,000 and the PSU 415,000.
- May Gramsci returns to Italy under cover of parliamentary immunity. (He was elected in his absence for the Veneto.)
Consultative conference of PCd'I near Como. Left have the majority.
- June PSU deputy Matteotti murdered by high-up fascists; opposition parties secede from parliament known as the Aventine Secession. Fifth World Congress of the Communist International calls for bolshevisation of the communist parties, criticised by Bordiga. Resignation of original Italian Executive: Bordiga, Fortichiari, Repossi and Grieco, accepted.
- July Fourth Enlarged Executive meeting of Comintern.
Double edition of *Prometeo*, PCd'I Executive bans further issues.
- August Third Internationalists from PSI fuse with PCd'I.
- Sept PCd'I launches slogan of "Workers' and Peasants' Committees".
Internationalists from PSI fuse with PCd'I.
- October Trotsky publishes *Lessons of October*.
Federal congress of PCd'I in Naples. 14-hour debate between Bordiga and Gramsci.
- Nov Communist deputies withdraw from the Aventine secession, after refusal of other opposition parties to convert assembly into a permanent "anti-parliament", and return to parliament.
- Dec Stalin launches attack on theory of "permanent revolution".

1925

- January Mussolini speech opens counter-attack which spells end of Matteotti crisis and brings complete fascist takeover.
- February First discussion of the "Russian question" in the Central Committee of the PCd'I.
- March Fifth Enlarged Executive meeting of Comintern, which reviews the progress of the Bolshevisation campaign. Bordiga absent. Gramsci present. Scoccimarro equates 'Trotskyism' with 'Bordigism' and calls it the biggest obstacle to bolshevisation.
- May Gramsci addresses parliament for the only time, on freemasonry.
PCd'I opens pre-Congress discussion.
- July Committee of Intesa dissolved.
- Nov Attempt to assassinate Mussolini by former PSU deputy Zaniboni fails; regime intensifies repression of opposition forces.

1926

- January Third Congress of PCd'I at Lyons (23rd-26th). Left are marginalised and theses of Left (Platform of the Left) rejected by 90.8% of votes. Bordiga and Venegoni, under threat of expulsion from the Party, are obliged to re-enter the Party Central Committee.
- Feb/Mar Sixth Enlarged Executive meeting of Comintern. Bordiga articulates opposition to theory of socialism in one country and defends right of the whole International to discuss the 'Russian question'.
- April United Opposition begins to form in Russia.
- October Bordiga letter to Karl Korsch argues against idea that Russian Revolution was a bourgeois revolution.
New attempt on Mussolini's life becomes pretext for total fascist dictatorship: all other political parties made illegal.
- Nov Comprehensive arrest of communist militants, including Gramsci, Damen, Bordiga, Maffi, Fortichiari, et.al. Of the Party Executive, only Togliatti, Ravera, Grieco and Tasca remain. The latter two decide to dissolve the Party until Moscow advises otherwise.
- Dec For a short time Gramsci, Damen and Bordiga are confined together on the island of Ustica before being sent to separate prisons.

1928

- April Formation of Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy at Pantin (Paris).
- June Gramsci, in failing health, along with other PCd'I leaders, condemned by Mussolini's Special Tribunal to 20 years imprisonment.
Prometeo, 2-monthly journal of fraction, published in Brussels.
- July Gramsci incarcerated with 5 other political detainees in Turi (Bari, southern Italy).

1929

Gramsci gets permission to write in his cell.
Trotsky expelled from Russia.
Onorato Damen, Luigi Repossì and Bruno Fortichiari expelled from the PCd'I.

1930

- March Bordiga expelled from PCd'I. Also Tresso, Ravazzoli and Leonetti expelled after contacting Trotsky.

1931

- April 4th PCd'I Congress held in Germany. Manifesto declares "*for the destruction of fascism and capitalism, for a Soviet Italy, for the dictatorship of the proletariat.*"
Monarchy overthrown and Republic declared in Spain.

1932

- Nov First issue of *Bilan*, French language monthly published by the Italian

Left fraction in France, so-called because it aimed to draw up a balance sheet of the defeat of the proletariat.

1933

Damen resumes political activity after being amnestied, although now under house arrest for 5 years.

Nov Gramsci transferred to Civitavecchia prison hospital.

Dec Gramsci moved again to a clinic at Formia, still under police supervision.

1934

Sept USSR joins League of Nations.

October Gramsci granted "conditional freedom" to leave the Formia clinic, but prevented from attending a more specialised hospital.

1935

Popular Front launched at 7th Comintern Congress.

Gramsci granted permission to transfer to hospital in Rome.

Fraction Congress changes name to Italian Fraction of the Communist Left and appeals for militants to abandon the old Parties. Damen re-arrested, then released.

1936

July Start of war in Spain.

August USSR accepts principle of non-intervention in Spain.

Oct First Soviet ship with supplies arrives in Spain.

Dec Stalin et al. letter to Largo Caballero urges winning over peasantry and urban bourgeoisie and drawing leader of Republican Party into the government "to prevent the enemies of Spain from regarding it as a communist republic and to forestall their intervention."

1937

Damen pursued by police who, according to Fascist records, suspect him of "distributing propaganda by the international left opposition against Comintern policies and against Stalinism in Spain."

April

21st Gramsci granted full liberty and plans to retire to Sardinia.

27th Gramsci, forty-six years old, dies from brain haemorrhage.

Onorato Damen (1893-1979) was among the revolutionary Marxists inspired by the Russian Revolution to split from Social Democracy. He was a member of the Communist Party of Italy at its foundation in 1921 and remained true to its revolutionary principles, even as soviet Russia degenerated into state capitalism and the Communist International became a tool of Russian foreign policy in the run-up to the second imperialist world war. By the summer of 1921 Damen was the target of Fascist hit squads. He was obliged to leave Italy for France where he worked with the young Communist Party (PCF) and edited the Italian version of L'Humanité until his return to Italy in 1924. Elected parliamentary deputy for Florence, he thus enjoyed some immunity from arrest. At the same time Antonio Gramsci also returned to Italy. Since May 1922 Gramsci had been in Russia, where he was persuaded of the need to install a 'mixed' leadership on the PCd'I after Bordiga's arrest in 1923. Damen was critical of this manoeuvre to establish a so-called Centrist leadership (notably Togliatti) on the Italian party and his worst fears were soon realised during the crisis provoked by the murder of the socialist deputy, Matteotti. Gramsci's bungling united front tactic of an 'Aventine secession' of deputies from parliament undermined the development of a more effective political resistance amongst the working class on the ground. Damen and others on the Left of the Party (who were still the majority of the membership) formed the Committee of Intesa in an attempt to combat the capitulation of the party under Gramsci's and Togliatti's leadership to 'Bolshevisation', or subservience to the Russian party. In 1926 he was arrested, along with Gramsci, Bordiga and hundreds of PCd'I members. Throughout Mussolini's dictatorship he survived between prison camps and house arrest. In 1929, whilst in prison, he was expelled from Togliatti's Communist Party for 'Leftism'. Ten years later, when Mussolini was reduced to a Nazi puppet and Italy became a battleground for both imperialisms, Damen quickly moved to re-establish a revolutionary political organisation – the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt). It condemned both sides in the war as imperialist fronts and called for the working class to abandon nationalism and pursue its own interests. This made Damen the target of Togliatti's hit men whose Russian-backed Italian Communist Party accused him of being in the pay of the Gestapo. He survived this period of turbulence and lived to see the transformation of the politically arid time of the Cold War and the post-war boom turn into a new search for a revolutionary solution as capitalism's inevitable economic crisis came back to haunt it. As ever, he was ready to encourage political discussion amongst internationalists, from the International Correspondence Committee he promoted in 1958 to the series of international conferences of the Communist Left which eventually began shortly before his death in the late 1970s.

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