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ANTONIO GRAMSCI: THE MAN

The concluding part of an article on the famous Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, by a lecturer in politics at Monash University, in ALK No. 1 (1998). Later articles will consider Gramsci's approach to Marxism, particularly his concept of hegemony, his views on the role of a socialist party in advanced capitalist countries and on the role of intellectuals and intellectual activity.

TWO FACTS MUST BE BORNE IN MIND in understanding Gramsci's thought in the _Ordine Nuovo_ period of 1919-1920. The first was the fact that he read as much Lenin as he could acquire after 1917 and disseminated it through the factories. The second is that even so, very little Leninism was reaching Western Europe before late 1920 and this meant a lopsided understanding of Lenin which is clear from Gramsci's work. In the years 1918-20 the October Revolution was often described as the revolution of the "soviets" and Lenin and Trotsky as leaders of the "soviet." The ruling idea was that the key to an understanding of the Russian revolution was an understanding of the role of the soviets. The nature of the bolshevist party was regarded as much less significant and until the second congress of the Communist International in August, 1920, which was formed to conduct the "world revolution" the nature of a communist party outside Russia was not regarded as important, even by the Russian leaders themselves. One of the earliest facts about the October revolution which Gramsci realised was the important role the soviets had played.

Almost contemporaneously with the formation of the Communist International in March, 1919, Gramsci, Togliatti, Tasca and Umberto Terracini, another Turin student, formed the paper _Ordine Nuovo_ (May, 1919). This paper was to become one of the most famous papers in Italian history although in its original form it only lasted two years. At first it was intended to be only a cultural journal. However, as Italy became more and more revolutionary and after the PSI became the first major socialist party of Western Europe to join the Comintern, socialists began
to ask themselves more and more how to conduct the revolution in Italy, where a revolutionary situation was rapidly developing.44
Having decided that the soviet was a universal form and not a Russian institution Gramsci looked around for something similarly in Italy and discovered the germs of the soviet system which could lead to the revolution in the commissioni interne of the Turin factories.45
The commissioni interne were akin to the English shop stewards committees. Gramsci proposed in Ordine Nuovo that they be developed into factory councils, consigli di fabbrica. These consigli could ultimately cover all factories and agricultural production in Italy and provide the basis for the socialist state after the revolution. In the meantime they would be the means whereby the worker would be made conscious of himself as part of a great productive process and taught that the managing of the socialist society was not beyond his power. Through this process the worker would attain true liberty.46
Gramsci felt that several problems making a revolution difficult could be solved through such a system. He felt that the nature of the Italian state had had an atomizing and alienating effect on its citizens; they became the "individual-citadini."47 This meant that in moments of radicalisation and worsening of conditions, such as those which prevailed after the First World War, the Italians became anarchist or libertarian.48 This in turn led to two developments in the leading circles of the socialist movement: either revolutionary adventurism or opposition to any attempts to take power at all.49 The development of the consigli di fabbrica would combat all these tendencies, by developing in the worker a consciousness of his social importance, preventing alienation; by combating anarchism through discipline; and by enabling the working class to take power already prepared to run the country.

In No. 7 of Ordine Nuovo in 1919 Gramsci launched an appeal to the very militant workers of Turin:
How can we confront the huge social forces which the war has born? How can we discipline these and give the existing political body which has the virtue of developing means, of continually being integrated until it becomes the skeleton of the socialist state in which the dictatorship of the proletariat will be incarnated? How can the present be wed to the future, satisfying the urgent necessities of the present and working sufficiently to create and "anticipate" the future?

He suggested that the socialist state already existed potentially in the organs of the working class, the commissioni interne, socialist clubs and peasant communities. They should be united and hierarchically ordered. In the first instance they should be united into regional committees. They should then demand that all state power be transferred to the consigli. He invited all "the best and most aware" workers to collaborate in this activity.
needed. His real originality (if we do not admit that arriving at Leninism without having read Lenin is original in itself) lay in his obtuse dicta and use of a wide knowledge of up-to-date Western European work in political science and sociology.

In *Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci argued that the main advantage of placing the consiglio in prime position in the creation of a dictatorship of the proletariat, and maintaining that the unions and then the socialist party were paece forms, lay in the fact that only in such a hierarchy could the workers reach an awareness of their ability to administer the state without the bourgeoisie. They would learn on the job their own all-important role in the capitalist state. They would also, because they were close to their social roles, more quickly discard their mythical, utopian, religious and petty bourgeois beliefs in favour of one based on their role in production. This mental readjustment was a sine qua non for revolution. It is important to note that emphasis on the importance of ideas precluded the theories developed later by Gramsci.

Gramsci argued deterministically in 1919-20 that the existing institutions of capitalism could not be used to conduct the revolution; nor, indeed, could those which had arisen in response to the capitalist system, that is the trade unions and the Socialist Party. He used the Michels thesis to indicate the manner in which such supposed proletarian institutions became estranged from the mass. Their leaders, he asserted, were too far from the mass to appreciate what the mass was feeling.

Nor did he admit that the state ushered in by the revolution would be a parliamentary democratic state. If too would be something completely new in which the communist party would at first be dominant.

Gramsci's thought on the role of the party went through several stages. The changes in his attitudes were determined both by the developments in Italy in 1919-20 and the influence of the Comintern on his ideas. They cannot be understood separate from these two factors. In 1919 the situation in Italy grew more and more unstable. It "felt" revolutionary. The Socialist Party proved unable to lead the proletariat to a revolution. It lacked both a programme of action and the will. Then, in October it affiliated to the Communist International and announced its commitment to the methods used in Russia. Shortly after Gramsci wrote an article called "The Party and the Revolution." This said that the PSI was the agent of a revolution being made by the complex of socio-economic conditions in which the masses were living. It was not the controller of the masses. Its job was to subtract from bourgeoisie democracy the "consensus" of the governed in the system. This was the negative function for the party. Its positive function consisted of diffusing in the masses via the new institutions in Idea (Weltanschauung) which would provoke a consciousness in the workers of the manner in which they would run the new society. The task of the Socialist Party consisted of convincing the masses that Italy under the current system of production was producing only half her needs. The only way out of the dilemma was to introduce a new social system. Four months later he wrote another article, revolution still being "like a spectre" over Europe. In this article he drew a distinction between the Socialist party and the Communist Party. The first had a multiclass base, the second a proletarian. The various classes supporting the first could have divergent interests. The second's followers saw their only salvation in revolution. The job of the PSI, while not neglecting the other classes, was to build a ruling class psychology in the proletariat proper.

How to carry out the revolution was the all important question. He called on the PSI to proceed with its task of educating the working class through the consiglio and to call a national congress of consigli. Perhaps more critical attitude towards the PSI was due to the admonition of the Comintern to the PSI to beware of the "reformists" in its midst. In the same number he tossed a determined attack on the "reformists." In mid-1920 the revolutionary wave was ebbing and already the Comintern was seeking to explain why the world revolution it had foretold for 1920 had not occurred. One of the reasons it advanced was that there was an absence of real revolutionary parties throughout the workers' movement. Before it announced its intention to have all Communist Parties conform to the bolshevik model, Gramsci wrote a further article calling for a renewal of the Socialist Party. This was delivered to the Milan congress held in April, 1920 just after a general strike had broken out in Turin. The PSI leaders and the congress did not support the strikers. This made the Ordinovisti and the Turin workers very bitter. Gramsci wrote (Togliatti delivered the report, which was ignored by the leadership led by G. M. Serra): "The present phase of the class struggle in Italy is the phase which precedes: either the conquest of political power by the proletariat in order to pass to a new mode of production and distribution which allow a renewal of productivity; or a tremendous reactionary triumph by the property class and the governing class." In this situation, because the socialist party was doing nothing to organise the masses, they were incapable of taking power. The PSI, despite its affirmations at the Bologna congress had remained a parliamentary party and done nothing about the
"refomists" in its midst. He warned that the working class would form a new party, which was cohesive and strongly disciplined. He gave warning that a faction would be created to convert the PSI.

After this date, his attacks in the PSI, a traditional socialist party came thick and fast. He accused the PSI of being primarily governed by the values of the bourgeoisie. In August, the Second Communist congress occurred. This instructed the PSI to adopt democratic centralism and to expel the reformists led by Turati. The Italian delegation resisted these directions, and Lenin announced that he thought that the line of the Ordinovisti was correct. Soon after the Turati workers occupied the factories of Turin. The PSI refused to extend the movement and the "reformists" attacked the protagonists of the occupation. Gramsci now turned on the PSI. It was no longer revolutionary he said; it was like the British Labour Party, a conglomerate of parties. He announced that at the next congress the communists would turn it into a communist party.47 At Leghorn in January, 1921 the communists needed to form the PCI. By that time the occupation of the factories had collapsed and the revolutionary wave was over in Italy.48

One of the main reasons for the impotence of Gramsci's group was its refusal to condense factional activity in the PSI or to build an opposition until it was too late. He himself admitted this later.51 Whether there could have been a revolution in Italy had his schemes been developed by the party will never be known. He felt so, and I am inclined to agree.

Anticipating the content of later articles on his theory, I will point out here that the policies advised for socialists in Gramsci's Ordine Nuovo period nearly all conflict with his later theories. The charge of inconsistency can be avoided if we see that conditions changed—the theories he was to evolve later were for advanced industrial or capitalist societies in a state of comparative social stability. In 1919-20 he was advancing theories to cope with a revolutionary situation. He himself recognized that they were methods for peculiar or particular circumstances.52 On the other hand it should also be remembered that he was still groping towards a clarification of his ideas at this time and greatly influenced by the Leninian he read. Even so, at this time there were already in embryo some of his future thoughts, and I shall refer back to these in other articles.

The next phase of Gramsci's life lasted from early 1921 until 1938 when he was arrested by the Fascist regime and jailed. He remained in jail until a short time before his death in 1937. This phase, too, was characterised by "deficit," although there can also be discerned a retreat from the values of Leninism as imposed by the Comintern.

In January, 1921 the Communist Party was formed at Leghorn after the maximalist majority, led by G. Serra, had refused to implement the Twenty One conditions of membership in the PSI. The communist party was rather heterogeneously composed at first. Apart from Gramsci's group there was the "autonomist" group led by Amadeo Bordiga and an extreme-left socialist group. Gramsci's Ordinovisti group was recognised by all as the leading intellectual group but Gramsci allowed the leading positions in the party to fall into the hands of Bordiga and his followers. Only Terraiani was on the first executive committee of the PCI and he had been the least "Gramscian" of Gramsci's followers in 1919-20. Gramsci thus allowed control of the party to slip into the hands of a group with which he had never really seen eye to eye and which had opposed him on various occasions.55

Though the first communist leadership did not realise it, there were two main problems to be faced in 1921-22; the menace of fascism and reconciliation with the socialists. The leadership was strongly "deficit" kept hoping for a revolution and regarded the "maximalists" as worse than the "reformists."56 Their attitude thus prejudiced the disastrous policies of the German Communist Party in 1928-33.

This leadership, perhaps drunk with the revolutionary fervour of the past, continued to call for revolution, and presented it as just around the corner. It neglected to unite to fight against fascism. Squadrismo was growing worse throughout the year 1921, however, and the Socialist Party entered what Nenni calls its period of defeat. They concluded a Pact of Pacification with the fascists, which while it temporarily resulted in a disconnection of the brawling, looked like a capitulation to the class enemy. The Communists immediately dissociated themselves from this Pact and Gramsci pointed out its short-sightedness.57 Both the PCI and the PSI lost members.58

Late in 1921 the Comintern, recognising that the communist movement was on the defensive and that the revolutionary wave had subsided, announced the introduction of the united front. This instructed the communists to reunite with the socialists to fight reaction and to play down revolution until the time was more appropriate. Coming so soon after the split, these directions seemed the result of opportunism to the Bordiga leadership. At the Rome congress of March 1922 they drew up these which were primarily an attack on the united front. These denied the
Soviet interest. He was present at the Fourth Comintern Congress at which Bordiga was also present. There he supported the motion while Bordiga opposed it, accepting the decisions of the congress only for disciplinary reasons.40

On his return to Italy, Bordiga showed that he was not prepared to carry out the directives of the Comintern to us; i.e., with the Socialists. Besides the tump of the socialists caused technical problems to unification. Quite clearly, at this stage and throughout 1928, the former Ordinovisti group, with the exception of Gramsci, supported Bordiga’s position. Togliatti, Terracini and others spoke out against the move of fusion.41 Only the right wing of the party, led by Tasca, was firmly in favour of the united front. Gramsci’s position can be gauged from his fear of the Right. He was still crouching to the left emotionally but he ascended to return to the Ordinovisti group to pressure Bordiga into carrying out the Comintern line and failed. The hostility of communists towards the socialists was too great.42

In November 1923 Gramsci moved to Vienna, perhaps in order to be closer to the party, whose more the fascists had come to power the previous year’ had been operating in conditions de facto illegality. He had now given up hope of recreating the Ordine Nuovo group but he continued his activity of organising a new leadership for the PCI, which, now that Bordiga was in jail, was shared by the right wing and the followers of Bordiga in the party. Gramsci’s formal enemies were still supporting Bordiga, who from prison was circulating material opposing the united front. The near collapse of the socialist movement, including the communists, in early 1924, may have been one reason why Gramsci managed to create an opposition in the party in that year. First one, and then the other, of the leading men of the party: Togliatti, Terracini and Scoccanaro, came over to his position in favour of working with the vanguards of the Socialist Party. Gramsci tolerated no compromise with Bordiga. The triumph of his line in the party leadership came at a meeting of the Central Committee held on 18th April 1924. The Comintern announced that it had no further complaint about the activities of the PCI. A month later the communists and the tump of the Socialists ran on a joint list in the elections, winning fifteen seats. Gramsci was elected for the Veneto electorate and returned to Italy after an absence of two years. He now had parliamentary immunity from fascist persecution.

On his return he immediately set about preparing the PCI for clandestine activity. He found that many of the PCI members still supported Bordiga. This made his task more difficult. Meanwhile fascist repression grew worse and worse. Within the PCI,
opposition to the Fifth Comintern Congress demand that it "bolshhevize" itself grew more acute.

Up to 1925 Gramsci had proved a loyal follower of the Comintern, leading the opposition to Bordiga in support of the Comintern policy and supporting the bolshevization of the PCI. In 1925 and 1926 his attitudes began to undergo a change. Had he remained free he might well have joined Bordiga, who was expelled as a Trotskyite in 1927, in the limbo of communist non-persons. The change in attitude was the result of a number of developments. First, Gramsci had had time to meditate on the nature of the Comintern and begin to have second thoughts about its usefulness and its function. For it was now in 1921 that the Comintern started to come under the yoke of Stalin and the transfer of faction fights from the CPSU (B) to the Comintern began. Gramsci was not averse to the introduction of bolshevist discipline to the PCI provided this did not mean that the PCI would be muted through Russian carelessness or in Russian interests. The Comintern had the moral obligation of duty towards its sections. However, the process of bolshevization coincided with directions for more aggressive activity by the PCI. While in 1922-4 discipline had coincided with the imposition of what Gramsci regarded as a correct line of working with socialists this new line did not. He himself accused the Comintern of applying irrelevant Russian methods to Italy. Interestingly, this had been the position of the PSI before Livorno and Bordiga after 1921. Gramsci wrote in 1926 a letter censured by the PCI and addressed to the Russian leaders: Contrary, in these nine years... you have been the organizing and motivating element for the revolutionary forces of all countries. But today you are destroying your work. You are degrading, and running the risk of nullifying, the winning function that the Communist Party of the USSR exercised through Lenin's effige. To us, it seems that the violent passion of Russian questions is making you lose sight of the international aspects of the Russian question itself, makes you forget that your duty as Russian institution can and must be fulfilled only within the framework of the interest of the Communist International.

He added with reference to bolshevization unity and discipline in this case cannot be mechanical and compulsory; they must stem from loyalty and conviction and not from those of an imposed or hygienic nature from thought of escape or surprise service.

This letter repeatedly never reached the leaders of the CPSU being "put in the wastepaper basket" by Togliatti.

However, although Gramsci was already showing doubts about Russian developments and certainly did not agree with the communist premise which ruled thereafter that the first duty of the communism was to secure the Soviet Union, I do not feel that we can distinguish the lines of his future thought in the 1926 Lyons theses of the PCI, which were the last official documents he drew up. On the whole these documents were leftist in tenor and have been admitted by Togliatti to be partly "leftist" in tenor. Most of them were concerned with the bolshevization of the PCI which was secured to some extent at this congress. It is true that there was considerable attention paid to Gramsci's speech to the tactics called for by the conditions of Italy, which he clarified as semi-industrialized. However, at this time it was Comintern policy for parties to take into account the national conditions of the country. Furthermore, Gramsci's analysis of Italy was fairly similar to that given by the Comintern. We have now to read into early communica documents traces of national communism. A case can only be made out if they are in conflict with the ruling Comintern directions. In this case they were not. So with Gramsci, we can only say that he was reformulating his thoughts and his attitudes at this time.

It was after he was sent to prison under the Exceptional Laws which were passed by Mussolini in late 1926 that his thought really started to develop in new directions. Had he been outside the prison where what he was doing could have been observed he would almost certainly have been expelled from the PCI. So, another factor in the understanding of Gramsci's thought is the fact that he was able to write as a communist without being subjected to the moral and political pressures placed on communists by their own leaders in the years which followed 1926. Of course, he was subjected to other pressures. The object of the court in sending him to jail for more than twenty years was to "prevent this brain from working for twenty years." The fascist regime did its best to make things difficult for him. Only his perseverance enabled him to receive the enormous amount of reading material which provided the source of his Prison Notebooks. At first he was imprisoned on the island of Ustica off the South of Italy, but he spent most of his term in Turi di Bari in miserable conditions, designed to kill him. Eventually the regime succeeded, releasing him just before his death. Always in poor health, he suffered agonies from various ailments, including tuberculosis.

He complained very little, and to the last maintained a clear mind of great brilliance. Unlike his earlier work which was written on the spot of the moment for political purposes, his work in prison was "pur ewig", for history, and indeed it seems to be of lasting value.

In it there came to fruition his knowledge of Italian conditions, of Marxism and of Czeeslan idealism, synthesized into a marxist theory for advanced industrial countries. This is the theory I will discuss in future articles.
34 See J. Hulse, The Forming of the Communist International, (Stanford, 1964). Australian readers may not assume that it took as long for Lenin to reach Italy as it did to reach Australia where What is to be Done? was only read in 1925. Taglialat has indicated that Italian translations of the contemporary works, i.e. non theoretical works of Lenin were reaching Italy in late 1919.
36 A. B. Davidson, op. cit.
37 M. Guarneri, I comizi di Fabbrice, (II Sole, n.d.)
39 Ibid., pp. 4, 14 and penins.
40 Ibid., pp.25, 72, 311, 379.
41 Ibid., pp.403.
42 A. Tagli, Il Mondo, 25 August 1932.
44 Ibid., p.446.
46 Ibid., p.67.
47 Ibid., pp.91ff.
48 Ordine Nuovo, p.117.
49 Ibid., p.181.
50 Some writers maintain that the peak was reached in April 1929, Cammert, op. cit., p.101.
51 P. Tagliatelli, Antonio Gramsci etc, pp.43ff.
52 Ordine Nuovo, p.98.
53 For an assessment of Terracini see P. Cohon, in Rivoluzione Liberale, 2, IV. 1922 in Valeri, op. cit., pp.59-6.
54 E.g. Bordiga had opposed Gramsci at the Second Comiteto Congress.
56 Original letter of E Caom. FCI dated 6 July 1921.
57 About 100,000 signatories did not renews membership in either party.
61 P. Tagliatelli, formazione op, cit, pp.55, 142. passim.
62 Ibid., pp.46-7.
63 Tava, op. cit., Il Mondo, 15 September 1933.
64 See J. Cammert, op. cit., p.170ff.
65 Tagliatelli, Il Partito Comunista Italiano, (Milan), p.91.
66 Lettere dei Carriera, p.58.