



Gramsci and the revolutionary Tradition

Tue, 29/09/1987 - 23:00

An article by Andy Cleminson and Keith Hassell about the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci. In 1926 he was arrested by Mussolini's fascists and two years later sentenced after a show trial to twenty years imprisonment. Although released in 1937 he was too ill to survive. He died in April that year.

The commemoration of his death has once again provided the occasion for quite distinct tendencies on the left to wrestle over his legacy. Marxism Today (MT), the journal of the Euro-Stalinist CPGB, reminded its audience in its April issue that:

Without doubt, Gramsci has been the most important single theoretical influence on Marxism Today over the last decade.⁽¹⁾

This influence was filtered through the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Yet the PCI had not always been so ready to recognise Gramsci's contribution to Marxism. It was ten years after Gramsci's death before the PCI decided to publish an edition of Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, suitably censored to remove any favourable references to Trotsky or hints of opposition to Stalin's policies in the 1930s.

But the crisis of Stalinism after 1956 produced an ideological vacuum in the ranks of the western Stalinist parties. In Gramsci the PCI found an 'Italian Marxism' that could fit the bill. It could claim continuity with the formation of the PCI, yet distance itself from the 'excesses' of Stalinism in the 1930s; it could claim to find in Gramsci's work a critique of 'statism' that could allow it to reject the monolithism of Stalinism without collapsing into social-democratism or conceding to the revolutionary (i.e. Trotskyist) critique of Stalinism.

The PCI were to argue that Gramsci's conception of 'hegemony' lent support to their policy in the 1970s for parliamentary backing to the anti-working class government of Christian-Democracy (the 'historic compromise').

In the last few years, however, the reformist trajectory of the PCI has led this party to put some distance between itself and Gramsci. Earlier this year the PCI leader, Natta, claimed that Gramsci was too 'fundamentalist'. It is no surprise, therefore, to find it increasingly common for anti-Stalinists to lay claim to Gramsci's heritage.

Fifty years ago in an obituary to Gramsci the Italian Trotskyist Pietro Tresso said it was vital to not allow the Stalinists to 'make use of Gramsci's personality for their own purposes'⁽²⁾. This remains the case. But modern centrism attempts to go further. For example Livio Maitan's appreciation of the Italian revolutionary's life in the Mandeliste review of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International seeks to establish that there is a 'completely revolutionary core' to Gramsci's work and that 'Revolutionary Marxists have the right and the duty to claim the heritage of Antonio Gramsci'⁽³⁾

The Socialist Workers Party (GB), while correctly taking Stalinism to task for seeking to depict Gramsci as a reformist, have, like Maitan, failed completely to generalise out of the Italian revolutionist's life a communist appraisal of his contribution to Marxism. John Molyneux says of the years 1922-26:

'Even a casual glance at Gramsci's writings of this period show that he remains firmly on the terrain of revolution.'⁽⁴⁾

Chris Harman's pamphlet for the SWP 'Gramsci versus reformism' adopts a similarly one-sided view of Gramsci. For Harman it is good enough that Gramsci believed in revolution not reform, never abandoned the insurrectionary road and recognised both the need for a Bolshevik-type party and the seeds of a workers' state lodged within the factory councils' movement.

In essence, Harman, Molyneux and Maitan only display an inverted error to the Stalinists. In their account Gramsci's contribution to the PCI up until his arrest is unproblematic and shows him to stand four square on the ground of the revolutionary Comintern. The 'Lyon Theses' of 1926 are represented as the pinnacle of his political work. His work after that time, as found in the Prison Notebooks, whilst containing certain errors, does not represent a rupture with the revolutionary Gramsci. For Maitan, 'there is an undeniable continuity in Gramsci's thought and approach from his writings in the years of the Russian revolution . . . to the 1935 notes when the Notebooks end(5)'. 'In Harman's view, it was simply that the fascists succeeded:

'. . . in preventing his Marxism from fully realising the potential displayed in L'Ordine Nuovo and the 'Lyon Theses'?(6)

In effect these accounts only serve to underline the truth of Trotsky's adage that it is very difficult for centrists to recognise centrism in others. It is necessary to analyse things more deeply than this. It is precisely because the present day SWP or USFI judge matters from a series of revolutionary principles and disdain to measure their own (or others) contributions by the yardstick of programme, that they fail to assess Gramsci's political theory and practice against the background of the leadership and policies of the Comintern in the period 1919-26.

When analysed from this perspective it is possible to show that while Gramsci was never a reformist, his politics were in serious measure at variance with the practice and theory of Lenin and Trotsky while they were in the leadership of the Comintern. In short, it can be seen that in fact Gramsci traversed a classical centrist evolution, in his case from ultra-leftism to right-centrism .

Gramsci 1915-21

Born in Ales on the island of Sardinia, Gramsci went to Turin in 1911 to study at the University. It was there that he was to come into contact with the powerful Turin labour movement whose centre of gravity was to be found in the Fiat car plants and related industries. In 1913 he joined the Socialist Party (PSI).

Drawn more and more into the work of the party Gramsci gave up his studies in November 1915 to join the editorial board of the PSI paper *Il Grido del Popolo*. Within months he was writing for the Turin edition of the official PSI daily *Avanti!*. In these years as an active militant but before the Russian Revolution of 1917 shook the foundations of European social democracy, Gramsci's politics were a considerable distance from those of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, despite the fact that Italy and Russia presented very similar strategic and tactical tasks. By the time Gramsci became a conscious revolutionary in 1915 the Bolsheviks had gone through the experience of one revolution and counter-revolution and in the process had clearly formulated their positions on the revolutionary party and the agrarian question. The implications of these positions were to elude the lefts in the PSI until 1921. By 1915 Lenin had come to grasp the reasons for the collapse of the Second International in the face of imperialist war and the need for a complete political break with it. Gramsci and the left in the PSI were ignorant of Lenin's attitude to these events.

Gramsci's own political apprenticeship had been markedly different to Lenin's. It was not the classically 'orthodox' Marxist tradition of Kautsky and the German SPD or Plekhanov which formed Gramsci's background but rather a specifically Italianised version of Marxism which found its way to Gramsci through the works of Croce, Labriola and Gentile. It was to these figures that Gramsci turned for a remedy to the weaknesses that he perceived in the practice and theory of the right wing in the Second International and the PSI. Gramsci felt that the passivity and fatalism of this trend was itself related to an original flaw in the historical materialism of Marx and Engels. He considered that Marx's critique of political economy as found in *Capital* was in fact mechanical materialism which ignored the role and power of the subjective factor (the working class) to become conscious of its own exploitation and rise up to overthrow a system regardless of economic conditions. Thus he saw the materialism of Marxism as deficient and in need of a return

to Hegel, which Croce advocated, in order to inject a dose of idealism and provide an adequate account of the subjective political factor in revolutionary politics.

Lenin and Trotsky's approach to the problems of the Russian Revolution were very different to this. As early as 1899 Lenin, in polemics with the Narodniks, argued against their mechanistic interpretation of Marx's political economy which led them to conclude that the backwardness of Russia's internal market meant that the development of capitalism in Russia could be avoided. As early as 1905 Trotsky outlined in his theory of 'permanent revolution' that Russian capitalism had to be understood in the context of the uneven and combined development of capitalism on a world scale. In alliance with European, especially French, capitalism, the Tsarist autocracy had overseen the rapid extension of capitalism in Russia. Precisely because of this both Lenin and Trotsky contested the legal Marxist view, however, which insisted that because of this development the leadership of the bourgeois revolution against the Tsar fell to the Russian bourgeoisie.

They proved that the weakness of an indigenous Russian bourgeoisie and the social weight of the Russian proletariat combined to guarantee that the former would bloc with reaction against the working class when faced with a real fight to force through bourgeois democratic demands.

Whereas for Gramsci the revolution in backward Italy had to be carried through despite its social relations through an act of will, for Lenin and Trotsky the revolution in backward Russia would occur precisely because of the contradictions in the material fabric of Russian capitalism. The flaws in Gramsci's methodological grasp of Marxism betrayed a real weakness in his grasp of historical materialism. For a while in the 1920's, as Gramsci was propelled towards the positions of the revolutionary Comintern, the significance of these weaknesses became obscured. The full significance of them were only to be fully revealed in the Prison Notebooks in his discussion of 'civil society' and the 'state'.

Gramsci and the Russian Revolution

It was with this method that Gramsci greeted the Russian Revolution of 1917. While welcoming it as a 'proletarian act . . . [which] must naturally result in a socialist regime'(7), he regarded it as a confirmation of his own view of Marxism. He considered it a 'Revolution against Das Kapital' and saw in the Bolsheviks' work 'the continuation of Italian and German idealist thought, and which in Marx was contaminated by positivistic and naturalistic incrustations.'(8)

Yet despite this attack on 'Marxism' in methodological terms his real target was the Menshevik strategy which believed that there was a:

' . . . fatal necessity for a bourgeoisie to be formed in Russia, for a capitalist era to open, before the proletariat might even think of rising up, of their own class demands, of their revolution.'(9)

In Lenin he saw the kind of leader that could force the pace of history by an act of organised will rather than someone who could give a conscious expression of the social contradictions in Russian society.

As the revolutionary crisis deepened in Italy in the years after the Russian Revolution Gramsci had occasion to reflect further on the lessons that could be learned from Lenin. In August 1917 workers in Turin led an insurrection against the local state which was supported by a general strike throughout the whole of the Piedmont region. Eventually defeated at the cost of 500 lives and another 2,000 casualties the Turin workers refused to be subdued. The working class movement rose again in an unprecedented manner during the years 1919-20. In these years the PSI grew from 81,000 in 1919 to 216,000 in 1920. The trade union federation under the direction of the PSI—the GCL—mushroomed from 320,000 to 2.3 million between 1914 and 1920.

In April 1919 Gramsci with others set up the paper *L'Ordine Nuovo*. Very quickly Gramsci steered it away from a simple diet of abstract propagandism with a heavy emphasis on cultural items towards a paper that sought to transform the growing movement of factory committees into something akin to the soviets in Russia. In June he wrote of the workers' state:

?This state does not pop up by magic: the Bolsheviks worked for eight months to spread and make their slogans concrete: all power to the Soviets, and the Soviets were already known to the Russian workers in 1905. Italian communists must treasure the Russian experience and save on time and labour.?(10)

In October 1919 the PSI affiliated to the Comintern and the following month fought a general election on a programme which called for the dictatorship of the proletariat. They won the largest bloc of seats in the new parliament?156 seats out of 508. In early 1920 the PSI went on to win control in over half the municipal councils. Without question the Italian workers were seeking the path of revolution.

By the spring of 1920 the struggle in the factories had risen to a higher stage with the formation of the Internal Commissions which enabled the workers to control whole aspects of the factory. Throughout the summer of 1920 in excess of a half a million workers were involved in the commissions and councils. Gramsci grasped exactly what was at stake:

?Under the capitalists the factory was a miniature state, ruled over by a despotic board. Today after the workers occupations, this despotic power in the factories has been smashed; the right to choose passed into the hands of the working class. Every factory that has industrial executives has become an illegal state, a proletarian republic living from day to day, awaiting the outcome of events.?(11)

But this was the crux of the matter: how to direct the ?outcome of events?? How to turn dual power in the factories into a challenge for national state power? Here Gramsci?s weaknesses over the party question were cruelly exposed.

Certainly the maximalist leadership around Serrati were guilty of refusing to take responsibility for organising the working class through the party to prepare for the seizure of state power. But Gramsci had always failed to strive for a revolutionary communist party. Even after the affiliation to the Comintern Gramsci was reluctant to fight the Turati reformist wing up to the point of expulsions. He did not even share Bordiga?s grasp of the need to organise to fight for one?s factional views on a national scale within the PSI.

It is a remarkable fact then that Harman in his pamphlet should skate over the failings of Gramsci and the party with the remark that when it came to valuing the role of Marxist intervention in the class struggle:

?His own activity in 1919-20 and 1924-26 was a shining (although not, of course, perfect) example of such intervention.?(12)

Lenin and Trotsky were much harder on the failings of all sections in the PSI. Trotsky said of the PSI:

?The Party carried on agitation in favour of the soviet power, in favour of the hammer and sickle, in favour of Soviet Russia, etc. The Italian working class en masse took this seriously and entered the road of open revolutionary struggle. But precisely at the moment when the party should have drawn all the practical and political conclusions from its own agitation it became scared of its responsibility and shied away, leaving the rear of the proletariat unprotected.?(13)

Lenin was equally harsh:

?Did a single communist show his mettle when the workers seized the factories in Italy? No. At the time there was as yet no communism in Italy.?(14)

In fact Gramsci retrospectively was a lot harder on himself than Harman is prepared to be. In 1924 he wrote:

In 1919/20 we made extremely serious mistakes which ultimately we are paying for today. For fear of being called upstarts and careerists we did not form a faction and organise this throughout Italy. We were not ready to give the Turin councils an autonomous directive centre, which could have exercised an immense influence throughout the country for fear of a split in the unions and of being prematurely expelled from the Socialist Party.?(15)

It was this quality of self-criticism?no matter how closely connected personally to the events and how costly the

mistakes proved a quality possessed by all great revolutionists, that enabled Gramsci to turn to the Comintern.

The Formation of the PCI

The failure of the PSI in the revolutionary situation in Italy in 1920 did at least force the left in the party to finally break with the reformist leadership. The Communist Party of Italy (PCI) was finally formed in January 1921 at Livorno. It was established in a period of ebb in the international class struggle; in Italy's case a period of strengthening reaction and the growth of fascism.

At its founding conference the PCI had between 40,000 and 60,000 members. By the time of Mussolini's march on Rome (a fascist coup) in October 1922 the party had shrunk to 25,000. Under the impact of the first round of repression that followed membership fell to around 5,000 by early 1923.

In these difficult years the PCI's leadership found itself in conflict with the Comintern's leadership as it sought to develop its perspectives for the early 1920's. By the time of the PCI's formation there had already been two Comintern congresses (1919, 1920). The perspectives and tactics outlined at these had been designed to take full advantage of the crisis of the bourgeoisie in Europe and the weakness of social democracy. It was a time of resolute splits with reformism and the formation of communist parties, of preparing for the seizure of power.

By the time of the PCI's founding congress and the Comintern's Third Congress in June/July 1921 the situation was changing. Opportunities had been lost, the bourgeoisie had endured the worst and survived. It gathered confidence and returned to the offensive. Social democracy, despite its treacherous aid to the ruling class, had been strengthened. A re-evaluation of perspectives and tactics was essential.

This reassessment was clearest around the question of the united front tactic. This tactic, applied by the Bolsheviks in the years leading up to the revolution, was codified and generalised in the Third and Fourth Congresses of the Comintern in 1921 and 1922. With reformism rather than communism in the ascendancy it was essential to break the working class from reformist and centrist organisations.

The resolution on tactics at the Fourth Congress stated:

"The systematically organised international capitalist offensive against all the gains of the working class has swept across the world like a whirl wind . . . is forcing the working class to defend itself.

There is consequently an obvious need for the united front tactic. The slogan of the Third Congress, "To the masses?", is now more relevant than ever . . . Using the united front tactic means that the communist vanguard is at the forefront of the day to day struggle of the broad masses for their most vital interests. For the sake of this struggle communists are even prepared to negotiate with the scab leaders of the social democrats."(16)

Of course, merciless criticism of the shortcomings and treachery of the leaders of the reformist parties and unions was obligatory if this joint action was to lead to the strengthening of the Communist Party.

The PSI rejected this outlook. Moreover in 1921 there was hardly an ounce of difference in the political outlook of Gramsci and the ultra-left leadership grouped around Amadeo Bordiga. Both resisted attempts to implement fully the Comintern's line of the Third and Fourth Congresses and instead gravitated towards the ultra-left positions of Bukharin who, in Trotsky's words:

" . . . fought against the policy of the united front and the transitional demands, proceeding from his mechanical understanding of the permanence of the revolutionary process."(17)

In December 1921 the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) issued a document outlining its united front policy towards the socialist parties and the trade unions. In January 1922 the Comintern published an appeal to the international working class based upon it. A month later an enlarged meeting of the ECCI took place with representatives of the PCI present to discuss the united front question at which the PCI delegates were in a minority.

At the same time as these events the PCI leaders, including Gramsci, drew up theses for the forthcoming Rome Congress of the PCI. They were published in January 1922 and revealed just how far the PCI was from Comintern thinking.

At one level the 'Rome Theses' accepted that there was no contradiction between:

'... participation in the struggles for contingent and limited objectives, and the preparation of the final and general revolutionary struggle.' (18)

Indeed, to this end the PCI agreed to participate:

'... in the organisational life of all forms of the proletariat's economic organisation open to workers of all political faiths ... which involves entering into the thick of struggle and action and helping the workers to derive the most useful experience from them.' (19)

But the PCI refused to contemplate agreements for common action between different political parties despite the fact that the PSI continued to hold the allegiance of a majority of the vanguard workers in Italy. Whereas the PCI would consider supporting:

'the demands put forward by the left parties ... of such a kind that is appropriate to call upon the proletariat to move directly to implement them ... the Communist Party will propose them as objectives for a coalition of trade union organisms, avoiding the setting-up of committees to direct the struggle and agitation in which the Communist Party would be represented and engaged alongside other political parties.' (20)

It believed that only in this way would the PCI remain:

'... free from any share in responsibility for the activity of the parties which express verbal support for the proletariat's cause through opportunism and with counter-revolutionary intentions.' (21)

This distinction between trade union and political blocs was an artificial one when approached from a correct understanding of the united front. Such an approach agrees to struggle for limited political or economic demands if they mobilise broad layers in a fight for them and their achievement would be a limited gain for the working class, strengthening its political independence and organisation thus taking the proletariat further along the path of revolution. The communists do not take responsibility for the failure of the socialists in either the economic or the political sphere.

The danger of the PCI approach is that it implies opportunism in relation to the trade union united front, only to be compensated for by a rigid sectarianism in the political field for fear of the consequences of such opportunism on the communist party. For example the Rome Theses stated that:

'Communists taking part in struggles in proletarian economic organisms led by socialists, syndicalists or anarchists will not refuse to follow their actions unless the masses as a whole, in a spontaneous movement, should rebel against it.' (22)

It is this attitude to spontaneity, embedded in the very foundations of Gramsci's politics, that motivated the PCI's ultra-leftism. Years later Gramsci admitted that such positions were 'essentially inspired by Crocean philosophy' (23). Spontaneous economic or trade union struggles are good in and of themselves and can be followed uncritically. Political struggles, unless under the leadership of the PCI are not. But 'bitter polemics' and prophecies of treachery will eventually lead the masses to break with the PSI. Such was the PCI method.

The twin dangers of opportunism and sectarianism come through clearly in a passage from the theses which manages to get the method of the united front completely the wrong way round:

'It [the PCI] cannot propose a tactic with an occasional and transitory criterion, reckoning that it will be able subsequently, at the moment when such a tactic ceases to be applicable, to execute a sudden switch and change of front,

transforming its allies of yesterday into enemies. If one does not wish to compromise one's links with the masses and their reinforcement at the very moment when it is most essential that these should come to the fore, it will be necessary to pursue in public and official declarations and attitudes a continuity of method and intention that is strictly consistent with the uninterrupted propaganda and preparation for the final struggle. (24)

For Lenin and Trotsky, the making of principled agreements and the breaking of them when one's 'allies' by their irresoluteness or treachery faced with carrying through this agreement transform themselves into 'enemies' represents precisely a 'continuity of method' that prepares the way to the 'final struggle'.

Gramsci stood by this PCI position through 1922 and the Fourth World Congress and continued his bloc with the Bordigists in the June 1923 Enlarged Executive meeting of the Comintern leadership. This meeting, at which Trotsky and Zinoviev headed a unified Executive delegation, witnessed the PCI majority (including Gramsci) and the minority around Tasca argue out their differences. Trotsky backed Tasca's minority report critical of the record of the PCI leadership.

This report outlined how the PCI had obstructed the Fourth Congress' decision to seek fusion between the PCI and the PSI by imposing ultimatic conditions. While minimising publicity of the call for fusion the PCI did publish an editorial which characterised the PSI as a 'corpse', which of course played into the hands of the anti-fusionists in the PSI who were able to play 'on the 'patriotism' of workers who feel a certain attachment to their party'(25). The PCI showed just how little they had adopted the united front tactic of Lenin and Trotsky when they further wrote in *Il Lavoratore* in May 1923:

'We conceive the tactic of blocs and of the united front as a means to pursue the struggle against those who betray the proletariat on a new level . . . That is why we have proposed it.(26)

As Tasca and the Comintern leadership concluded of Gramsci and the PSI majority:

'The conception which these comrades have of the party and its relations with the masses is perfectly designed to maintain the 'sect' mentality which is one of the most serious defects of our organisation'(27)

Gramsci's Objections

Beyond his flawed attitude to spontaneity there were other reasons behind Gramsci's opposition to the Comintern's policy. At a conjunctural, tactical level he resisted it because he felt that the rightist minority in the PCI around Tasca who supported the Comintern theses would be strengthened and that they represented a liquidationist tendency in the PCI who had not fully broken with the politics of the PSI and who resisted the necessary re-orientation to illegal work in conditions of fascist repression. In June 1923 he said that:

'The attitude of the Comintern and the activity of its representatives is bringing disunity and corruption into the communist ranks. We are determined to struggle against the elements who would liquidate our Party.(28)

In short, Gramsci is indicating that he felt that it was necessary to bloc with the abstentionists around Bordiga, despite differences with them in order to complete the belated break with reformism and centrism in the period 1921/22. Some confirmation of this is found in a letter he wrote to the PCI leaders inside Italy in February 1924. He argued that he accepted the PCI's 'Rome Theses' on tactics:

' . . . only for contingent motives of party organisation and declared myself in favour of a united front right through to its normal conclusion in a workers' government'(29)

In fact no record of such an opposition at that time exists and this letter was written after Gramsci had changed his position on the Comintern's Fourth Congress resolutions and had decided to break with Bordiga. If true, however, it would have been an unprincipled position to have taken and one which only served to further fatally delay the crystallisation of a truly Bolshevik PCI.

But there is a far deeper reason for Gramsci's unbending attitude to the politics of Lenin and Trotsky in these years. It was based on a conception of differing strategies for the 'east' and 'west' in Europe. Unless we understand this conception of Gramsci's we cannot grasp how and why he was to change his attitude to the Fourth Congress resolutions without at the same time correcting his false political methodology.

The notion of 'east' and 'west' was less a question of geography and more a matter of political economy. For Gramsci the 'east' consisted of the 'backward' capitalist world whereas the 'west' was the advanced world of Western Europe. This dividing line was essential to Gramsci's opposition to the Comintern. He wrote:

'In Germany the movement tending towards the establishment of a social-democratic government is based on the working class masses; but the tactic of the united front has no value except for industrial countries, where the backward workers can hope to be able to carry on a defensive activity by conquering a parliamentary majority. Here [in Italy] the situation is different . . . If we launched the slogan of a workers' government and tried to implement it, we would return to the socialist ambivalence, when the party was condemned to inactivity because it could not decide to be either solely a party of workers or solely a party of peasants . . . The trade union united front, by contrast, has an aim which is of primary importance for political struggle in Italy . . .

'When one speaks of a political united front, and hence of a workers' government, one must understand a 'united front' between parties whose social base is furnished only by industrial and agricultural workers and not by peasants . . .

'In Italy there do not exist, as in Germany, exclusively workers' parties between which a political united front too can be conceived. In Italy the only party with such a character is the Communist Party.'(30)

After he had broken from Bordiga, Gramsci was to accurately describe the former's rejection of such tactics as based on the reasoning that:

'Since the working class is in a minority in the Italian working population, there is a constant danger that its party will be corrupted by infiltrations from other classes, and in particular from the petit bourgeoisie.'(31)

In the first place this view was profoundly at odds with the conception of an international programme, perspectives and tactics. The united front is a tactic designed to maximise working class unity in a struggle against the bosses and their state. But the working class finds itself confronted with these tasks across the world wherever it exists. The international character of this fight ensures that the tactic cannot be confined to either the 'east' or 'west'.

In fact, in those countries where the peasantry is a large class and where imperialism has multiplied the problems of land hunger—such as in Italy—the 'political' united front has a greater application. This is so since the peasantry, as a petit bourgeois strata, gives rise to parties outside of the Communist or Socialist Parties with which it is possible to bloc in the fight against the unified camp of industrial capital and the large landholders. Such was the case in Italy.

Such a possibility underwrote the Bolsheviks bloc with the left Social Revolutionaries after October 1917. The fact that in Italy the PSI and PCI were less well embedded in the peasantry of Southern Italy than they should have been only meant that the tactic of the united front was more, not less, urgent.

A Shift of Position?

During the course of 1923/24 the Comintern leadership began to have some success in driving a wedge between Gramsci and Bordiga. Although in a bloc within the PCI, their politics were never identical. Their differences over the factory councils in 1920 was symptomatic of the divergence. The politics of passivity and abstention were the hall mark of Bordiga. Whatever his ultra-leftism this was totally alien to Gramsci who saw the necessity to go beyond passive propagandism, merely stating fundamental truths and waiting for the inevitable process of disillusionment among the workers to benefit the PCI. After the Fourth World Congress in 1922 Bordiga became more and more intransigent and inward looking. Bordiga's faction refused to serve on the leading committees of the PCI because of their divergences with the Comintern. Gramsci felt this was bound to deliver the PCI into the hands of the minority around Tasca who,

Gramsci felt, was an opportunist towards the trade union leaders.

Events inside Italy also convinced Gramsci that passivity on the PCI's part preventing it from intervening in the crisis of the fascist regime. In the spring of 1923 important divisions opened up within the Popular Party which had hitherto firmly backed Mussolini's rule. Significant discontent with this support began to be voiced both in the Popular Party (which had a large peasant following) and increasingly within the urban republican petit bourgeoisie during the course of 1923 and 1924. The PCI needed tactics designed to relate to this discontent in a way that would prevent the republican bourgeoisie and social democracy being the beneficiaries.

Hence Gramsci came to the view, by the close of 1923, that it was impossible to make any concessions to Bordiga. A complete break with him and the creation of a new leadership of the 'centre' was essential if the party was to turn to mass work and lead the anti-fascist resistance.

Taken together these considerations pushed Gramsci back towards the Comintern. In September 1923 he abandoned his resistance to the 'political' united front in Italy and urged the PCI to adopt the call for a workers' and peasants' government in Italy. To all intents and purposes Gramsci had reconciled himself to the positions of Lenin and Trotsky. In January 1924 he wrote:

'I absolutely do not believe that the tactics which have been developed by the Enlarged Executive meeting and the Fourth Congress are mistaken.' (32)

He stressed in this letter to Scoccimarro that in launching a fight to redirect the PCI he would:

'... take the doctrine and tactics of the Comintern as the basis for an action programme for activity in the future.' (33)

Gramsci articulated his shift in position in a manner that was identical to the arguments of Lenin and Trotsky. In a letter to Togliatti written from Vienna in February 1924 he argued that he could no longer agree with Bordiga on the united front:

'Firstly, because the political conception of the Russian communists was formed on an international and not on a national terrain. Secondly, because in Central and Western Europe the development of capitalism has not only determined the formation of broad proletarian strata, but also 'and as a consequence' has created the higher strata, the labour aristocracy, with its appendages in the trade union bureaucracy and the social democratic groups. The determination, which in Russia was direct and drove the masses onto the streets for a revolutionary uprising, in Central and Western Europe is complicated by all these political superstructures, created by the greater development of capitalism. This makes the action of the masses slower and more prudent, and therefore requires of the revolutionary party a strategy and tactics more complex and long term than those that were necessary for the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November 1917.' (34)

This was a genuine step forward for Gramsci and an important break with the methodology and theoretical justification for his previous position.

Previously, Gramsci had considered that Italy was part of the 'east' in which the united front was obsolete. Here he does not simply transfer Italy to the 'west' but rather, and much more importantly, he states that the tactic has international relevance. The possibility of avoiding ultra-leftism in the 'east' and opportunism in the 'west' is at least predicated on such a shift of analysis.

However, the practical consequences of this shift for the PCI in 1924 were less clear to see. In January 1924 the PCI proposed an electoral bloc to the other working class parties for the April 1924 elections. But the terms of this pact were designed to meet with a refusal. Togliatti 'leading the party in Italy in Gramsci's absence' wrote to the Comintern executive that the basis for the propaganda of this pact was that:

'Fascism had opened up a period of permanent revolution for the proletariat, and the proletarian party which forgets

this point and helps to sustain the illusion among the workers that it is possible to change the present situation while remaining on the terrain of liberal and constitutional opposition will, in the last analysis, give support to the enemies of the Italian working class and peasantry.?(35)

Being reformists and constitutionalists the PSI was being asked to abandon its *raison d'être* in order to be in the bloc, something they could hardly be expected to do.

The tragedy of Gramsci is that just as he was breaking with the ultimatism of Bordiga (rejection of the united front on principle) events in the Comintern leadership were to ensure that his complete progress to the positions of Lenin and Trotsky would be derailed.

The Rise of Stalinism

Events within the Comintern at the end of 1923 and its repercussions in the Russian party were to cut short Gramsci's positive evolution. It was the defeat of the German revolution in October 1923 which gave an impetus to Stalinism. Trotsky argued that with this defeat capitalism had secured for itself a period of relative economic and political stabilisation. This unfavourable shift in the international balance of class forces demanded of the Comintern and its sections a recognition that considerable preparatory work was needed in order to win the masses again. He thus placed emphasis firmly on the united front tactic.

On the other hand Zinoviev and Stalin refused to admit that a serious defeat had occurred. On the contrary, they insisted that the Comintern was confronted, especially in Germany, with an imminent revolutionary situation.

In June 1924 the Fifth Congress of the Comintern backed this ultra-left view. In the same month Stalin took up the pen to contest Trotsky's view that bourgeois stabilisation was also indicated by a strengthening of social democracy in Europe. Stalin rejected this by claiming that social-democracy was a form of fascism:

?'It would therefore be a mistake to think that 'pacifism' signifies the liquidation of fascism. In the present situation, 'pacifism' is the strengthening of fascism with its moderate, social democratic wing being pushed into the foreground?(36)

And since fascism and social democracy 'do not negate, but supplement each other, they are not antipodes, they are twins'(37), a united front with the leaders of such parties was therefore out of the question. They excluded the use of the united front tactic except 'from below', that is, without the leaders of the reformist and centrist trade unions and political parties. The Fifth Congress declared:

'The tactics of the united front from below are the most important, that is, a united front under communist leadership concerning communist, social democratic, and non-party workers in factory, factory council, trade union.?(38)

In short it was little more than an ultimatum issued to the rank and file workers in these organisations to abandon their parties unconditionally. Since these workers believed in their leaders it could be seen by them as little more than a trick and in fact help strengthen social democracy not weaken it.

So just as Gramsci had attained undisputed leadership of the PCI and was moving in the direction of the Comintern's Fourth Congress positions, the Comintern in effect moved to encompass Gramsci's own ultra-leftism. The PCI during the autumn of 1924, with Gramsci back in Italy, launched a campaign for workers' and peasants' committees and the Peasants Defence Association which the PCI ran and was counterposed to the socialist controlled peasants' trade union federation.

In addition, during 1924 and 1925 the PCI set up Agitational Committees of Proletarian Unity, under their leadership but in open conflict with the unions of the General Workers' Confederation (CGL). Thus, while Gramsci accepted the applicability of the united front for Italy it was implemented in the Fifth Congress form. While he moved away from Bordiga's rejection of the united front in principle he moved to a position of united front from below.

In fact the Fifth Congress resolutions on tactics and perspectives are pivotal to an understanding of Gramsci's evolution from 1924 to the conceptions in the Prison Notebooks. While ultra-leftism had held sway since the German defeat the perspectives before the Congress were more moderated, not least because of the battle waged by Trotsky against them. In Section 13 of the 'Theses on Tactics', entitled 'Two Perspectives' Zinoviev outlined alternative developments:

'The epoch of international revolution has commenced. The rate of development as a whole or partially, the rate of development of revolutionary events in any particular continent or in any particular country, cannot be foretold with precision. The whole situation is such that two perspectives are open: (a) a possible slow and prolonged development of the proletarian revolution, and (b) on the other hand that the ground under capitalism has been mined to such an extent and that the contradictions of capitalism as a whole have developed so rapidly, that the solution in one country or another may come in the not so distant future.'(39)

This was a very vague and flexible perspective. On the one side it justified the ultra-leftism then in force and yet it could also serve to justify a right-opportunist turn if necessary. In fact, of course, such a turn did occur in mid-1925. When it came Zinoviev, at the Sixth Plenum of the ECCI in early 1926, used the Fifth Congress resolution to justify it.

The right-centrist turn of 1925 was based on a belated recognition that stability had occurred in Europe. Given this and given the Stalinist conception that socialism could be built in the Soviet Union if outside intervention could be prevented the Comintern leadership began the search for alliances in the European countries that could help prevent such intervention. In Britain the Anglo-Russian Committee was set up in 1925 between the Russian and British trade unions with this in mind.

How did this right turn effect Gramsci's understanding of the united front? At one level Gramsci was capable of formulating the problem of strategy and tactics in a formally correct manner. So in the 'Lyon Theses' for the PCI's Third Congress in January 1926 Gramsci posed the problem in the following way:

'The tactic of the united front as political activity (manoeuvre) designed to unmask so-called proletarian and revolutionary parties and groups which have a mass base, is closely linked with the problem of how the Communist Party is to lead the masses and how it is to win a majority. In the form in which it has been defined by the World Congresses, it is applicable in all cases in which, because of the mass support of the groups against which we are fighting, frontal struggle against them is not sufficient to give us rapid and far reaching results . . .

'In Italy, the united front tactic must continue to be utilised by the party, in so far as it is still far from having won a decisive influence over the majority of the working class and the working population.'(40)

At one level this position is correct and a repetition of the statement of early 1924. But taken together with other writings of Gramsci during 1926 it is possible to detect the influence of the right centrist turn in the Comintern which we find amplified in the Prison Notebooks. In a report to the Party's executive in August 1926 on the Italian situation Gramsci drew a distinction once again between 'advanced capitalist countries' (England and Germany) and 'peripheral states' such as Italy. In the first group 'the ruling class possess political and organisational reserves' which means that 'even the most serious economic crises do not have immediate repercussions in the political sphere' because the 'state apparatus is far more resistant than is often possible to believe'.(41)

In countries such as Italy 'the state forces are less efficient'. However, Gramsci does not go on to say, as he did with Bordiga in the early 1920's, that the united front is only applicable in the first case but not the second. On the contrary he maintains that the tactic is applicable in both cases.

The purpose of drawing the distinction is different. In the 'peripheral states' there are many intermediate classes between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. These classes in the Europe of the mid-1920s are being radicalised to such an extent that the tasks of the party and the class are those 'between the political and technical preparation of the revolution'. In Italy at this time it meant a united front under communist leadership based on a perspective of the imminent demise of Mussolini. In the advanced countries, however, 'the problem is still one of political preparation'.

Drawing these distinctions is not an idle matter for Gramsci for in each case he is concerned to address a 'fundamental problem?', namely:

'... the problem of transition from the united front tactic, understood in a general sense, to a specific tactic which confronts the concrete problems of national life and operates on the basis of the popular forces as they are historically determined.'(42)

In the case of England Gramsci argued that the trade unions were the concrete form in which the 'popular forces' would operate. And it is at this point that we see the right centrist interpretation that Gramsci gave to the united front where long political preparation is necessary. Despite the experience of the betrayal of the General Strike of 1926, including the lefts in the TUC, Gramsci believed that:

'The Anglo-Russian Committee should be maintained, because it is the best terrain to revolutionise not only the English trade union world, but also the Amsterdam unions. In only one event should there be a break between the communists and the English left: if England was on the eve of the proletarian revolution, and our party was strong enough to lead the insurrection on its own.'(43)

This contrasted sharply with the revolutionary assessment of the role of the Anglo-Russian Committee as expressed by Trotsky after the General Strike:

'... the Politburo majority has pursued a profoundly incorrect policy on the question of the Anglo-Russian Committee. The point at which the working masses of Britain exerted the greatest opposing force to the General Council was when the general strike was being broken. What was necessary was to keep step with the most active forces of the British proletariat and to break at that moment with the General Council as the betrayer of the general strike ... without this, the struggle for the masses always threatens to turn into an opportunist kowtowing to spontaneity ... The line of the Politburo majority on the question of the Anglo-Russian Committee was clearly a transgression in terms of the revolutionary essence of the united front policy.'(44)

On Gramsci's part all this is a reversion away from the international application of the united front that he espoused in early 1924 and back towards a differential application based on the ultimately false division between 'east' and 'west'. At the same time, given he was dealing with England, he reverts to a rightist, an opportunist variant of this tactic. In a sense all Gramsci was doing was utilising the Fifth Congress positions for his own twin perspectives for the 'east' and 'west'. His position on the Anglo-Russian Committee is a concrete expression of Zinoviev's perspective of the 'slow and prolonged development of the proletarian revolution'.

Having said this there was still a considerable distance between Gramsci's strategic and tactical prescriptions and those in force in the Comintern under Stalin. It was precisely in 1926 that Stalin was insisting that in China the Communist Party dissolve itself into the Kuomintang and, under the slogan of 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry', abandon the Leninist position of the leading and directing role of the proletariat.

Gramsci at the Lyons Congress in January 1926 recognised that:

'The proletariat must struggle to tear the peasants from the bourgeoisie's influence, and place them under its own political guidance.'(45)

Indeed, Gramsci insisted to the PCI that given that the weak Italian bourgeoisie rested for its power on the peasantry this question 'is the central point of the political problems which the party must resolve in the immediate future'.(46)

He recognised that the slogan of the 'workers' and peasants' government' was a way of drawing in the peasantry behind the working class, 'the means to transport them onto the terrain of the more advanced proletarian vanguard (struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat)'(47)

Far from accepting, like Stalin, that the governmental alliance of workers and peasants was distinct stage separate to,

and prior to, the struggle for socialism, Gramsci argued that:

?. . . the party cannot conceive of a realisation of this slogan except as the beginning of a direct revolutionary struggle: i.e. of a civil war waged by the proletariat, in alliance with the peasantry, with the aim of winning power. The party could be led into serious deviations from its task as leader of the revolution if it were to interpret the workers' and peasants' government as corresponding to a real phase of development of the struggle for power: in other words, if it considered that this slogan indicated the possibility for the problem of the state to be resolved in the interests of the working class in any other form than the dictatorship of the proletariat?.(48)

If anything Gramsci's formulations indicate that right up until his imprisonment he veered in the direction of ultra-leftism.

Captive Thoughts

Gramsci's reflections on problems of strategy and tactics in the Prison Notebooks continue his rupture with ultra-leftism. But in its place he developed further the conception that owes its origin to the right-centrist turn of 1925-27. The final triumph of fascism in 1926 led Gramsci to reassess his views about the stability and strength of bourgeois rule in the west including Italy. In the Prison Notebooks he states:

?It seems to me that Ilitch [Lenin] understood a change was necessary, from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the east in 1917, to a war of position, which was the only form possible in the west?when as Krasnov observes, armies could rapidly accumulate endless quantities of munitions, and where the social structures were of themselves still capable of becoming heavily armed fortifications. This is what the formula of the ?united front? seems to me to mean, and it corresponds to the conception of a single front for the Entente under the sole command of Foch?.(49)

Here Gramsci has abandoned the idea he presented in 1926 of the united front tactic as a war of manoeuvre and turned it into a war of position in the west; that is, he has turned the united front into a prolonged strategy through which the party and the class succeed in capturing positions in society, gradually surrounding and laying siege to the state. This is the antithesis of the revolutionary use of the united front as elaborated and practised in the Comintern under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky.

At one and the same time Gramsci outlines in the Prison Notebooks a simplistically one-sided view of the Russian Revolution, with its absurd implication that the united front was absent from Bolshevik's tactical armoury and that Lenin led a continuous ?revolutionary offensive? against an unfortified Tsarist state; yet he holds to an opportunist view of strategy in the west which sees a seamless united front in operation between the communists and the reformists (and even liberal/democratic bourgeois forces) right up to the seizure of power. Gramsci is unaware that the ends and the means contradict themselves in this view. The seizure of power depends upon the growth in influence of the communist party and this in turn can only be done at the expense of, and in struggle with, the reformists and centrists. This can only occur if common fronts for specific limited actions are combined with ruthless criticism of the limitations of the partners in the alliance of struggle, exposing their half-heartedness and inconsistencies together with the limitations of their own prescriptions.

Did all this amount to reformism as the Euro-Stalinists insist? Not one bit! Gramsci may have turned a tactic into a strategy but this is not the same as turning revolution into reform. In part Gramsci's right centrist conception in the Prison Notebooks was an undialectical response to the opposition he maintained to the ultra-left turn of Stalin in 1928/29, about the time he began to write his notebooks. If anything it is a Bukharinite rightist critique of the Third Period that we find in Gramsci's Notebooks. This emphasises the distance between him and Trotsky, but it also serves to underline the gap that separated Gramsci from Stalin.

This gap is further evidenced by the reports of discussions with a fellow prisoner, Athos Lisa, from 1930. Commissioned and then suppressed by Togliatti they underline that Gramsci objected to the Third Period, could not agree to the expulsion of oppositionists in the PCI and that he retained his belief in the need for an insurrection:

?The violent conquest of power necessitates the creation by the party of the working class of an organisation of a military type, pervasively implanted in every branch of the bourgeois state apparatus, and capable of wounding and inflicting grave blows on it at the decisive moment of struggle.?(50)

Gramsci was no longer well enough to write by 1935, the year of the Stalinist Comintern?s definitive passage from bureaucratic centrism into counter-revolution and reformism. The signing of the Stalin-Laval Pact in that year gave a green light for the French Stalinists to embrace patriotism with the full backing of the Kremlin. There is nothing in Gramsci?s life or work which can give comfort to today?s Euro-Stalinists in their attempt to turn Gramsci into the patron saint of the Popular Front.

Quite the contrary. In a couple of striking passages by Gramsci in 1926 he explicitly argues against a popular front to defeat fascism in a manner which almost anticipates the apologetic arguments of Togliatti ten years later about Spain. He disputes the arguments of the bourgeoisie who:

? . . . have an interest in maintaining that fascism is a pre-democratic regime: that fascism is related to an incipient and still backward phase of capitalism.?(51)

This leads to the view that:

?The best tactic is one whose aim is, if not an actual bourgeois-proletarian bloc for the constitutional elimination of fascism, at least a passivity of the revolutionary vanguard, a non-intervention of the Communist Party in the immediate political struggle, thus allowing the bourgeoisie to use the proletariat as electoral troops against fascism.?(52)

Whereas:

?For us communists, the fascist regime is the expression of the most advanced stage of capitalist society. It precisely serves to demonstrate how all the conquests and all the institutions which the toiling classes succeed in realising . . . are destined for annihilation, if at a given moment the working class does not seize state power with revolutionary means.?(53)

?Permanent Revolution? or ?Socialism in One Country??

There is still another way to judge Gramsci?s evolution. What was his attitude to the theoretical underpinnings of centrism in the Comintern??socialism in one country??and to its revolutionary critique??permanent revolution??

His passages in the Prison Notebooks on these questions give no support to the arguments of those, like Perry Anderson, who see an affinity between the positions of Gramsci and Trotsky in their respective critiques of the ultra-leftism of Stalin after 1928.

The truth is that Gramsci, from the middle of 1924, is a savage critic of Trotsky?s theory. The last favourable reference to Trotsky on this score occurs in February 1924. He sympathetically surveys the Opposition?s attacks on bureaucracy in the USSR and says further:

?It is well known that in 1905, Trotsky already thought a socialist and working class revolution could take place in Russia while the Bolsheviks only aimed to establish a political dictatorship of the proletariat allied to the peasantry that would serve as a framework for the development of capitalism, which was not to be touched in its economic structure. It is well known that in November 1917 Lenin . . . and the majority of the party had gone over to Trotsky?s view and intended to take over not merely political power but also economic power.?(54)

Yet within six months, by the time of the Fifth World Congress, Gramsci had abandoned this view and gone over to the faction of the Stalin/Zinoviev/Kamenev troika. The immediate impetus to this is Gramsci?s attitude to factional activity:

?Trotsky?s conceptions . . . represent a danger inasmuch as the lack of party unity, in a country in which there is only one party, splits the state. This produces a counter-revolutionary movement; it does not, however, mean that Trotsky is

a counter-revolutionary, for in that case we would ask for his expulsion.

Finally, lessons should be drawn from the Trotsky question for our party. Before the last disciplinary measures, Trotsky was in the same position as Bordiga is at present in our party.?(55)

This tragic mistake, namely, a right-opportunist identification of Marxism as ultra-leftism, is repeated and amplified many times in the Prison Notebooks. In the fervour of his own 1924 break with Bordiga he was only too willing to side with the majority in the CPSU in the campaign, launched at the Fifth Congress, of 'Bolshevisation'. This was in fact the first step in the strangling of inner-party life in the communist parties and led Gramsci into opposing all factional activity.

While as late as October 1926 Gramsci was still prepared to argue for disciplinary leniency with regard to the Joint Opposition by the early 1930's he argued that:

'The tendency represented by Lev Davidovitch [Trotsky] was closely connected to this series of problems . . . an over resolute (and therefore not rationalised) will to give supremacy in national life to industry and industrial methods, to accelerate through coercion, from outside the growth of discipline and order in production, and to adapt customs to the necessities of work. Given the general way in which all the problems connected with this tendency were conceived it was destined necessarily to end up in Bonapartism. Hence the inexorable necessity of crushing it.?' (56)

Given this attitude and assessment it was not surprising that Gramsci would review his 1924 attitude towards Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution:

'Bronstein [Trotsky] in his memoirs recalls being told that his theory had been proved true . . . fifteen years later . . . In reality his theory, as such was good neither fifteen years earlier nor fifteen years later. As happens to the obstinate . . . he guessed more or less correctly; that is to say, he was right in his more general prediction. It is as if one was to prophesy that a little four year old girl would become a mother, and when at twenty she did one said 'I guessed that she would?' overlooking the fact that, however, that when she was four years old one had tried to rape the girl, in the belief that she would become a mother even then.?'(57)

This rejection of what he understands to be Trotsky's theory is at the heart of his overall strategic and tactical conceptions in the Prison Notebooks. Thus the:

' . . . political concept of the so-called 'permanent revolution' which emerged before 1848 as a scientifically evolved expression of Jacobin experience from 1789 to Thermidor. The formula belongs to an historical period in which the great mass political parties and the great economic trade unions did not yet exist, and society was still, so to speak, in a state of fluidity from many points of view: greater backwardness of the countryside, and almost complete monopoly of political and state power by a few cities or even by a single one (Paris in the case of France); a relatively rudimentary state apparatus, and greater autonomy of civil society from state activity; a specific system of military forces and of national armed services; greater autonomy of the national economies from the economic relations of the world market, etc. In the period after 1870, with the colonial expansion of Europe, all these elements change: the internal and international organisational, relations of the state become more complex and massive, and the Forty-Eightist formula of the 'permanent revolution' is expanded and transcended in political science by the formula of 'civil hegemony'. The same thing happens in the art of politics as happens in military art: war of movement increasingly becomes war of position, and it can be said that a state will win a war in so far as it prepares for it minutely and technically in peacetime.?' (58)

So Trotsky is accused of being behind the times regarding strategy for the advanced west. He accuses Trotsky of being 'the political theorist of frontal attack in a period when it only leads to defeats'.(59)

Such a conception forms the basis of modern day Euro-Stalinism's critique of Trotskyism. The first thing that needs to be said is that Gramsci's exposition which equates 'permanent revolution' with frontal attack or war of movement has got nothing to do with Trotsky's theory. Trotsky took as his point of departure the combined, uninterrupted, character

of the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions in certain situations. So Trotsky could not, and did not, apply this aspect of his theory to the 'west' where the bourgeois revolution had been completed in all essentials.

If anyone was guilty of the conceptions that Gramsci accuses Trotsky of holding then it is Bukharin at the Third and Fourth Congresses:

'who held to his standpoint of the scholastic permanence of both the economic crisis and the revolution as a whole.' (60)

Gramsci agreed with Bukharin at the time. It could also be a conception attributable to Zinoviev and Stalin at the Fifth Congress, again which Gramsci did not dissent from.

The painful truth is that Gramsci held a position between 1922 and 1924 not dissimilar to the one he criticises here. He argued that the collapse of the fascist regime was both imminent and could not give way to a transitional regime of bourgeois democracy. In January 1924 he maintained that:

'... in reality fascism has posed a very crude sharp dilemma in Italy: that of the permanent revolution, and of the impossibility not only of changing the form of the state, but even of changing the government, other than by armed force.' (61)

After his ultra-left illusions were weakened with his break with Bordiga, and shattered for good with the final triumph of Mussolini in 1926, Gramsci altered his strategic conception to the right; but while attacking Trotsky's theory he was in reality attacking his own ultra-left past.

The fact that Gramsci identified his own previous stance with that of Trotsky can only be explained by the fact that he accepted completely the Stalinist lies about 'Trotskyism' pushed in the Comintern after 1923. If Trotsky indeed had been guilty, as the Stalinists, claimed of advocating a 'leap over' the bourgeois stage of the Russian Revolution, if Trotsky had indeed 'underestimated the peasantry', as his opponents insisted, thus giving the Russian Revolution a purely 'socialist' working class character, then Gramsci's jibes may have had some point. But they were not true. If anything it was Gramsci who 'underestimated the peasantry' in his ultra-left period.

A National Road

Nor did Gramsci remain silent on the other issue at stake between Trotsky and Stalin while in prison. He wrote several passages on the methodological questions at stake in the dispute over 'socialism in one country' which is intimately connected with the question of permanent revolution. He reasoned as follows:

'Do international relations precede or follow (logically) fundamental social relations? There can be no doubt that they follow. Any organic innovation in the social structure, through its technical military expression, modifies organically absolute and relative relations in the international field too. Even the geographical position of a national State does not precede but follows (logically) structural changes, although it also reacts back upon them to a certain extent (to the extent precisely to which superstructures react upon the structure, politics on economics, etc)' (62)

Gramsci gets it all upside down. By 'fundamental social relations' he means capitalist relations of production. He counterposes these to 'international relations' and thereby implicitly argues that capitalism is nationally defined. Having done that it is then possible, argues Gramsci, to examine the relations between the national and international. By analogy the international relations are the 'superstructures and the national the 'base'. This is the starting point for Stalin's 'socialism in one country'.

Marxism reasons in an opposite fashion. It starts from the fact that capitalism is a world entity and its relations encompass the globe. National economies can be examined and are determined in this light.

For Gramsci, starting with the 'national' played the same role as starting from the 'uneven' nature of world economy instead of the 'uneven and combined' nature of that economy as Trotsky did. Gramsci, like Stalin felt that this was the only way to appreciate what was 'unique', and 'specific' about a particular country at a particular time:

?In reality, the internal relations of any nation are the result of a combination which is ?original? and (in a certain sense) unique: these relations must be understood and conceived in their originality and uniqueness if one wishes to dominate them and direct them. To be sure the line of development is towards internationalism, but the point of departure is ?national??and it is from this point of departure that one must begin. Yet the perspective is international and cannot be otherwise . . . The leading class is in fact only such if it accurately interprets this combination?of which it is itself a component and precisely as such is able to give the moment a certain direction, within certain perspectives. It is on this point in my opinion, that the fundamental disagreement between Lev Davidovitch [Trotsky] and Vissarionovitch [Stalin] as interpreter of the majority movement [Bolshevism] really hinges. The accusations of nationalism are inept if they refer to the nucleus of the question. If one studies the majoritarian struggle from 1902 to 1917, one can see that its originality consisted in purging internationalism of every vague and purely ideological (in the perjorative sense) element, to give it a realistic political content. It is in the concept of hegemony that those exigencies which are national in character are knotted together.?(63)

Thus for Gramsci Lenin?s ?democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry? was hegemonic and national while the theory of ?permanent? revolution? was incapable of grasping and dealing with the specific realities of Russian society.

Of course, Trotsky did precisely what Gramsci accuses him of failing to achieve. Trotsky?s analysis of Russia was based on a detailed examination of its history and specific social relations. In his work, Results and Prospects, from 1906 Trotsky compares and contrasts the Russia of 1905 to France of 1870 and Germany of 1848 on the basis of tracing the evolution of international developments. Then he was able to outline in a remarkable manner the specific features that were present in Tsarist Russia which destined Russia to experience a socialist revolution before the ?advanced? and ?mature? countries and yet be unable to sustain it without international help.

Since the national is a specific combination of the international trends it is precisely impossible to really grasp the national without first understanding the international.

The connection between Gramsci?s view of the relation between national and international relations and the strategic and tactical tasks of the working class are fully revealed. Only the national is specific and hegemonic; what separates countries is more important than what connects them. Hence, although Italy and England can in one period be very different types of nation and then later in the same camp, the fact is that different types of united front are applicable depending on which type of country we are dealing with; united front from below and a war of manoeuvre in the ?backward? or ?peripheral? states, a strategic united front and a war of position in the advanced capitalist countries. Only briefly, in early 1924, having decided to break politically with Bordiga did Gramsci pose the problem correctly. But these insights were not sustained and Gramsci surrendered to rightism.

Conclusion

The prosecutor at Gramsci?s trial demanded that any sentence ?stop this brain working for twenty years?. They failed. But it has now stopped working for fifty years. Many are eager to claim him as their own. This hagiographical attitude to the greatest of Italian revolutionists would have appalled Gramsci. We approach Gramsci?s political life critically. By breaking with the ultra-leftism of Bordiga in 1923-24 Gramsci set himself the conscious project of steering the infant and repressed PCI between the ultra-leftism of Bordiga and the opportunism of Tasca. In doing so his goal was to return to the positions of the revolutionary Comintern of Lenin.

In trying to reach that goal Gramsci was responsible for a considerable body of perceptive work on the errors of Bordigism, on the history, class structure and strategic problems of Italian society. Every revolutionary militant today will find much in his work that is valuable and inspiring.

But Gramsci failed to build Bolshevism in Italy precisely because the bureaucratic centrist ?Bolshevisation? of Stalin and Zinoviev intersected his evolution. In the period up until his arrest, this ensured that a PCI under Gramsci?s direction failed to expunge a milder form of ultra-leftism in Italy and an affinity for the growing right opportunism in the ?west?. In prison, his further reflections based on a one-sided rejection of his own ultra-leftism and nurtured by the

Stalinists? myth about Trotsky, led Gramsci further into the camp of right centrism. Gramsci did not so much expand the boundaries of Marxism but rather narrowed its concerns. His insights were often not unique, once they transgressed the bounds of Italian history and society and were often overly abstract and even ambiguous. In the historical period that opens with the degeneration of the USSR it is Trotskyism, not Gramscism, that stands on the shoulders of Leninism and makes Marxism taller by a head.

Despite that, during this, the fiftieth year since Gramsci's cruel and painful death, we can find inspiration in his life and struggle. We can only hope to preserve him from the grasp of his 'friends'.

End notes

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