Chapter 3

Gramsci: Local Context

If marxism tends to be a special kind of totally encompassing normative rationalism, as I argued in the last chapter, then Gramsci's effort from within marxism to give theoretical attention to the depth, complexity, and power of the 'non-rational' is a curiosity inviting scrutiny. My premise is that marxists give up much more than do most theorists when they give up the presumption of the fundamental rationality of social life, because their vision of the new order relies on the rational collective action of large groups of people. Thus, study of Gramsci supplies a uniquely powerful lever: who knows what interesting, creepy fauna may be revealed under the apparently-sturdy boulders of early 20th-century rationalism?

In this chapter, I begin to consider the resources in marxism and in Gramsci's own background that enabled him to pursue a more articulated theory of revolution than did the figures in the last chapter. I sketch out the boundaries of his theoretical space, and begin to map his relationship to European social thought in general in the first third of this century. Gramsci's imprisonment by his fascist opponents in 1926 created an unusual but convenient break in his 'context', essentially by cutting it off and freezing it at the moment, so to say, of his arrest. This chapter focuses on the development, before prison, of the conceptual space that Gramsci spent the years in prison re-exploring and remapping.

I. Gramsci, Himself

Somehow Gramsci was able to resist the sociological shortcutting that characterized the marxist revolutionary theory he found available and, consequently, to see in marxism its most radical participatory and liberationist ingredients. Some of the key elements of his background that seem to have enabled this intellectual trajectory were general features of Italy's peculiar national history, with its regional components and their

social, economic, and linguistic consequences.[1] It is no exaggeration to say that the last time Italy showed anything like a common culture (if then) was sometime before the fall of the Roman Empire. Throughout the centuries that followed, the peninsula was politically fragmented and culturally disparate. Substantial geological and climatic differences contributed to the particularly radical divergence of northern from southern Italy. Successive invasions of the north, primarily from the north, and of the south, usually from the south provided additional political and cultural stimuli for this trend. These factors shaped Italian society and politics, as well as Italian writing about them.

By the time of the late political unification of Italy in 1861, northern and southern Italy had very little in common.[2] There was no such thing as an 'Italian culture' outside of the salon, just as 'the' Italian language was a fiction perpetuated by the cultural imperialism of Tuscany.[3] Furthermore, the relatively urban, cosmopolitan north, with its relatively easy access to the rest of Europe, was in the initial stages of vigorous industrialization. The primarily agrarian south, while providing the base for a stratum of Europeanized intelligentsia, was economically and socially backward, and became in some respects the first colony of the north as the new nation scrambled to play catch-up in the game of world dominance. Under these general circumstances, dreams of unified collective life (e.g. Mazzini, Garibaldi) and nuanced appreciation of the difficulty of obtaining them (e.g. the 'neo-Machiavellians', Mosca, Pareto, and Michels) both made sense. Even so, modern Ital-

1Good general histories of Italy in English include Stuart Woolf, *A History of Italy 1700-1860: The Social Constraints of Political Change* (New York: Methuen, 1979); Martin Clark, *Modern Italy 1871-1982* (New York: Longman, 1984); and Denis Mack Smith, *Italy: A Modern History* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1969).

2'Late' in relation to other European nations like England and France. That this sort of comparison has its nationalistic biases has been pointed out by historians of Italy, Germany, and Austria-Hungary. Non-eurocentrists have other counter-examples to offer.

3Notoriously, Piedmontese King Victor Emmanuel II, under whom Italy was finally unified, spoke the Piedmontese dialect almost exclusively. Small wonder that many Italians experienced unification as just another invasion. Even today natives of, say, Calabria and Lombardy may have a great deal of difficulty communicating. Italian dialects are frequently so distinct as to be, for all practical purposes, different languages. See Martin Clark, *Modern Italy* 34ff. for an overview. This was an issue that interested Gramsci greatly; his university studies were in linguistics, and he returned to the subject many times in the *Notebooks*. He related the problem to the lengthy survival of Latin as the exclusive language of culture, and the subsequent development of a cultured 'vulgate' still Latin in syntax and without popular roots. See *Q* 3, §76, 354.

ian intellectual history is rarely marked by characters who managed to synthesize both positions as powerfully as did Gramsci.[4]

Gramsci was born in Sardinia, in 1891. The island had been for hundreds of years a minor bargaining chip and medium of exchange in continental power struggles, and its integration into the new kingdom was little more than an administrative overlay. While Gramsci's father had come to Sardinia as part of that administrative apparatus, his imprisonment for embezzlement when Gramsci was very young assured the social ruin and poverty of the family and Gramsci's intimate exposure to the lowest ranks of Sardinian culture. In terms of Italian social and political geography, Sardinia was part of the agrarian south, dominated by traditional patterns of obligation, deference, and rebellion. Its popular culture and language were remote from those of the cosmopolitan ruling elite. Accounts of his early years and his own reminiscences make it clear that from the experiences of his youth Gramsci absorbed tremendous respect for the dignity and durability of popular culture; at the same time, he refused to accept its ignorance and limited worldview as eternal features of human society. His own success in rising above these things, attributable to family aspirations rooted in their former status as well as to his own strength of will, was undoubtedly an important stimulus.[5]

After fighting his way through the restricted educational system available in Sardinia, Gramsci received a scholarship in 1911 to attend the University of Turin. His work there, apart from the rigorous basic curriculum, focused on historical linguistics and in particular on Sardinian language. This interest in linguistics, and especially in the impact of language on concept-formation (Gramsci's general term for this was 'conceptions of

4Gramsci's contemporaries, Roselli and Gobetti, both attempted the same synthesis from what is usually called a liberal standpoint, although their notions of community were far more enveloping than is generally true in that tradition. And Mussolini's fascism may be seen as a resolution by force of a tension he gave up on resolving more organically. Gramsci's most succinct statement of the peculiarly cosmopolitan but heterogeneous nature of Italian culture and his place in it may be his letter to sister-in-law Tania of October 12, 1931, now in *LP* II, 84-8.

5See Dante Germino, *Antonio Gramsci: Architect of a New Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1990) for the most insistent argument that Gramsci's provincial background and physical deformity (he was hunchbacked) uniquely sensitized him to the politically marginal. When details become this personal, however, they illuminate only the person and not her ability to communicate with others. Giuseppe Fiori, *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary*, trans. Tom Nairn (New York: Schocken, 1970) remains the most solid biography, usefully supplemented by John M. Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1967) and Paolo Spriano, *Antonio Gramsci and the Party: The Prison Years*, trans. John Fraser (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979).

the world'), remained a constant motif of Gramsci's thinking.[6] His studies were impeded by ill-health and lack of funds, but he did not abandon them until 1915, when he began to devote himself full-time to socialist journalism.

Turin was one of the major centers of the industrializing North, and labor struggles were frequent. Its problems were very different from those of Sardinia. Yet many among the workers of Turin were originally of rural background, and the city's industries attracted immigrants from all over Italy. Gramsci's experiences in Turin seem to have consolidated his sense of Italy as a fundamentally heterogeneous nation, and to have provided clues to potential cultural unification through socialist politics.

From 1914 to 1919 Gramsci's primary political activity was as a journalist and propagandist for the socialist publications *Il Grido del Popolo* [The People's Shout] and *Avanti!* [Forward!]. Most of his work from this period was understandably raw, consisting of short, polemical pieces of generic socialist criticism of day-to-day political events in Turin.[7] Further, these were the war years, and Gramsci was heavily censored along with the rest of the socialist press, a situation that undoubtedly resulted in a certain amount of reactive self-censorship ("One begins. One erases. One begins again")[8]. When he was later given

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6The most developed study of this aspect of Gramsci's intellectual equipment is Franco Lo Piparo, *Lingua, intellettuali, egemonia in Gramsci* (Bari: Laterza, 1979).

7These writings can be mined for plentiful early evidence of Gramsci's later concerns, and there is certainly no question of an 'epistemological break' between early and late Gramsci. Like most people, he matured and got his thoughts together better as he went. This would seem to be straightforward enough, but a number of writers have found it necessary to produce elaborate periodizations of Gramsci's life and thought. See, for example, Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 4-6 and *passim*, where he discerns four "phases:" 1914-1919, 1919-1920, 1921-1926, and prison years. Those who, like Femia, lump the entire *Prison Notebooks* into one period are further chastised in Gianni Francioni, *L'officina gramsciana. Ipotesi sulla struttura dei "Quaderni del carcere"* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1984), based on a philologically monumental reconstruction of the order of composition of Gramsci's notes (Gramsci himself had not seen fit to date them). Beyond their formal defensibility, it is not clear at all what is to be learned from these periodizations — except that Gramsci thought of some things before he thought of other things, and occasionally changed his mind. I will simple-mindedly suppose time and context to be real and effective, and proceed accordingly.

8*CF,* 436. Many of Gramsci's articles of the time frankly discuss the frustration that the frequently arbitrary censorship produced; one index of this was that sentences, paragraphs, or whole articles whited out by the Turin censors could be passed by those in Milan, and vice-versa. This was true of "The Revolution Against *Capital*," discussed below. An interesting consequence of this experience may be the survival of the *Prison Notebooks*, due to Gramsci's by-then highly developed sense of how to say what he wished without exciting the arbitrary wrath of the censor.

opportunities to collect these writings, he refused. At this time, Gramsci also began to develop close personal ties with the socialistically inclined factory workers in Turin, an effort that created mutual respect unusual between a member of the socialist leadership and the rank and file.[9]

The evidence from this period is that Gramsci was genuinely interested both in teaching workers and in learning from them. He rejected the attitude of the intellectual mandarin out of hand.[10] This sort of immediate involvement was one of the key factors enabling Gramsci to push beyond the rationalist limitations of marxist revolutionary theory to a more nuanced observation of the obstacles to conscious collective action. At the same time, Gramsci's politics were shaped by first-hand experience of collective action in Turin during the general strikes of 1914 and 1919-20. This experience gave him a better sense of the fully-articulated foundation that would be necessary for the next step to be taken. The key question is how he avoided the temptation to place the seizure of power at the top of the priorities list; here, the fact that he had a first-hand sociological and psychological familiarity with urban *and* rural working people is significant. He respected their capabilities without romanticizing them, and he understood their limitations.

In 1919 Gramsci founded *L'Ordine Nuovo* [The New Order], with Angelo Tasca, Umberto Terracini, and Palmiro Togliatti — young socialists who would all participate in the leadership of the Communist Party. This "weekly review of socialist culture" provided a forum for greater emphasis on matters of socialist theory and proletarian culture. As such, it was the platform from which Gramsci and the others participated in the occupation of the factories by workers in Turin in 1920.[11]

9These ties are amply documented in Mimma Paulesu Quercioli, ed., *Gramsci vivo nelle testimonianze dei suoi contemporanei* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977).

10See for example Andrea Viglongo's testimony in Quercioli, ed., *Gramsci vivo,* 163. See also Gramsci's "Leggi economiche," *CT,* 287-8, for his respectful report of a lesson in economics received from a trattoria waiter. And see Alastair Davidson's discussion in *Antonio Gramsci: Towards an Intellectual Biography* (New Jersey: Humanities, 1977), 73.

11The standard history is Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920*, trans. Gwyn A. Williams (London: Pluto, 1975 [1964]). Spriano is by far the most prolific and incisive, though partisan, historian of Italian communism. See also, by the same Gwyn A. Williams (who translated Spriano's book in large part to make available its documentary Appendix), *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Italian Communism 1911-1921* (London: Pluto, 1975).

The failure of the PSI to act decisively in support of the factory councils in Turin and Milan, part of its general inability to take advantage of post-war turmoil in Italy, provided the intransigent revolutionaries of the party with the final stimulus to split with those whose practical emphasis was on non-revolutionary reform and gradual action.[12] Gramsci participated in the formation of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I, later changed to Italian Communist Party, PCI) at the PSI congress in Livorno, January 1921.[13] During 1922 and 1923 Gramsci was the representative of the PCd'I to the Comintern.[14] Although he was ill for part of this time, his direct contact with Bolshevik leaders and participation in the functioning of the International undoubtedly helped to demystify the Russian experience for him and to broaden his political horizons.[15] Upon his return to Italy (via Austria) in 1924, Gramsci assembled a new leadership group and replaced original leader Amadeo Bordiga as the head of the party, a position he held until his imprisonment by the Fascists (in contravention of his constitutional immunity to arrest as a member of parliament) in late 1926. He remained in prison, in increasing ill-health and isolation from the then-clandestine operations of the party, led from abroad by Togliatti, until just days before his death in 1937.[16]

II. Gramsci and Italian Socialism

Throughout his career, Gramsci's enveloping intellectual context was the Italian socialist movement. In those features of his work most closely under examination here, he transcended this context, but a great deal of the material he used to do so was available in the movement for his reordering. Particularly in his writings before his imprisonment, it is apparent that Gramsci was casting about among the same elements of socialist

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12The terms 'left', 'right', and 'center' are generally so thoroughly laden with layers of polemical baggage and theoretical confusion as to be virtually useless analytically. This is even more true within the socialist movement. The terms will be avoided here at all costs.

13It was during this period that the now-customary distinction of 'socialist' and 'communist' became widespread.

14'Comintern' was the customary abbreviation of 'Communist International' .Such conceits were the subject of Orwell's satire in *1984*.

15Gramsci was unable to meet Lenin himself, whose health was poor and who was increasingly isolated in his last years.

16The standard account of these years is Spriano, *Antonio Gramsci and the Party: The Prison Years*. Recently Giuseppe Fiori has added an interesting series of reflections on this period in *Gramsci Togliatti Stalin* (Bari: Laterza, 1991).

analysis and politics that were in discussion throughout the movement. His construction of a more densely-elaborated articulation of these elements relied in part on the already high quality of discussion to which he was exposed.

This quality can be difficult to uncover, however.[17] At the time of Gramsci's entry into socialist politics, the socialist movement was experiencing the pattern of gradual degradation of revolutionary impetus that was standard among European parties achieving a degree of institutional legitimacy. The model, of course, was the SPD, which famously revealed itself to be on this course with the revisionism debates at the turn of the century and the marginalization of revolutionaries like Rosa Luxemburg. In Italy as in Germany, the success of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in electing a parliamentary representation and in penetrating or influencing union leaderships had encouraged many among the party's leadership, notably founders Filippo Turati, Anna Kuliscioff, and Claudio Treves, to settle in for the gradual long haul, so that the period from 1900 to 1917 can be called with justice "the heyday of reformism."[18]

During the first ten years of the century, debates within the party centered on the issue of whether socialism required an ultimate overthrow of capitalism, or whether the immediate efforts toward reform from within parliamentary democracy were sufficient. That this discussion was virtually identical to those in France and Germany may have been a sign of the times, but it also reveals the degree of abstraction from the local context that the socialist leadership labored under. Certainly the extremely limited political culture of an Italy still recently unified contributed to this.[19] The formal gains of the party in

17There is evidence that Gramsci himself was none too impressed with the intellectual qualifications of the socialist leadership. Giuseppe Berti quotes Tasca that in the early years of Gramsci's involvement in socialist journalism in Turin he demonstrated "aggressive pride" and elected to remain intellectually isolated. leading to "permanent tension and almost insupportable relations." *I primi dieci anni di vita del Partito Comunista Italiano: documenti inediti dell'Archivio Angelo Tasca*, ed. and intro. Giuseppe Berti (Milan: Annali dell'Istituto Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Anno VIII, 1966), 45. This is corroborated by the voluminous testimony that Gramsci was both immensely patient with workers struggling to attain socialist consciousness, and extraordinarily impatient with leaders who in his view had failed their responsibility to have already achieved it.

18Alexander De Grand, *The Italian Left in the Twentieth Century: A History of the Socialist and Communist Parties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989), 15.

19By limiting access to negotiated, pluralistic solutions within a legitimate political culture, the Italian system encouraged opportunism at the center (the famous '*trasformismo*') and extravagant impracticality at the periphery. Not just the history of Italian socialism but those of futurism and fascism were bound up in this dynamic. This is the essence of Adrian Lyttleton's argument in *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1929* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987 [1973]). Relating

achieving a few seats in parliament (twelve seats out of 500 in 1895; thirty-three seats in 1900; fifty-two in 1913, the first election under the new electoral law that expanded the suffrage) were more than offset by the institutional lock on power enjoyed by the small elites, produced by the combination of northern money, southern aristocracy, and monarchy. Turati's principled insistence that socialists remain outside of the government assured that no conventional political acculturation could occur, while the party's own elite organization, passivity, and consistent failure to develop an inclusive alternative meant that no organized socialist counter-acculturation ever got off the ground.[20]

In recognition of this, on one side of the party liberals led by Leonida Bissolati and Ivanoe Bonomi favored complete abandonment of any revolutionary agenda in favor of participation in establishment power-brokering. Their notion was that the power base of the unions could be used to create windows for gradual reform within the limitations of the existing structure.[21] Among those who adhered to a more recognizably radical agenda, the generic cosmopolitan socialism of the northern reformists was nuanced from the south and from outside of the party by Gaetano Salvemini, who argued in his journal *L'Unità* for a more specifically Italian strategy, focused on the development of a broad-based democratic political culture to overcome the political and cultural separation between North and South, worker and peasant. This sophisticated position had very little impact

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the political culture to the structural features of Italy's national development outlined above, he notes "the continued lack of a widely diffused 'civic culture'" and argues that "the limitation on the numbers of those willing and able to engage in political activity favoured the development of interest groups and clienteles rather than parties with general programmes or ideologies," 5-7 and *passim*. His analysis reflects the central place that Gramsci's ideas have assumed in the historiography of modern Italy.

20Turati's mixed feelings about socialist participation in the ministry are poignantly expressed in his article "Dura salita," published in April 1911 in his journal *Critica Sociale* on the occasion of Leonida Bissolati's refusal of an offer to enter the government. "What are we? What will we be? No longer, certainly, are we who we were. Not yet who we dream of being. One thing in theory, another thing in reality. And not because of calculated hypocrisy: because of the force of events." Now in Filippo Turati, *Socialismo e riformismo nella storia d'Italia: Scritti politici 1878-1932*, ed. Franco Livorsi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), 208-9. Turati himself had been offered a portfolio as early as 1903, in Giolitti's first government. This ambiguity was resolved for him by the Libyan war, which convinced him finally that no minority participation by socialists in the government could be allowed.

21These elements were expelled from the party in 1912.

on the practical politics of the party, but had a profound influence for Gramsci's generation.[22]

Italian radicals' historical fascination with anarchism, itself rooted in the severely restricted access to legitimate political life that characterized most of Italy's modern history, assured that reformist socialism was not unopposed. Despite the presence of Antonio Labriola, who actually had very little impact on the Italian socialist movement, the key source of radical theory from within socialism before the Great War was syndicalism, particularly of the sorelian variety discussed in the last chapter. Marx's writings were little available and not generally known.[23] While syndicalism's influence did a great deal to encourage the preservation of a revolutionary element in Italian socialism, the vocal intransigence of syndicalists like Arturo Labriola (no relation to Antonio) and F.S. Merlino, a former anarchist, produced little in the way of substantive theory. Promising insights about the need to coordinate workers and peasants, North and South were overwhelmed by cartoonish caricatures of class politics that blocked any direct assessment of social and political relationships. Here too, political phraseology operated at a level almost entirely abstracted from the specifics of Italian society.

Throughout this period, ties between the party leadership and the workers were tenuous at best. The only contact between the directorate and the membership (or its representatives) occurred at the annual party congresses. Otherwise, the business of the party was split: local sections supervised day-to-day business; the socialist trade union federation (Confederazione Generale del Lavoro, CGL) controlled organization and strategy in the workplace in a loose regional fashion; the parliamentary deputies were independent; while the national leadership articulated general principles. What little coordination there was came from the party newspaper, *Avanti!*, which was itself independent of party discipline; but its primary mission was to express model socialist positions and

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22Gramsci expressed his qualified admiration in the important essay "Some Aspects of the Southern Question" (drafted shortly before his arrest), *SPW* II, 443-6, and at various points in the *Notebooks*.

23Entertaining anecdotal evidence of this difficulty is supplied by Labriola himself, in Antonio Labriola, *Socialism and Philosophy* (St. Louis: Telos, 1980), Chapter II.

polemic.[24] To the extent that there was a theory behind this, it was that the consciousness of the membership would benefit from such demonstrations of correct thinking.

Perhaps as a result of its disconnection from the life of the 'masses', socialist writing before the war revealed a social conception that was little more than a thin stew of vulgar economic determinism, enlightened paternalism, and political opportunism. This was true across the board of a number of internal factions whose *raisons d'être* in technical matters of party orientation need not detain us here.[25] The questions of revolutionary consciousness at issue in this study were subsumed under assumptions about the practical representative character of the party on one hand, and the organizational sufficiency of the unions on the other. Insofar as there was a theory of revolution, it resembled either the kautskian orthodoxy or the bernsteinian revisionism described in the last chapter, but without the detailed theoretical apparatus that the German debates supplied. The leaders of the party were people of good will, unimpressed by apocalyptic visions and radical breaks. Consequently, any relationship between the PSI and a hypothetical socialist revolution would have been purely accidental; and, at least at that moment, this was well in line with intentions, if not with stated objectives.

III. The New Order

Thus, when Gramsci came onto the scene around 1913, there was little to work with in the Italian socialist movement in terms of both revolutionary theory and organization, as he soon learned while working for several years as a socialist journalist. This frustrating lack of organizational and theoretical focus on concrete revolutionary preparation was the context in which young socialists Gramsci, Tasca, Togliatti, Terracini decided to found *L'Ordine Nuovo* 1919. Their objective (albeit internally contested in its details) was to move toward understanding and developing proletarian culture, and at the same time to attempt to determine the organizational forms that the revolutionary movement should take. Their motto, "Instruct yourselves, because we'll need all your intelligence.

24A summary of party organization is in De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 20. See also the Introduction in *SPN*, xxvii.

25For detailed descriptions of party organization and day-to-day debates, see James Edward Miller, *From Elite to Mass Politics: Italian Socialism in the Giolittian Era, 1900-1914* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 1990). Miller's thesis, that the elite organizational structure of the PSI prevented it from taking advantage of opportunities, is something of a commonplace, but the book is a useful resource for its reporting on every aspect of socialist organization and factional struggles.

Agitate [yourselves], because we'll need all your enthusiasm. Organize yourselves, because we'll need all your strength"[26] used reflexive verb forms to indicate from the outset that the goal was not an imposition from 'above', but a discovery and development on the part of the workers themselves. *L'Ordine Nuovo* reported closely on the activities of organized labor in Turin, published the most detailed available information on the revolutionary organization of labor in Russia,[27] and sought to provide the materials for a detailed and balanced socialist acculturation.

A word on the sources for a discussion of Gramsci's pre-prison thought is in order here. As mentioned earlier, Gramsci himself declined when given the opportunity to collect his writings. "In ten years of journalism I wrote enough lines to fill fifteen or twenty volumes of 400 pages each, but they were written for the day and, in my opinion, were supposed to die with the day," he informed his sister-in-law.[28] While historians cannot so readily discard the documentary richness that Gramsci's journalistic writings provide, his own assessment of them must be respected in any evaluation of his career. Gramsci's concern with levels of communication informed his belief that things written for the political analysis of the moment, with microscopically polemical/ educative intent, have no purpose outside of that immediate context. The particular target of any one such text or set of texts, for Gramsci, may require tactics that would create a partial or deformed view of the overall conception of the author if taken at face value. Furthermore, since for Gramsci history itself is political, attempts to appreciate such texts *per se* can only function conservatively, even or especially if the attempt is made to reinsert them into their context. What follows will have to be seen in this light.[29]

Gramsci had already spelled out his attitude toward marxism, best summed up as non-dogmatic or even anti-dogmatic, in his articles on the revolution in Russia, an electri-

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26*L'Ordine Nuovo: Rassegna settimanale di cultura socialista*, year 1 vol. 1 (May 1, 1919), and all following, masthead.

27E.g. by John Reed, "The Factory Commissions [commissari di reparto] in the Russian Revolution," *L'Ordine Nuovo* vol. I, no. 23 (1919), 177. Now in Paolo Spriano, *"L'Ordine Nuovo" e i consigli di fabbrica: Con una scelta di testi dall'"Ordine Nuovo" (1919-1920)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971), 191-6.

28Letter to Tania, September 7, 1931, now in *LP* II, 66.

29Of course, if someone managed to write that many pages over that many years without ever saying a thing she really thought, we would be in the presence of an unfathomable genius (or some kind of monster).

fying event that had a powerfully preemptive effect on socialist theory and practice. While censorship made details difficult to come by, the unavoidable observation at the time was that something funny was going on from the standpoint of strict economic determinism. In "The Revolution Against *Capital*," written late in 1917, Gramsci argued that while the fatalism of economic stages could be valid under the normal conditions described by Marx in *Capital*, deviations from the ideal historical pattern (in this case, the war) produced opportunities that could be seized by a collective revolutionary will. In Russia, he claimed, "events have overcome ideology," and the normally difficult process of formation of a national popular will had been accomplished at a stroke.[30] Less important than his questionable grasp of both *Capital* and the dynamics of the Russian revolution at this time is his insistence on revolutionary flexibility and the central place he accorded conscious, collective action as against the fatalism of economic stages.

While it has been tempting to see this position as an expression of youthful voluntarism, Gramsci was hardly unaware of the power of material existence to shape and limit social action. In another important article written a few months later, "Our Marx," Gramsci again insisted on a non-dogmatic interpretation of marxism. "Marx did not write a nice little doctrine, he is not a Messiah who left a string of parables laden with categorical imperatives, with absolute, unquestionable norms beyond the categories of time and space."[31] But this did not mean the pure reign of the will in the bergsonian sense of which he was accused at the time.

> With Marx, history continues to be the domain of ideas, of spirit, of the conscious activity of single or associated individuals. But ideas, spirit, take on substance, lose their arbitrariness, they are no longer fictitious religious or sociological abstractions. Their substance is in the economy, in practical activity, in the systems and relations of production and exchange.[32]

30*SPW* I, 34; *AGR* 33.

31*AGR,* 36. Gramsci had made a similar point in "La critica critica," *CF,* 554-8. His argument in that article that collective action, will, and mode of production become one in the historical act is easy to see as part of the activist appropriation of Croce that also produced Giovanni Gentile. But Gramsci was far from supposing that action is self-justifying, or that will of any intensity could overcome the basic limits of the means and forces of production. His sense of the interpenetration of these elements is crucial.

32*AGR* 37. Or see "Wilson e i massimalisti russi:" "The creative efficacy of human wills and initiatives is conditioned in space and time." *CF,* 689.

As his experience in the socialist movement increased, Gramsci continued to develop more concretely his analysis of the relationship among ideas, collective will, and more material structures in the classical sense, as mutually enabling and limiting features of given historical social spaces. In his writings before prison, this line of inquiry took the form of a continuous search for the variety and proper function of socialist activities and institutions that could develop, nurture, and channel the revolutionary consciousness of Italian workers. *L'Ordine Nuovo* supplied the first practical and intellectual context in which he was able to devote himself substantively to this search.

From the earliest issues, it was clear that there was little consensus among the contributors to *L'Ordine Nuovo* about what a proletarian culture might involve, or what it was for. In particular, it proved difficult to escape the Scylla and Charybdis of economic determinism (economism, the last-instance determination of consciousness by class and class alone) and paternalism. Luigi Serra, for example, discussed the "moral subjection" of the masses to their bourgeois officers in the army. In this dynamic, the bourgeois leaders used non-coms recruited from the mass to "transmit and execute" this moral subjection. But from this analysis, clearly groping for an understanding of the social-psychological blockages to the development of socialist consciousness and the mechanisms of what Gramsci would call hegemony, Serra drew the conclusion that rather than liberate themselves from this manipulation, socialists should exploit it for their own ends (a move justified by those ends). Thus, the goal of the revolutionary party was to educate the "corporals" to direct the worker army; only for this reason was there a need for socialist culture and education of the masses.[33] Here, assumptions about the necessary class consciousness of the workers combined with the paternalistic imposition of proper socialist leadership from above to short-circuit a promising analysis.

This article was typical, but a bit cruder than most. In general, these tendencies toward economism and paternalism were more diffuse,[34] often hidden in puppy-dog confi-

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33"Maggioranza e minoranze nell'azione socialista," *L' Ordine Nuovo* year 1, no. 2 (May 15, 1919), 14.

34See, for example, Ezio Bartalini, "Esperienze di scuola: II. Conoscere gli allievi.:" "...the premise of every pedagogical school is the necessity of *knowing* those who must be the object of the educational effort," again a promise to investigate and understand the worker's sociological consciousness, blocked by a subtly paternalistic approach to students as "objects" of instruction in which the knowledge is not used to modify the content of the lesson but its mode of delivery. *L'Ordine Nuovo*, year 1, no. 22 (October, 1919), 170.

dence, perhaps related to the pre-existing relative sophistication of Turin's skilled workforce (taken as representative of 'the masses') .Review of the journal uncovers striking commitment to exploring the proper means to create a collective will, to encourage socialist culture as living philosophy rather than bookishness,[35] to produce political solidarity through shared experiences, and earnest debates about what these experiences should be, how to respect and develop the proletariat's unique gifts as a process of self-formation, what the role of the state was in organizing or inhibiting collective expression,[36] and so on. These analyses were consistently blocked in shallow waters by categorical assumptions about the proper nature of the proletariat, its consciousness, and its political commitment to socialism.[37]

At times the sophisticated understanding of the complexity of social order and the interrelationship of ideas and social reality was impressive. Encrustations of messianic idealism failed to conceal the emergence of more modern conceptions; in the same article, arguing generally that proletarian institutions must act as the anchor, or foundation, for a new moral order, this: "The idea lives eternally only when it becomes reality itself, when it acquires flesh and blood, entering as a living creature into the world of political and social institutions, becomes concrete in new [social] organisms, in new forms of civic association, becoming in this manner the effective, animating force of history,"[38] could follow this: "Most people, deep down, do not find in themselves the strength to live righ-

35"Culture is not the possession of a well-stocked warehouse of data [*notizie*, sense of disconnected facts], but the capacity that our mind has to understand life, our place in it, and our relationship with other people… culture is a same thing as philosophy." "Cultura e socialismo," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, year 1, no. 8 (June, 1919), 55. [Unsigned; Togliatti]

36E.g. "La battaglia delle idee: Lo Stato e il socialismo:" the state is the concrete form of human society, and advances become real when crystallized institutionally in the form of the state, *L'Ordine Nuovo*, year 1, no. 8 (July, 1919), 62; contrast with anarchist/ libertarian position of Carlo Petri, in various articles. The whole spectrum from anarchism to authoritarianism was represented.

37Against this tendency but sharing the overall optimism, the editorial "Fare ognuno il proprio dovere" argued: "We get too much in the habit of saying: 'the masses', 'the proletariat', 'the countryside', 'the country' will do this, want that...." Let us put faces to these categories, work to make contact through everyday propaganda; "…we'll realize many times that [these categories, *appellativo*] leave more people out than they effectively include." *L'Ordine Nuovo*, year 1, no. 14 (August, 1919), 103-4. A terrific insight, a blip on the screen.

38Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* pops to mind here, through the mediating influence of Croce. The search for *specific* social/ historical roots, however, while also superficially akin to Hegel (though here, not Croce), is distinctive and marks a sociological, rather than a more generally philosophical exploration.

teously and morally, without outside help, without the outside support of an authority. To the contrary, I think that no one can elevate himself to truly human life without consciously and actively taking part in a social organism." [39] But these admixtures revealed the limitations of ideas burdened by great expectations: it never seems to have occurred to any of the contributors that there was any impediment but time and (proper) effort to the creation or *awakening* of class consciousness.

Even before the factory council movement and the occupation of the factories, the search for concrete, rooted, institutional bases for the development and activation of socialist consciousness was the primary concern of the journal, and Gramsci was already working out a revolutionary division of labor that could enfold the whole proletariat in a process of political emergence. In the editorial "Democrazia operaia" he argued that "the socialist state already exists in potential in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class," and that a variety of these institutions was needed to absorb, discipline, and educate the working class. For Gramsci, at this time, the party was to remain separate from the state — in the sense of an enfolding political and moral community — as a continuing source of impetus, while the unions were to act as a source of local direction and "partial realization." Workplace councils and nets of worker organizations would act more locally as schools of political and administrative experience, giving the workers a foundation to develop political culture and the capacity to make their own decisions directly. The combination of these elements would produce, Gramsci believed, a "radical transformation of worker psychology."[40]

This was already a very sophisticated articulation of institutional elements, geared to have what Gramsci would later call a 'molecular' (gradual and minute) impact on the formation of political personae and civic culture at an intricate variety of levels. Gramsci soon further added to the array in "Cronache dell'*Ordine Nuovo*," noting that workers found the articles in the paper too difficult. He pointed out that the basic, "evangelical"

39This could have been written by Durkheim. "Psicologia socialista," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, year 1, no. 10 (July, 1919), 74-5. [Unsigned; Tasca?] Sometimes the encrustation was the whole story, as in the contributions of Zino Zini, an academic socialist of the old school: "The past is in a certain sense its own negation, the present is only struggle, but the future is certainly victory," a typically abstract, idealist formulation of his assumptions about the content of the workers' class consciousness. "Preludio alla fondazione di un ordine nuovo," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, year 1, no. 22 (October, 1919), 169.

40*L'Ordine Nuovo*, year 1, no. 7 (June, 1919), 47-8.

diffusion of communist ideas had largely succeeded (a telling optimism based on the limited Turin experience) but that political culture at the level needed for informed self-determination was still lacking; to solve this he proposed study circles, soviets of proletarian culture. These were to be devoted specifically to the study of local problems, as the milieu in which problems were most familiar and the chance of successful intervention was greatest.[41] All of the political elements for the construction and, crucially, democratic self-construction of proletarian political culture were here, relying only on the basic will of the workers to participate. As Gramsci was to realize over the next few years, however, this was an unwarranted reliance, and he was forced to deepen his understanding of the blockages and dynamic impediments to even rudimentary class consciousness in masses that, in Italy, were also not reliably proletarian.

The first opportunity to test the *Ordine Nuovo* group's approach to the questions of proletarian consciousness and revolution came during the occupation of the factories, in 1920. Although the paper's impact on the workers' actions was marginal,[42] the experience helped to develop Gramsci's sense of the complex articulations of revolutionary practice. The occupation was carried out under the leadership of FIOM, the national metalworkers' union, but was organized around the factory councils, Italy's closest analog to the soviets.[43]

The workers themselves organized the councils more or less spontaneously, leading the *Ordine Nuovo* group to believe that they were theorizing a revolution in progress. Meanwhile, the PSI debated whether or not the situation was revolutionary. This dynamic created tremendous urgency to think through the relationship that should exist among unions, councils, and party in the revolution, and the proper role of each. This was the subject of debate in *L'Ordine Nuovo* and between it and the rest of the socialist press throughout this period, a crucial time for the development of Gramsci's political thought.[44] Here Gramsci continued his attempt to assemble the materials found within the socialist

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41*L'Ordine Nuovo*, year 1, no. 9 (July, 1919), 63.

42See Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920*, trans. Gwyn A. Williams (London: Pluto, 1975), Williams' Introduction, 16.

43The practical reality of the occupation of the factories was that FIOM intended the action as a defensive maneuver to forestall an industrial lockout and avoid a more costly strike. When the situation mushroomed into something potentially more fundamental, the socialist leaders at both the party and union levels were more interested in backing off than their 'bourgeois' opponents. Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories*, 58-9.

movement to construct a qualitatively different approach to revolutionary theory and organization.

During the *Ordine Nuovo* period, Gramsci's attention was on the factory councils as a site for the formation of a new type of proletarian political culture. Consequently, he held a new and controversial position with respect to the traditional socialist debate between those who saw in either the party or the unions the locus of revolutionary activity. For the development of this position, Angelo Tasca proved the perfect adversary.[45] Slightly older and still locked to a degree in the formal, paternalistic abstractions of orthodox socialism, Tasca nevertheless occupied a middle ground due to his sensitivity to the importance of revolutionary consciousness and proletarian culture in general. Thus, Gramsci was able to attack Tasca on common ground, while at the same time being forced to recognize the validity of Tasca's positions. This dynamic, in combination with the later one between Gramsci and Amadeo Bordiga, had the effect of injecting the entire problem-space of conventional socialism into Gramsci's conceptual universe, in assimilable form.

Tasca had been an important figure in the years before the war, acting as an independent *liaison* between the party and organized labor and introducing the issue of proletarian culture to the socialist youth movement. He was the editor of *L'Ordine Nuovo* at its inception (in part because he was the only one of the group with the financial resources to float the new journal), but he was overthrown after several issues because of what Gramsci later described as the journal's "absence of a concrete programme, [its] vague and hopeless aspiration to deal with concrete problems" during his leadership.[46] Gramsci's critique stemmed directly from Tasca's rootedness in the traditional socialist organizations of

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44See Paolo Spriano, *'L'Ordine Nuovo' e i consigli di fabbrica. Con una scelta di testi dall'"Ordine Nuovo" (1919-1920)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971). *SPW* I contains selections by Amadeo Bordiga from his journal *Il Soviet*, specifically in polemic with the positions of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, which provide a flavor of both the excitement and confusion of the time.

45In his important *In Stalin's Shadow: Angelo Tasca and the Crisis of the Left in Italy and France, 1910-1945* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1986), Alexander J. De Grand argues that Tasca's influence on Gramsci was small. It seems to me that this is correct in the direct sense of influence usually intended in the history of ideas. I am arguing something slightly different: that Tasca was a crucial interlocutor for Gramsci, helping to establish the boundaries and possibilities within which Gramsci's emerging theory was shaped. This 'influence' could be said to be 'indirect'; I would prefer to understand Tasca's impact on Gramsci's theoretical formation as 'structuring'. Within the intellectual context of Turin socialism, it was impossible to engage with the union question without engaging with Tasca's structuring of that question.

46"On the *L'Ordine Nuovo* Programme," now in *SPW* I, 292.

the party and the unions, in which the other founders of the journal had lost confidence. To Gramsci, Tasca was infected with the same abstract, bureaucratic ignorance of the social psychology of the proletariat that paralyzed the PSI.

In many respects, Gramsci's critiques of Tasca on the issues of proletarian culture and the relationship of unions and councils seem melodramatic and petty (including an accusation "that in the two or three hours of his intervention [at a Chamber of Labor congress], he ruined efforts to educate and raise the level of working-class culture that had cost the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* and the group around it a whole year of labour and struggle," which, however, reveals how important, difficult, and fragile Gramsci thought socialist culture to be).[47] Tasca's contributions to the first issues of *L'Ordine Nuovo* had been very scholarly analyses of 19th-century socialists' ideas (e.g. those of Louis Blanc), written with a historian's regard for dispassionate investigation. That such efforts could have no immediate bearing on revolutionary politics was not in doubt, but Tasca's sense that the development of a socialist political culture could benefit from knowledge of the historical forms of socialist thought was not misplaced, if taken as part of a general effort.

The problem was deeper, however, than Gramsci and Tasca ever managed to articulate.[48] Tasca's interest in acculturating the proletariat, rather than in learning from them, was consistent with his general concept of the masses as raw material for the party and unions to mold into the proper revolutionary shape.

> The real fundamental problem of the revolution [is], how can the Socialist Party come to seize the masses, in a way that nullifies in them as much as possible indifference, blind instinct of conservatism, particularism, and provokes instead active consent and overwhelming sympathy with the precise ends of the communist order? How, after all, to have these masses under our hands, close, consenting and collaborating?

The task of communist institutions was to inspire the workers' trust in the communist party, so that they would "love, follow, and help" it.[49]

47"The Tasca Report and the Congress of the Turin Chamber of Labor," *SPW* I, 259. This whole article is unappealingly shrill.

48The published record of their debate may be found, in its essential statements, in Spriano, *"L'Ordine Nuovo" e i Consigli di fabbrica*, and more impressionistically in *SPW* I, 239-298.

49"Gradualismo e rivoluzionarismo nei Consigli di fabbrica" (January, 1920), in Spriano, *"L'Ordine Nuovo" e i Consigli di fabbrica*, 231-3. This was a response to an article by Bordiga in *Il Soviet*.

These formulations of the issues facing socialist practice skirt a subtle line between realistic analysis of the political preparation and capacity for self-directed action of the masses, and a more conservative party paternalism characteristic of the PSI and the social democracy of the Second International. This may be the most advanced and concise programmatic statement of the *Ordine Nuovo*'s concern with proletarian culture and consciousness. Nonetheless, the problem is posed in superficial, phenomenological terms: "blind instinct" may *describe* mass behavior, but makes no move to *analyze* it. For Tasca, the factory councils provided a space-maintainer at a very sophisticated level of awareness about the intricacy of political consciousness. But he was unable or unwilling to push beyond this, a failure that was profoundly irritating to Gramsci, who was groping for a way in which the proletariat could accomplish its own liberation.

Thus, although it seemed clear at the foundation of *L'Ordine Nuovo* that Tasca and Gramsci shared a commitment to proletarian culture as an essential and neglected feature of the revolutionary dynamic, in practice their positions were substantively different. Tasca was interested in impressing upon the proletariat a culture that would be adequate to ensure their cooperation in a revolution made by the party and organized through the unions — with, if helpful, the subsidiary assistance of the councils. Gramsci also understood that the masses would have to be helped to develop a socialist political culture. But he expected this to be a process that would begin from an understanding of the masses' own sociological consciousness, a respectful approach that would uncover and encourage the elements of popular culture most likely to develop a political will toward collective self-liberation. (That this was the correct outcome of the masses' self-discovery was never in doubt.)

For Gramsci, the factory councils offered the opportunity for the direct participation of workers at the site of production in the production of their own freedom. Unlike the party and the unions, which he saw as voluntary organizations with limited objectives and participation, the councils would enfold and involve every worker in a self-determining community. This community arose naturally from the organization and interdependence necessitated by production itself and was thus the unavoidable and ideal means to develop solidarity, class consciousness, and, with experience, political culture. For Gramsci, then, the political, organizational, and cultural issues were inextricably linked, a di-

mension that Tasca missed by supposing that the councils were simply another useful tool like any other in the political organization of socialist labor.

Because of his sense of the immediacy and evanescence of the uniquely revolutionary period Italy was experiencing after the war, Gramsci's positions were hasty, abstract and tinged with desperation. To Tasca's steady, conservative, superficial acculturation efforts, Gramsci counterposed "the proposal that we devote our energies to 'unearthing' a Soviet tradition within the Italian working class, to digging out the thread of the real revolutionary spirit in Italy — real because at one with the universal spirit of the workers' International, the product of a real historical situation and an achievement of the working class itself."[50] Clearly, Gramsci was operating with a far deeper sense of the need to link the formation of socialist culture with the historical reality of the masses' sociological consciousness. And such linkage had to validate and empower the working class, rather than simply being an imposition (or imputation, in Lukács' terms) from without. But, just as clearly, Gramsci had not figured out how to do this, and he had to resort to the abstract language of 'spirit' to communicate a very complex dialectic of cultural formation. This confusion and sense of limited opportunity helps to account for the tone of his critiques of Tasca, who had a great deal to teach Gramsci about the messy practicalities of politically organizing people not immediately in tune with the objectives of the organization.

At this time, Tasca's more limited aspirations allowed him to keep a clearer head about the types of problems likely to crop up in the day-to-day interaction of councils, unions, and bosses. He confronted the disorganization of the vast majority of workers as a genuine problem that required a practical solution; he hoped that, as the minority acted in the meantime, the grave economic crisis would push the masses to a "sentimental repercussion" in favor of the socialists, who could then enfold them.[51] In response to Gramsci's rather abstract argument that the unions represented the temporarily legalized form of class relations, while the councils were "the negation of industrial legality,"[52] an attempt to create a conceptual division of labor between two moments of socialist practice,

50"On the *L'Ordine Nuovo* Programme" (August, 1920), in *SPW* I, 293.

51"Il problema dei disorganizzati," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, year 1, no. 30 (December, 1919), 237-8. Tasca's economism was not based on optimism but on a realistic assessment of available forces, though his willingness to fill the space of missing mass political preparation with minority action was a dangerous gamble.

52"Unions and Councils" (1920), in *SPW* I, 265-6 and *AGR*, 93-4.

Tasca pointed out that "Comrade Gramsci can insist all he likes on his point that the council strives to break with legality and the union to remain within it. But the fact is that when the council departs from legality, the employer calls in the Royal Guard and makes it… depart from the factory. And then the workers come to the union [to take care of practical matters]."[53] In his search for an institutional focus for the political awakening of the working class, Gramsci had temporarily substituted theoretical order for concrete analysis and organization.

But equally true, the substance of Tasca's position in denying an autonomous sphere of activity and unique revolutionary potential to the councils was to fall back on the institutions that had failed in the past. Tasca argued that the ossification of the party and the unions into bureaucratic structures distant from their base in the working class was a historical rather than an essential feature of these forms of organization. But his distrust and lack of interest in the contribution that the masses could make to the conception of their own revolution made it unclear how the paralysis could be broken.

IV. The Communist Party

Gramsci looked upon the *biennio rosso*, or 'red biennium', as a great missed opportunity and redoubled his commitment to discovering the articulation of institutions, theory, and political practice that could ensure success the next time around. Gramsci felt that the local movement in Turin had been sabotaged by the PSI, which had failed to support, organize, and lead on a national level the more local efforts of the factory councils. And he looked to Russia for evidence that, with the proper organization of revolutionary functions at various levels, a heterogeneous population could succeed in working together to achieve collective goals. What he saw helped to convince him that he needed to pay more attention to the party as the focus of coordination and leadership of the revolutionary effort. In order to succeed from below, the revolution had to be organized and directed from above. These considerations, coupled with a sense that the moment had passed and that a slow, patient effort of preparation would be necessary to renew the revolutionary forces, encouraged Gramsci to participate in the split of the Communist Party from the PSI in 1921.[54]

53"Polemics Over the *L'Ordine Nuovo* Programme — Tasca" (1920) in *SPW* I, 284.

Three main groups supplied the doctrinal surface of the new party, which maintained a small membership with respect to thePSI.[55] Amadeo Bordiga, first leader of the PCd'I, represented the 'abstentionist' group organized around the Neapolitan journal *Il Soviet*.[56] Their position was to insist on the purity of the class war in every instance, refusing any compromise with non-proletarian groups or institutions. The second group included Gramsci and the other founders of *L'Ordine Nuovo*.[57] While hardly unified themselves on all points, they agreed in opposing Bordiga's rigid position, but felt that the new party could not be made without the abstentionists.[58] Both of these groups had had strained relations with the majority of the PSI all along. The third group, less coherent than the first two, was made up of socialist 'maximalists' (the term used to denote a certain impatience about achievement of the 'maximal' goal of the party, the revolution), who for a variety of reasons felt the politics of the PSI to be unsatisfactory.

In a pair of articles in the new party journal *Rassegna Comunista* [Communist Review], Bordiga articulated his view of the party as the essence of the proletarian class. Indeed, since for him the party was the coalesced minority possessing consciousness and will, method and purpose, there could be no definition of class without the party, and the two were historically inseparable.[59] Thus, the party and only the party encapsulated the entire space within which the proletariat could operate politically: he rejected any other formal organization of the workers, such as unions and factory councils, as purely economic, with no connection to the revolution. In the doctrinal purity of his party-centered political theory Bordiga out-Lenined Lenin, whose strengths included a tactical flexibility en-

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54This was a step he had previously resisted, on the grounds that unity was crucial if the moment was to be seized.

55See Paolo Spriano, *Storia del Partito comunista italiano: 1. Da Bordiga a Gramsci* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967) chapter 6.

56Bordiga was an engineer from Naples. His opposition to bolshevism (thought of as a strategy rather than an orthodoxy in the PCd'I before the years of clandestinity) led to his expulsion from the PCI in 1930. Despite their sometimes intense and fundamental theoretical differences, he and Gramsci highly respected one another and maintained a friendly personal relationship.

57By the summer of 1920, Gramsci had become convinced that the *Ordine Nuovo* approach to proletarian culture and the factory councils was insufficient, had broken with the other members of the group, and was isolated once again. As they came to appreciate the importance of a strong communist party, relations improved.

58Paolo Spriano, *Storia del Partito comunista italiano: 1. Da Bordiga a Gramsci* 101.

59Amadeo Bordiga, "Partito e classe," *Rassegna Comunista* 1, no. 2 (April 15, 1921) 64-5.

tirely missing from Bordiga.[60] But Bordiga believed that it was precisely this uncompromising rigidity that would be the party's strength, and that the masses would be attracted to the party by its "loyalty to tight discipline of programme and internal organization."[61]

Bordiga's coherent sectarian rigidity looked good as an alternative to the PSI's waffling, and Gramsci accepted it as a corrective to his own lack of attention to the national-political issues of leadership and coordination during the *Ordine Nuovo* period. Where his debates with Tasca had forced him to take better notice of the distinct place of the unions in organizing and directing the struggle for the site of production, his exposure to Bordiga provided a strong model of the party as the organizer and director of the struggle for the state. And, as Gramsci explored the Russian experience more carefully and began to familiarize himself directly with Lenin's writings and those of the other Bolsheviks, Bordiga and his followers supplied direct evidence of both the strengths and weaknesses of extreme party-centered politics. But despite this important lesson, Gramsci was in no danger of accepting Bordiga's position exclusively.

The purity of Bordiga's conception, conceding nothing to Italy's distinctive problems, was like a laser searchlight into the dark recesses of the marxist political compression strategies discussed in the last chapter. Far from considering proletarian revolutionary consciousness to be a problem of any kind, Bordiga simply assumed that it would be generated by the manifestly contradictory economic imperatives of developed capitalism and made available as needed to the resolute action of the party. The role of the party was to hold fast to its principles and remain ready to strike at a moment's notice when the moment was right — as it had been during the occupation of the factories, when in its weakness the PSI squandered the opportunity. The only item on Bordiga's revolutionary agenda was the seizure of power; issues like the democratization of the workplace, the development of socialist political culture, and the difficulties of collective action in a divided country were irrelevant. Capitalism and the state it had erected as its defender were the enemy, and, once they were smashed, the rest would take care of itself.

Bordig's position was simply the most radical form of the attempt to maintain the 'revolutionary consciousness' space with a preemptive imposition from above. Indeed,

60Lenin mentioned Bordiga by name as one of the culprits in *"Left-Wing" Communism, an Infantile Disorder,* 48-9, footnote.

61Amadeo Bordiga, "Partito e classe," *Rassegna Comunista 1*, no. 4 (May 31, 1921), 163.

Bordiga did not recognize this space to exist. The only indeterminate element in his revolutionary theory was 'when'; 'who', 'why', and 'how' were already known, and unproblematic. Bordiga's understanding of social order was characterized by an economic determinism of the most spectacular simplicity; variations on correct class action were errors that would become irrelevant at the moment of class struggle. And, without Lenin's accompanying flexibility, which Gramsci grasped and admired but Bordiga rejected as a matter of principle, the compression of politics to the party alone resulted in a complete inability to act. There was always some reason that the situation was not quite right.

For Gramsci, who thought the revolutionary moment had passed, this was not initially a serious problem; his concern, for some time in perfect harmony with Bordiga's, was with the formation of a compact and disciplined party that could work and survive in the new climate of reaction, something that became even more important with the fascist seizure of power in 1922. But Gramsci disagreed with Bordiga's assessment that the revolution would occur more naturally and easily in the West and broke with him in part over the question of adherence to the International. His analysis of Bordiga's position was typically incisive:

> Amadeo [Bordiga] has a whole theory about this, and in his system everything is logically coherent and consistent. He thinks that the tactic of the International reflects the Russian situation, i.e. was born on the terrain of a backward and primitive capitalist civilization. For him, this tactic is extremely voluntaristic and theatrical, because only with an extreme effort of will was it possible to obtain from the Russian masses a revolutionary activity which was not determined by the historical situation. He thinks that for the more developed countries of central and western Europe, this tactic is inadequate or even useless. In these countries, the historical mechanism functions according to all the approved schemes of Marxism. There exists the historical determinism which was lacking in Russia, and therefore the over-riding task must be the organization of the party as an end in itself.

Gramsci's response was equally incisive. While the elements of the general compression of the political interests of the masses to a class basis are clearly present, Gramsci also had grasped that the political engagement of the workers was substantively conditioned by sociological fragmentation, competing political organizations and agenda, and the degree of social and economic elaboration characteristic of each national history and conjuncture:

> I think that the situation is quite different. 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 the broad proletarian strata, but also — and as a consequence — has created the higher stratum, 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 super-structures, 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 altogether more complex and long-term than those which were necessary for the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November 1917.[62]

The successes of the fascists in consolidating their power substantiated this analysis, convincing Gramsci that intricate labors of opposition were immediately necessary, including the official public opposition that only participation in parliament made possible. When Bordiga's conflict with the International came to a head, Gramsci was chosen to replace him as head of the party. He had little time to change things before his arrest.

During the 1920's, Gramsci was working through the materials that the debates with Tasca, Bordiga, and others had made available, although his focus was clearly on the central role of the party in organizing the national-political struggle, in providing the masses with a political persona.[63] In 1922 he articulated this position in terms of the history of Italian political culture: "Now, however, the problem is a problem of organization of forces… In Italy there has never been any political education: there is a confusion of ideas that is frightening. Without the force of the Communist Party that beats against the mattress [lit.; in the sense of soft, yielding, obstructive but amorphous] of political confusion there can be no successful work of education."[64] But within the socialist movement, attempts to deepen any understanding of the complex consciousness of the masses

62"Gramsci to Togliatti, Terracini and Others (Vienna, 9 February 1924)," *SPW* II, 199-200. Gramsci wrote this important letter during his brief stay in Vienna while returning to Italy from Russia. It is one of the early documents of Gramsci's formation of a new leadership group to replace Bordiga.

63"Politically, the broad masses only exist insofar as they are organized within political parties." "Parties and Masses" (September, 1921), *SPW* I, 71.

64Fourth Congress of the International, "Meeting of November 15, 1922 of the Italian Delegation and of the Commission on the Italian Question," from the transcript published in *Lo Stato Operaio*, year II, n. 7 (March, 1924), 3. The discussion regarded re-fusion with the PSI.

remained conspicuous by their absence, and disputes continued at best along the same lines pioneered by *L'Ordine Nuovo,* without adding much. The early years of fascism in particular were confusing and demoralizing for Gramsci and the PCI, full of casting about and reliance on old formulae in the absence of the sophisticated analytical tools that would have been required to account for the collapse.[65]

A "comrade metalworker" put his finger on this confusion in 1924 and sadly encapsulated the state of communist theory and practice throughout much of Europe during the mid-to late-twenties. In an article published without comment in *Lo Stato Operaio* [The Workers' State], the official organ of the PCI, he began by stating that, as demanded by the party, he had attempted to follow the debates over tactics and the ineffectiveness of the party.[66] But "I ask myself what interest for me and for the workers enrolled in our party a polemic can have that goes on intensely between various intellectual elements of our party. They seem to want to reciprocally stick each other with the responsibility for the missed Italian revolution, or at least the blame if our party failed to conquer the leadership of the Italian proletarian movement." These squabbles left him and his comrades "indifferent;" the intellectuals' conviction that the failures of the party were due to the failure to apply their own theories "leaves our modest followers [*gregari*] perplexed, as they approve of the tactic followed up to now by our party and have never even dreamed of seeing in it such errors." So they bought the paper, and then put it aside in dismay.[67]

65The epithet 'petty-bourgeois' was particularly conspicuous as a catch-all pseudo-analysis encompassing any action not conforming to a class-determined bourgeois or proletarian rationale — revealing a failure to cope with even the rudiments of understanding the complexities of Italian society and politics. ì

66Such laundry might not have been aired publicly elsewhere, but one of the most refreshing features of Italian socialist history has been a fairly consistent openness of discussion. This continued even during the stalinist period.

67"Modifichiamo la discussione," *Lo Stato Operaio*, year II, n. 21 (June, 1924), 2.