The Historical Context of Gramsci's Political Work Prior to the Prison Notebooks

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Section III of **Towards the War of Position: Gramsci in Continuity and Rupture with Marxism-Leninism (http://wp.me/pqCiM-Fm)**

by Amil K.

It must be said that Gramsci's conceptual apparatus is not entirely original. This is not a diminution of Gramsci's thought, but rather a recognition that Gramsci quite clearly builds upon Marxist-Leninist foundations. But to be sure, Gramsci does not simply apply what he called "philosophy of praxis" (Marxism) to the Italian situation – you know, break out the old Marxist tool bag and begin putting them to work in Italy. Rather, Gramsci articulates a conceptual apparatus that attempts to get beyond some of the limitations and under-developed aspects of Leninism, ideas that may be instructive for our own challenges today.

The communist movement proved insufficiently capable of emerging victoriously from the revolutionary crisis after World War I. Its gains were important; but its defeats were not insignificant and owed a lot to the lack of preparation of Communist Parties for the tasks they faced. With the exception of the Bolsheviks, virtually all communist parties emerged as breakaways or left-poles of pre-existing social democratic, socialist and/or syndicalist organizations which either had no clear strategy for revolution, or were not working towards a forceful revolutionary transformation. In Italy, the base for the formation of the PCI was the left tendency in the Socialist Party that defined themselves as 'electoral absentionists' (the same Socialist Party out of which Mussolini originates!). None of these formations were prepared to meet the challenges of proletarian revolution and all the questions that went along with it. None were prepared to answer the question of by what means can the proletariat take and hold onto power and crush the resistance of the exploiters and oppressors.

By the time of the formation of the Partito Comunista d'Italia (PCI), the postwar revolutionary crisis already peaked and passed with the Turin metalworkers strike in April 1920, where an effective dual power existed between revolutionary workers and the bosses (Hoare and Nowell Smith: xl-xli "Introduction" to Gramsci's *Selections from Prison Notebooks*). The closest Italy came to its insurrectionary moment was later in 1920 with the factory council movement which extended from Milan to Turin and all across much of the country. Hoare and Nowell, the editors of the first English edition of the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, summarize the failures of the early Italian communist movement:

> [Gramsci's] *Ordine Nuovo* might have implanted an *idea* that had caught imagination of the masses; the intransigents and Bordiga's abstentionist fraction might have defined an *attitude* which rejected all compromises; but not even these forces – and how much less the mass organizations, the Party, and the trade unions – had made any serious attempt to organize the proletariat, on a national scale, for a revolutionary assault on the capitalist state. Instead, what transpired was the state taking initiative to disarm the movement through concessions, while beginning to arm and finance the fascist squads. In short, they lacked even the sort of disciplined vanguard organization that Lenin had been advocating since 1903 as an alternative to the opportunist organizational structures of social democracy, and that Gramsci would come to further elaborate upon. Bordiga's effective leadership within the Party came to an end with the smashing of the Party apparatus, which reduced its membership by 80% to 5000 members (lv).



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/0913.jpg)

Italian "Red Guards" – dated 20 September 1920.

In September 1923, Gramsci proposed creating a new working-class daily, *Unitá*, along the lines of the *Ordine Nuevo* of 1919-1920, and proposed the creation of "a federal republic of workers and peasants" as ideological preparation for a Soviet regime in Italy. As Hoare and Nowell recount, "Gramsci sided with Bordiga in resisting the Comintern's advice of adhesion to the PSI, but broke with him on a series of other questions, particularly his lack of a positive strategy for Italy and his desire to start an internationalist opposition to the Comintern" (lxi). Gramsci also differentiated himself from Bordiga on the question of the relationship between Party and masses. Taking historical inspiration from how the *commissioni interne* of the factory councils 1919-1920 served as a counter to the leadership of the reformist trade union movement, the Confederazione Generale del Lavora (CGL), Gramsci argued that the mass organizations of proletarian revolution were the institutional basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat.[1]

In response to the setbacks to the PCI, and with Bordiga in captivity, Gramsci proposed a new strategic orientation for the communist movement in Italy. Gramsci strategic points included:

1. Intensive propaganda for a worker-peasant government;
2. A struggle against the labour aristocracy and reformism to cement an alliance between northern workers and southern peasants;
3. A new programme of political education in the party to overcome past divisions that were no longer decisive; and
4. Stepping up communist activity in the émigré population in France.

The foundation of Gramsci's strategic points was his new conception of the Party:

The error of the party has been to have accorded priority in an abstract fashion to the problem of organisation, which in practice has simply meant creating an apparatus of functionaries who could be depended on for their orthodoxy towards the official view… The communist party has even been against the formation of factory cells. Any participation of the masses in the activity and internal life of the party, other than on big occasions and following a formal decree from the centre, has been seen as the result of a dialectical process in which the spontaneous movement of the revolutionary masses and the organising and directing will of the centre converge; it has been seen merely as something suspended in the air, something with its own autonomous and self-generated development, something which the masses will join when the situation is right and the crest of the revolutionary wave is at its highest point, or when the party centre decides to initiate an offensive and stoops to the level of the masses in order to arouse them and lead them into action (lxii-iii).

This is essentially a critique of the party form under Bordiga, a bureaucratic centralist organizational structure. Bordiga's conception of the Party may have opposed the reformist structures of the Second International parties. But neither could the conception of the Party that he maintained bring about a positive strategy for the making of revolution in Italy, nor

an organizational form to identify and carry through such a strategy. By the spring 1924 election in which the PCI participated, under the guidance of Gramsci's strategic changes, the Party had once again grown to 12,000 members.

The foundation of Gramsci's strategy was a class analysis that embraced Lenin's theory of the labour aristocracy and applied it to Italy, recognizing the obstacles that this stratum of labour posed to proletarian revolution. However, at this period of time, this stratum of labour only really dominated the labour movement in the advanced capitalist-imperialist countries, where the bourgeoisified stratum of labour plays its part in disciplining the proletariat and channeling its struggles into arenas of struggle where the bourgeoisie always wins. Whereas the backwardness and under-developed nature of capitalism in Russia had meant that the masses were not under the domination of a labour aristocracy, Gramsci pointed out that in:

…Central and western Europe the development of capitalism has determined not only the formation of broad proletarian strata, but also and as a consequence has created the higher stratum, the labour aristocracy with its appendages of trade-union bureaucracy and the social-democratic groups. The determination, which in Russia was direct and drove the masses into the streets for a revolutionary uprising, in central and western Europe is complicated by all these 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 altogether more complex and long-term than those which were necessary for the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November 1917 (lxvi-ii).

The period in which Gramsci led the PCI was the practical basis for the working out of his thinking in prison. Gramsci dismissed Zinoviev's scapegoating of the German Communist Party's Brandler for the failure of the 1923 attempt at an insurrection, and offered a deeper critique of its attempt as being putschist. Under the new strategy and Gramsci's leadership, the PCI made considerable advances despite the growing strength of fascism. As repression intensified throughout 1925, Gramsci viewed insurrection as only possible through a unification of workers and peasants committees well prepared in advance. The former would take the form of autonomous factory committees, while defending the independence of the CGL from fascist liquidation. Attempts were also being made to create an underground apparatus. Despite intensifying repression, PCI membership rose to 27,000 members, with an increasing proportion coming from the ranks of the peasantry. Gramsci came to recognize that the situation was qualitatively changing, and this led to his 1926 paper on the Southern Question, in which he articulated his theses on the dual role of the northern proletariat and the southern peasantry.

In the early months of Gramsci's incarceration, before facing solitary confinement, Gramsci's political agitation in prison can be seen as the seminal form of the profound theoretical points that he later worked out in prison notebooks over the coming decade. These theoretical points consisted of the following:

1. The conception of the party as being led by the organic intellectuals of the proletariat;
2. The need for military organization understood not in narrow technical terms but broad political terms;
3. The importance of the intermediate slogan of "constituent assembly," as first a means of winning allies for the proletariat in its struggle against the ruling class, and subsequently on the shifting terrain to struggle against all compromise and capitulation;
4. A more precise formulation of the worker-peasant alliance under the slogan of "a republic of worker and peasant soviets in Italy";
5. Fascism as a particular expression of the bourgeois revolution on the basis of Italy's specificities, which included the lack of unity amongst Italy's bourgeoisie;
6. Countering the weight of the Catholic Church; and
7. The necessity of proletarian hegemony over the peasantry (xci).

From some of Gramsci's strategic points, I believe we can extrapolate questions of significance for the entire international communist movement (many of which have been responded to by Maoism. But let's hold off on elaborating those for Part II of this essay.). I find that these general contributions consist at least of the following:

- The question of actual proletarian leadership in the proletarian revolutionary party, to which Gramsci responds with the "organic intellectual" and to which Mao responds with the concept of the *mass line* [Point 1 above];
- An understanding of the military question as a political question, of war as politics and political struggle as a form of military struggle [Point 2 above];
- A class analysis that differentiates among the popular classes which will play the leading role in the revolution, which constitute a numerically main force, and which must follow the hegemony of other classes [Points 4 and 7].

It was only incidentally that Gramsci's sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht was able to smuggle out his 33 prison notebooks after his death, allowing us to study how Gramsci develops these points over the course of nearly a decade in fascist prisons.

The next section summarizes the conceptual developments of the prison notebooks. **(https://ri-ir.org/2013/09/10/gramscis-prison-notebooks-towards-a-war-of-position/)**

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1 *In these debates, we can already see the articulation of a position on the relationship between the Party and the masses and their mass organizations by Gramsci that would find its most advanced expression soon thereafter in the Chinese revolution. This position would later become part of the theoretical synthesis that is Marxism-Leninism-Maoism) .*

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