Chapter Two
Antonio Gramsci and the Italian Communist Press in the Fascist Era

Gramsci and L’Ordine Nuovo

The first issue of *L’Ordine Nuovo*, subtitled a ‘weekly review of socialist culture’, appeared in Turin on 1 May 1919. The review was launched by four dedicated left-wing Socialists who, in January 1921, were among the founders of the Communist Party of Italy: Antonio Gramsci, Palmiro Togliatti, Angelo Tasca, and Umberto Terracini.

Gramsci was the leader of the quadrumvirate. He was a small, hunchbacked man, but his lucid intelligence and tenacious will compensated for his physical disabilities. He had left his native Sardinia in 1911 to pursue a course of literary and philological studies at the University of Turin. During World War I, he resumed his early interests in politics and economics, and by the beginning of 1917 he was named secretary of the Turinese section of the Italian Socialist Party. From that point on he devoted himself to the task of building a militant socialist movement in Italy.

The weekly *L’Ordine Nuovo* of the years 1919 and 1920 reflected the experiences and thought of those Italian socialists who, like Gramsci and his friends, were dissatisfied with what they regarded as the excessively cautious and opportunistic policies of their party’s leadership and who aspired to place the Italian Socialist Party at the vanguard of a revolutionary movement capable of rebuilding Italian society on new foundations. The review spurred on the Turin workers in their struggles against the city’s managerial and industrial
class. To this end, its editors elaborated a programme for the creation of workers’ coun-
cils that were, in fact, successfully if only temporarily established in many of the factories of Turin. Gramsci’s speaking voice was thin and reedy, yet he was able through sheer force of personality and focused intelligence to hold the attention of workers on the shop floor. Among other qualities, he was a gifted speaker and teacher.

In January 1921, coincident with the founding of the Communist Party of Italy, which became a member organisation of the recently founded Communist International, *L’Ordine Nuovo* was transformed from a weekly into a daily newspaper whose motto, borrowed from the Swiss socialist and friend of Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, read ‘to tell the truth is revolutionary’. But Lenin, not Lassalle, was the real driving force behind the new communist daily. Nearly all of Gramsci’s writings in *L’Ordine Nuovo*, although bearing the imprint of an independent and creative mind, were inspired by the teachings of Lenin.

The most painful ‘truth’ to be told, according to Gramsci, was that in Russia a workers’ state had been founded on the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat, while in Italy the Italian Socialist Party, despite its mass following and many opportunities for revolutionary action, had indulged in futile sloganeering and had allowed itself to be overwhelmed by the assaults and raids of Fascist militiamen. In this situation, Gramsci concluded, it had become clear that only a genuinely revolutionary Communist Party, functioning within the framework of the Third International, could mobilise the energies of the working class in its struggle to overthrow the capitalist system. Gramsci did not deviate from this position in the next few years. As Fascist violence increased and as it became evident that the National Fascist Party would probably seize power in Italy, his point of view appealed to those Italians who looked to the young Soviet Union as a model of revolutionary politics.

Throughout the year 1921, Gramsci grappled with the phenomenon of Italian Fascism, which he thought reflected the ideology of a disaffected petty bourgeoisie. This was the segment of Italian society that was providing the men and ideas for the Fascist movement; they were the organisers of the ‘punitive expeditions’ against socialist and labour organisations; they supplied the Fascists with the peculiar mix of nationalism and authoritarianism that was emanating increasingly from the mouth of their leader Benito Mussolini.

But Gramsci went to considerable pains to point out as well that the petty bourgeois ideologues who formed the shock troops of the Fascist movement were in the final analysis instruments in the hands of Italian capitalists, who through Fascism were attempting to resolve the problem of capitalist production and trade resulting from the recent war through the establishment of a dictatorship of the Right able to safeguard their economic interests. But like Lenin in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*,

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