CHAPTER 2

The Paradox between Communist Scission and United Front

1 How the Communist Scission in Italy Consolidated Itself over the Dispute within the Communist International and the Fascist Offensive

Even after the Comintern’s Third Congress, Gramsci continued to believe that the situation favoured the international socialist revolution. He had hopes that the deep social crisis in Poland would lead to the collapse of the ruling anti-Soviet régime and create good opportunities, because ‘in the countries with a more objectively revolutionary situation, such as Germany, Czechoslovakia and Italy, the international environment will be more favourable to the proletariat in reorganising itself and victoriously organising the system of soviets atop the ruins of imperialism ...’

As for Italian politics, Gramsci dedicated great attention to the polemic against the PSI and its leader Serrati, in which he also indicated that the new policy established at the Third Congress, with its implicit perception that a new phase in the struggle of the working class had begun and thus a new policy was needed, had not yet been well understood. Gramsci and especially the leadership of the PCd’I held the theoretical view that the moment of the scission and the revolutionary offensive was still current.

The policy of a united front with the socialists could not be put into action, because Gramsci believed that ‘the Socialist Party is a counterrevolutionary party’, and understood that ‘a united front means only one thing: the regrouping of the great proletarian masses around a concrete programme for immediate action in the realm of trade unions’. This would be justified by the fact that Italian trade unions appeared less as organs for the defence of corporate interests and more ‘as organisations established by the sympathisers of certain political persuasions’.

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This political orientation was based in a plausible understanding of the final orientation of the Third Congress and on a certain interpretation of the process of class struggle in Italy, which ‘would be an enigma if one neglected to take as the central focus of one’s historical vision the ceaseless endeavours of certain governmental strata to incorporate into the ruling class the most eminent personalities from the working-class organisations’. In this methodological suggestion, we can find the seeds not only of the notion of transformism but also of hegemony, which would be important threads in Gramsci’s mature reflections.

For Gramsci, the state and the political régime in Italy were established as the northern capitalists bureaucratically superimposed themselves over the central and Southern agricultural classes. The development of industrial and financial capital in the North encouraged a rearrangement of alliances, and so the alliance of the propertied classes from north and south was cast aside in favour of an alliance with the urban proletariat, as a foundation for a parliamentary democracy which enabled the strengthening of trade unions and cooperatives.

However, ‘the system of cooperatives and all the other organisations of resistance, insurance and production of the Italian working class were not born out of some original and revolutionary creative impulse, but depended on a whole series of compromises in which the strength of the government represented the dominant element’.

It was by precisely these means that the bourgeoisie shaped a system of alliances which forged a petit-bourgeois stratum within the working class, with vested interests in the established order. But that which the bourgeoisie always allowed to grow under its control became a challenge after 1919, when the Socialist Party began to question its rule, such that ‘fascism became the instrument for blackmailing the Socialist Party; for producing a scission between the petty-bourgeois elements, encrusted like barnacles upon the established interests of the working class, and the rest of the Socialist Party – which limited itself to feeding on ideological formulae’.

So, on the one hand using fascist violence without directly involving the institutions of the state, and on the other ‘intensifying to the point of absurdity the policy of compromise which is traditional for the Italian ruling classes, the bourgeoisie has succeeded in obtaining what it had patiently been preparing

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4 Gramsci 1999b, p. 133.
5 Gramsci 1999b, p. 135.