The Strategy of the Anti-Fascist United Front

1 The ‘Lyons Theses’ and the Theory of the Socialist Revolution in Italy

The political situation in Italy meant that the Third National Congress of the PCd’I had to take place clandestinely in the French city of Lyon. In the meeting in preparation for the congress, Gramsci espoused the main points that should guide the debates, seeking to counter the theses of the ‘extreme left’ minority, led by Amadeo Bordiga, with the theses from the majority of the CC, which he represented. He began insisting on the importance of the ‘Bolshevisation’ of the party, according to the intervention presented during the Fifth World Congress and Fifth Enlarged Plenary of the ECCI, which was seen as ‘a question of combating every deviation in the doctrine and practice of the revolutionary class struggle’.1

This statement was dangerous, in view of the subsequent events in the life of the RKP(b) and the Comintern. It aimed to highlight the fundamental points of disagreement between the political orientation which was being developed and those defended by the opposition. In spite of the occasional harshness of his choice of words, Gramsci’s goal still was to create a new ‘theoretical synthesis’, because this was the way he understood ‘Bolshevisation’.

Gramsci presented the problem of the disagreements among Italian communists as revolving around three fundamental points: ‘1. the problem of relations between the central leadership of the party and the mass of comrades enrolled in its ranks; 2. the problem of relations between the central leadership and the working class; 3. the problem of relations between the working class and the other anti-capitalist classes’.2

The solution to these problems ‘is necessary for the working class to become the class that leads the anti-capitalist struggle; for the Communist Party to lead the working class in this struggle; and for the Party to be structured internally in such a way that it can fulfil this its basic function’.3

The two first problems are organisational, with implications for the nature of the party and its class character. Gramsci’s explanation once again suggests

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1 Gramsci 1999b, p. 428.
2 Gramsci 1999b, p. 429.
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that the question of the workers’ revolutionary consciousness was seen as arising from its class position, and it also pointed to the risk of the formation of an intellectual social stratum disconnected from the class. This was a theme already present, though in different form, in Sorel, Luxemburg and the late Lenin.

Gramsci insisted that the party should be seen as ‘“part” of the working class’, that it should seek ‘to raise the political level of the masses’, and also that ‘the organisers of the working class must be the workers themselves’. From this position came his emphasis on the political unification of the working class and on its organisation in the workplace. In Gramsci’s critique, the theoretical position of the ‘extreme left’ was wrong to see the party as an ‘“organ” of the working class’, because in placing the elements of which the party was comprised all on the same level, regardless of their social origin, it was ‘not concerned to safeguard the proletarian character of the Party’, and thus put the intellectuals in a special position, as ‘the most politically and socially advanced elements’.4

Besides seeking the unification of the working class, the communists should also unite every anti-capitalist class, because

In no country is the proletariat capable of winning power and keeping it with its own forces alone. It must therefore obtain allies: in other words, it must follow a policy that will enable it to place itself at the head of the other classes who have anti-capitalist interests, and guide them in the struggle to overthrow bourgeois society. The question is of particular importance for Italy, where the proletariat is a minority of the working population and geographically distributed in such a manner, that it cannot presume to lead a victorious struggle for power unless it has previously resolved very precisely the problem of its relations with the peasant class.5

Even though Gramsci did not explicitly refer to the political formula of the united front, at that point his understanding of the question was very clear. He wished to unite the working class under the leadership of the communist party, ensuring its autonomy and its antagonistic position. For that, it would be necessary ‘to disintegrate the Opposition, socially and thus politically, in order to deprive it of the base it had among the masses’. This would also be achieved