The Gramsci-Bordiga Debate, 100 Years On

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Abstract This paper examines the 1924 leadership transition from Amadeo Bordiga to Antonio Gramsci in the *Partito Comunista d'Italia* (PCd'I), to reconstruct the theoretical and political determinations of their confrontation. The *Gramsci-Bordiga debate*, emerging amid revolutionary fervour and the rise of fascism in Italy, reveals enduring contradictions between invariance and counter-hegemonic strategy. Using a sociological and historical method and a corpus of writings, letters, and speeches, the paper situates the debate within the material and strategic conditions of interwar Europe. The analytical approach treats their opposition as a relative totality in which conflict generates conceptual development. The findings argue that, a century on, the structural economic, social, and political conditions that framed the debate persist – rendering its insights urgently relevant. From the debate emerges a necessary synthesis: Gramsci's strategy of expansive articulation and Bordiga's insistence on theoretical and organizational rigour form two indispensable poles of revolutionary praxis. The paper identifies three principles for contemporary emancipatory politics: grounding strategy in material and historical analysis; linking immediate struggles to systemic transformation; and combining flexible articulation with programmatic coherence. These key tensions outline a register for contemporary struggles to grasp from the debate.

In 1924, Antonio Gramsci succeeded Amadeo Bordiga as leader of the Communist Party of Italy (*Partito Comunista d'Italia*, PCd'I). The transition from the first to the second leader of the PCd'I occurred amidst profound differences within the Italian communist movement. Faced with the immediate danger posed by the rise of fascism, Gramsci denounced Bordiga's orthodoxy and resulting immobilism. Bordiga, for his part, foresaw the looming authoritarian and bureaucratic turn of the Communist International, which he saw reflected in Gramsci's programme, and rejected any divergence from the revolutionary struggle. A century after the transition in leadership of the PCd'I, we are witnessing similar symptoms of global capitalist crisis to those Gramsci and Bordiga struggled with. Yet, cohesive, emancipatory, and revolutionary programmes like theirs seem lacking. To be sure, the questions raised by Gramsci and Bordiga seem more pressing than ever, and their debate offers a significant register for ongoing political struggles.

The paper addresses a central question: *What can be drawn from the debate between Gramsci and Bordiga, 100 years on?* The goal is twofold. First, to offer a comprehensive understanding of the debate, combining a historical account with a critical examination of the political-theoretical contributions it conveys. Although extensive literature has covered the debate from a historical perspective, most contributions have either accounted for the political history (of the PCd'I and other contemporary

organizations) or the biographical trajectory of Gramsci and Bordiga. Scarce research focuses specifically on the debate, while almost none comprehensively historizes its political-theoretical tensions. The second goal is to suggest a register for current emancipatory projects, debates, and practices. Crucial aspects of Gramsci and Bordiga's debate now occupy a marginal position in emancipatory politics. However, to address the most serious issues we are experiencing, these aspects ought to resurface. Gramsci and Bordiga have certainly influenced valuable political currents since, but the latter have arguably led to impasses. The paper aims to grasp crucial aspects of the *Gramsci-Bordiga debate*; to foster efficient and theoretically informed praxis. The method is historical and sociological. It draws from a corpus of original interventions, including publications, newspaper articles, programmes, letters, transcripts of conferences and speeches authored by Gramsci and Bordiga, or in which they were involved, as well as related commentaries by their contemporaries. This corpus is approached contextually. To locate the political and its conceptualization contextually is to ground political theory within the specific, historically situated social formation in which it emerged. Hence, the analysis looks at social forces and material conditions. This renders a more cohesive account of the debate, including the relationship between Gramsci and Bordiga's interventions and the strategic landscape in which they struggled.

The debate is understood as a dialectical relationship; that is, as a relative totality in which the conflictual relationship between the two debaters and their perspectives, through development and negation, results in a more complete conceptualization and leads to change. As such, the account considers the debaters' reciprocal influence on each other's perspectives and their mutual influence on their historical context. This provides a comprehensive account from which conclusions can be drawn.

The discussion addresses the resilience of the conditions that shaped Gramsci and Bordiga's strategic landscape. It builds upon academic literature and political interventions inspired by Gramsci and Bordiga. The analytical approach followed throughout is correctly described as a historical-dialectical; by tracing the significance of its legacies and how the determinants that influenced the debate have unfolded throughout the centenary historical process that followed, it informs the analysis of the current landscape, and how the inherited conditions can change. Doing so results in a twofold contribution: it offers keys that help to characterize historical changes and identify the issues that remain; it signals a threshold for further discussions and new debates to engage with and converge upon politically.

What follows is divided into three main sections. The first contextualizes the account of the debate. The second covers the debate chronologically,

unpacking crucial theoretical contentions and considering tensions within the strategic landscape. The third section discusses significant developments and critically examines their contradictions relative to the current conjuncture. The conclusion answers the central question posed in the paper, suggesting a register for ongoing struggles against capitalism.

Approaching…

When approaching accounts of the debate, one faces two significant contradictions. The first can illuminate the present conjuncture, whereas the second has and continues to obscure the debate's legacy. Evocative of the rich theoretical contributions and major political changes of the early 20th century, the first contradiction is that of genuine political and theoretical divergences and disagreements between Gramsci and Bordiga. This contradiction is negotiated throughout the paper. The second is related to the narratives that framed previous accounts and have historically influenced the (unequal) reception of Gramsci and Bordiga's works. It contradicts the analysis and fruitfulness of the debate. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that said narratives attest to the protagonists strategic landscape. To overcome this contradiction, rather than ideological bias or idealistic oppositions, it is addressed in terms of political constraints and situated praxis; national and international pressures upon the Italian Communist movement and the material practice of people involved in publishing and/or, conversely, censoring the debaters' work.

Because the first contradiction is realized in view of the second, it can only be overcome after unpacking the ladder. In more concrete terms: The posthumous co-optation of Gramsci's work by the *Partido Communista de Italia* (PCI)–not to be conflated with its predecessor the PCd'I–and the antagonism constructed against Bordiga reflect the strategic landscape which unpacked, clarifies the political determinants (e.g. pressures from international political organizations, tactical demands, contingent threats, opposition between forces, structural economic changes, etc.) that influenced the debate and must be understood to mitigate some limitations to the comprehensive historical examination, and to assess the debate's legacy and tensions within it.

Co-optation and Antagonism

The work of Palmiro Togliatti is emblematic of the initial limitations to studying the debate. After Gramsci's arrest in 1926, Togliatti assumed leadership of the PCd'I. Excluding a short interim from 1934 to 1938, he remained General Secretary of the party until 1968, the year of his death. Under his leadership, the party's programme was aligned with the unequivocal positions pushed by the Comintern and transformed into the PCI, a new structure and programme of his design. Togliatti's consolidation of his leadership was characterized by a

dual strategy of appropriating Antonio Gramsci's legacy while constructing an antagonism against Amadeo Bordiga. This strategy reflected the significant challenges imposed by the recently established Fascist regime upon the Italian Communist movement.

Indeed, in 1925 and 1926, Mussolini's government passed the *Leggi Fascistissime*, the series of laws which dissolved all non-fascist political organisations, abolished freedom of the press, and set up the Special Tribunal for the Defense of the State, the organ that, ran by fascist militia and the regime's military officers, pursued anti-Fascist "subversives", systematically imprisoning political opponents or sending them into exile. From the beginning, Togliatti led the PCd'I from Moscow, in exile. In 1943, he renamed the party PCI, and upon his return to Italy in 1944, he transformed the formerly revolutionary party into a reformist, nationalist mass organization. In his words, the PCI was to resolve the "problem of the emancipation of labour within the frame of our national freedom and life," with "the salvation, the resurrection of Italy" as its goals (Togliatti 1972, cited in Basso 2023, 131). For ideological and party-discipline purposes, the PCI antagonized Bordiga, whose programme the PCI was breaking from. Meanwhile, as George Hoare and Nathan Sperber put it, the PCI instrumentalized the defunct Gramsci, who became, in the post-war period, a "quasi-mythological figure for the party rank and file" (Hoare and Sperber 2016, 212). The definitive dichotomy constructed between the two previous leaders served to validate the party's new strategic direction.

The co-optation of Gramsci's legacy was intended to present Togliatti as his natural successor, instrumentalizing the prestige Gramsci acquired among Italian workers during the Turin strikes (1918–1919), while obscuring his past disagreements with Togliatti and his non-alignment with Stalin's dominant line in the International. The party reframed Gramsci's work as compatible with Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and the PCI's new nationalist identity. According to Francisco Fernández Buey, this interpretation was "inseparable from the political and cultural vision of Palmiro Togliatti" (2014, 99). That effort was also detrimental to the early reception of Gramsci's political-theoretical contribution, as in the case of the Prison Notebooks' (1948–1951) first edition, which suffered substantive "interpretative choices" under Togliatti's supervision (Thomas 2009, 106).

These editorial choices reflect a complex political landscape where the PCI navigated both national imperatives and international pressures. As Peter Thomas argues, Togliatti's approach to Gramsci's work resulted from "complex political calculations" and "intense diplomatic *manoeuvres*" concerning the PCI's place within the International communist movement (Thomas 2009, 105–6). Domestically, the party aimed to enforce internal discipline and legitimize its own reformist, parliamentary programme by presenting it as the

natural continuation of Gramsci's leadership versus Bordiga's defeated strategy. As such, Gramsci's writings on party discipline were "appealed to when loyalty to the PCI leadership had to be enforced within the ranks" (Hoare and Sperber 2016, 212). Conversely, his writings on revolution were introduced as contingent to the incremental march towards socialism, which itself was reduced to the party's social-democratic programme and parliamentary politics (Basso 2020a, 131). For Pietro Basso, this effort involved masking the "very open-endedness" of Gramsci's political theory; for instance, in the first edition of the Prison Letters (1947), the compilers systematically "expunged" content deemed "compromising to the PCI," such as all 18 sympathetic references to Bordiga (Basso 2020b).

The antagonism towards Bordiga was also driven by political determinants, both national and international. Domestically, Togliatti sought to neutralize Bordiga's enduring influence, which challenged his own leadership and the PCI's new reformist direction. He systematically denigrated Bordiga, using his figure to embody all internal criticism and to rally the base by defining the party in opposition to Bordighism, whose proponents were excluded from its ranks. In Basso's words, Bordiga's position contradicted the PCI's programme that now revolved around national unity through collaboration with bourgeois and capitalist parties to rebuild a democratic Italy after the Fascist regime; "Hence Togliatti's instruction: build up a physical, psychological, ideological, 'moral' chasm to divide these cadres from Bordiga and his positions" (Basso 2020b). This strategy dovetailed with the Comintern's own rejection of Bordiga, who was expelled in 1930. To further discredit him, the PCI conflated his position with Trotskyism–despite their theoretical differences–a tactic exemplified by Togliatti's 1937 depiction of Bordiga as a "Trotskyist skunk protected by the police and by fascists and hated by workers in the way that a traitor has to be hated" (Togliatti 1972, 29).

The strategic landscape of the 1930s to the 1950s fundamentally shaped the reception of Gramsci and Bordiga's work. Gramsci was systematically assimilated into Leninism and orthodox Marxist ideology, stripping it of its historical and national context, while Bordiga was marginalised and his contributions largely erased from communist discourse (Fontana 1993, 4). This politicized framing and the related ideological tensions underscore the necessity of historicizing both the texts and their interpretations; hence, the following account is analysed from a social and material perspective.

…the Debate

Gramsci and Bordiga first met clandestinely in Florence in November 1917 at a conference of PSI dissidents critical of the party's leadership. Both represented groups from the party's intransigent left: Gramsci as a delegate

from Turin, and Bordiga, already an established figure from Naples. Galvanized by the recent Bolshevik Revolution, which affirmed the viability of a worker-led revolution and the need to break with reformism, the dissidents prepared a common left-wing position for the upcoming national congress. The resulting platform condemned both Italy's participation in the imperialist war and the party's reformist wing, though internal divisions persisted over tactics, particularly the expulsion of reformists from the PSI.

The left platform largely reflected Bordiga's positions, which aligned with Lenin's April Theses (April 7th, 1917). Unlike the official PSI stance of "Neither support, nor sabotage" the state's war effort, Bordiga had opposed the conflict since 1914 and now advocated for organized armed insurrection: "It is essential to act […] The proletariat in the factories is tired. But it is armed. We must act" (Bordiga quoted in Gramsci 1971, xxxiii). He argued the party must lead the proletariat in a decisive revolutionary struggle, presenting this as the only alternative to the twin failures of nationalist capitulation and socialist indecision.

Although Gramsci initially supported Bordiga's platform (he spoke in their favor and promoted the Florence platform), their analyses of the October Revolution fundamentally diverged. In his 1917 article *La Rivoluzione contro il Capitale*, Gramsci portrayed the Bolshevik success as a vanguard movement that fused with a popular revolution. He emphasized the primacy of the ideological factor; the "Bolshevik revolution is based more on ideology than actual events", he wrote (Gramsci 1917). For him, the revolution was led by a vanguard movement that proved successful by merging with the broader popular Russian struggle and transforming the movement into revolutionary control over the state. Furthermore, he argued, the unforeseen character of the revolution demonstrated the inadequacy of the traditional Marxist method.

> The Bolsheviks renounce Karl Marx and they assert, through their clear statement of action, through what they have achieved, that the laws of historical materialism are not as set in stone, as one may think, or one may have thought previously (Gramsci 1917).

Gramsci challenged the traditional historical materialist view that revolutionary will emerges mechanically from capitalism's internal contradictions. Instead, he argued that the Russian Revolution succeeded through a process of political articulation: diverse populations, united by shared wartime struggles and the February Revolution, came to see themselves as part of a whole, as a collective historical agent. The Bolsheviks' crucial role, in his view, was to foster the "socialist thinking" that ignited: the blooming "collective sense" into a cohesive communist revolutionary will (Gramsci 1917). This analysis was not a rejection of historical materialism but an effort to specify its operation within the unique Russian context.

Gramsci's analysis was widely criticized as a form of Marxist idealism. Reformists dismissed it as utopistic voluntarism, while Bordiga offered a more radical critique, arguing that its idealist character fundamentally contradicted historical materialism as a method and Marx himself. Bordiga contended that the Bolshevik victory aligned perfectly with the Communist Manifesto: a proletarian revolution following an incomplete bourgeois revolution. He wrote:

> What did not happen in Germany, for complex reasons, has happened in Russia in 1917. It is therefore not right to say that the beginning of the socialist revolution is anti-Marxist, precisely in the country where the bourgeois revolution has not yet been accomplished (Bordiga 1998, 418–19).

Indeed, before the Revolution, neither the Russian state nor the economy underwent a bourgeois revolution, as Tsars still ruled and capitalist modes of production had not subsumed agriculture. Rather, Bordgia attributed the success to the party's "extreme force of will" and the unique weakness of the Tsarist state, whose resources it expanded in the war; conditions absent in advanced capitalist countries like Italy, where strong state mechanisms could easily suppress revolutionary vanguards. Consequently, Bordiga concluded that in Western contexts, the primary task was not insurrectionary voluntarism but the patient organization of a disciplined Communist Party.

Despite deeming the Bolsheviks' tactics specific to Russia, Bordiga nevertheless celebrated the October Revolution as a transformative international event. He argued it exposed the absurdity of the imperialist war and reaffirmed the interconnected, global nature of class struggle, as foreseen by Marx and Engels; the message sent by the Russian revolutionaries concerned the global capitalist order as a whole (Basso 2020a, 128). For Bordiga, the revolution was not the application of an internationalist idea to a national context, but a strike against nationalism itself; and this, Marxists should recall in their method, the inherent contradiction of the international capitalist system is grounded in people's material conditions: "the revolution has dealt a mighty blow to the *nationalist* conception of the war" (Bordiga 1996, 411). Rather than contradicting Marxism, it ultimately confirmed communism's inherently international character.

Il Soviet and l'Ordine nuovo

In the aftermath of World War I, Italy experienced a major financial crisis, laying the grounds to major general strikes throughout the country, especially in Turin—the *biennio rosso* (1919–1920), out in Turin. During this period, the divergence between Gramsci and Bordiga intensified. Each developed their analysis of the events through their respective newspapers. Yet, they shared a critique: condemning the PSI's passive stance toward the crucial situation of the simultaneous revolutionary worker

uprisings and the growing fascist threat.

In Naples, Bordiga founded *Il Soviet* in 1918 with other militants of the Communist Abstentionist Fraction. The journal promoted an abstentionist line — "Not one socialist at the polls!"—arguing that the PSI had reduced socialism to a mere expansion of democracy, within bourgeois institutions. The PSI equated socialism to "the *widening of democracy* within the limits of existing institutions" and regarded class struggle as a "*law-abiding peaceful* way of boosting this revolutionary process, with elections being the key" (Basso 2020a, 128). Bordiga adamantly opposed such a programme. In his view, class struggle was being diluted into lawful electoral gradualism. Indeed, Il Soviet paid particular attention to the Russian context, and its editorial lines championed Bolshevik intransigence toward Social democracy and Socialist reformism, contending that their success in "win[ing] the trust and allegiance of the great majority of the Russian workers' stemmed from unwavering commitment to a "consistent adherence to the maximum programme" (Bordiga 2020, 24).

Founded in Turin by Gramsci, Togliatti, and other local militants, *L'Ordine Nuovo* first appeared on May 1st, 1919. Its aim, as outlined days earlier (April 25th) in *Avanti!* was to appeal to all Italian socialists who had faith in the future and wanted to put this faith into practice, to achieve, through passionate and coordinated research, a maximum programme that met the requirements of the national and international situation. The group believed that replacing the existing bourgeois implied appealing to the "common sense" emerging from the workers' "spontaneous experience" during the *biennio rosso*; that "organizing" this common sense into a unified revolutionary programme would increase tenfold the "strength" of their "enthusiasm" (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 123). Alongside reporting on local struggles, the journal published translations of revolutionary texts from Russia, France, and England, seeking to adapt international insights to the ebullient Italian conditions, to understand them, and to draw inspiration from them.

Gramsci's direct involvement with factory councils sharpened his critique of the PSI's lack of support for the revolutionary strikers. In *L'Ordine Nuovo*, he polemized with the "traditional intellectuals" trade unionists, rejecting the "industrial vision" concerned with "defending" the factory committees while waiting for the revolutionary culture to develop and the proletariat to become educated enough for its success (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 126). In *L'Ordine Nuovo*, he polemized against PSI MPs who favoured negotiation with industrialists and whose position was tantamount to passivity in the face of fascist militia, police, and strike-breakers' offensives. Instead, Gramsci called for mobilizing workers beyond the factories and building a powerful unitary movement.

Throughout the *biennio rosso*, Gramsci pragmatically supported the

two major leading organizations, the anarcho-syndicalist *Unione Sindacale Italiana* and the revolutionary syndicalist *Unione Italiana del Lavoro*, despite theoretical disagreements. These organizations–accustomed to small, militant circles–proved unable to develop a strategy suited to the mass movements they now represented (Bertrand 1982, 383–84). Meanwhile, PSI reformists and the *Confederazione Generale del Lavoro* (CGL) actively suppressed what they deemed primitive tactics and anarchist tendencies among the workers. For example, when anarcho-syndicalists sought to coordinate food riots into a broader uprising in Turin, local Socialists obstructed these efforts, prioritizing achievable reforms like the eight-hour workday over insurrectionary actions that threatened their "control over the masses" and the labour movement (Bertrand 1982, 185).

Despite his scepticism toward anarchism, Gramsci recognized the potential of Italy's main revolutionary organizations, drawing inspiration from the Soviet model. He argued that Soviets were effective precisely because they emerged organically from the masses; the *a priori* articulation of a general movement freed from the control of elected representatives or predetermined agendas. In his view, Italian workers–through self-organization and direct action–were already developing their own methods and their own ends, "the tools better suited to forming a perfect cohesion of the working class" and "realizing, already, the self-government of the masses" (Gramsci 1919a). In *L'Ordine Nuovo*, he championed the Soviet council as the "central model" for the whole communist organization of society (Gramsci 1919b).

Under the combined Fascist offensives and state repression and subsided by the settlements union and Socialist leaders negotiated, the Turin strikes collapsed in 1920. Gramsci considered that the "immediate task" was studying what led to both the rise and the failure of this revolutionary sequence. In his editorial *Superstizione e realtà* (May 8th), Gramsci analysed the defeat through the lens of Marx and Engels' writing on the failed 1848 German Revolution. He rejected the official narrative–promoted by state-aligned newspapers and moderate socialists–that blamed the failure on the irresponsibility of a few instigators, including the *Ordine Nuovo* group. Against this "superstition", he argued the understanding that the revolution failed because of the movement's "immaturity" and absence of revolutionary cohesion, for which the PSI was prominently responsible; because they focused on beneficial settlements, reformist forces, including the PSI, worked to prevent the expansion of the mass movement in Turin, isolating it, ultimately signing its exhaustion (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 137–38). Yet, like Marx and Engels, who argued "every attempt at forcible repression will only bring it forth stronger and stronger, until it bursts its fetters," Gramsci believed that, despite the defeat, the *biennio ros-*

so would only strengthen working-class resolve (Marx 1851). He concluded that Turin's workers had emerged with a critical insight on two fronts: the control over factories and over their own political organizations.

In *Il Soviet*, Bordiga offered a distinct analysis of the events. While he agreed that post-war conditions sparked the revolutionary wave and that class collaborationists led to its failure, he opposed granting greater autonomy to local councils. For Bordiga, the revolutionary party necessarily preceded and superseded all other forms of organization, including unions, Soviets, or parliamentary groups. The party, he wrote, "came before unionism or parliamentary groups" (Basso 2020a, 128).

He acknowledged that factory councils were valuable for the socialization of the working class and the management of local production but rejected the view that they could unify the proletariat as a revolutionary subject. This divergence was rooted in the analysis of the Soviet model. While the Soviet embodied the immediate power of the proletariat—as it "took upon itself alone the task of directing the entire life of society"—only the party could unify its forces and express its general and historical interest as a class (Bordiga 2020, 24). Despite this disagreement with Gramsci over the *question of organization*, both concurred on the essential next step: breaking from reformists to create a new party committed to a revolutionary programme.

The Question of Fascism

During the interwar period, alongside the *biennio rosso*, Italy experienced the rise of fascism. Between the defeat of the Turin strikes and the founding of the PCd'I, Fascists gained their first political foothold in the country. Yet, before the March on Rome, most communists underestimated the threat, believing Fascism would soon collapse under the internal contradictions of its class constitution—a movement of the petty bourgeoisie, too fragmented and economically insignificant to consolidate lasting control over the state, that was showing its last performance before undergoing an inner dissolution (Adamson 1979, 53).

L'Ordine Nuovo documented the daily Fascist military offensive against workers and their devastating impact on the strikes. Nevertheless, its early analyses often reduced Fascism to a tool of the dominant economic forces, capitalist manufacturers and big landowners, devoid of political autonomy and perspective (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 165). In a January 1921 article, Gramsci characterized Fascism as a negative phenomenon, emerging as a mere reaction to the war and the ensuing financial downturn. Because of its class structure, the movement of the unproductive (having no real economic or political significance, nor a determining class articulation either to capital or labour) petty bourgeois class could only mimic other classes in its political activity.

> The petit bourgeoisie, even in this last political incarnation of "fascism," has definitively shown itself in its true nature of servant of capitalism and of landed property, of agent of counter-revolution. But it has also shown that it is fundamentally incapable of carrying out any historical task: the ape people fills the press, it does not make history, it leaves a trace in the papers, it does not offer material to write books (Gramsci 1921)

This view, though perceptive in identifying its class composition, initially overlooked Fascism's capacity to develop a coherent and autonomous political force.

Bordiga's analysis similarly underestimated fascism, reducing it to a transient bourgeois counter-revolutionary tool that would dissipate once no longer needed by the ruling class. Even following the March on Rome and Mussolini's ascent to power in 1922, Bordiga maintained that fascism was functionally equivalent to other bourgeois forces that had suppressed the revolutionary movement. Unlike Gramsci, who later revised his views (especially after the formation of the 1922 Fascist government), Bordiga never substantially developed his analysis beyond this instrumentalist reading. This remained Bordiga's perspective: fascism and social democracy (like that of the PSI) were two different yet complementary functions of the bourgeois state—differing in form, but identical in their role in upholding class domination.

The Foundation of the Partito Comunista d'Italia

In January 1921, the left wing of the PSI split during its Livorno national Congress and formed the *Partito Comunista d'Italia* (PCd'I). The secession, representing a third of the PSI membership, united three main factions: the maximalist left, the Neapolitan group led by Bordiga, and Gramsci's *Ordine Nuovo* group. The new party immediately voted to join the Comintern and elected Bordiga as its first general secretary (Gramsci 2000, 110).

The Comintern's response, however, was ambivalent. At its Third World Congress in June 1921, the International criticized the PCd'I for "concentrating its activity on consolidating the scission and making permanent attacks on 'centrism'," its leaders were denounced as "ultra-left factionalists" who stripped the PSI of a great portion of its members (Del Roio 2015, 49). This tension defined the PCd'I's early international relations, culminating, between 1921 and 1924, in a dispute regarding the contentious United Front policy. The PCd'I leadership–including Bordiga, Gramsci, and Togliatti–supported the policy in principle but opposed the Comintern's version imported from above, which they saw as a step toward reunification with the reformist PSI. As such, the United Front policy was inaudible. From their standpoint, the reunification was unnecessary at best–since Communists remained convinced that the Fascists' recent political victory would not change

fundamentally the Italian situation–while, at worst, it would mean renewed collaboration with bourgeois forces, betraying both the precise reason for their split and the party's programme (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 183). Instead, the PCd'I advocated for a United Front from below, built directly through production-based' organizations. This stance, however, was tantamount to rejecting the Comintern's tactical directive (Gramsci 1971, xvliii).

The formation by trade unions, following the fall of the Bonomi government, of the anti-fascist *Alleanza del Lavoro* in February 1922–which a priori excluded communists from its leadership–sharpened tensions over the United Front. In *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci criticized this exclusion as symptomatic of a deeper disconnect between the leadership, comprised of union bureaucrats, and the working-class rank and file. He argued that a genuinely representative system, based on elected local committees–rather than a structure regulated by professional union officials–would logically position communists at the vanguard of the struggle, reflecting their organic connection to organized workers (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 173).

The Rome Congress

At its second congress in Rome (March 1922), the PCd'I grappled with the question of the United Front amid exclusion from the *Alleanza del Lavoro*. The party's leadership was divided on the issue. Gramsci's *Trade Union Theses* clashed with the *Theses on Tactics* (or *Rome Theses*) put forward by Bordiga and Terracini, which ultimately prevailed and were adopted in bloc. The *Rome Theses* defined the party as the political party of the proletarian class, to constitute itself as a historical subject, asserting that without the party, it remained an aggregate of workers rather than a coherent revolutionary class. The *Theses* emphasized the party operated as a collective and based its praxis upon a "critical consciousness" from which it also "draws its programme" (Communist Party of Italy 1922). They identified "construct[ing] this party and enlarg[ing] its influence over the masses," while providing members "coherence, discipline and preparation" was the party's primary tasks in order "to draw behind it ever broader layers of the working class" (Communist Party of Italy 1922). While offering circular definitions, the Theses crystallized Bordiga's vision: the Communist party does not merely represent the class—it fundamentally constitutes it.

During the Congress, the PCd'I was equally concerned with "preparing a defence against fascism" as it was with "attacking" and "exposing" the PSI.(Beetham 1984, 96) For Bordiga, fascism remained marginal. Yet, the Congress agreed the Italian situation was not on for passivity, not towards fascism nor the bourgeois state. As reflected in the Theses adopted, the consensus was that fascism could not be defeated in isolation but only through the destruction of capitalism itself.

> To combat fascism does not mean to believe that it is possible to annul one function of bourgeois society without destroying the latter's existence; nor to delude oneself that fascism can be defeated in itself, as an episode cut off and isolated from the overall offensive activity of capitalism (Communist Party of Italy 1922)

While simply reiterating the party's Livorno positions, the Theses cemented a cohesive revolutionary programme. The Congress also mandated Gramsci and Bordiga to present this platform at the Fourth World Congress of the Communist International (scheduled June 7–11, 1922).

During the Moscow Congress, Bordiga elaborated his analysis of fascism as a functional instrument of bourgeois counter-revolution. He identified fascism as the bourgeoisie's political solution to the revolutionary crisis of the *biennio rosso* (1919–1920). As it emerged from war, Italy was indeed in a crisis. Its ruling class was faced with a dual problem, which the weakened state was unable to regulate: all the forces mobilized in the military campaign were suddenly re-entering the labour market, while the financial crisis generated the nationwide uprising of a reinvigorated proletariat (Bordiga 2020, 164). Thus, capitalists relied on two parallel strategies to reassert control: making concessions to the proletariat through collaboration with reformist socialists and unions (the bourgeois Left), while simultaneously unleashing fascism as a military force to subdue violently the uncompromising revolutionaries and restore state authority.

In Bordiga's analysis of this situation, fascism and social democracy functioned as complementary instruments of bourgeois rule—one collaboration, the other through coercion. For instance, he argued that fascism extended its influence in the countryside (where the proletariat, numerous, represented a consequential force) not only through violence but also by creating alternative trade unions and peasant organizations: Capitalizing on the PSI's lack of a clear agrarian policy, it attracted segments of the working class disillusioned with the socialists' inaction; meanwhile, by advocating for small landownership and labour reforms, fascism attracted segments of the petty bourgeoisie that sought to adapt to the economic downturn. In industrial cities, however, it operated primarily through political/military organisations designed for brutal and savage violence against revolutionary workers; while the official party organ simultaneously engaged in the "most cynical demagogy", in critiquing the government's "cowardice against revolutionaries", hence fulfilling the role of Socialists by mimicking their "so-called criticism of liberal democracy" (Bordiga 2020, 163–68). One distinction Bordiga (2020) considered between fascism and the bourgeois Left was the former's nationalist hubris.

> When it is asserted that all interests must be subordinated to the superior interest of the nation, that means that

> class collaboration is upheld in principle, while, in practice, the conservative bourgeois institutions are supported against the proletariat's efforts to free itself (168–69)

In his view, fascism and social democracy function on a continuum: both ultimately served bourgeois interests, with fascism merely adopting more nationalist and violent methods to achieve similar class-collaborationist goals.

Bordiga acknowledged fascism's organizational strength and strategic ability but denied it possessed any coherent ideology or transformative political programme. He argued that fascism, despite its "powerful political and military organization" and "influential press" had "no ideas and no programme" beyond serving the dominant class (Bordiga 2020, 167). In his view, the consolidation of the Fascist regime was illusory; it could not create a truly new society, only reinforce existing capitalist structures. It would inevitably wither, Bordiga claimed, so long as communists fulfilled their historical revolutionary task.

During the Fourth World Congress, Gramsci began openly diverging from Bordiga. He now thought the PCd'I had to "re-orient its policies" and adapt "to the line of the Comintern" (Gramsci 2014, 22). This exposed latent divisions within the Italian leadership, whereas only one year previously, it had risen unanimously against reunifying with the PSI. The United Front policy splintered the leadership into three factions: Bordiga's abstentionist left, Tasca's compliant right, and a Gramsci-led center that pragmatically navigated between intransigent defense of the Rome programme and the right's full compliance with the Comintern. Faced with this stalemate, the Comintern formed a commission to force fusion with the PSI and appointed Gramsci to it, signaling a shift away from Bordiga's leadership.

After the World Congress, Bordiga returned to Italy while Gramsci remained in Moscow due to illness. In February, upon his return to Italy, Bordiga was arrested by the Fascist police. From prison, he wrote a manifesto reaffirming his opposition to the Comintern's authoritarian centralism and its disregard for the autonomy of national sections. He warned that the Executive Committee was poised to override the PCd'I's majority positions to enforce its own tactical line—a shift he saw as a betrayal of communist principles. The manifesto was polarizing: his critics saw it as evidence of personal stubbornness and factionalism among the PCd'I, while his supporters viewed it as a defense of the International's original commitment to democratic centralism and national party autonomy. Bordiga's position stemmed from his rigid conception of the Communist Party. He thought the Comintern's concessions reflected a misguided fetishism of the numbers to include reformists and an overreaction to temporary setbacks—the complete capitulation to the counter-revolutionary ebb. Instead, during periods

of revolutionary ebb, he argued, the party must "carry on the agitational and propaganda work possible until the next turn of the tide," resisting any dilution of its programme (Goldner 1995, 82). For Bordiga, the priority was preserving the Party's historical task and the Communist programme's fundamental revolutionary principle.

While in Moscow, Gramsci gradually aligned with the Comintern but still shared some positions with Bordiga—regarding the United Front, he favored a strategy "from below." When the Italian Executive Committee overwhelmingly endorsed Bordiga's manifesto, Gramsci (2014) was the sole opponent, who saw it as the "beginning of a battle without quarter against the International" (224–25). Despite the left consensus in the PCd'I, some internal divisions persisted. Tasca's right wing still advocated full compliance with the Comintern, while the center faction, including Gramsci, acknowledged the risk of liquidation and expressed solidarity with aspects of Bordiga's critique. For Gramsci (1971), in 1932, the Comintern itself was "showing signs of degeneration" with the PCd'I as a vanguard on its left, "struggling against this degeneration" (lvii). Faced with this impasse, the Comintern's Executive Committee took the unprecedented step of replacing the elected PCd'I leadership with a mixed provisional committee of its selection—marking the first time it directly overrode the majority of a national section.

During that time, fascist repression intensified in Italy. Many communists fled the country, while clandestinity became the norm for the remaining. Comintern tasked Gramsci with rebuilding the disarrayed PCd'I. From his exile in Vienna, where he founded the newspaper *L'Unità*, Gramsci emphasized the need for greater unity and centralization among European communist parties. He criticized the party's previous leadership for its immobilism—an overemphasis on internal organizational dogma at the expense of dynamic agitation and propaganda. Gramsci (2014) argued that, as the recent debates concerning organizational form and principles reflected, the PCd'I had abandoned the organic engagement with the working class—the "organic activity of agitation and propaganda" (224–25). He began planning a renewed party focused on active political education and mass mobilization.

In a February 1924 letter, Gramsci elaborated to Togliatti and other comrades his rejection of Bordiga's manifesto and outlined a new vision of the party. He criticized the prior leadership for creating, he wrote, "a veritable separation between the mass and the leaders," fixating on rigid organizational principles while stifling the need to "create among the masses the possibility of expressing themselves in the same sense as the Communist Party." This isolation, Gramsci (2014) argued, reduced the party to a refractory elite circle prone to individual "opportunism" and disconnection (222–26).

Gramsci's vision contrasted with Bordiga's conception of a historical vanguard. He considered that, since Livorno and Rome, the PCd'I was conceived as "something suspended in mid-air": developing *itself for itself*, waiting either for the revolutionary masses to join it or for the leadership to decide the conditions where ripe to bring itself down to the level of the masses and lead them into action. Instead, in his letter, Gramsci (2014) conceived the party as a dynamic, expansive form: "the result of a dialectical process in which there is the convergence of the spontaneous movement of the revolutionary masses and the organisational and directive will of the centre" (226). He rejected Bordiga's obsession with a fixed programme, emphasizing the dialectical process: "historically, a Party is never definite in form and never will be, since it will be defined only when it has become coterminous with the entire population, in other words at the moment of its disappearance" (Gramsci 2014, 226).

While Gramsci organized from Vienna, Bordiga led the PCd'I in Italy through the 1924 general election campaign. Despite facing a dominant Fascist bloc–having recently absorbed a large stratum of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes, gained the Vatican's support, and industrialist's financial backing–the communists positioned themselves as the primary electoral opposition to Mussolini's regime (Gramsci 1971, lxiii). While other opposition parties initially advocated a boycott, the PCd'I successfully persuaded them to participate in the elections. though they rejected communist proposals for a united anti-fascist electoral front. Other anti-fascist parties followed and rejoined the electoral process but refused the Communist Party's invitation to form a united electoral bloc (Gramsci 1971, lxiii).

In April 1924, Gramsci was elected to parliament, allowing him to return to Italy under political immunity. By November, he had replaced Bordiga as General Secretary of the PCd'I. From his parliamentary position, Gramsci witnessed firsthand the Fascists' autocratic consolidation of power. He grew increasingly frustrated with the "infighting" and the left's "effort to create factionalism" within his party (A. Gramsci, "Letter to Giulia Schucht," June 22, 1925). Speaking out against the Fascists' legislative attempts to limit freedom of assembly—his final parliamentary and public address, delivered in May 1925, offered a matured analysis of fascism's roots. Moving beyond his earlier writings, he argued that fascism emerged not only from the post-war international financial crisis but also from the specific class composition and conditions of uneven development of the Italian state (Short 2014, 106). Because the bourgeoise had insufficiently industrialized the country, its post-war unstable economy was particularly vulnerable to the economic crisis and, as political dissent started to emerge from the a geographically and econo-

mically disarticulated working class, fascism exploited other social pressures–such as emigration and imperialist ambition–to gain mass support, especially from a middle-class who saw its socioeconomic position threatened by the uprisings and whose class articulation was to the state rather than to capital or labour.

The 3rd Congress and the Lyon Theses

Due to Fascist repression in Italy, the PCd'I held its Third Congress clandestinely in Lyon in January 1926. Drafted by Gramsci and Togliatti, the fourth thesis of the congress (also known as the *Lyon Theses*) presented a position that marked a decisive break with Bordiga's *Rome Theses*. They discussed the Italian situation and the party's reorientation. Crucially, they offered a deeper analysis of fascism–including Gramsci's analysis of the movement's class foundations–and emphasized ideological unity. In terms of praxis and programme, they revived the United Front strategy while reinscribing revolution on the agenda. However, by arguing the leading role of the Russian party and the Comintern in directing the party, while rejecting the compatibility of factions, the *Lyon Theses* exacerbated the foregoing conflict with the left (Bassi 2019, 17). Approved overwhelmingly with 90.8% support, the *Lyon Theses* realigned the PCd'I with Comintern directives, and marginalized Bordiga's left opposition while cementing Gramsci's leadership and ideological shift (Descendre and Zancarini 2023, 240).

Hence, the third congress and the positions adopted with the *Lyon Theses* marked both the culmination of the PCd'I's Bolshevization–the total alignment of its programme with Comintern directives–and the ascendancy of Gramsci's distinctive analysis (Del Roio 2015, 156–58). After Lyon, the party underwent a reorganization aimed at disciplining and unifying its ranks. While committed to disciplinary measures—expelling so-called "extremists" and "left factionalists," for instance—to maintain unity, Gramsci (1971) insisted that the major tendencies within the party should "all be represented in its leading bodies" (lxxxii). Seeking a comprehensive leadership coalition–however fragile–, he successfully persuaded Tasca, who was also part of the Executive, and Bordiga to join the Central Committee. Gramsci programme followed the analysis developed in the *Lyon Theses*, in particular on the "Southern Question": he emphasized the revolutionary potential of an alliance between the northern industrial proletariat and the southern peasantry, aiming to undermine fascism's social base by also appealing to segments of the Southern middle classes—an alliance capable of fighting fascism while laying a revolutionary basis (Del Roio 2015, 156–58).

Throughout the following year, the Fascist regime intensified its suppression of political opposition, effectively outlawing all rival parties in Italy. Many PCd'I members were imprisoned, including both Gramsci and Bordiga, who

were arrested in 1926. Togliatti, having escaped capture, was exiled to Moscow, where he assumed leadership of the party and directed its activities—until its eventual dissolution. Imprisoned and ill, Gramsci produced his seminal Prison Notebooks, while Bordiga, disillusioned and ostracized, withdrew from the communist movement after his release—until his return in the 1950s.

Discussion

This paper cannot exhaustively treat Gramsci and Bordiga's post-1926 contributions. Thus, the following discussion focuses on two currents inspired by their respective work.

Bordigist Current

Bordiga's postwar work centered on a return to Marx's critique of political economy and early writings. From the 1940s to the 1970s, he developed a pioneering analysis of the USSR, while developing original theoretical insights from the *Grundrisse*. His later theses–including the equation of social democracy with fascism, the primacy of the party, and the invariance of Marx's 1848 doctrine–remained consistent with his 1920s orthodoxy, emphasizing a rigidly materialist link between economic conditions and consciousness.

In The Original Content of the Communist Party Manifesto (1958), Bordiga asserts his conceptualization of the Party. He reads Marx and Engels' Manifesto not only as a programme for negating class society but also extends its logic to a broader perspective of the "Historical Party". Noting the USSR experience, he argues that communists have mistakenly reduced their historical task to abolishing private property and, by institutionalizing the proletariat as an entity of socialism, merely transferred the private ownership of production—a move tantamount to creating new capitalist subjects. Instead, for the communist society to emerge:

> there must not survive any subject of property, contrary to the historically sterile petit-bourgeois ideologies, and that there must not survive any object, either: means of production or exchange, land, fixed plant, nor consumer goods; not even individual consumption goods (Bordiga 1958)

Bordiga extended his critique of political economy to both the Russian model and advanced capitalist states, like the US. Precursor, he argued, as early as the 1950s, that the USSR retained elements of capitalism–such as outsourcing to private firms and a gradual reduction of state control–and emphasized the agrarian rather than industrial basis of capitalist social relations. He highlighted the resilience of capitalist structures in Soviet cooperative farms (Kolkhoz) and wage-labour state farms (Sovkhoz), where agrarian production depended foremost on small privately owned plots (Bordiga 2020, 77). Rather, Bordiga remained a tenacious defender of Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) in Russia—while reiterating an internationalist perspective (Basso 2020b).

For Bordiga, the revolution from

which capitalism emerged was above all an agrarian one. He contended that the Bolsheviks had skipped the necessary bourgeois revolution and capitalization of agriculture—a contradiction he initially believed could be resolved through the international proletarian revolution and collectivization of agrarian production. After recognizing the failure of "World Revolution", he predicted the USSR would transition to an intensive phase of accumulation–that is, as Marx outlined, the transformation of peasants into workers in the process of subsumption during phases of primitive accumulation–deepening its internal capitalist tendencies and thus its fundamental political-economic contradiction (Goldner 1995, 80).

Furthermore, Bordiga argued that "socialism in one country" was contradictory to the communist project. Communism, in his view, was not to be conflated with proletarian self-management of production, and the class itself not to be idealized or institutionalized, nor nationalized. In his view, since the proletariat itself is a product of capitalism–a function of its economy—its historical task is not to manage capitalist production but to abolish capital–and ultimately, to abolish itself as a class as it dismantles the political and economic structures that reproduce class society. The "essential thing", he wrote, was whether the capital was reproduced in the new production process. If profitability and surplus-value extraction persisted, then "there could not be socialist planning" (Bordiga 1958). For him, even state-controlled economies could not abolish capital, because, as long as it was continued through production, its fundamental aspect was reproduced: capitalist social relations.

Bordiga came to articulate his vision of communism through the concept of *Gemeinwesen*–which translates to community or species-being–Marx theorized in the Grundrisse and refers to the human condition or the "human community" of communism. In those terms, since its initial alienation from the earth and the fragmentation of human communities in the division of labour, the human-species is alienated from its communal essence, which it continuously intends to materialize anew. To stabilize the ensuing contradictions, throughout history, various social structures (modes of production, forms of state, cultures, etc.) reified and institutionalized forms of alienation, and incrementally, alienated modes of relation integrated all social aspects of life. In other words, Bordiga actualized the concept of *Gemeinwesen* and radicalized Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation.

Bordiga's early critiques of social democracy and fascism coalesced into an original political ecology. He argued that socialist industrialism not only alienated revolutionary forces by restructuring labour but also deepened the *Gemeinwesen's* alienation from the earth by privatizing and destroying the conditions for fulfilling biological needs. He argued that communist production, established through

a common and rational plan, would constitute its own reward; however, a revolutionary dictatorship over consumption was necessary in this process. Rooted in historical materialism, his programmatic vision of communism was a life plan: the revolution against the structures that alienate human needs. This framework led him to outline strategies such as reducing working hours and consumption, which he considered were the main drivers of capitalist modes of production—and thus the organized destruction of life. In his view, a practical programme was a "unitary, international plan for production and consumption" oriented towards oriented toward "the satisfaction" of human needs (Bordiga 1958).

Bordiga's radical critique resonated in 1970s left-communist circles, particularly through Jacques Camatte, who translated and expanded his work in the journal Invariance. Camatte adopted Bordiga's view of the party as "the organization of those who have lost their original organic unity with the community" (el-Ojeili 2014, 352). Moreover, he extended the concept of *Gemeinwesen* into an ontological framework. Camatte theorized a "Homo Gemeinwesen"—a post-capitalist humanity existing in continuity with nature, driven by need-satisfaction and enjoyment; in contrast to Homo Sapiens whose "processual knowledge" further alienated itself as it aimed to understand its historical separation from nature (Camatte 1978). In his view, communism entails ending humanity's "wandering"–a profound identity crisis stemming from its alienation from nature—through "inversion": the act of "leaving this world" to access the repressed "natural essence" that remains in each individual; rather than engaging in political struggle which, like every social arrangement and organizational project, only mimic the social relations humans can no longer experience (Camatte 1973). Indeed, Camatte (2023) opposes this "inversion" to the "enmity" of politics, which, in his view, corresponds to the division and conflicting logic of capital.

This perspective is fundamentally ahistorical and anti-political, positing a universal alienated ontology across all societies and rejecting conjunctural struggles. While Bordiga grounded his revolutionary theory in historical materialism and political economy, Camatte's (1978) retreat from material analysis leads toward anarcho-primitivism and communist nihilism, without any grasp on existing strategic landscapes, offering individual withdrawal rather than collective struggle and social transformation.

Gramscian Current

Part of Gramsci's (1971) enduring contribution lies in his concept of the "modern prince"—developed in the Prison Notebooks.

> The modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of so-

> ciety in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form (129)

Gramsci does not conceive of this Prince as an individual figure, a circumscribed political subject, or a formal institution valid across historical contexts. On the contrary, the modern prince emerges from a specific historical context—initially conceived as the national terrain. The modern prince represents an expansive and unifying political force; it articulates existing struggles, politicizes and expands them, as much as the struggles, through their unity, give the process a concrete form in its institution. In other words, the modern prince is a "dynamic process" of "institutionalizing" a new form of social organization that expansively connects "subaltern" groups, making them politically active, organically articulating fragmented social forces under a unified programme and worldview (Ciavolella 2015, 123).

The figure of the modern prince embodies a collective will into a long-term strategy. Crucially, for Gramsci, the strength of will does not guarantee the success of revolutionary social forces—the path to a successful revolutionary movement depends on its given strategic landscape. By studying the history of different societies, Gramsci identified different social and political orders and theorized strategic perspectives for each. This analysis is reflected in his conceptualization of hegemony. For Gramsci, an order can be hegemonic or not, relatively stable over a certain time. In the first case, the ruling class enjoys the consent for its political authority and ideological adherence, whereas, in a situation of non-hegemonic order, the ruling class can assert its dominance only through coercion. Indeed, for Gramsci, rather than the simple coercion of other classes under its supremacy, the hegemony of a ruling class depends on acquiring and maintaining consent for its leadership: "the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'." Moreover, to acquire and maintain its hegemony: "A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for winning such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well" (Gramsci 1971, 57–58).

One of Gramsci's concerns was the politics that emerge when there is a breakdown of hegemony. That is what he conceptualized as a situation of organic crisis; it occurs either because the ruling class loses "consent" of a particular class (or fraction of class) it used to dominate, or because "masses" suddenly passed "from a state of political passivity to a certain activity"—inthat situation, even if the masses' particular demands are not cohesively formulated, they culminate in a revolutionary movement (Gramsci 1971, 210). For Gramsci, a situation of crisis repre-

sents a gap for transforming the prior social order; the organized masses can claim a dominant position in society, which they aim to transform. However, Gramsci considered that, if the revolutionary masses are unable to organize sufficiently and instate a new hegemonic order, the traditional ruling class can re-establish its rule by crushing its adversary. And, in his view, when neither antagonist class has "the strength for victory," it means a "static equilibrium" exists (Gramsci 1971, 211). Gramsci (1971) described this situation as an "interregnum": "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (276).

For Gramsci (1971), fascism emerged in such a situation—when "the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner" such that "a continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction" yet, neither is in a position to prevail, then a "third force" intervenes, "subjugating what is left of both" (219).

Gramsci (1971) recognizes that, often, this third force is embodied by a charismatic figure who promises to reconcile order but ultimately restores the old system through force (210). He conceptualized this form of political reaction as "Caesarism". Appearing in a situation of organic crisis, when the conflicting social forces reach a catastrophic stalemate, it supposedly responds to the immediate dangers–such as those which accompany the crisis–but is only adapted to the restoration and reorganisation of the dominant social order.

> In the modern world, only those historico-political actions which are immediate and imminent, characterised by the necessity for lightning speed, can be incarnated mythically by a concrete individual (Gramsci 1971, 129)

Crucially, while it can be personified by a charismatic leader, Caesarism can also take impersonal forms. A Cesarist solution can exist without a heroic or representative personality—like all coalition governments. Furthermore, for Gramsci (1971), Caesarism always contains the possibility of going through successive phases — "culminating in a more pure and permanent form"—consolidating itself over a new form of state, as he observed from the March on Rome to the establishment of the full Fascist dictatorship (220).

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in their book Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985), reinterpreted the concepts hegemony and organic crisis. To describe their contemporary situation, through a post-Marxist lens, they reframed the latter as a "conjuncture of organic crisis":

> A conjuncture where there is a generalized weakening of the relational system defining the identities of a given social or political space, and where, as a result there is a proliferation of floating elements […] It does not emerge from a single point, but it is the result

> of an overdetermination of circumstances; and it reveals itself not only in a proliferation of antagonisms but also in a generalized crisis of social identities (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 136)

Laclau and Mouffe argue that the social world is not a closed, predetermined totality governed by economic laws; it exists only as a perpetual political struggle to impose a temporary order on a fundamentally open and unstructured field of discursivity. In their view, any political discourse (e.g., liberalism, socialism, conservatism) is, in essence, a hegemonic project: a contingent attempt to dominate said field, to fix the flow of differences, and to create a temporary structure of meaning. However, the success of this project is always partial and temporary—it is a partial fixation. This temporal fixation coalesces around nodal points: "privileged discursive points of this partial fixation" that a hegemonic project empties of a prior fixed meaning and then uses to anchor a whole chain of other meanings, thereby constructing a new political reality (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 112).

Where Gramsci rooted hegemony in material antagonisms, Laclau and Mouffe consider that social identities and political demands are not fixed by class or economics but are discursively constructed through contingent articulations. Rejecting class as the central political subject, they argue that socialist strategy rests on articulating diverse struggles under a hegemonic project; the contingent, political process of constructing a collective will, a people, out of a plurality of disparate social demands. What is at stake, for Laclau and Mouffe, is how to bridge a multiplicity of actors with heterogeneous demands by mobilising them against a stated, common adversary. In this view, charismatic political individualities represent an effective option for building a collective subject.

Laclau and Mouffe extend Gramsci's insight that Caesarism can be reactionary or progressive, focusing on how charismatic figures can unify diverse actors against a common adversary. Their strategy assumes the second possibility. However, their rejection of objective material interests and class articulation leads to a critical flaw: the political direction of such movements becomes inherently unpredictable. They discard the question of whether the struggles are objectively antagonistic to capital. By prioritizing discursive contingency over capitalism's structural logic, they fail to distinguish between genuinely anti-capitalist forces and those merely using oppositional rhetoric to reinforce the status quo. In other words, their contingentist strategy risks conflating revolutionary change with restorative populism, overlooking how class dynamics and capitalist social relations persistently shape social conflicts—as well as identity.

The strategic landscape

A brief outline of the political landscape's evolution in the past decades helps to decipher the relevance–and

shortcomings–of Gramsci and Bordiga's analysis and insights.

With the neoliberal period came the abandonment of traditional party programmes in favour of more charismatic political figures and, tendentially, a profound popular disenchantment with the prevailing social and political institutions (Betz 1993). In core capitalist countries, traditional parties underwent a strategic shift. In the 1980s in particular, as left parties adopted more economically liberal agendas while emphasizing progressive rhetoric—the "centrist" Third Way movement, in the US Democratic party under Bill Clinton and the UK Labour under Tony Blair, for instance–radical right parties combined more socially conservative positions with more economically liberal policies, turning from their ideological heritage to adopt a more consensual electoral image–the Front National's *dédiabolisation* under Marine Le Pen as a prime example. Both sides shared an opposition to the form of state that had prevailed since the 1930s: the left promoted market deregulation and reduction of the bureaucratic developmental welfare state, while the right promoted more economic laissez-faire, and cutting taxation and state programs (Callinicos 2001). After 1989, the collapse of the USSR–and the Stalinist regimes–compounded the crisis of Keynesianism, confirming, in ideological terms, the already broadly accepted belief that "no alternative" to capitalism was possible—signalling, for the following decades, the globalization and consolidation of the neoliberal order (Davidson 2017, 622).

In the mid-2000s, the contradictions of this new regime were becoming obvious. In dominant neoliberal states, as the political economic impacts of global neoliberalism–including increasing inequalities and the stratification of the working class, the stagnation or decline in real wages, unprecedented levels of household debt, unemployment after the onslaught on the labour movement or total capitulation of major trade unions to the state, and, within the workplace, the corresponding transfer of authority to management under corporate restructuring, amidst the general hollowing of democratic institutions and normalization of disembedded economic orders–spread increasingly among the population, the disconnect between traditional parties and their base widened, and distrust toward the new political and economic elite heightened (Davidson 2017; Ruggie 1982; Mair 2006).

The 2007–2008 global financial crisis completed the social and political rupture in those states. In its wake, the far-right was particularly successful with the petty bourgeoisie. It was both appealed to by right-wing discourse and pushed by class constraints. For the past three decades, the petty bourgeoisie had been experiencing the decline of its traditional social and economic standing; yet, because of its class articulation to the state, it could not turn to radical left alternatives—not to social movements such as Occupy Wall Street

in the US, nor electoral programmes such as Podemos in Spain (or other left "populist" options and contingentist strategies). Indeed, the petty bourgeoisie remained invested in the prevailing capitalist model conducive to its accumulation and in the form of state that valorised its social and cultural status.

In terms of discourse, the left lost its previous traction: if progressive rhetoric had previously justified drawing the assets and debts of greater segments of the population into the financial system–promoting, for instance, the expansion of mortgage lending as benefiting homeownership in marginalized and racialized populations–it lost all credibility after the crisis, especially since it affected predominantly the poorer while governments issued bailouts to the capitalist class responsible for the catastrophe. Conversely, the far-right provided external scapegoats for economic anxieties: immigrants and the "establishment" at the forefront appealed to segments of the unemployed, disenfranchised population who felt economic competition, and to the petty bourgeoisie's historical attachment to the national state, while the promise to evict neoliberal elites and recapture the state turned popular discontent into political support (Short 2014, 122–23; Albo 2008).

While the structural transformations associated with neoliberalism achieved the disarray of the political left's organizational foundations–by restructuring labour relations, reorganizing the state, and fragmenting the working class–it benefited the far-right. Across the world, the current rise of far-right forces is characterized not only by charismatic figures but also by the articulation of national reactionary programmes into international organizations and networks—most often promoted and subsidized by the upper segment of the transnational capitalist class (Stewart 2020; Orellana and Michelsen 2019). However, unlike previous periods, neither far-right forces nor transnational capital face the powerful and "intractable enemies" that communist parties and the Soviet Union embodied (Badiou 2019, 12–13).

Conclusion

What can be drawn from the debate between Gramsci and Bordiga, 100 years on? To be sure, as the current conjuncture shares structural conditions–of economy, class, and politics–with the interwar period, their insights remain urgently relevant. From their debate emerges a necessary synthesis for our time. The PCd'I's failure to transform the revolutionary energy of Italy's *biennio rosso* into lasting political transformations illustrates the fatal gap between conflicting strategic perspectives. Gramsci and Bordiga represent two essential poles of this problem: a strategy of counter-hegemonic articulation, emphasizing the patient work of building collective will across diverse struggles; a theory of revolutionary invariance, insisting on theoretical rigor and unwavering commitment to the

communist programme. Their perspectives reveal both insights and limitations: Gramsci's expansive strategy risks dilution without theoretical rigor, while Bordiga's invariance risks sectarian isolation without adaptive articulation. Yet, the contrast between the two suggests a register for current emancipatory politics. This register comprises at least three points.

The first concerns analysis: the strategy must be grounded in material and historical analysis. Indeed, effective organization must begin not with abstract principles, but with a rigorous analysis of concrete conditions. The key to both Gramsci and Bordiga's most acute and lasting contributions derives from their shared materialist method–analyzing fascism through class composition, and agrarian production through political economy and social relations–which remains essential. Gramsci's analysis of fascism was not only correct, contrasting in its complexity with that of his contemporaries, but also pointed to a concrete strategy. Bordiga's political economic analyses were not only sophisticated and precursory–revealing contradictions that would be determining for Russia's agrarian sector–but also fostered a new, precise, and relevant programme. Indeed, material realities, not ideological positionality, can both inform strategic priorities and offer a threshold for convergence. Portraying the strategic landscape's concrete conditions is a collective effort from which diverging struggles can emerge and various tactical options can be undertaken—diverse practices articulated in a direction informed by a common understanding of the strategic priorities.

The second concerns the strategy. It is necessary to articulate immediate struggles with a revolutionary strategy. The task is connecting everyday demands to systemic transformation: to show how immediate needs are indeed political issues, and how instant policies cannot fully overcome them, since the fundamental alienation they reveal is anchored in capitalist social relations.

The second point concerns the programme and organization. Revolutionary organizations need both Gramsci's flexible perspective and Bordiga's invariance: the capacity to build tactical alliances and articulate diverse struggles within an expansive political form, and to maintain clear revolutionary horizons against reformist dilution while centering on structural historical struggles. They must be flexible enough to incorporate new movements and perspectives yet structured sufficiently–around a basic programme–to maintain strategic direction through periods of ebb and to foster prompt, efficient action in the face of reaction.

None of these points is sufficient on its own: no analysis, nor organization, is strategic without an efficient practice. It is only with the third point–the development of a normative action plan–that the first two are completed. Any contemporary communist project must navigate this dialectic: combining theoretical rigor with flexible articulation, grounding strategy in historical

and material analysis while building the capacity to connect diverse struggles through a shared revolutionary project. This synthesis, not the resurrection of past forms, can direct today's radical energies into lasting political transformations. Gramsci and Bordiga's century-old debate provides not ready-made solutions but essential strategic keys. What remains is the difficult work of construction: building movements that can simultaneously analyze, articulate, and act—transforming today's capitalist crises into tomorrow's emancipatory possibilities. The present task is to give them analytical coherence, strategic cohesion, and a revolutionary form.

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