

## 7 Balance sheet of the Russian Revolution

All the revolutionaries of the 1930's were obliged to reflect theoretically on the nature of the Russian revolution, its lessons, and the reasons for its defeat. The triumph of Stalinism and its alliance with western 'democracies', the concentration camps unknown to the 'friends of the USSR' but experienced by many militants, the massacres and the Moscow Trials all pushed the Italian Left to make a balance sheet of the October revolution. It had to explain how a proletarian revolution could in a few years be metamorphosed into a monstrous caricature of socialism. Had communism failed? Or, on the contrary, was defeat, no matter how profound, the precondition for lasting victory?

The crisis of 1929 showed the Italian Fraction that it was not socialism that had failed, but capitalism, which was heading remorselessly towards world war. If the Russian revolution had failed, this was because the programmatic issues had only been posed, but not resolved by the Bolsheviks and the Third International. The future victory of socialism, which the permanent crisis of capitalism had made a necessity, could only come about through a resolute critique of the "political errors" of the Bolsheviks and the Third International. Haunted by the horrors of Stalinism, the Italian Left did not want the revolution of tomorrow to turn into its opposite because the proletariat had not been able to draw the bitter but vital lessons of its past defeats.

## The method of *Bilan*

It was thus necessary to break new ground if all errors were not to be repeated. In order to avoid becoming sclerotic, Marxism had to be used as a method of investigation, and not as a catechism in which everything has already been defined, resolved and codified in immutable, unchanging dogmas:

*“The workers, in the course of the struggle for emancipation, cannot just ‘repeat’, but must innovate, precisely because they represent the revolutionary class of present-day society. The inevitable defeats they encounter on this road must be seen as stimulants, as precious experiences which will contribute to the ultimate victory of the struggle. On the other hand, if we repeat even one of the errors of the Russian revolution, we will compromise the future of the proletariat for a long time to come...”* (*Bilan* no. 29, March-April 1935 ‘Pour le 65<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la Commune de Paris’).

The precondition for a future victory was to draw up an uncompromising ‘balance-sheet’ (‘bilan’ in French, hence the name of the group and its review) of October 1917. Still faithful to Bolshevism and Lenin, it wanted to go further. For *Bilan*, to turn Lenin into ‘Leninism’ was the worst kind of aberration and meant turning him into an icon. Guided by the idea that Marxism is the expression of a class and not of an individual, however great his genius; that theory was elaborated in a collectivity of militants which went beyond individualities and not in the brains of men of destiny, *Bilan* could write:

*Lenin has given us the theoretical notions which the working class could use in the period he was working in: he could not do more, he could not understand more, since a Marxist is not a religious apostle of the new world, but an artisan of the*

*destruction of capitalist society.* (*Bilan* no. 2, 'La crise du mouvement communiste').

But the work of *Bilan*, then of *Octobre* and *Communisme* was largely to go beyond the framework of Russia and the Comintern. In fact the whole historical period from the World War I to 1933 was critically examined without prejudice or ostracism. No subject was 'taboo': the organisation of the working class, party, unions, councils; the forms of the class struggle; the period of transition following the seizure of power, and the nature of the transitional 'proletarian' state.

"Today we can only stammer" (1), as Vercesi replied to Hennaut concerning the nature and evolution of the Russian revolution. As we shall see, the Italian Left did more than stammer, it provided answers startling in their rigour, their originality, and their depth, whatever judgement one may make on their content.

### **The point of departure: the party**

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, it was practically from the beginning of its existence that the Italian Left had started to draw the political lessons of the failure of the 1917-21 revolutionary wave. Its opposition to the Comintern and the Russian party on questions of 'tactics' (united front, workers' and peasants' governments, Stalin's and Bucharin's 'Bloc of Four Classes') and of organisation (cells, centralism and federalism) had right from the outset brought it into conflict with the Russian state which controlled the Comintern's leading organs. It had noted the stages in the degeneration of the

Russian revolution and the parties of the International, without immediately grasping the underlying causes.

With the Rome Theses (written by Bordiga and Terracini and adopted by the Communist Party of Italy) as a starting point, the Fraction considered that the proletariat derived its existence as a class from the communist party, which provided it with its consciousness, its goals, and its methods. Having been one of the first left currents in the 1920s to understand the reflux in the revolutionary wave after 1921, it had sought the causes of the defeat in Russia and internationally above all in the tactical faults of the Comintern and the Russian party, leading to an inevitable distortion and then negation of their basic revolutionary principles. A communist party could only have a good tactic if it had firmly revolutionary principles. Any false tactic would mechanically involve a disintegration of principles. Principles and tactics were inseparable and determined each other reciprocally.

This vision, seemingly a very abstract one, in fact put the stress on the subjective factors of the revolution, of which the party was the main, and even the only expression. The privileged character ascribed to the party looked like a monstrosity to other groups, a caricature of the Stalinist cult of the party. The Belgian LCI (after the split with its 'Bordigist' minority) wrote that "the doctrine of the party presented to us by the Italian Fraction is not a supercession of the degeneration of Bolshevism, but one of its many expressions, in the same way as Stalinism and Trotskyism" (*Bulletin*, March 1937).

The whole history of the Italian Left shows that this accusation is baseless — that it is more a knee-jerk

reaction than a political demonstration. When the Italian Left declared that the party is decisive for the revolution, it was only following in the path of all the currents which came out of the II<sup>nd</sup> International (including the German Left) for whom this was one of the elementary truths of Marxism. When the Fraction said that the party takes power in the name of the working class and exercises the proletarian dictatorship, it was in continuity with Lenin and the International, and even with Rosa Luxemburg who said the same thing.

In fact, what at first sight looks like a ‘mystique’ of the party, in which every social phenomenon had to be subordinated to this question, was, paradoxically, to lead the Italian Left to make a critical evaluation of the party’s role in the revolution. Because it had such an elevated idea of its function, it saw it as a privileged instrument of the class struggle, which had to fulfil scrupulously the task assigned to it by a proletariat which by itself was unable to arrive spontaneously at a revolutionary political vision.

The communist party bore a very heavy historical responsibility: the preparation and leadership of the revolution until its ultimate victory. If it proved unable to carry out this role, it would be heading towards bankruptcy. If it betrayed and joined up with the hangmen of the proletariat, it was because the revolutionary principles which gave it life had been abandoned.

In fact, for the Fraction, which adhered to the Rome and the Lyon Theses, the party was a part of the proletariat, whose communism goals it represented. Like the class as a whole it was forged by the fires of historical experience and enriched by new principles, “as long as classes exist - and this applies even

under the dictatorship of the proletariat - there will be a necessity to increase the ideological patrimony of the proletariat, the only condition for realising the historical mission of the working class.” (*Bilan* no. 5, ‘Les Principes : armes de la révolution’). The Italian Left of the 1930’s rejected any ‘patriotism’ of the party, subjecting the question to the judgement of history.

Convinced that they represented the nucleus of the future world party, the Italian and Belgian Fractions were to accomplish an enormous theoretical work. Following Lenin, they insisted that “without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary party.” Hundreds of pages were written in *Bilan*, *Communisme* and *Octobre*, on the lessons of the Russian revolution, centred around a critique of the tactics of the Bolsheviks and the Comintern.

This critique was not an attempt to reconstruct history and to justify it a posteriori. Bilan’s approach was not based on the postulate that ‘everything that is real is rational’, but on a praxis whose aim was the world revolution. This is why, rather than making a painstaking catalogue of the positions of the Italian Left and the Russian experience, it seems to us preferable to define its theory of the proletarian revolution in the light of the balance sheet that it drew from October 1917. This theory in any case often went beyond the Russian framework and was supported for example by the Fraction’s experience in the trade union sphere; similarly, in looking at the evolution of the Russian State at the time of the Moscow Trials, it also took into account the general phenomenon of state capitalism in the wake of the Great Crisis.

We will therefore examine:

- the conditions for the world revolution, according to *Bilan*;
- the means: party, trade unions;
- the goals: communism and the question of the State.

### **The objective conditions: "capitalist decadence"**

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The failure of the world revolution, after the crushing of the German proletariat between 1919-21, posed the question of the future possibilities of revolution. In 1917, the Mensheviks had argued that the Russian revolution had been premature, on the grounds that the objective conditions (the development of capitalist production) were not sufficiently ripe in Russia. In the mood of profound depression in the 1930's, which followed the exaltation of the 1920's, many revolutionaries seemed to be saying that capitalism had become too strong to be overcome. While recognising the collapse of world production, elements like Prudhommeaux considered that the proletariat, like Spartacus and the slaves of antiquity, was only able to throw itself into desperate revolts with no real perspective (2).

Did the objective conditions for the world revolution still exist? Were they sufficient for its triumph? Such were the questions which the Italian Left inevitably asked itself during these dark years.

For *Bilan*, and especially in Mitchell's texts, World War I was the sign that the entire capitalist system had entered its phase of decline - this was the period of the "decadence of capitalism", the epoch of

wars and revolution. In this, it adhered strictly to the original positions of the Comintern. This decadence was not a moral concept, but was based on the reality of the permanent crisis, which since 1929 had seemed to have achieved a definitive domination over the world economy. It was expressed less by a regression in the productive forces, since accumulation continued with the rise of the war economy, than by a process in which they were obstructed or held back. As Mitchell put it in an article in *Bilan*: "... capitalist accumulation has arrived at the extreme point of its progression and the capitalist mode of production is nothing but a barrier to historical evolution" (*Bilan* no. 31, May-June 1936, 'Problèmes de la période de transition').

This decadence laid the bases for the revolution without automatically producing it. Capitalism was not "a ripe fruit which the proletariat had only to pick in order to begin the reign of happiness"; all that existed were the "material conditions... to build the base (and only the base) of socialism as the preparation for a communist society".

Did this mean, that in all countries, even the most backward ones, the objective conditions for the revolution were ripe? In a polemic directed against the Italian Left, Hennaut seemed to explain the failure of the Russian revolution by referring to the immaturity of the economic base in the Russia of October 1917. He thought that "... *Bilan* does not attribute any importance to the backwardness of Russia's economic structure, when it comes to explain what it calls the degeneration of the proletarian State". He considered that "the Bolshevik revolution had been made by the proletariat, but had not been a proletarian revolution". (*Bilan*, no. 33, July-August 1936, 'Nature et évolution de la révolution

russe’).

This analysis could lead to the view that the proletarian revolution was impossible in the backward countries and that at best all that could happen there were bourgeois revolutions, which liquidated the old pre-capitalist modes of production. Without denying that the world economy was made up of national components, the Italian Left argued that all countries, whatever their level of development, were ripe for socialism in that this was posed by the world wide antagonism between the classes:

*The criterion of maturity is to be rejected. Both for the more highly developed countries and for the backward ones. >From now on the problem has to be approached from the angle of the historic maturation of social antagonisms resulting from the acute conflict between the material forces and the relations of production. A proletariat, no matter how “poor” it is, does not have to “wait for” the action of the “richer” proletariats, before making its own revolution (Bilan, no. 28, February-March 1936, ‘Problèmes de la période de transition’, Mitchell).*

This is why, in an initial period, the proletarian revolution, as in Russia, was more likely in the backward countries, where the bourgeoisie was less secure economically and politically. But for *Bilan*, the question of socialism could not be posed in terms of specific national conditions, but only on an international terrain. “Because socialism is international or it is nothing” (*Bilan*, no. 35, ‘Réponse à Hennaut, by Vercesi’).

The conditions for the revolution were fundamentally political. The criterion of maturity was a

subjective one and had to be connected to the socialist consciousness of the various proletariats; those in the under-developed countries had been less infected and dissolved by democracy — which to *Bilan* was the worst of all poisons — than in the advanced countries.

### **The subjective conditions: the party**

For the Italian Left, without a revolutionary party there could be no revolution. This conception, shared by the whole communist movement of the day, did not mean that it denied that proletarian movements could arise in the absence of the party in a given country. But these movements would be doomed to go under if they were not given a clear orientation.

In fact, the proletariat's ability to create its party reflected a situation of maturing class consciousness. This could only be brought about by an objectively revolutionary situation “with the appearance of a perspective of attack by the world proletariat” (*Octobre*, no. 1, February 1938, ‘Résolution sur la constitution du Bureau International’). Outside such a period, the Italian Left refused to envisage any voluntarist formation of the party:

*Against the formula ‘We need a class party to create the class struggle’ the Bureau defends the formula ‘We need the class struggle to found the party’ (ibid.).*

In a period that was still not revolutionary, it was the Fraction which crystallised the revolutionary

consciousness of the proletariat, even when the class was prey to apathy and defeat.

*The proletariat, despite its defeat, finds in the fraction the political arena where it can concentrate and strengthen its class consciousness, which is the precondition for its capacity to act in the more mature situations of tomorrow. (Communisme, no. 1, April 1937, 'Déclaration de principes de la Fraction Belge').*

A whole historical process was involved in the fraction's transformation into the party: **without the fraction, no party; without the party, no revolution** (*Octobre*, no. 1, 'Règlement intérieur des fractions de la Gauche Communiste Internationale').

The function of the communist party, engendered by a revolutionary situation, was to lead the proletariat to victory through the seizure of power and the overthrow of the existing social order. As the embodiment of class consciousness, the party will exert a "dictatorship" of the party on behalf of the proletariat during the period of transition from capitalism to communism. It would be the real soul of the revolution, and would try to take over the leadership of the trade unions and the soviets, which would only gain a revolutionary content through the triumph of the party's political positions within them.

On the question of its structure, the future communist party, in the image of the Bolshevik party before 1917, had to be a 'narrow' organisation. The Italian Left rejected the II<sup>nd</sup> International's vision of mass parties. If they were to carry out their tasks, the militants would have to be ideologically and

organisationally prepared and selected by the class struggle. Far from looking for immediate successes, increasing its membership through recruiting drives, the party had to work for the future, taking care to select the cadres of the revolution. *Bilan* saw the transformation of the Comintern's sections into mass parties as one of the clearest expressions of its degeneration.

In its critique of the Comintern it rejected the concept of 'democratic centralism', which it saw as one of the causes of the exclusion of revolutionary elements, through the free play of the vote. It stood instead for 'organic centralism', which had to flow from the party's programme, and not from an electoral mechanism. It did not however deny, that divergences about the programme could arise; this would necessarily be expressed in the form of fractions, whose existence would also be something organic rather than being based on a 'right' recognised by the party. They would be reabsorbed through the victory of that fraction which defended the revolutionary programme.

In its fundamental positions, the International Communist Left did not move far from the conceptions of Lenin, and above all of Bordiga in the early twenties. It was completely opposed to the conceptions of Trotsky and the Trotskyists, who thought the party could proclaim itself independently of a revolutionary situation. In fact, it was in opposition to Trotsky that the Italian Left elaborated its conception of fraction and party as moments in a process, in which each moment conditioned the other.

But what was essential for the Italian Left, what gave life to a communist party, was its attachment to a

revolutionary international. It conceived the latter not as a federation of parties, but as the world communist party, of which the territorial sections in this or that country were emanations, and to whose world wide discipline and centralisation they were subordinated. Even if a party had taken power in a given country, like the Bolsheviki in Russia, it had to submit to this international discipline; it remained a section of the World Party, without particular rights of precedence, whatever its numerical strength or prestige.

This enormous place accorded to the party as a factor in the proletarian revolution was to have major consequences for the Italian Left, above all during and after the war (see below).

In the period 1926-39, the Italian and Belgian fractions had a tendency to theorise the absence of a party, developing a view according to which the proletariat will disappear as a class, if the party was absent. As Vercesi put it, “the present situation is witnessing the provisional disappearance of the proletariat as a class, and the problem to be resolved consists in the reconstruction of this class” (*Bilan*, no. 6, April 1934, ‘Parti-internationale-Etat’). What’s more, during the war this same conception was to lead Vercesi himself to defend the idea that, socially speaking, the working class had disappeared. This being the case, communists could only engage in humanitarian activities - which is what he did (see below).

This conception led Hennaut to say in his polemic against *Bilan* that for the Italian Fraction, “the class struggle is no longer the motor for us - its place is taken by the struggle of parties” (*Bilan*, no. 33, op.

cit.). But Hennaut, who defended a conception close to that of the Dutch Left, was above all convinced that “the proletarian revolution cannot be a party revolution. It will be a class revolution or it will not be” (*Bilan*, no. 34, August-September 1936, ‘*Démocratie formelle et démocratie socialiste*’). He concluded that “the comrades of *Bilan*, who proclaim themselves disciples of Lenin without calling themselves Leninist, are in fact more Leninist than Lenin” (*Bilan*, no. 33, op. cit.).

In fact, *Bilan*'s positions were less ‘Leninist’ than at first appears. Its theoretical balance sheet of the Russian revolution, its criticisms of Leninist ‘tactics’ during the revolution are proof of this. Its critique of the union ‘tactic’ was to be the first step in a general questioning of the Comintern’s policies.

### **Trade unions and class struggle**

Unlike the German-Dutch Left, whose anti-union positions it criticised, the Italian Left had always been in favour of active work within the trade unions. Any militant who could join a union was expected to play an active part in it, in order to defend the Fraction’s positions within the economic struggles.

It saw the unions as a ‘school for communism’ where proletarian consciousness could be forged. They were the place where the future party would develop by gaining a growing audience in a revolutionary period. Tomorrow, in the period of transition, they would be at the basis of the proletarian dictatorship.

The fraction therefore followed the evolution of the 'reformist unions' with particular attention, especially in France and Belgium where they provided a base of support for the left parties which controlled them.

In opposition to Trotsky, it rejected any idea of working to undermine the fascist unions from within. By becoming State organs, they had been destroyed as organs for the workers' immediate economic defence. In these conditions, "in principle the problem is automatically posed of forming new unions" (*Communisme*, no. 8, 15 Nov. 1937, 'Résolution sur les tâches actuelles de la Fraction dans les syndicats').

Vis-à-vis the Communist and Socialist trade unions, it was in favour of conquering them from within, taking over the leadership and chasing out the 'reformist leadership'. It was only in these unions that it was possible to construct a trade union united front against the bourgeoisie. In order to make this happen, the best solution, faced with capitalism's offensive against wages, would have been the formation of a single union federation.

The realisation of this unity under the banners of the Popular Front, with the aim of attaching the unions to the state, "would represent another factor in the demobilisation of the proletariat to capitalism's advantage" (*Bilan*, no. 9, July 1934, 'La situation en France').

However, the fraction did not call for the formation of new unions, or for their 'politicisation'. It therefore opposed both the anarcho-sindicalists of the CGT-SR and Dommanget's teachers' union

(CGT-U) who wanted to create a 'politico-trade-union' current. It considered that the "communist trade union current spreads a more refined form of the reactionary opinion that the union is enough because it gives rise to conscious minorities (Bilan, no. 29, March-April 1936, "L'écrasement du prolétariat français").

The fraction's position was that the union's task was to defend the workers's immediate interests. They were to be distinguished from the communist party in that it was inside them "that the working class could forge the tools that would lead them to victory" (*Bilan* no. 5, op cit.).

Only the Left Communist militants could get the unions back on the right track and restore their original function: to be instruments of the class struggle, in which the economic struggle is transformed into a political struggle for power. The deformation of this function implied, for the Italian Left in the 1930's, that there had to be 'fraction rights' in the unions, in order to preserve their class life and eliminate the 'agents of the bourgeoisie' (i.e. the parties of the Popular Front).

*In demanding the right for fractions to exist within the organs of the class, we recognise the union's inability to elaborate the programme of the revolution, while at the same time we see that they can express the life of the class, its reactions to the contrasts of capitalism - that they can become bastions of the proletarian struggle, in which communist currents and agents of the bourgeoisie vie for leadership. (Bilan, no. 25, Nov.-Dec. 1935, 'L'unité syndicale en France et les Fractions').*

In order to stay inside the unions, and despite the impossibility of making their positions heard, the Communist Left was prepared to adopt to the full the ‘tactic’ that Lenin defined in *Left-Wing Communism and Infantile Disorder*.

*For us, what Lenin said remains applicable until the situation changes: ‘We have to lie to put up with all kinds of sacrifice, to use all kinds of strategies and subterfuge, to remain silent sometimes, to bend the truth sometimes, with the sole aim of entering the unions, staying in them, and despite everything, carrying out communist work within them’.* (*Communisme*, no. 5, August 1937, ‘Les syndicats ouvriers et l’Etat capitaliste’).

In fact, the Italian Left had too great a sense of political responsibility to hide itself. It always expressed its union and political positions in an open manner within the unions. During the war in Spain, despite all the hostility they encountered, the ‘Bordigist’ militants defended their position of revolutionary defeatism and called for workers’ solidarity with all the victims of the war, on both sides. They overtly denounced the war policies of the social-democratic and Stalinist parties, of the popular front and the USSR. Expulsions, for all sorts of reasons, were not long in following: they were always for political reasons, however, because the Bordigists always had a militant, active attitude to the struggle for immediate demands and were irreproachable at this level. Vercesi, though defended by the typographers’ union in Brussels, was excluded from the office workers’ union by POB (Parti ouvrier belge) and PCB militants on account of his positions during the events in Spain (3).

This impossibility of working in the unions was to lead the two fractions to discuss the union question

in greater depth, and thus to examine the forms of the class struggle in the “decadence of capitalism”.

The evolution of the unions in the inter-war period pushed forward this work of theoretical reflection. The Italian and Belgian Fractions realised that the crisis had compelled the state to seek a greater degree of control over the unions. Not only had they pronounced in favour of national unity with a view to war, and for the reorganisation of the capitalist economy under the authority of the state (‘planism’), but the state was also tending to incorporate them through all kinds of measures: union contributions to unemployment relief institutions, and parity commissions in Belgium; the recognition of the unions and the institutionalisation of ‘workers’ delegates’ in France after 1936. In both these countries the collective agreements and arbitration commissions showed that the state and the bosses were consciously seeking to avoid new ‘accidents’ like June 1936.

It was above all in the Belgian Fraction that the discussion on the union ‘tactic’ went deepest. In a country where unionisation was practically obligatory, the group had to define its attitude on the union question clearly. No doubt its positions were influenced by its contacts with the Dutch Left, which rejected any participation by its militants in the unions and advocated their destruction and the organisation of the workers in ‘Unionen’ and in strike and unemployed committees.

While the Belgian Fraction rejected any idea of leaving the unions, it did call for wildcat strike action whenever the official unions opposed strikes, as they had done in July 1932 and May 1936. It defined the immediate aims of its activity as follows:

a) to mark the stages in the progressive incorporation of the unions into the state machine: union contributions to the organisation of unemployment relief, the De Man plan, the national union, the diversion of class reactions into anti-fascism, the consecration of national socialism, the channelling of class conflicts towards the mechanism of parity commissions and collective agreements; to denounce the profoundly reactionary nature of the reforms of the state and of professional organisations.

b) to defend the vital necessity for the unions to break all the bonds tying them to capitalist institutions...

c) to denounce tirelessly the practice of localising strikes and of compromises aimed at smothering them while at the same time putting forward slogans aimed at the generalisation and 'politicisation' of strikes. To give firm support to so-called 'wildcat strikes' which arise spontaneously in opposition to the capitalist directives of the union bodies...

e) to call for union democracy only in the sense of regular and frequent convocation of general assemblies; of respecting the prerogatives and sovereignty of the assemblies; of the freedom of expression for union fractions, and finally of organic independence from any political party.

... the union can only remain in the service of the proletariat on the condition that it rejects any truce in the class struggle, no matter what the situation. (*Communisme*, no. 8, 15 Nov. 1937, 'Résolution sur les tâches actuelles de la Fraction dans les syndicats').

Very quickly, but still with much hesitation, the Belgian Fraction began to question the 'working class' nature of the unions. In an article 'Occupations d'usines et conscience de classe' (Factory occupations and class consciousness, *Communisme*, 15 June 1938), it wrote: "it is certain that the trade union today is the prey of capitalism, but the same is true of the proletariat which has been thrown into the orbit of

the imperialist war and the war economy, by consenting to participate in the organisation of its own massacre”. It added: “The trade union is what the proletarian class is, and the life of the class cannot but be reflected in the life of its organisations”.

It was thus not the form but the content (consciousness) which was no longer working class, in a political not a sociological sense. This position was thus still different from that of the KAPD, for whom both the unions’ form and content had to be rejected. But to what extent?

The Belgian Fraction did not exclude the possibility of the destruction of the unions in a revolutionary period, or of the workers going beyond them by forming new unitary organs:

*At the present time, given the level of maturity that the situation has reached, it is impossible to pose the question of the destruction of the unions. We do not know how far this will be possible tomorrow. It will depend to a decisive degree on the creative capacities of the masses in the heat of gigantic social battles.*

Tomorrow will show whether or not the unions have been superseded by the necessities of new situations” (*Communisme*, no. 15, 15 June 1938, ‘Occupation d’usines et conscience de classe’).

The union question was thus an open question, one that had not yet been decisively settled. In the Italian Fraction, certain militants went even further than the Belgian Fraction. A discussion opened up to determine whether the militants should leave the unions and work outside them. A tendency

emerged (4), led by Luciano Stefanini — one of the founders of the Italian Fraction in 1927 — which answered this question in the affirmative:

*Today the question is not whether it is possible for Marxists to develop a healthy activity within the unions or not, but of understanding that these organs have passed definitively into the enemy camp and that it is impossible to transform them... It is thus a question of making this clear to the workers - essentially from the outside - by insisting that any possibility of a proletarian struggle against capitalism consists of a definitive break with all forms of capitalist oppression, including the existing unions. (Il Seme Comunista, no. 5, Feb. 1938, 'Contribute alla discussione sul rapporto Vercesi', by Luciano).*

In fact, since they were so often expelled, the militants were generally obliged to work outside the unions, without it being possible to make themselves heard in a period of such growing isolation.

There was a risk that such isolation would be theorised. If there were no longer any workers' organs apart from the Fraction, had defensive struggles become impossible? if strikes were diverted away from revolutionary goals, did this mean that the proletariat had disappeared socially?

This was the conclusion drawn by Vercesi and a minority of the Fraction, who, on the basis of their theory of the war economy, thought that only a directly revolutionary struggle was possible. Acceptance of this view was far from unanimous. Jacobs (Benjamin Feingold), who had previously written (in *Bilan* no. 29, March-April 1936, op. cit.) that “the proletariat momentarily no longer exists as a class, as a

result of profound world-wide defeats” defined this non-existence in political and not social terms. The class struggle still continued at the economic terrain, without being able to take on its own political forms:

*The French experience shows us that, in the first phase, which for lack of any other term we can call the ascendant period of the war economy, struggles for immediate demands were not ‘partial’ but were emptied of their substance throughout their development, in the second phase, that of the ‘crisis’, these struggles became intolerable to capitalism, which began to use more brutal methods to prevent them from emerging. (Il Seme Comunista, Feb. 1938, ‘I sindacati e la guerra imperialista’, by Michel (Jacobs)).*

All these questions, far from being resolved, continued to be debated during the war, and even afterwards in the various branches issuing from the Italian Left.

## **The defeat of the Russian Revolution**

In fact the views of the two Fractions were much clearer on the goals of the world revolution, after the seizure of power, than on its means, prior to this point. They were based on a patient, thoughtful, mature discussion of the Russian experience in the light of the theoreticians of Marxism.

From Marx and Lenin, the Italian Left took up the theory of the state. In order to transform capitalist society into communism, the proletariat had to install its own dictatorship by breaking up the old state machine. In *State and Revolution* Lenin had affirmed the necessity for a proletarian state in this transitional phase. The proletarian dictatorship, which would be that of the immense majority of the labouring population, would be exercised by everyone through the soviets, and the simplest cook would be able to participate in the running of the newly emerging society.

The birth of the Communist International in 1919 showed that, at the time, the Bolsheviks and all the communists in other countries were aware that this period of transition could only be set in motion by the world-wide victory of the proletariat. Russia was seen simply as a country which had undergone a successful proletarian insurrection before the others, and not as the 'socialist fatherland'. As a proletarian bastion, the 'proletarian' state had to be at the service of the world revolution; and the Comintern had to be the expression of the whole international revolutionary movement.

Some years later, the soviets had been emptied of their revolutionary content; controlled by the Bolshevik party and the State, they were no longer the emanation of the Russian workers. The militarisation of labour in 1920, then the bloody repression mered out to the workers and sailors of Kronstadt in 1921 were so many disturbing signs of the gulf gradually opening up between the proletariat on one side and the party/state on the other. The development of the Cheka and the 'Red Terror', whose repression was more and more being directed against the workers, showed that far from withering away the state was genuing stronger and stronger, to the point that in the 1920's there were

more functionaries than workers. The dictatorship of the proletariat, which was supposed to control society, had ceased to exist. So an Preobrazhensky proclaimed the need for a 'socialist accumulation' (5) which bore a strange resemblance to capitalist accumulation. Lenin and the Bolsheviks even advocated the development of State capitalism on the German model, as an antechamber to socialism. This was followed by the notion of building socialism in one country', which was to compete economically with the capitalist world, and which clearly entailed an intensified exploitation of labour power.

It seemed that the Bolshevik party, the party of the world revolution, had become a Russian party tied to the state whose leadership it had assumed. Gradually the Comintern, of which the Bolsheviks had been the main architect, became an appendage of the Russian CP and of the foreign policy of the Russian state. In 1922, the treaty of Rapallo marked Russia's reintroduction into the concert of the great powers. Alliances were formed with the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal, who ferociously repressed the young Turkish Communist Party. In 1922 the Red Army rearmed the Reichswehr, which carried out exercises in Russia itself. In 1923, while the Comintern was calling for an uprising by the German workers, the Russian government was supplying arms to Von Seeckt, who would use them against the insurgents in Hamburg. Soon, despite strong resistance, including that of the Communist Party of Italy, the CPs became more like supporters of Russian foreign policy in their own countries than parties working for the world revolution.

It took a number of years, and a good deal of hindsight, for the small revolutionary groups coming out of the Comintern to examine the Russian experience with a critical eye. They often saw the 'tactical

errors' of the Bolsheviks and the Comintern without inquiring whether the causes lay deeper. In order to explain the 'degeneration' of the Russian revolution, they often argued that its only cause was the "capitalist encirclement" which resulted from the inability of workers in the West to make the revolution. But nearly all of them, and Trotsky in particular, saw the five year plans and the process of industrialisation as an undeniable indication that socialism in Russia could catch up with and even overtake a capitalist world that had plunged into crisis. It was not the economic policies that were called into question, but the politics of the man Stalin, or of the 'bureaucracy, which were seen as a threat to the 'conquests of October'. Other revolutionaries faced with the 'Russian enigma', like the KAPD and the Dutch-German GIK, saw the failure of the Russian revolution as a confirmation of its bourgeois nature. There had been no proletarian revolution in 1917, but a coup d'Etat which gave power to the Bolsheviks, whose role was to carry out the bourgeois revolution by setting up a form of state capitalism (6).

For the Italian Communist Left, there was no question of casting doubt on the proletarian character of the Russian revolution, still less on the revolutionary nature of the Bolshevik party which had contributed so much to the birth of the International. Neither was it prepared to accept the Trotskyist thesis that the Russian economy was orienting itself towards socialism, despite the 'bureaucratic deformation' of the state.

All these analyses were confined to the framework of Russia. *Bilan* started from a world-wide framework in order to explain the reasons for the defeat. In a world dominated by capitalism the road

to socialism could only be posed, not resolved, in Russia. For *Bilan* the revolution had to unfold first of all on the political level, that is by maintaining the party which had taken power on a revolutionary course, under the direction of the Communist International.

It was by applying this global framework that *Bilan* came to the conclusion that the 'defence of the USSR' was to be rejected, and that the Russian state had fallen into the hands of world capitalism and become a pawn in the game of inter-imperialist confrontation.

This method was to be vigorously criticised by the LCI, with which the Italian Left was still discussing. It thought that this approach was a justification for the policies of the Bolsheviks and the Comintern, in order to avoid posing the question of their responsibility in the death of the revolution. *Bilan*, it said, merely wanted to show that the failure of the Russian revolution was simply the product of its isolation, in order to avoid any criticism of 'Bolshevism':

*...to find in this isolation excuses for the essential form taken by the Russian revolution: the dictatorship of the communist party. This is a real example of taking effects for causes. (Bilan, no. 34, op. cit.).*

Hennaut thought that the causes of the Russian counter-revolution had been essentially internal ones:

*The Russian proletariat was vanquished not by the big bourgeoisie (which had disappeared) , nor by international capitalism, but by the peasant and urban petty bourgeoisie in Russia. It was the emergence of an exploiting class in the*

*USSR which permitted the latter to lie up with world capitalism. The Russian bureaucracy works for its own interests when it exploits the Russian proletariat (ibid.).*

It seemed in fact that the Italian Left only took the external causes of the defeat into account when it affirmed that “...the antagonist of the workers’ state is solely world capitalism and ... internal questions only have a secondary value” (*Bilan*, no. 18, April-May 1935, ‘L’Etat prolétarien’ by Vercesi).

But the discussion inside *Bilan*, and also with Hennaut, was to lead to a reevaluation of the causes of the Russian defeat, which took account both of external factors and internal factors, with *Bilan* looking at the latter more and more clearly.

### **The nature of the Russian 'proletarian' state**

A whole discussion took place in the 1930's to try to determine the nature of the Russian state. In fact the debate had already begun in the 1920's. While for the Stalinists and Trotskyists it was evident that this state was 'proletarian', a number of small revolutionary groups had put this 'analysis' into question; in fact it was less an analysis than an apology for the unconditional defence of the USSR.

For the German Left, at the outset the Russian revolution had been a dual revolution, bourgeois and proletarian, whose proletarian phase could not be realised owing to the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party and the weight of the peasantry within Russian society. The economy was capitalist, and profits

from the exploitation of labour power went into the pockets of the bureaucracy and the peasantry, via the state.

The KAPD, and after them the GIK, did not however define the class nature of the Russian state. If the economy was state capitalist, what was the nature of the state bureaucracy? The response to this was that it was not a truly capitalist class, but a 'new ruling class', or a bourgeoisie reincarnated in the Bolshevik party. In other words, the positions of the German Left on this question were not homogeneous.

In the 1930's, in France in particular, a lively discussion went on around the nature of the Russian state and the 'bureaucracy'. In this, the Italian Left opposed the analysis developed by Treint.

In 1933 the Treint group developed a new theory. A text presented by the XVth Rayon at the unification conference of the Left Opposition ("To unravel the Russian enigma", comrade Treint's theses on the Russian question), declared that the "bureaucracy is a new class". Basing himself on Marx's texts on Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, Treint considered that this class was of a Bonapartist type. Its function was to maintain a balance between the classes, without having a truly bourgeois character, since the private appropriation of the means of production had been eliminated in 1917. There was state capitalism, but no capitalist class. To a certain extent, this analysis prefigured the one taken to its logical conclusion by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* after 1949 (but also, several years before that, by Burnham in the USA with his theory of the 'managerial class').

The Italian Left, on the other hand, was to confront the 'Russian enigma' with extreme caution. To begin with, it was convinced that the Russian revolution had been proletarian; the degeneration could only have come from the outside, from the capitalist surroundings and the progressive death of the International. Secondly, it based itself on the classics of Marxism elaborated in the previous century and could see no other point of departure for theoretical advance. At first It considered that capitalism could only be the private appropriation of the means of production by private capitalists. Consequently, the State born out of the revolution could only be proletarian, since the bourgeoisie had been expropriated economically and politically.

How was it possible to call for a new proletarian revolution in Russia, and still affirm that the Russian state was proletarian? How could one affirm that this state was at one and the same time 'working class' and in the hands of world capitalism? There was a contradiction here and the Italian Left felt it with some embarrassment, but it was unable to overcome it until the war. It was above all concerned that its response to the problem clearly corresponded to the classical teachings of Marxism:

*If you object that the idea of a proletarian revolution against a proletarian state is a nonsense and that phenomena must be harmonised by calling this State a bourgeois state, we reply that those who reason in this way are simply expressing a confusion on the problem already dealt with by our masters... (Bilan, no. 41, May-June 1937, 'Quand les bourreaux parlent... (le discours de Staline)').*

In fact the Italian Fraction was marked by the polemic it had waged against *Réveil Communiste* and Treint's theories, which asserted that the Russian 'bureaucracy was a new class' arising out of a collective appropriation of the means of production. For *Bilan*, this bureaucracy could only be parasitical:

*..the Russian bureaucracy is not a class, still less a ruling class, given that there are particular rights over production outside the private ownership of the means of production, and that in Russia the essentials of collectivisation still survive. It is certainly true that the Russian bureaucracy consumes a large portion of social labour, but this is the case for any social parasitism, which should not be confused with class exploitation. (Bilan no. 37, Nov.-December 1936, 'Problèmes de la période de transition', 4th part, by Mitchell).*

But implicitly, little by little, the Italian Left was to call this analysis into question. The long studies of the period of transition (see below), which were to continue until the war, were to contribute much to this. But it was above all the evolution of Russia, which was more and more acting as a great world power, and the development of state capitalism, which the Italian Left defined as a general tendency, which were to act as a powerful motor in calling this analysis into question. As early as 1936, Vercesi, in a reply to Hennaut, who was arguing for the bourgeois nature of the 'bureaucracy', did not exclude the possibility that the latter would evolve towards a capitalist form. This evolution would be related to the private appropriation of the collectivised means of production:

*In Russia, where the differentiation has not yet reached the point of determining the private appropriation of the means of*

*production, we do not yet have a capitalist class. (Bilan, no. 35, 'Nature et évolution de la révolution russe: réponse au camarade Hennaut').*

Three years later, Vercesi declared that:

*...state industry could well metamorphose into State capitalism, into a brutal negation of the working class, without it being necessary for there to be a reaffirmation of the bourgeois regime of private property. (Octobre, no. 5, August 1939, 'La dictature du prolétariat et la question de la violence').*

Since it insisted that the Russian economy was still subjected to the law of value, and that it was based on the extraction of surplus value, the Italian Left was gradually forced to “harmonise phenomena”. A more developed study at the economic level, a return to the texts of Marx and Engels (*Anti-Dübring*) showed that the collectivisation of the means of production could indeed coexist with a capitalist class collectively appropriating surplus value through the intermediary of the state. But the definition of the state as an ‘ideal collective capitalist’ and of the ‘bureaucracy’ as bourgeois was only really posed during the war by the French and Italian Fractions and then later on by the PCInt of Italy.

### **The State in the period of transition**

All this reflection on the nature of the Russian state, on the underlying causes of the defeat of the proletariat in Russia, was to lead the Italian Left to overturning its perspectives completely. Whereas its

initial view had been that the counter-revolution in Russia had triumphed from the outside, it began more and more to focus its theoretical analysis on the internal causes which had allowed the external factors to take effect so easily.

The Italian Left finally found the key to the 'Russian enigma' in the dangerous role played by the 'proletarian' state, which by its nature represented a permanent threat to the proletarian revolution.

• *The danger of the State*. Starting from the Marxist view that the state emerges from a society divided into classes where scarcity still reigns, and that it seeks to preserve itself in the interests of an exploiting class, the Italian Left was to consider "following Engels, that the state is a scourge inherited by the proletariat". It even said, in Vercesi's words, that the proletariat "would have an almost instinctive mistrust for it" (*Bilan*, no. 26, Jan. 1936, 'L'Etat soviétique').

The proletariat, whose revolution is only beginning once it takes power, comes up against a state whose function is the opposite of the proletariat's objectives: to preserve the existing order.

*The state is both an instrument whose historical necessity arises from the inability of production to satisfy the needs of the producers (a historical circumstance which will accompany any proletarian revolution) and also, by its very nature, an organism destined to safeguard the supremacy of an exploiting class who will use its machinery in order to install bureaucracy which will gradually be won over to the cause of the enemy class.* (ibid., no. 25, Nov.-Dec. 1935).

Going even further, the Italian Left declared that:

*... the state, despite the adjective 'proletarian', remains an organ of coercion, it remains in acute and permanent opposition to the realisation of the Communist programme; it is to some extent the revelation of the persistence of the capitalist danger during all the phases of the life and evaluation of the transitional period. (Octobre, no. 2, March 1938, 'La question de l'Etat').*

Thus, the seizure of power by the proletariat did not alter the nature and function of the state inherited from the long chain of previous class societies. If it became 'proletarian', it was only in the sense that the proletariat, in order to take power, had to destroy the old bourgeois state machine. In no circumstances could the new 'proletarian' State embody the revolutionary essence of this class. At best, "the state is simply a balancing organism necessary only to orient all the workers towards solutions of general interest..." (*Bilan* no. 5, 'Parti-Internationale-Etat').

This "almost instinctive mistrust" for the state was not, in the case of the Italian Left, a purely visceral, anarchistic reaction against the latter day 'Leviathan'. It was based both on an analysis of economic relations and on the Russian experience.

The period of transition would in fact remain dominated by capitalist laws which would exert their influence on the state, constantly threatening to tie the workers to the 'general interest' which could only be that of non-proletarian strata. There is a permanent economic contradiction between capitalism,

exerting itself through the state, and socialism. “The pole for the accumulation of surplus value is the state whose laws lead inevitably to accumulate more and more to the detriment of the workers” (*Octobre*, no. 2, op. cit.)

It is through the state, even the ‘proletarian’ state, that we see the rebirth of capitalist privileges for which “it tends to become the pole of attraction”. “This is why, whereas there can be no antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois state, one does arise between the proletariat and the transitional state” (*Bilan*, no. 37, Nov.-Dec. 1936, ‘Problèmes de la période de transition’).

Politically, the Russian example showed that all the organs of the proletariat (party, workers’ councils, trade unions) risked being absorbed by this state, which recognised no power but its own:

*...the Russian revolution, far from assuring the maintenance and vitality of the class organisations of the proletariat, sterilised them by incorporating them into the State apparatus, and thus devoured its own substance. (Bilan no. 31, May-June 1936, ibid.).*

• *The danger of substitutionism: violence.* The Italian Left, through the theoretical studies of Vercesi and Mitchell, could not ignore the role played by the Bolshevik party in the triumph of the state counter-revolution. It was one of the rare revolutionary groups to criticise the repression carried out against Makhno and the sailors of Kronstadt. It argued that “the first frontal victories obtained by the Bolsheviks with regard to groups acting inside the proletariat (Makhno and Kronstadt) were won at the

expense of the proletarian essence of the State organisation. (*Bilan*, no. 19, May-June 1935, 'L'Etat soviétique', 2nd part).

According to *Bilan*, the Bolsheviks made the mistake of confusing party and State, a confusion which was "all the more prejudicial in that there is no possibility of reconciling these two organs and that there is an irreconcilable opposition between the nature, function and objectives of state and party" (*Bilan*, no. 26, Jan. 1936, *ibid.*)

The Italian Left thus called into question the Bolsheviks' schema according to which the dictatorship of the state was assimilated to the dictatorship of the party. Nevertheless, faithful to its conception of the party as the embodiment of class consciousness, it considered that the dictatorship of the proletariat could only be the dictatorship of the party over the state. But it was careful to point out that this conception was diametrically opposed to the dictatorship of the Stalinist party:

*The dictatorship of the party cannot become... the imposition on the working class of the solutions arrived at by the party; above all it cannot mean that the party can rely on the repressive organs of the State to sniff out any discordant voice, basing itself on the axiom that any criticism, any position coming from other working class currents is by nature counter-revolutionary. (Bilan no. 26, *ibid.*)*

The Italian Left was convinced that there could be no guarantee that the communist party would not one day betray the interests of the proletariat in the name of the revolution. It even argued - and this

may seem astonishing from a current advocating the dictatorship of the party - that the latter was “not a completed, immutable untouchable organism; it does not have an irrevocable mandate from the class, nor any permanent right to express the final interests of the class...” (*Communisme*, no. 18, Sept. 1938).

For *Bilan*, even more important than the party was the goal of the proletarian revolution: socialism, which meant liberty for the exploited, and not constraint (“ **whoever talks about the state talks about constraint. Whoever talks about socialism talks about liberty** ” affirmed *Octobre*, op. cit.). This difficult goal could only be achieved by the workers themselves as active agents in a process which no-one else could carry out:

*The emancipation of the workers will be the task of the workers themselves, said Marx, and this central formulation of socialism has for us nothing to do with a conception used to justify denigrating those workers who follow other conceptions: IT REPRESENTS THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF THE PROLETARIAT.* (*Octobre*, no. 2, *ibid.*).

It was this principle, which many ‘revolutionaries’ seemed to have forgotten, which determined the Italian Left’s absolute rejection of any violence within the working class and its organisations (party, unions, soviets): “...is not the central proletarian position the fraternisation of the workers against the extermination of the workers?” wrote Vercesi (*Octobre*, no. 5, August 1939, ‘La dictature du prolétariat et la question de la violence’).

While violence was a necessity faced with other classes in the conditions of civil war, its role could “only be subsidiary and never fundamental” (ibid.).

In all cases “YOU CANNOT IMPOSE SOCIALISM ON THE PROLETARIAT BY FORCE AND VIOLENCE” (underlined by *Octobre* no. 2). This is why the Italian Left advocated the following measures to keep the dictatorship of the proletariat intact:

- the widest, most unrestricted democracy within the party:

*The whole mechanism of the party must function in an absolutely free manner and the greatest latitude must be given to the formation of fractions which must be provided with the financial means needed for their expansion by the party itself. (Octobre, no. 2);*

- the defence of the economic interests of the workers in the face of the state, through the trade unions and through the right to strike:

*Faced with a State whose NATURAL evolution is to oppose the economic advance of the workers, there is no other solution than the existence of trade union organisations with full rights, and above all, their organic independence with regard to party and state, and the right to strike. (Octobre, no. 2).*

The Italian Left went even further. In the case of a conflict between the proletariat and the ‘proletarian’

state, in which the party participated as a delegation, it considered that it would be better for the party to give up power rather than to become the hangman of the workers in the name of ‘socialism’:

*It would have been better to have lost Kronstadt than to have kept it from the geographic point of view when substantially this victory could only have one result: altering the very basis and substance of the action carried out by the proletariat... it would have been a thousand times better to have taken on the State with the certitude of being beaten than to have stayed in power by inflicting a defeat on proletarian principles. (ibid.).*

While remaining faithful to the principle of the ‘dictatorship of the party’, the Italian Left more and more abandoned it in practise. Against Lenin’s formula that there could only be two parties, one in power, the other in prison, it put forward a conception which refused to wage the political struggle against non-proletarian or petty bourgeois parties in the form of despotic or police measures. It was convinced that there could not be a plurality of proletarian parties in the government, “because to admit adverse parties would mean posing the condition for the re-establishment of the power of the economy after it has been overthrown” (*Bilan*, no. 35, ‘Réponse à Hennaut’). But faced with parties which disseminated bourgeois ideology (anarchists, socialists), the ideological struggle was the only effective one, the only one which would not lead “to the progressive alteration of the very nature of the proletarian party” (ibid.).

All the remedies proposed by the Communist Left were situated in the context of a country (or group of countries) where the proletariat had taken power. It was aware that the only guarantee for keeping

the state in the hands of the workers lay in the extension of the revolution. In the meantime, the proletarian dictatorship would have to be strengthened through the control over the party in power by the International as a whole. In this way the communist party would not run the risk of fusing with the interests of a national state, which would by nature be hostile to internationalism. Under no circumstances could a 'revolutionary war', as in 1920 against Poland, be a solution to the antagonism between the 'workers' state' and world capitalism. The only solution lay in the seizure of power by the workers in all countries. Within this perspective, all remedies - internal and external - could only be palliatives.

• *The danger of 'building socialism'*. One might easily be astonished by the enormous amount of space devoted by *Bilan*, *Communisme* and *Octobre* to the political tasks of the proletariat in the "transitional period". This was because the Italian Left, in full continuity with Marxism, insisted that the revolution had to be political before it could be economic. It rejected any schema of the Stalinist or Trotskyist type, which considered the 'building of socialism' to be the fundamental task of the proletariat. This process could only begin "after the destruction of the most powerful capitalist states..." (*Bilan*, no. 37, Nov.-Dec. 1936, op. cit.).

Economics had to be rigorously subordinated to politics. It had to be integrated into the international struggle for the world revolution. Under no circumstances could accumulation in one country, where the proletariat held power, be carried out at the expense of the final revolutionary goal: world socialism. The Italian left was haunted by the Stalinist model in which the accumulation of capital is presented as

‘socialisation’. This model was ‘monstrous’ and had “reduced the Russian workers to misery” (ibid.).

It was therefore with a good deal of reticence that *Bilan* approached the question of the economic measures of the period of transition. As Mitchell, who studied the problem, noted:

*The comrades of Bilan, animated by the correct concern to deal with the role of the proletarian state on the world-wide terrain of the class struggle, have singularly resurrected the importance of the problem in question, considering that ‘the economic and military domains can only be accessories, points of detail, in the activity of the proletarian State’, whereas they are of an essential order for an exploiting class. (Bilan, no. 38, ibid.).*

The revolution was not only political. It also had to penetrate into the economic sphere. It seemed difficult to imagine that the proletariat could retain power if economically it was subjected to the same constraints as under capitalism. How could it maintain the initiative if, weakened by hunger, it was incapable of struggling for anything except its immediate survival - mobilising all its strength to this end, and sinking into a war of each against all?

For these reasons, the Italian Left advocated an economic policy founded not on the accumulation of capital, but on the massive production of consumer goods. In Marxist terms, there had to be a relative decrease in sector I (producer goods) and an accelerated growth in sector II (food, clothes, furniture, leisure, etc.). While the law of value continued to exist during the period of transition, its role would be lessened through a real rise in the living conditions of the labouring classes. There would be a profound

alteration which would gradually lead it to disappear:

*What has to be changed is the mode of production, which must no longer obey the laws of the growing increase of surplus labour, but the opposite laws of a constant and continuous improvement in the workers' living conditions. (Bilan, no. 21, July-August 1935, op. cit., by Vercesi).*

However, socialism could only emerge through an unprecedented development of the productive forces. For this, it was necessary to increase the hours of labour devoted to such a development. There was thus a great risk that the workers would be asked to make sacrifices' in the name of this goal. This the Communist Left rejected. It thought that it would be much better if for a whole period "there was a much slower rhythm of accumulation than in the capitalist economy" (ibid.).

The result — communism — would be the fruit of a long process taking society from the reign of necessity to the reign of abundance.

There were no easy answers to be found through 'egalitarian' recipes. In particular, the 'war communism' adopted in 1918-20 could not provide a model for the communist transformation. It was a series of contingent measures in which scarcity was 'socialised'. In the industrialised countries, the proletariat would not need to go through such a phase.

The Italian Left rejected with equal force the economic measures advocated by the German-Dutch

Left. In a work published in Berlin in 1930 (*Grundprinzipien kommunistischer Produktion und Verteilung*) written by Jan Appel and Henk Canne-Meijer, both members of the GIK, this current advocated 'labour time vouchers' as the best route to communism.

These 'vouchers' would not only enable the transitional society to facilitate the integration of bourgeois or non-bourgeois strata who had never done productive work, but also to prevent any attempt at capitalist accumulation. The vouchers could neither be accumulated nor exchanged. They crystallised the labour time performed by each worker. In exchange, each worker, whatever his qualification or the amount he produced would receive on the basis of an 'average social labour time' his proportion of the collective consumption. This would lead to the gradual elimination of the law of value - founded on exchange - and any individual tendency to accumulate wealth (7).

*Bilan* had asked Hennaut to summarise the *Grundprinzipien* (8), but remained unconvinced by the GIK's arguments. Mitchell remarked that to establish consumption on the basis of average social labour time amounted to determining it by the law of value. He reproached the Dutch internationalists with trying to come up with mathematical solutions and with being fascinated by the example of war communism. They wanted to establish a juridical equality at the level of wages, but the suppression of wage inequalities they called for "remains suspended in mid-air, because the suppression of capitalist wage labour does not correspond to the immediate disappearance of differences in the retribution of labour" (*Bilan*, no. 35, Sept.-Oct. 1935).

For the International Communist Left, the solution was less mathematical and juridical than political. The real issue was the need for a considerable increase in consumer goods, making it possible to overcome scarcity. This alone would make it possible to dissolve the law of value and wage labour - to produce for social need and not for exchange and profit. In fact, at no point could “formal equality exist, given the existence of individual, geographical, and other differences; communism will finally establish a real equality amid natural inequalities” (ibid.).

It may seem surprising that among the hundreds of pages of *Bilan*, *Octobre* and *Communisme*, hardly any deal with the question of the workers’ councils and the soviets. This can be explained if one bears in mind that, apart from the German-Dutch Left, no current had really undertaken a profound study of the Russian and German councils. At the beginning, under Bordiga’s influence, the Italian Left had been very distrustful of the ‘factory councils’ advocated by Gramsci. It had thought that the councils had to be formed in the local sections of the communist party. Otherwise they would tend to encourage workers to have an economist and localist viewpoint.

In the 1930’s, the Italian Fraction scarcely altered its position. It conceded that the workers’ councils or soviets could take on “an enormous importance in the first phase of the revolution, the civil war to overthrow the capitalist regime”; but after that they would lose their initial importance. The real organs of the proletariat were the party and the International. It saw the councils as a “Russian form of the dictatorship of the proletariat rather than a specific form with an international validity” (*Bilan*, no. 31, May-June 1936, op. cit. by Mitchell). However, it remained prudent - especially Vercesi. It thought that

the councils could “represent an element of control over the action of the party which has every interest in being surrounded by the active surveillance of the whole mass regrouped in these institutions” (*Bilan*, no. 26, January 1936, op cit.). It was mainly after the war that a part of the Italian Left began to deepen the question of the councils, seeing them as the true organs of the proletarian dictatorship.

Many contradictions appeared in the theoretical reflections of the Italian Left. Defending the idea of the ‘proletarian’ state, it was its most ferocious adversary. Gradually rejecting the trade unions as organs of class struggle, it made them into organisms of the proletarian dictatorship. Partisans of the ‘dictatorship of the party’, it wanted the party to be strictly controlled by the broad proletarian masses and the International, and even, if necessary, to be eliminated from power. But, to use its own term, it was only stammering. Moreover, its theoretical critique was very largely based on the Italian, French and Russian experiences, rather than on the German experience which was so heavily marked by the movement for the anti-trade union councils.

Nevertheless, one can only be staggered by the extent of the theoretical reflection accomplished by the Italian Left during the dark years of the 30’s, on all the questions of the past and present. It was a current that aimed to prepare the future, which could only be the communist revolution. It took advantage of its isolation to prepare that future and to avoid falling into the errors of its predecessors, no matter how glorious they might have been. It did not have the vision of a revolutionary programme fixed for all eternity. The programme remained “an approximation until the very threshold of

communist society”. It could never be more than “a ‘movement’ in historical consciousness whose progress is measured against social evolution itself” (*Communisme*, no. 18, Sept. 1938).

But, above all, the Italian Communist Left felt itself to be profoundly a part of the world proletariat. It did not see theory as a luxury, a game, a dream — a consolation for hard reality. It was a vital instrument which it wanted to use in order to remain indissolubly linked to the proletariat which had given birth to it. It did not want to betray the proletariat or become its executioner.

## NOTES

(1) *Bilan* no. 35, Sept.-Oct. 1936.

(2) This idea, already developed by Prudhommeaux in *L'Ouvrier Communiste*, is defended most cogently in the postscript to the book *Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin (1918-1919)* (*Cahiers Spartacus* no. 15), entitled ‘La tragédie de Spartacus’. André and Dori Prudhommeaux say here that “the two Spartacist struggles, the ancient and the modern, offer the same aspect of a combat at a dead end, which is at the same time a culmination of the past, and an implicit point of departure for the future. The constant elements of human revolt are affirmed there”. The tone of this postscript is startlingly religious: “... socially there appeared the structure suited to redeeming minorities, charged with a heavy burden of responsibility and fatality in a sinful world... the proletariat is Christ...”.

(3) cf. *Communisme*, no. 3, June 1937, ‘In the union movement: police provocation’. In order to defend himself, Ottorino Perrone wrote a text to the National Committee of the General Union of Office Workers’ (20 Nov. 38), protesting against his expulsion: “the only grievances against me are based on my interventions in the assemblies. I have been accused of no

reprehensible act against the union. Moreover, the expulsion procedure began and developed when the Sûreté's rules concerning political refugees' residence in the country made it impossible for me to intervene in the assemblies". Perrone was employed by the 'Association Typographique' in Bruxelles, which defended him against the accusations levelled against him. Because of his job he was a member of the Office Workers' Union (Syndicat des Employés).

(4) Another member of this anti-unionist tendency was Luigi Danielis (known as 'Gigi'). Stefanini and Danielis resolutely defended their position on the unions against the majority of the PCIInt founded by Damen, at the Turin conference (see chap. 9).

(5) Preobrazhensky: *The New Economics*, 1922.

(6) For the positions of the German Left, after 1921, on the Russian revolution cf. *Die Kommunistische Arbeiterinternationale*' by Herman Gorter, *Proletarier*, Berlin, 1923; 'Thesen über den Bolschewismus', *Räte Korrespondenz*, Dec. 1934.

(7) The *Grundprinzipien kommunistischer Produktion und Verteilung* were republished in 1970 in Berlin, with an introduction by Paul Mattick.

(8) *Bilan*, nos. 19 to 21, 1935: 'Les fondements de la production et de la distribution communiste'; 'Problèmes de la production et distribution communiste'.

