

# THE GRAMSCI READER

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## VI HEGEMONY, RELATIONS OF FORCE, HISTORICAL BLOC

### Introduction

The reality in which Gramsci found himself after 1926 was one in which socialist revolutions had either been defeated or had failed to take place in the West, where capitalism had managed to survive the post-war economic crisis and stabilize itself, where parliamentary regimes had stood firm or had been replaced with authoritarian ones. These conditions were very different from those of the phase of revolutionary offensive between 1917 and 1921. They demanded a new analysis of the political and ideological resources of capitalist societies, the sources of their extraordinary resilience. They also demanded a new strategy, one which would be different from that which had worked in Russia in 1917.

It is the basis of such an analysis and strategy that Gramsci sought to develop in the prison notebooks. One important strand of this work was theoretical. The Marxist tradition in which he had matured as a political militant was strong on general predictions about the course of capitalist development and about connections between economic crises and political transformation. But it was weak on detailed analyses of the forms of political power, the concrete relations between social classes and political representation and the cultural and ideological forms in which social antagonisms are fought out or regulated and dissipated. There was no adequate Marxist theory of the state or of what Gramsci called the 'sphere of the complex superstructures': political, legal, cultural. In order to conduct his analysis, therefore, Gramsci needed to make a theoretical critique of mechanistic forms of historical materialism, most notably 'economism' (see Glossary of Key Terms). He then needed to expand the space occupied by politics in the Marxist tradition.

To do this he went back not to the Marx of *Capital* or the Engels of *Anti-Dühring* but to the *Theses on Feuerbach* and to Marx and Engels's historical texts (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis*

*Bonaparte, The Civil War in France, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*). He also drew on a non-Marxist source – the Italian idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce – for the latter's insights into the 'ethico-political' sphere, that is to say the ideological, moral and cultural cements which bond a society together. Significantly, too, he went back to the passage on structure (base) and superstructure in Marx's 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and read it in a strongly anti-economistic way. What the passage says, for Gramsci, is that changing socio-economic circumstances do not of themselves 'produce' political changes. They only set the conditions in which such changes become possible. What is crucial, in bringing about these changes, are the 'relations of force' obtaining at the political level, the degree of political organization and combativity of the opposing forces, the strength of the political alliances which they manage to bind together and their level of political consciousness, of preparation of the struggle on the ideological terrain. It is in the context of this discussion that two central concepts develop: 'hegemony' and 'historical bloc'.

## 1 Structure and Superstructure [i]

Economy and ideology. The claim (presented as an essential postulate of historical materialism) that every fluctuation of politics and ideology can be presented and expounded as an immediate expression of the structure, must be contested in theory as primitive infantilism, and combated in practice with the authentic testimony of Marx, the author of concrete political and historical works. Particularly important from this point of view are *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and the writings on the Eastern Question, but also other writings (*Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany, The Civil War in France* and lesser works). An analysis of these works allows one to establish better the Marxist historical methodology, integrating, illuminating and interpreting the theoretical affirmations scattered throughout his works.

One will be able to see from this the real precautions introduced

by Marx into his concrete researches, precautions which could have no place in his general works. [...] Among these precautions the following examples can be enumerated:

1. The difficulty of identifying at any given time, statically (like an instantaneous photographic image) the structure. Politics in fact is at any given time the reflection of the tendencies of development in the structure, but it is not necessarily the case that these tendencies must be realized. A structural phase can be concretely studied and analysed only after it has gone through its whole process of development, and not during the process itself, except hypothetically and with the explicit proviso that one is dealing with hypotheses.

2. From this it can be deduced that a particular political act may have been an error of calculation on the part of the leaders of the dominant classes, an error which historical development, through the parliamentary and governmental 'crises' of the ruling classes, then corrects and goes beyond. Mechanical historical materialism does not allow for the possibility of error, but assumes that every political act is determined, immediately, by the structure, and therefore as a real and permanent (in the sense of achieved) modification of the structure. The principle of 'error' is a complex one: one may be dealing with an individual impulse based on mistaken calculations or equally it may be a manifestation of the attempts of specific groups or sects to take over hegemony within the directive grouping, attempts which may well be unsuccessful.

3. It is not sufficiently borne in mind that many political acts are due to internal necessities of an organizational character, that is they are tied to the need to give coherence to a party, a group, a society. This is made clear for example in the history of the Catholic Church. If, for every ideological struggle within the Church one wanted to find an immediate primary explanation in the structure one would really be caught napping: all sorts of politico-economic romances have been written for this reason. It is evident on the contrary that the majority of these discussions are connected with sectarian and organizational necessities. In the discussion between Rome and Byzantium on the Procession of the Holy Spirit,<sup>1</sup> it would be ridiculous to look in the structure of the European East for the claim that it proceeds only from the Father, and in that of the West for the claim that it proceeds from the Father and the Son. The two Churches, whose existence and

whose conflict is dependent on the structure and on the whole of history, posed questions which are principles of distinction and internal cohesion for each side, but it could have happened that either of the Churches could have argued what in fact was argued by the other. The principle of distinction and conflict would have been upheld all the same, and it is this problem of distinction and conflict that constitutes the historical problem, not the banner that happened to be hoisted by one side or the other. [...]

SPN, 407-9 (Q7§24)

## 2 [Structure and Superstructure ii]

The proposition contained in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* to the effect that men acquire consciousness of structural conflicts on the level of ideologies should be considered as an affirmation of epistemological and not simply psychological and moral value.<sup>2</sup> From this, it follows that the theoretical-practical principle of hegemony has also epistemological significance, and it is here that Ilyich [Lenin]'s greatest theoretical contribution to the philosophy of praxis should be sought. In these terms one could say that Ilyich advanced philosophy as philosophy in so far as he advanced political doctrine and practice. The realization of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact. In Crocean terms: when one succeeds in introducing a new morality in conformity with a new conception of the world, one finishes by introducing the conception as well; in other words, one determines a reform of the whole of philosophy.

SPN, 365-6 (Q10,II§12)

## 3 Structure and Superstructures [iii]

Structures and superstructures form a 'historical bloc'. That is to say the complex, contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructures is the reflection of the ensemble of the social relations of production. From this, one can conclude: that only a

totalitarian system of ideologies gives a rational reflection of the contradiction of the structure and represents the existence of the objective conditions for the revolutionizing of praxis.<sup>3</sup> If a social group is formed which is one hundred per cent homogeneous on the level of ideology, this means that the premisses exist one hundred per cent for this revolutionizing: that is that the 'rational' is actively and actually real. This reasoning is based on the necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructures, a reciprocity which is nothing other than the real dialectical process.

SPN, 366 (Q8§182)

## 4 [The Concept of 'Historical Bloc']

[...]

Croce's assertion that the philosophy of praxis 'detaches' the structure from the superstructures, thereby reviving theological dualism and positing a 'structure as hidden god', is not correct and it is not even a particularly profound invention. The accusation of theological dualism and of a breaking up of the process of reality is vacuous and superficial. It is strange that such an accusation should have come from Croce, who introduced the concept of the dialectic of distincts and for this is always being accused by the followers of Gentile of having himself broken up the process of reality.<sup>4</sup> But, leaving this aside, it is not true that the philosophy of praxis 'detaches' the structure from the superstructures when, rather, it conceives their development as intimately connected and necessarily interrelated and reciprocal. Nor can the structure be likened to a 'hidden god', even metaphorically. It is conceived in an ultra-realistic way, such that it can be studied with the methods of the natural and exact sciences. Indeed, it is precisely because of this objectively verifiable 'consistency' of the structure that the conception of history has been considered 'scientific'. Is it perhaps that the structure is thought of as something immobile and absolute and not rather as reality itself in movement? And does not the statement in the *Theses on Feuerbach* about the 'educator who must be educated' posit a necessary relation of active reaction by man upon the structure, affirming the unity of the process of reality? The concept of 'historical bloc' constructed by Sorel

grasped precisely in full this unity upheld by the philosophy of praxis.<sup>5</sup> [...]

\*(Q10,II§41.i)

## 5 [Ethico-Political History]

Definition of the concept of ethico-political history. Note that ethico-political history is an arbitrary and mechanical hypostasis of the moment of hegemony, of political leadership, of consent in the life and activities of the state and civil society. [...]

The most important problem to discuss in this paragraph is this: whether the philosophy of praxis excludes ethico-political history, whether it fails to recognize the reality of a moment of hegemony, treats moral and cultural leadership as unimportant and really judges superstructural facts as 'appearances'. One can say that not only does the philosophy of praxis not exclude ethico-political history but that, indeed, in its most recent stage of development, it consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to its conception of the state and to the 'accrediting' of the cultural fact, of cultural activity, of a cultural front as necessary alongside the merely economic and political ones. Croce commits the serious error of not applying to his criticism of the philosophy of praxis the methodological criteria that he applies to his study of much less important and significant philosophical currents. If he were to employ these criteria, he would be able to discover that the judgement contained in his attribution of the term 'appearance' to superstructures is none other than a judgement of their 'historicity' expressed in opposition to popular dogmatic conceptions and therefore couched in a 'metaphorical' language adapted to the public to whom it is destined. The philosophy of praxis thus judges the reduction of history to ethico-political history alone as improper and arbitrary, but does not exclude the latter. The opposition between Crocism and the philosophy of praxis is to be sought in the speculative character of Crocism.

SCW, 104-7 (Q10,I§7)

## 6 [Ethico-Political History and Hegemony]

From everything that has been said previously it emerges that Croce's historiographical conception of history as ethico-political history must not be judged as futile, as something to be rejected out of hand. On the contrary, it needs to be forcefully established that Croce's historical thought, even in its most recent phase, must be studied and reflected upon with the greatest attention. Essentially it represents a reaction against 'economism' and fatalistic mechanicism, even though it is put forward as the destructive supersession of the philosophy of praxis. The criterion that a philosophical current must be criticized and evaluated not for what it professes to be but for what it really is and shows itself to be in concrete historical works applies to Croce's thought too. For the philosophy of praxis the speculative method itself is not futile, but has generated 'instrumental' values of thought in the development of culture, instrumental values which the philosophy of praxis has incorporated (the dialectic, for example). Credit must therefore, at the very least, be given to Croce's thought as an instrumental value, and in this respect it may be said that it has forcefully drawn attention to the importance of facts of culture and thought in the development of history, to the function of great intellectuals in the organic life of civil society and the state, to the moment of hegemony and consent as the necessary form of the concrete historical bloc. That this is not futile is demonstrated by the fact that, in the same period as Croce, the greatest modern theorist of the philosophy of praxis [Lenin] has – on the terrain of political struggle and organization, and with political terminology – in opposition to the various tendencies of 'economism', revalued the front of cultural struggle and constructed the doctrine of hegemony as a complement to the theory of the state-as-force and as a contemporary form of the 1848 doctrine of 'permanent revolution'.<sup>6</sup> For the philosophy of praxis the conception of ethico-political history, in that it is independent of any realist conception, may be adopted as an 'empirical tool' of historical research, one which needs constantly to be borne in mind in examining and understanding historical development, if the aim is that of producing integral history and not partial and extrinsic history (history of economic forces as such etc.).

\*(Q10,I§12)

## 7 [Political Ideologies]

One of the points which is most interesting to examine and analyse in detail is Croce's doctrine of political ideologies. [...] For Croce too, now, superstructures are merely apparent and illusory; but has he thought through this change in his position and, in particular, does it correspond to his activity as a philosopher? Croce's doctrine on political ideologies is evidently derived from the philosophy of praxis: they are practical constructions, instruments of political leadership. In other words, one could say that ideologies for the governed are mere illusions, a deception to which they are subject, while for the governing they constitute a willed and a knowing deception. For the philosophy of praxis, ideologies are anything but arbitrary; they are real historical facts which must be combatted and their nature as instruments of domination revealed, not for reasons of morality etc., but for reasons of political struggle: in order to make the governed intellectually independent of the governing, in order to destroy one hegemony and create another, as a necessary moment in the revolutionizing of praxis. Croce would seem to be nearer than the philosophy of praxis to the vulgar materialist interpretation. For the philosophy of praxis the superstructures are an objective and operative reality (or they become so, when they are not pure products of the individual mind). It explicitly asserts that men become conscious of their social position, and therefore of their tasks, on the terrain of ideologies, which is no small affirmation of reality. The philosophy of praxis itself is a superstructure, it is the terrain on which determinate social groups become conscious of their own social being, their own strength, their own tasks, their own becoming. In this sense Croce himself is right when he asserts that the philosophy of praxis 'is history already made or in the process of becoming'.<sup>7</sup>

There is however a basic difference between the philosophy of praxis and other philosophies: other ideologies are non-organic creations because they are contradictory, because they aim at reconciling opposed and contradictory interests; their 'historicity' will be brief because contradiction emerges after each event of which they have been the instrument. The philosophy of praxis, on the other hand, does not tend towards the peaceful resolution of the contradictions existing within history. It is itself the theory of

those contradictions. It is not an instrument of government of dominant groups in order to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over subaltern classes; it is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths, even unpleasant ones, and in avoiding deceptions (impossible) by the ruling class and even more by themselves. The criticism of ideologies, in the philosophy of praxis, attacks the complex of superstructures and affirms their rapid transience in that they tend to hide reality – namely struggle and contradiction – even when they are 'formally' dialectical (like Crocism), that is to say they present a speculative and conceptual dialectic and do not see the dialectic in historical becoming itself. [...]

The concept of the concrete (historical) value of the superstructures in the philosophy of praxis must be enriched by juxtaposing it with Sorel's concept of the 'historical bloc'. If men become conscious of their social position and their tasks on the terrain of the superstructures, this means that between structure and superstructure a necessary and vital connection exists. One should find out what currents of historiography the philosophy of praxis was reacting against at the time of its foundation and what were the most widespread opinions at the time with respect to the other sciences too. The very images and metaphors on which the founders of the philosophy of praxis frequently draw give some clues in this direction: the argument that the economy is to society what anatomy is to biological sciences – one must remember the struggle that went on in the natural sciences to expel from the scientific terrain principles of classification that were based on external and transient elements. If animals were classified according to the colour of their skin, their hair or their plumage, everyone nowadays would protest. In the human body it certainly cannot be said that the skin (and also the historically prevalent type of physical beauty) are mere illusions and that the skeleton and anatomy are the only reality. However for a long time something similar to this was said. By highlighting the anatomy and the function of the skeleton nobody was trying to claim that man (still less woman) can live without the skin. Going on with the same metaphor one can say that it is not the skeleton (strictly speaking) which makes one fall in love with a woman, but that one nevertheless realizes how much the skeleton contributes to the grace of her movements etc.

Another element in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique* is without doubt to be connected to the reform of legislation on trials and punishments. The preface says that just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks of himself, so one cannot judge a society by its ideologies.<sup>8</sup> This affirmation is perhaps connected to the reform in penal judgements whereby material proofs and the oral evidence of witnesses have replaced the statements of the accused and the corresponding use of torture, etc.

Referring to so-called natural laws and the concept of nature (natural right, state of nature, etc.) 'which emerged in the philosophy of the seventeenth century and was dominant in the eighteenth', Croce mentions that 'This conception is in fact only obliquely attacked by Marx's critique which, analysing the concept of *nature*, showed how it was the ideological complement of the historical development of the bourgeoisie, an enormously powerful weapon which the bourgeoisie used against the privileges and oppressions it sought to destroy.' Croce uses this observation to make the following methodological statement: 'That concept may have arisen as an instrument for practical and occasional ends and yet it may still be intrinsically true. "Natural laws" are equivalent, in that case, to "rational laws"; and it is necessary to deny the rationality and excellence of those laws. Now, precisely because it is of metaphysical origin, that concept can be radically rejected, but one cannot refute it in its particularity. It wanes with the metaphysics to which it belonged; and it seems now to have waned for good. Peace be unto the "great goodness" of natural laws'.<sup>9</sup>

The passage as a whole is not very clear or lucid. One should reflect on the fact that in general (i.e. sometimes) a concept may arise as an instrument for a practical and occasional end and nonetheless be intrinsically true. But I do not believe there are many who would maintain that once a structure has altered, all the elements of the corresponding superstructure must necessarily collapse. What happens, rather, is that out of an ideology that arose to lead the popular masses and which therefore necessarily takes account of certain of their interests, several elements survive: the law of nature itself, which may have waned for the educated classes, is preserved by the Catholic religion and is more alive among the people than one thinks. Besides, in his critique of

the concept the founder of the philosophy of praxis affirmed its historicity, its transience; he limited its intrinsic value to this historicity but did not deny it.

*Note 1.* The phenomena of the modern breakdown of parliamentarism can offer many examples of the function and concrete value of ideologies. The way in which this breakdown is presented so as to hide the reactionary tendencies of certain social groups is of the greatest interest. [...]

\* (Q10,II§41.xii)

## 8 Ideologies

It seems to me that an element of error in assessing the value of ideologies is due to the fact (by no means casual) that the name ideology is given both to the necessary superstructure of a particular structure and to the arbitrary elucubrations of particular individuals. The bad sense of the word has become widespread, with the effect that the theoretical analysis of the concept of ideology has been modified and denatured. The process leading up to this error can be easily reconstructed:

1. ideology is identified as distinct from the structure, and it is asserted that it is not ideology that changes the structures but vice versa;

2. it is asserted that a given political solution is 'ideological', i.e. that it is insufficient for changing the structure, although it thinks that it can do so; it is asserted that it is useless, stupid, etc.;

3. one then passes to the assertion that every ideology is 'pure' appearance, useless, stupid, etc.

One must therefore distinguish between historically organic ideologies, those, that is, which are necessary to a given structure, and ideologies that are arbitrary, rationalistic, 'willed'. To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is 'psychological'; they 'organize' human masses, they form the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc. To the extent that they are 'arbitrary' they only create individual 'movements', polemics and so on (though even these are not completely useless, since they function like an error which by contrasting with truth, demonstrates it).

SPN, 376-7 (Q7§19)

## 9 Validity of Ideologies

Remember the frequent affirmation made by Marx on the 'solidity of popular beliefs' as a necessary element of a specific situation. What he says more or less is 'when this way of conceiving things has the force of popular beliefs', etc. (Find these statements and analyse them in the contexts in which they are expressed.)<sup>10</sup> Another affirmation of Marx's is that a popular conviction often has the same energy as a material force or something of the kind, which is extremely significant.<sup>11</sup> The analysis of these propositions tends, I think, to reinforce the conception of 'historical bloc' in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely indicative value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces.

SPN, 377 (Q7§21)

## 10 Analysis of Situations: Relations of Force

It is the problem of the relations between structure and superstructures which must be accurately posed and resolved if the forces which are active in the history of a particular period are to be correctly analysed and the relation between them determined. Two principles must orient the discussion: 1. that no society sets itself tasks for whose accomplishment the necessary and sufficient conditions do not either already exist or are not at least beginning to emerge and develop; 2. that no society breaks down and can be replaced until it has developed all the forms of life which are implicit in its internal relations [...].

'No social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the

course of formation.' (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*)

From a reflection on these two principles, one can move on to develop a whole series of further principles of historical methodology. Meanwhile, in studying a structure, it is necessary to distinguish organic movements (relatively permanent) from movements which may be termed 'conjunctural' (and which appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental). Conjunctural phenomena too depend on organic movements to be sure, but they do not have any very far-reaching historical significance; they give rise to political criticism of a minor, day-to-day character, which has as its subject small ruling groups and personalities with direct governmental responsibilities. Organic phenomena on the other hand give rise to socio-historical criticism, whose subject is wider social groupings – beyond the people with immediate responsibilities and beyond the ruling personnel. When a historical period comes to be studied, the great importance of this distinction becomes clear. A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts (since no social formation will ever admit that it has been superseded) form the terrain of the 'conjunctural', and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organize. These forces seek to demonstrate that the necessary and sufficient conditions already exist to make possible, and hence imperative, the accomplishment of certain historical tasks (imperative, because any falling short before a historical duty increases the necessary disorder, and prepares more serious catastrophes). (The demonstration in the last analysis only succeeds and is 'true' if it becomes a new reality, if the forces of opposition triumph; in the immediate, it is developed in a series of ideological, religious, philosophical, political and juridical polemics, whose concreteness can be estimated by the extent to which they are convincing, and shift the previously existing disposition of social forces.)

A common error in historico-political analysis consists in an inability to find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural. This leads to presenting causes as immediately



operative which in fact only operate indirectly, or to asserting that the immediate causes are the only effective ones. In the first case there is an excess of 'economism', or doctrinaire pedantry; in the second, an excess of 'ideologism'. In the first case there is an overestimation of mechanical causes, in the second an exaggeration of the voluntarist and individual element. (The distinction between organic 'movements' and facts and 'conjunctural' or occasional ones must be applied to all types of situation; not only to those in which a regressive development or an acute crisis takes place, but also to those in which there is a progressive development or one towards prosperity, or in which the productive forces are stagnant.) The dialectical nexus between the two categories of movement, and therefore of research, is hard to establish precisely. Moreover, if this error is serious in historiography, it becomes still more serious in the art of politics, when it is not the reconstruction of past history but the construction of present and future history which is at stake. One's own desires and one's baser and more immediate passions are the cause of error, in that they take the place of an objective and impartial analysis – and this happens not as a conscious 'means' to stimulate to action, but as self-deception. In this case too the snake bites the charlatan – in other words the demagogue is the first victim of his own demagogy.

The failure to consider the immediate moment of 'relations of force' is linked to residues of the vulgar liberal conception – of which syndicalism is a manifestation which thought itself more advanced when in reality it was taking a step backward. In fact the vulgar liberal conception, stressing relations between political forces organized in the various forms of party (newspaper readerships, parliamentary and local elections, the mass organizations of parties and trade unions in the strict sense), was more advanced than syndicalism, which gave primordial importance to the fundamental socio-economic relation and only to that. The vulgar liberal conception took implicit account of this socio-economic relation too (as many signs clearly indicate), but it put more emphasis on the relation of political forces – which was an expression of the former and in reality contained it. These residues of the vulgar liberal conception can be traced in a whole series of works purporting to be connected with the philosophy of praxis, and have given rise to infantile forms of optimism and folly.

These methodological criteria will acquire visibly and didactically their full significance if they are applied to the examination of concrete historical facts. This might usefully be done for the events which took place in France from 1789 to 1870. It seems to me that for greater clarity of exposition it is precisely necessary to take in the whole of this period. In fact, it was only in 1870-71, with the attempt of the Commune, that all the germs of 1789 were finally historically exhausted. It was then that the new bourgeois class struggling for power defeated not only the representatives of the old society unwilling to admit that it had been definitively superseded, but also the still newer groups who maintained that the new structure created by the 1789 revolution was itself already outdated; by this victory the bourgeoisie demonstrated its vitality *vis-à-vis* both the old and the very new.

Furthermore, it was in 1870-71 that the body of principles of political strategy and tactics engendered in practice in 1789, and developed ideologically around 1848, lost their efficacy. (I am referring to those which can be resumed in the formula of 'permanent revolution'; it would be interesting to study how much of this formula passed into Mazzini's strategy – for example, in the Milan insurrection of 1853 – and whether this happened consciously or not.) One piece of evidence for the correctness of this point of view is the fact that historians are by no means of one mind (and it is impossible that they should be) in fixing the limits of the group of events which constitute the French Revolution. For some (Salvemini, for instance) the Revolution was complete at Valmy: France had created its new state and had shown itself capable of organizing the politico-military force necessary to assert and to defend its territorial sovereignty. For others the Revolution continues until Thermidor – indeed they speak of various revolutions (10 August is a separate revolution, etc; see *La Révolution française* by A. Mathiez, in the A. Colin series.) The interpretation of Thermidor and of the work of Napoleon provokes the sharpest disagreements. Was it revolution or counter-revolution? For others the history of the Revolution continues until 1830, 1848, 1870 and even until the World War of 1914.

All these views are partially true. In reality the internal contradictions which develop after 1789 in the structure of French society are resolved to a relative degree only with the Third

Republic; and France has now enjoyed sixty years of stable political life only after eighty years of convulsions at ever longer intervals: 1789, 1794, 1799, 1804, 1815, 1830, 1848, 1870. It is precisely the study of these 'intervals' of varying frequency which enables one to reconstruct the relations on the one hand between structure and superstructure, and on the other between the development of the organic movement and that of the conjunctural movement in the structure. One might say that the dialectical mediation between the two methodological principles formulated at the beginning of this note is to be found in the historico-political formula of permanent revolution.

The question of so-called relations of force is an aspect of the same problem. One often reads in historical narratives the generic expression: 'relations of force favourable, or unfavourable, to this or that tendency'. In such abstract terms this formulation explains nothing, or almost nothing – since it merely repeats twice over the fact which needs to be explained, once as a fact and once as an abstract law and an explanation. The theoretical error consists therefore in making what is a principle of research and interpretation into an 'historical cause'.

Meanwhile, in the 'relation of forces' various moments or levels must be distinguished, and they are fundamentally the following:

1. A relation of social forces which is closely linked to the structure, objective, independent of human will, and which can be measured with the systems of the exact or physical sciences. The level of development of the material forces of production provides a basis for the emergence of the various social groupings, represents a function and has a specific position within production itself. This relation is what it is, a refractory reality: nobody can alter the number of firms or their employees, the number of cities or the given urban population, etc. This fundamental configuration allows one to study whether in a particular society there exist the necessary and sufficient conditions for its transformation – in other words, to check the degree of realism and practicability of the various ideologies which have been born on its own terrain, on the terrain of the contradictions which it has engendered during the course of its development.

2. A subsequent moment is the relation of political forces; in other words, an evaluation of the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness and organization attained by the various social

groups. This moment can in its turn be analysed and differentiated into various levels, corresponding to the various moments of collective political consciousness, as they have manifested themselves in history up till now. The first and most elementary of these is the economic-corporate level: a tradesman feels *obliged* to stand by another tradesman, a manufacturer by another manufacturer, etc., but the tradesman does not yet feel solidarity with the manufacturer; in other words, the members of the professional group are conscious of its unity and homogeneity, and of the need to organize it, but in the case of the wider social group this is not yet so. A second moment is that in which consciousness is reached of the solidarity of interests among all the members of the social group – but still in the purely economic field. Already in this moment the problem of the state is posed – but only in terms of winning politico-juridical equality with the ruling groups: the right is claimed to participate in legislation and administration, even to reform these – but within the existing fundamental structures. A third moment is that in which one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the merely economic group, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups. This is the most purely political phase, and marks the decisive passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures; it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies become 'party', come into confrontation and conflict, until only one of them, or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail, to gain the upper hand, to propagate itself over the whole social area – bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a 'universal' plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups. It is true that the state is seen as the organ of one particular group, destined to create favourable conditions for the latter's maximum expansion. But the development and expansion of the particular group are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the 'national' energies. In other words, the dominant group is co-ordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the state

is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups – equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly economic-corporate interest.

In real history these moments imply each other reciprocally – horizontally and vertically, so to speak – i.e. according to socio-economic activity (horizontally) and to territories (vertically), combining and diverging in various ways. Each of these combinations may be represented by its own organized economic and political expression. It is also necessary to take into account the fact that international relations intertwine with these internal relations of nation-states, creating new, original and historically concrete combinations. A particular ideology, for instance, born in a highly developed country, is disseminated in less developed countries, impinging on the local interplay of combinations. (Religion, for example, has always been a source of such national and international ideological-political combinations, and so too have the other international organizations – Freemasonry, Rotarianism, the Jews, career diplomacy. These propose political solutions of diverse historical origin, and assist their victory in particular countries – functioning as international political parties which operate within each nation with the full concentration of the international forces. But religion, Freemasonry, Rotary, Jews, etc., can be subsumed into the social category of 'intellectuals', whose function, on an international scale, is that of mediating the extremes, of 'socializing' the technical discoveries which provide the impetus for all activities of leadership, of devising compromises between, and ways out of, extreme solutions.) This relation between international forces and national forces is further complicated by the existence within every state of several structurally diverse territorial sectors, with diverse relations of force at all levels (thus the Vendée was allied with the forces of international reaction, and represented them in the heart of French territorial unity; similarly Lyons in the French Revolution represented a particular knot of relations, etc.).

3. The third moment is that of the relation of military forces, which from time to time is directly decisive. (Historical development oscillates continually between the first and the third

moment, with the mediation of the second.) But this moment too is not undifferentiated, nor is it susceptible to immediate schematic definition. Here too, two levels can be distinguished: the military level in the strict or technical military sense, and the level which may be termed politico-military. In the course of history these two levels have appeared in a great variety of combinations. A typical example, which can serve as a hypothetical demonstration, is the relation involved in a state's military oppression of a nation seeking to attain its national independence. The relation is not purely military, but politico-military; indeed this type of oppression would be inexplicable if it were not for the state of social disintegration of the oppressed people, and the passivity of the majority among them; consequently independence cannot be won with purely military forces, it requires both military and politico-military ones. If the oppressed nation, in fact, before embarking on its struggle for independence, had to wait until the hegemonic state allowed it to organize its own army in the strict and technical sense of the word, it would have to wait quite a while. (It may happen that the claim to have its own army is conceded by the hegemonic nation, but this only means that a great part of the struggle has already been fought and won on the politico-military terrain.) The oppressed nation will therefore initially oppose the dominant military force with a force which is only 'politico-military', that is to say a form of political action which has the virtue of provoking repercussions of a military character in the sense: 1. that it has the capacity to destroy the war potential of the dominant nation from within; 2. that it compels the dominant military force to thin out and disperse itself over a large territory, thus nullifying a great part of its war potential. In the Italian Risorgimento the disastrous absence of politico-military leadership may be noted, especially in the Action Party (through congenital incapacity), but also in the Piedmontese Moderate Party, both before and after 1848,<sup>12</sup> not to be sure through incapacity but through 'politico-economic Malthusianism' – in other words, because they were unwilling even to hint at the possibility of an agrarian reform, and because they had no desire to see a national constituent assembly convoked, but merely waited for the Piedmont monarchy, free from any conditions or limitations of popular origin, to extend its rule to the whole of Italy – sanctioned only by regional plebiscites.

A further question connected with the foregoing is whether fundamental historical crises are directly determined by economic crises. The answer is contained implicitly in the foregoing paragraphs, where problems have been considered which are only another way of presenting the one now under consideration. Nevertheless it is still necessary, for didactic reasons, given the particular public which is being aimed at, to examine each of the ways in which a single question may present itself as if it were a new and independent problem. It may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events; they can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life. Moreover, all assertions concerning periods of crisis or of prosperity may give rise to unilateral judgements. In his historical outline of the French Revolution [...] Mathiez, in opposition to the vulgar traditional history which aprioristically 'discovers' a crisis coinciding with every major rupture of social equilibrium, asserts that towards 1789 the economic situation was in an immediate sense rather good, so that it cannot be said that the downfall of the absolute state was due to a crisis of impoverishment. It should be observed that the state was in the throes of a mortal financial crisis and considering which of the privileged social orders would have to bear the sacrifices and burdens necessary for the state and royal finances to be put back in order. Furthermore, if the economic position of the bourgeoisie was flourishing, the situation of the popular classes was certainly not good either in the towns or, especially, on the land – where they suffered from endemic poverty. In any case, the rupture of the equilibrium of forces did not occur as the result of direct mechanical causes – i.e. the impoverishment of the social group which had an interest in breaking the equilibrium, and which did in fact break it. It occurred in the context of conflicts on a higher plane than the immediate world of the economy; conflicts related to class 'prestige' (future economic interests), and to an inflammation of sentiments of independence, autonomy and power. The specific question of economic hardship or well-being as a cause of new historical realities is a partial aspect of the question of the relations of force at their various levels. Changes can come about either because a situation of well being is threatened by the narrow self-interest of an opposing group, or because hardship

has become intolerable and no force is visible in the old society capable of mitigating it and of re-establishing normality by legal means. Hence it may be said that all these elements are the concrete manifestation of the conjunctural fluctuations of the totality of social relations of force, on whose terrain the passage takes place from the latter to political relations of force, and finally to the military relation which is decisive.

If this process of development from one moment to the next is missing – and it is essentially a process which has as its actors men and their will and capability – the situation is not taken advantage of, and contradictory outcomes are possible: either the old society resists and ensures itself a breathing space, by physically exterminating the elite of the rival class and terrorizing its mass reserves; or a reciprocal destruction of the conflicting forces occurs, and a peace of the graveyard is established, perhaps even under the surveillance of a foreign guard.

But the most important observation to be made about any concrete analysis of the relations of force is the following: that such analyses cannot and must not be ends in themselves (unless the intention is merely to write a chapter of past history), but acquire significance only if they serve to justify a particularly practical activity, an initiative of will. They reveal the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can be most fruitfully applied; they suggest immediate tactical operations; they indicate how a campaign of political agitation may best be launched, what language will best be understood by the masses, etc. The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organized and long prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware. This is clear from military history, and from the care with which in every period armies have been prepared in advance to be able to make war at any moment. The great states have been great precisely because they were at all times prepared to intervene effectively in favourable international conjunctures – which were precisely favourable because there was the concrete possibility of effectively intervening in them.

## 11 Some Theoretical and Practical Aspects of 'Economism'

Economism – theoretical movement for free trade – theoretical syndicalism. It should be considered to what degree theoretical syndicalism derives originally from the philosophy of praxis, and to what degree from the economic doctrines of free trade – i.e. in the last analysis from liberalism. Hence it should be considered whether economism, in its most developed form, is not a direct descendant of liberalism, having very little connection with the philosophy of praxis even in its origins – and what connection it had only extrinsic and purely verbal.

The nexus between free-trade ideology and theoretical syndicalism is particularly evident in Italy, where the admiration of syndicalists like Lanzillo & Co. for Pareto is well known. The significance of the two tendencies, however, is very different. The former belongs to a dominant and directive social group; the latter to a group which is still subaltern, which has not yet gained consciousness of its strength, its possibilities, of how it is to develop, and which therefore does not know how to escape from the primitivist phase.

The approach of the free trade movement is based on a theoretical error whose practical origin is not hard to identify: namely the distinction between political society and civil society, which is made into and presented as an organic one, whereas in fact it is merely methodological. Thus it is asserted that economic activity belongs to civil society, and that the state must not intervene to regulate it. But since in actual reality civil society and state are one and the same, it must be made clear that *laissez-faire* too is a form of state 'regulation', introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means. It is a deliberate policy, conscious of its own ends, and not the spontaneous, automatic expression of economic facts. Consequently, *laissez-faire* liberalism is a political programme, designed to change – in so far as it is victorious – a state's ruling personnel, and to change the economic programme of the state itself – in other words the distribution of the national income.

The case of theoretical syndicalism is different. Here we are dealing with a subaltern group, which is prevented by this theory from ever becoming dominant, or from developing beyond the

economic-corporate stage and rising to the phase of ethico-political hegemony in civil society, and of domination in the state. In the case of *laissez-faire* liberalism, one is dealing with a fraction of the ruling class which wishes to modify not the structure of the state, but merely government policy; which wishes to reform the laws controlling commerce, but only indirectly those controlling industry (since it is undeniable that protection, especially in countries with a poor and restricted market, limits freedom of industrial enterprise and favours unhealthily the creation of monopolies). What is at stake is a rotation in governmental office of the ruling-class parties, not the foundation and organization of a new political society, and even less of a new type of civil society. In the case of the theoretical syndicalist movement the problem is more complex. It is undeniable that in it, the independence and autonomy of the subaltern group which it claims to represent are in fact sacrificed to the intellectual hegemony of the ruling class, since precisely theoretical syndicalism is merely an aspect of *laissez-faire* liberalism – justified with a few mutilated (and therefore banalized) theses from the philosophy of praxis. Why and how does this 'sacrifice' come about? The transformation of the subordinate group into a dominant one is excluded, either because the problem is not even considered (Fabianism, De Man,<sup>13</sup> an important part of the Labour Party), or because it is posed in an inappropriate and ineffective form (social-democratic tendencies in general), or because of a belief in the possibility of leaping from class society directly into a society of perfect equality with a syndical economy.

The attitude of economism towards expressions of political and intellectual will, action or initiative is to say the least strange – as if these did not emanate organically from economic necessity, and indeed were not the only effective expression of the economy. Thus it is incongruous that the concrete posing of the problem of hegemony should be interpreted as a fact subordinating the hegemonic group. Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is

ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity.

Economism appears in many other guises besides *laissez-faire* liberalism and theoretical syndicalism. All forms of electoral abstentionism belong to it (a typical example is the abstentionism of the Italian clericals after 1870, which became ever more attenuated after 1900 until 1919 and the formation of the Popular Party;<sup>14</sup> the organic distinction which the clericals made between the real Italy and the legal Italy was a reproduction of the distinction between economic world and politico-legal world); and there are many such forms, in the sense that there can be semi-abstentionism, 25 per cent abstentionism, etc. Linked with abstentionism is the formula 'the worse it gets, the better that will be', and also the formula of the so-called parliamentary 'intransigence' of certain groups of deputies. Economism is not always opposed to political action and to the political party, but the latter is seen merely as an educational organism similar in kind to a trade union. One point of reference for the study of economism, and for understanding the relations between structure and superstructure, is the passage in *The Poverty of Philosophy* where it says that an important phase in the development of a social group is that in which the individual components of a trade union no longer struggle solely for their own economic interests, but for the defence and the development of the organization itself (see the exact statement;<sup>15</sup> *The Poverty of Philosophy* is an essential moment in the formation of the philosophy of praxis; it can be considered as a development of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, while *The Holy Family* – an occasional work – is a vaguely intermediate stage, as is apparent from the passages devoted to Proudhon and especially to French materialism. The passage on French materialism is more than anything else a chapter of cultural history – not a theoretical passage as it is often interpreted as being – and as cultural history it is admirable. Recall the observation that the critique of Proudhon and of his interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic contained in *The Poverty of the Philosophy* may be extended to Gioberti and to the Hegelianism of the Italian moderate liberals in general. The parallel Proudhon-Gioberti, despite the fact that they represent non-homogeneous politico-historical phases, indeed precisely for that reason, can be

interesting and productive.) In this connection Engels's statement too should be recalled, that the economy is only the mainspring of history 'in the last analysis' (to be found in his two letters on the philosophy of praxis also published in Italian),<sup>16</sup> this statement is to be related directly to the passage in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* which says that it is on the terrain of ideologies that men become conscious of conflicts in the world of the economy.

At various points in these notes it is stated that the philosophy of praxis is far more widely diffused than is generally conceded. The assertion is correct if what is meant is that historical economism – as Professor Loria<sup>17</sup> now calls his more or less incoherent theories – is widely diffused, and that consequently the cultural environment has completely changed from the time in which the philosophy of praxis began its struggles. One might say, in Crocean terminology, that the greatest heresy which has grown in the womb of the 'religion of freedom' has itself too like orthodox religion degenerated, and has become disseminated as 'superstition' – in other words, has combined with *laissez-faire* liberalism and produced economism. However, it remains to be seen whether – in contrast to orthodox religion, which has by now quite shrivelled up – this heretical superstition has not in fact always maintained a ferment which will cause it to be reborn as a higher form of religion; in other words, if the dross of superstition is not in fact easily got rid of.

A few characteristics of historical economism: 1. in the search for historical connections it makes no distinction between what is 'relatively permanent' and what is a passing fluctuation, and by an economic fact it means the self-interest of an individual or small group, in an immediate and 'dirty-Jewish' sense. In other words, it does not take economic class formations into account, with all their inherent relations, but assumes motives of mean and usurious self-interest, especially when it takes forms which the law defines as criminal; 2. the doctrine according to which economic development is reduced to the course of technical change in the instruments of work. Professor Loria has produced a splendid demonstration of this doctrine in application, in his article on the social influence of the aeroplane published in *Rassegna Contemporanea* in 1912; 3. the doctrine according to which economic and historical development are made to depend directly



on the changes in some important element of production – the discovery of a new raw material or fuel, etc. – which necessitate the application of new methods in the construction and design of machines. In recent times there has been an entire literature on the subject of petroleum: Antonio Laviosa's article in *Nuova Antologia* of 16 May 1929 can be read as a typical example. The discovery of new fuels and new forms of energy, just as of new raw materials to be transformed, is certainly of great importance, since it can alter the position of individual states; but it does not determine historical movement, etc.

It often happens that people combat historical economism in the belief that they are attacking historical materialism. This is the case, for instance, with an article in the *Paris Avenir* of 10 October 1930 (reproduced in *Rassegna Settimanale della Stampa Estera* [Weekly Review of the Foreign Press] of 21 October 1930, pp. 2303-4), which can be quoted as typical: 'We have been hearing for some time, especially since the war, that it is self-interest which governs nations and drives the world forward. It was the Marxists who invented this thesis, to which they give the somewhat doctrinaire title of "historical materialism". In pure Marxism, men taken as a mass obey economic necessity and not their own passions. Politics is passion; patriotism is passion; these two demanding ideas merely act as a façade in history. In reality, the history of peoples throughout the centuries is to be explained by a changing, constantly renewed interplay of material causes. Everything is economics. Many "bourgeois" philosophers and economists have taken up this refrain. They pretend to be able to explain high international politics to us by the current price of grain, oil or rubber. They use all their ingenuity to prove that diplomacy is entirely governed by questions of custom tariffs and cost prices. These explanations enjoy a high esteem. They have a modicum of scientific appearance, and proceed from a sort of superior scepticism which would like to pass for the last word in elegance. Emotions in foreign policy? Feelings in home affairs? Enough of that! That stuff is all right for the common people. The great minds, the initiates, know that everything is governed by debits and credits.

Now this is an absolute pseudo-truth. It is utterly false that peoples only allow themselves to be moved by considerations of self-interest, and it is entirely true that they are above all

motivated by desire for, and ardent belief in, prestige. Anyone who does not understand this, does not understand anything.' The article (entitled 'The Desire for Prestige') goes on to cite the examples of German and Italian politics, which it claims are governed by considerations of prestige, and not dictated by material interests. In short, it includes most of the more banal polemical gibes that are directed against the philosophy of praxis; but the real target of the polemic is crude economism of Loria's kind. However, the author is not very strong in argument in other respects either. He does not understand that 'passions' may be simply a synonym for economic interests, and that it is difficult to maintain that political activity is a permanent state of raw emotion and of spasm. Indeed he himself presents French politics as systematic and coherent 'rationality', i.e. purged of all elements of passion, etc.

In its most widespread form as economic superstition, the philosophy of praxis loses a great part of its capacity for cultural expansion among the top layer of intellectuals, however much it may gain among the popular masses and the second-rate intellectuals, who do not intend to overtax their brains but still wish to appear to know everything, etc. As Engels wrote, many people find it very convenient to think that they can have the whole of history and all political and philosophical wisdom in their pockets at little cost and no trouble, concentrated into a few short formulas. They forget that the thesis which asserts that men become conscious of fundamental conflicts on the terrain of ideologies is not psychological or moralistic in character, but structural and epistemological; and they form the habit of considering politics, and hence history, as a continuous *marché de dupes*, a competition in conjuring and sleight of hand. 'Critical' activity is reduced to the exposure of swindles, to creating scandals, and to prying into the pockets of public figures.

It is thus forgotten that since 'economism' too is, or is presumed to be, an objective principle of interpretation (objective-scientific), the search for direct self-interest should apply to all aspects of history, to those who represent the 'thesis' as well as to those who represent the 'antithesis'. Furthermore, another proposition of the philosophy of praxis is also forgotten: that 'popular beliefs' and similar ideas are themselves material forces. The search for 'dirty-Jewish' interests has sometimes led to monstrous and

comical errors of interpretation, which have consequently reacted negatively on the prestige of the original body of ideas. It is therefore necessary to combat economism not only in the theory of historiography, but also and especially in the theory and practice of politics. In this field, the struggle can and must be carried on by developing the concept of hegemony – as has been done in practice in the development of the theory of the political party, and in the actual history of certain political parties (the struggle against the theory of the so-called permanent revolution – to which was counterposed the concept of revolutionary-democratic dictatorship; the extent of the support given to constituentist ideologies, etc.)<sup>18</sup> A study could be made of how certain political movements were judged during the course of their development. One could take as a model the Boulangist movement (from 1886 to 1890 approximately) or the Dreyfus trial or even the coup d'état of 2 December (one would analyse the classic work on the subject<sup>19</sup> and consider how much relative importance is given on the one hand to immediate economic factors, and on the other to the concrete study of 'ideologies'). Confronted with these events, economism asks the question: 'who profits directly from the initiative under consideration?', and replies with a line of reasoning which is as simplistic as it is fallacious: the ones who profit directly are a certain fraction of the ruling class. Furthermore, so that no mistake shall be made, the choice falls on that fraction which manifestly has a progressive function, controlling the totality of economic forces. One can be certain of not going wrong, since necessarily, if the movement under consideration comes to power, sooner or later the progressive fraction of the ruling group will end up by controlling the new government, and by making it its instrument for turning the state apparatus to its own benefit. This sort of infallibility, therefore, comes very cheap. It not only has no theoretical significance – it has only minimal political implications or practical efficacy. In general, it produces nothing but moralistic sermons, and interminable questions of personality.

When a movement of the Boulangist type occurs, the analysis realistically should be developed along the following lines: 1. social content of the mass following of the movement; 2. what function did this mass have in the balance of forces – which is in process of transformation, as the new movement demonstrates by

its very coming into existence? 3. what is the political and social significance of those of the demands presented by the movement's leaders which find general assent? To what effective needs do they correspond? 4. examination of the conformity of the means to the proposed end; 5. only in the last analysis, and formulated in political not moralistic terms, is the *hypothesis* considered that such a movement will necessarily be perverted, and serve quite different ends from those which the mass of its followers expect. But economism puts forward this hypothesis in advance, when no concrete fact (that is to say, none which appears as such to the evidence of common sense – rather than as a result of some esoteric 'scientific' analysis) yet exists to support it. It thus appears as a moralistic accusation of duplicity and bad faith, or (in the case of the movement's followers) of naïvety and stupidity. Thus the political struggle is reduced to a series of personal affairs between on the one hand those with the genie in the lamp who know everything and on the other those who are fooled by their own leaders but are so incurably thick that they refuse to believe it.

Moreover, until such movements have gained power, it is always possible to think that they are going to fail – and some indeed have failed (Boulangism itself, which failed as such and then was definitively crushed with the rise of the Dreyfusard movement; the movement of Georges Valois; that of General Gajda).<sup>20</sup> Research must therefore be directed towards identifying their strengths and weaknesses. The 'economist' hypothesis asserts the existence of an immediate element of strength – i.e. the availability of a certain direct or indirect financial backing (a large newspaper supporting the movement is also a form of indirect financial backing) – and is satisfied with that. But it is not enough.

In this case too, an analysis of the balance of forces – at all levels – can only culminate in the sphere of hegemony and ethico-political relations.

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## 12 Observations on Certain Aspects of the Structure of Political Parties in Periods of Organic Crisis

(To be connected to the notes on situations and relations of force.)  
At a certain point in their historical lives, social groups become



detached from their traditional parties. In other words, the traditional parties in that particular organizational form, with the particular men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognized by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression. When such crises occur, the immediate situation becomes delicate and dangerous, because the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic 'men of destiny'.

These situations of conflict between 'represented and representatives' reverberate out from the terrain of the parties (the party organizations properly speaking, the parliamentary-electoral field, newspaper organization) throughout the state organism, reinforcing the relative power of the bureaucracy (civil and military), of high finance, of the Church, and generally of all bodies relatively independent of the fluctuations of public opinion. How are they created in the first place? In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class's hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses (war, for example), or because huge masses (especially of peasants and petty-bourgeois intellectuals) have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A 'crisis of authority' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or crisis of the state as a whole.

The crisis creates situations which are dangerous in the short run, since the various strata of the population are not all capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or of reorganizing with the same rhythm. The traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp. Perhaps it may make sacrifices, and expose itself to an uncertain future by demagogic promises; but it retains power, reinforces it for the time being, and uses it to crush its adversary and disperse his leading cadres, who cannot be very numerous or highly trained. The passage of the troops of many different parties under the banner of a single party, which better represents and resumes the needs of the entire class,

is an organic and normal phenomenon, even if its rhythm is very swift – indeed almost like lightning in comparison with periods of calm. It represents the fusion of an entire social class under a single leadership, which alone is held to be capable of solving an overriding problem of its existence and of fending off a mortal danger. When the crisis does not find this organic solution, but that of the charismatic leader, it means that a static equilibrium exists (whose factors may be disparate, but in which the decisive one is the immaturity of the progressive forces); it means that no group, neither the conservatives nor the progressives, has the strength for victory, and that even the conservative group needs a master (see *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*).

This order of phenomena is connected to one of the most important questions concerning the political party – namely the party's capacity to react against force of habit, against the tendency to become mummified and anachronistic. Parties come into existence, and constitute themselves as organizations, in order to influence the situation at moments which are historically vital for their class; but they are not always capable of adapting themselves to new tasks and to new epochs, nor of evolving *pari passu* with the overall relations of force (and hence the relative position of their class) in the country in question, or in the international field. In analysing the development of parties, it is necessary to distinguish: their social group; their mass membership; their bureaucracy and general staff. The bureaucracy is the most dangerously hidebound and conservative force; if it ends up by constituting a compact body, which stands on its own and feels itself independent of the mass of members, the party ends up by becoming anachronistic and at moments of acute crisis it is voided of its social content and left as though suspended in mid-air. One can see what has happened to a number of German parties as a result of the expansion of Hitlerism. French parties are a rich field for such research: they are all mummified and anachronistic – historico-political documents of the various phases of past French history, whose outdated terminology they continue to repeat; their crisis could become even more catastrophic than that of the German parties.

[...]

One point which should be added to the note on economism, as an example of the so-called intransigence theories, is the rigid

aversion on principle to what are termed compromises – and the derivative of this, which can be termed ‘fears of dangers’. It is clear that this aversion on principle to compromise is closely linked to economism. For the conception upon which the aversion is based can only be the iron conviction that there exist objective laws of historical development similar in kind to natural laws, together with a belief in a predetermined teleology like that of a religion: since favourable conditions are inevitably going to appear, and since these, in a rather mysterious way, will bring about palingenetic events, it is evident that any deliberate initiative tending to predispose and plan these conditions is not only useless but even harmful. Side by side with these fatalistic beliefs however, there exists the tendency ‘thereafter’ to rely blindly and indiscriminately on the regulatory properties of armed conflict. Yet this too is not entirely without its logic and its consistency, since it goes with a belief that the intervention of will is useful for destruction but not for reconstruction (already under way in the very moment of destruction). Destruction is conceived of mechanically, not as destruction/reconstruction. In such modes of thinking, no account is taken of the ‘time’ factor, nor in the last analysis even of ‘economics’. For there is no understanding of the fact that mass ideological factors always lag behind mass economic phenomena, and that therefore, at certain moments, the automatic thrust due to the economic factor is slowed down, obstructed or even momentarily broken by traditional ideological elements – hence that there must be a conscious, planned struggle to ensure that the exigencies of the economic position of the masses, which may conflict with the traditional leadership’s policies, are understood. An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies – i.e. to change the political direction of certain forces which have to be absorbed if a new, homogeneous politico-economic historical bloc, without internal contradictions, is to be successfully formed. And, since two ‘similar’ forces can only be welded into a new organism either through a series of compromises or by force of arms, either by binding them to each other as allies or by forcibly subordinating one to the other, the question is whether one has the necessary force, and whether it is ‘productive’ to use it. If the union of two forces is necessary in order to defeat a third, a recourse to arms and coercion (even

supposing that these are available) can be nothing more than a methodological hypothesis; the only concrete possibility is compromise. Force can be employed against enemies, but not against a part of one’s own side which one wishes rapidly to assimilate, and whose ‘good will’ and enthusiasm one needs.

[...]

SPN, 210-11; 167-8 (Q13§23)