

Bordiga versus Pannekoek

Antagonism
2000–2001

Antagonism notes this was written by “an anonymous collective” in 2000–2001. It consists of a bibliography and an introduction to two texts on the relationship between class and party. One text is by Anton Pannekoek of the German–Dutch communist left, the other is by Amadeo Bordiga of the Italian communist left. It was originally posted at <https://www.oocities.org/capitolhill/lobby/3909/bordiga/bvptoc.html>.

Introduction

Party, Class and Communism

2001, over a decade has passed since the fall of the Berlin wall, and the announcement then of the “End of History” seems now to be not just ideological, but beneath contempt. Open warfare returns to Europe, not as an isolated episode, but endemic like an ancient disease grown resistant to modern antibiotics. The global economy veers headlong into recession. Many of the political institutions of international capitalism (G8, IMF, World Bank) are more discredited, and protested against, than ever before. At the same time, the development of capital has not, as many expected, seen the building of ever more and ever larger factories in the oldest capitalist countries, but instead the closure not just of factories, but of whole industries. As a consequence there is a decrease in the percentage of the population who appear as the archetypal workers of Marxist or syndicalist lore. This has led many to regard class as an old-fashioned idea. Talk of a “party” is often regarded as even more irrelevant because of its association with parliamentarism (more and more people quite rightly don’t vote and don’t see why they should) or Leninism (when the Bolshevik legacy of the USSR/Eastern Europe has disintegrated).

Nevertheless, the fundamental division of society into classes remains. Power and wealth are becoming more rather than less concentrated as *capital* under the control of a small minority. And whatever the changes in work patterns, culture and identity, more people than ever before can only survive by exchanging their life for a wage, and are thus subjected to the vagaries of the economy. Although individuals with origins in other classes may also be part of a revolutionary movement, the abolition of capitalism is inconceivable without a movement of the mass of this class of the dispossessed, the *proletariat*, that has a material interest in change. At present, as in most historical periods, only a small minority are actively involved in opposing capitalism on a revolutionary basis. Whether they define themselves as a “movement”, “organisation”, “party”, or even if they reject all formal organisation, the question of how a radicalised minority relates to the rest of the proletariat is a crucial one. It is precisely this issue which Bordiga and Pannekoek address in the following texts.

The two articles presented here, both entitled “Party and Class” were written at different times, and places, and represent two different, and in some ways opposed views of the relationship between communist organisation, consciousness and class. In fact they also present different viewpoints of what class is. These questions have remained important, and controversial. They have been addressed by all radical tendencies in one way or another, at least tangentially. This is the case even for tendencies that reject the concept of the revolutionary party. For example, many class struggle anarchists try to deal with the problem by designating their party “the revolutionary organisation” assuming that by changing the name they exorcise the beast. From then on they can conflate their own organisation with the organisation of the class. The Italian and German communist lefts dealt with these questions directly, but each in their own way.

In 1921 when Bordiga wrote “Party and Class” as a text of the Italian Communist Party, revolutionaries everywhere looked to Russia as the first example of a proletarian revolution. Although both the Italian and the Dutch/German Lefts had already disagreed with the Bolsheviks over “tactics”, and been denounced by Lenin, both tendencies still saw themselves as part of the same movement. By the time Pannekoek wrote his article on the same subject, both the German and Italian lefts had recognised the capitalist nature of “Soviet” Russia. The fact that Bordiga’s “Party and Class” was written in 1921, at his most “Bolshevik”, and Pannekoek’s twenty years later, at his most “councilist” accentuates the dissimilarities of the two tendencies. This makes a comparison of their differences easier, but perhaps obscures some of their underlying convergences.

The work of Bordiga and the Italian left can be regarded, to some extent at least, as representing one pole of a continuing dialectic within the communist movement. Theoretical and organised communism bases its ideas and practice on the real movement of the proletariat in its antagonistic struggle against capital. Theoretical communism is an attempt at a distillation of the lessons learned by proletarian struggle. However, there is a continual contradiction in this endeavour. The learning of lessons from previous struggles tends toward an ever more coherent theory manifesting itself as a principled programme. But adherence to this programme necessarily means maintaining a critical attitude to proletarian struggles. As a result, the principled communists tend to become more and more distanced from the actual struggle of proletarians. “Bordigism”, in some of its manifestations, as a principled movement based on an “invariant” programme is one of the purest examples of this pole.

Pannekoek and the German/Dutch left appear at the opposite pole to this dialectic, as do such movements as “Autonomism”. These tendencies try to keep their theory in touch with the latest struggles of the proletariat, and the changes in the organisation of capital. This can unfortunately lead to a continual revising of political positions (or rather a refusal to hold to any position), or else can lead to an immediatist or spontaneist work-erism.

What is necessary is to go beyond any false opposition of programme versus spontaneity. Communism is both the self-activity of the proletariat and the rigorous theoretical critique that expresses and anticipates it.

Origins of the Lefts

If the German and Italian lefts, in their final incarnations, represent two recurring moments in the class struggle, then the question arises as to why this is the case. After all, both movements originated at the same time, in European states that had undergone revolutionary shocks after WWI. What are the material differences that lead to in some ways different attitudes? The Italian and German Left can be seen as products of the history of the proletarian movement in their respective countries and the social democratic

parties which they issued from.

Both Bordiga and Pannekoek had already fought against “revisionism” (reformism) prior to World War One, and the Dutch radicals had already formed their own party. The crucial difference between the Italian and German socialist parties was their attitude to WWI, and these differences reflected the level of cohesion in their respective societies. Both Germany and Italy had been fairly recently unified as national states. Italy was a relatively weak power with a consequently vacillating foreign policy. This meant that there was a great deal of questioning of the war in Italian society in general. Germany was a far stronger power, with a modern industrial economy and centralised state with a powerful military. Support for the state’s war aims was thus far more pervasive. The leadership of the German SDP supported the war, opposed first of all by only a small radical left, which grew as the war dragged on. After failing to win over the party, the left was forced to split and form their own organisations. Pannekoek’s emphasis on the “spirit” of the class, outlasting particular organisational forms, can be seen to originate here, as can the councilist emphasis on splits. The Italian Socialist Party on the other hand, opposed the war, if in a half-hearted and vacillating way, with only a dissident minority around Mussolini supporting it and leaving to found fascism. The left split organisationally only as they made a principled break between revolutionaries and Maximalists¹ to form their own communist party in 1921. This perhaps is the origin of the Italian Left’s emphasis on organisational continuity and programme. Similarly, it is possible to discern material reasons in their respective histories for their very different attitudes to democracy. Bordiga’s fight against Freemasons within the Italian Socialist Party, who were a democratic element within the party, but in no way Marxists, was the beginning of a fight against democracy as such. On the other hand, Pannekoek’s support for the combatative *rank and file* against the revisionist leaders can be seen as the origin of his spontaneism and democratism.

Pannekoek

Pannekoek was a communist from the Netherlands active in both Dutch and German social democratic parties and later the Communist Party of Holland, and the Group of International Communists. He was influential on the left communist movement, especially in Germany, but also further afield. His work should be seen as a theorisation of the German/Dutch revolutionary proletarian movement, in its strengths and weaknesses, rather than just the product of a single intellectual. His work is an example of a particular, re-occurring tendency in radical movements. This tendency is characterised by such terms as councilism, workerism, “at the point of production”, immediatism and an emphasis on spontaneity. These aspects reappear again and again in different contexts, and in different movements: Workers Autonomy, situationist ideas, the Industrial Workers of the World, some anarchist currents, and in German, Dutch and British left communism.

The First International had declared that “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves...”. This apparently straightforward statement, which almost all modern Marxist tendencies adhere to is actually interpreted in subtly different ways. Are particular groups of workers, or even individual workers, to emancipate themselves, or does the class as an entity emancipate itself? Does every struggle by a group of workers have the possibility of recreating the communist programme, or does the development of class consciousness require wider discussion and experience? The council communists put faith in “the workers themselves” and tended to assume that communism was immanent in all workplace struggles. This belief had a

¹ In Italy at the time, the term Maximalism referred to reformists with revolutionary phraseology. This contrasts with Russia where Maximalism was a revolutionary tendency.

number of important corollaries. It formed the basis of their critique of political groups – what is their positive role if the workers can recreate communist critique in any struggle? It formed the basis of their democratism and self-managementism – as the workers are inherently communist, giving power to the workers was the same as destroying capital. Finally, it underpinned their workerism – if workplace struggles are inherently communist, then everything else can be subordinated to them.

There is a basic tension in the belief that workers become revolutionary spontaneously, purely from their own individual experiences and the fact that this belief itself is held and propagated by a minority of politically active councilists (for example). The conceptions of the councilists developed not spontaneously, but through a confrontation with Marx, Luxemburg, Kautsky, Lenin, through reading, and political discussion, and not just participation in a strike, or strike movement. The tension between spontaneity and conscious minorities has been a continuing problematic for the German left, and has tended to find a resolution in liquidation. The councilists theorise themselves out of existence.

Consciousness develops unevenly; it often develops first of all in minorities and these minorities may play a positive role, “they bring clarity” as Pannekoek puts it. These minorities are the “organs of self-enlightenment of the working-class”. But can such “self-enlightenment” be simply a change in consciousness, as he implies? Surely it is “enlightenment” also about tactics and action. That is the minorities, which form the *material party* (see below) may also lead the class in the sense of defining a course which the most combative elements of the class sees as the best to follow. In this sense the party becomes the “organ of the class” (Bordiga) and any hard distinction between the communist minorities and the mass of the proletariat disappears.

Pannekoek’s “Party and Class”

When Pannekoek states that “The old labour movement is organised into parties” it is clear that he uses the word “party” primarily to refer to formal organisations. He distinguishes the party from the class, and does not have the concept of the “historic” or material party as a product of the class.

According to Pannekoek, “The workers must ... think out and decide for themselves.” But workers, individuals employed in thousands of separate enterprises, think, act and decide individually, or at best sectionally, for the most part. Only when workers begin to combine together as a class for itself, acting in concert, politically, can they start thinking, acting and deciding collectively in a coherent manner that anticipates communism. Under normal circumstances the only agreement they have is that of bourgeois citizenry.

For Pannekoek, “classes are groupings according to economic interests”. But what is the significance of economic interests? Why look to one class, the workers, rather than another, the peasants, say? Or why choose our *class*, rather than our gender, nation, skin colour or eye colour? The important thing is communism, class struggle, the antagonisms in this society which tend toward a resolution in communism. Class defines itself first of all through class struggle, a struggle of the alienated, the proletarians, against alienating forces: capital, its state, the relations of wage labour, isolation, and so forth. Economic interests are a *determining* element but not the *defining* one; the starting point is struggle, practical antagonism. Councilism makes the error of overemphasising the objective conditions, the *class in itself*. Setting out from that starting point it ends up at workerism, democratism and spontaneism. Bordiga, in “Party and Class”, makes the opposite error of overemphasising the subjective condition, the class in struggle, the *class for itself*². This overemphasis on the subjective element results in an *idealistic* slant

² This error was corrected after WWII in the analysis of the proletariat as a class “without reserves”, e.g. in “Marxismo e Miseria”. See below.

to his analysis, and an overemphasis on the political in tactics. Class needs to be grasped in its dialectical unity, of class for itself and class in itself, of its economic conditions as a foundation for its antagonistic position within society. The position of the workers as elements of production is not the defining point for class struggle, and communism, but forms part of its material basis.

Pannekoek points out a mistaken viewpoint of the old workers movement: "During the rise of Social Democracy it seemed that it would gradually embrace the whole working class... because Marxian theory declared that similar interests beget similar viewpoints..." The conception that Pannekoek attacks was indeed wrong. It looked toward all of the class in itself (defined, according to Pannekoek, by economic interests) developing into the class for itself (defined by its struggle against capital) and doing this formally, before actually, that is organisational unity first, unity in revolutionary struggle later. In reality, some whose economic interests lie in communism will remain counter-revolutionary till the end. Pannekoek is correct to see that the working class will be the main source of the movement toward communism. Nevertheless, he still holds to the mechanistic ideal that all workers – or all manual workers – will *en masse* become socialists, which is nonsense. Pannekoek attacks a failed strategy based on this starting point but does not attack the erroneous starting point itself. Society as he says does indeed proceed in "conflicts and contradictions", and that is why revolutionary struggles break out without all workers becoming communist. Here Pannekoek maintains a democratic, sociological, workerist viewpoint, at odds with reality.

Pannekoek assumes that present day parties want to substitute themselves for the class, and in fact, rule over the workers (something which Bordiga opposes). But Pannekoek does allow the possibility of political groupings, "entirely different ... from those of today". He correctly emphasises the necessity for class action, both during the revolution and after it as necessary for defeating the bourgeoisie, and ensuring victory (with or without the formal party). He also alludes to the necessity of mass involvement as a method of development of consciousness. Here he echoes what Marx argued in the *Germany Ideology*:

"Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew."

Self-Management

One element of council communism in general is the demand for "self-management of enterprises" (Pannekoek). This product of the German left's democratic workerism, is one of the weakest elements of this tendency. The council communists saw as their aim that workers take over the factories and run them themselves. It results in a myopic view of revolution, which looks for changes in management, rather than total transformation of society.

Self-management, the running of the enterprise by the workers employed in it, changes only the ownership and management of the enterprise. In capitalist society, where different enterprises operate through market mechanisms as elements of a single social capital, it matters not whether an enterprise is owned privately, or by a joint stock company, or by the state or by its employees. Likewise, whether the management is hierarchical or democratic does not change the enterprise's nature as an element in capitalist

society. Self-management boils down to the proletarians' self-management of their own exploitation. Worse, as a measure that is often introduced in unprofitable, failing companies, by workers trying to prevent closure and their own unemployment, self-management often entails a higher level of exploitation than a normal business. The workers "freely choose" (under pressure from the market) to work harder for less money, in order to keep the enterprise going. Self-management operates therefore as a weapon of capitalist crisis management. The capitalist nature of self-managed enterprises has not only been demonstrated theoretically, but has been shown in the fact that self-management has been taken up by capitalist groups from time to time³.

The problem with self-management was already being grasped by Bordiga in 1920, even if with a statist perspective. "The factory will be conquered by the working class – and not only by the workforce employed in it, which would be too weak and non-communist – only after the working class as a whole has seized political power. Unless it has done so, the Royal Guards, military police, etc. – in other words, the mechanism of force and oppression that the bourgeoisie has at its disposal, its political power apparatus – will see to it that all illusions are dispelled"⁴.

The practical result of the self-management perspective was shown in France in 1968. The movement of occupations started in the universities, which were transformed by the revolutionaries into social spaces (and *not* collective universities). As two participants in the movement describe:

"The escalation had gone as far as the formation of general assemblies of sections of the population inside the occupied universities. The occupants organized their own activities.

"However, the people who 'socialized' the universities did not see the factories as SOCIAL means of production; they did not see that these factories have not been created by the workers employed there, but by generations of working people"⁵.

Those that held this perspective 'supported' the workers, but worried about substituting their own activity for that of the workers. The workers were thus relied on to liberate themselves in isolation, factory by factory:

"By telling themselves that it was 'up to the workers' to take the factories, a 'substitution' did in fact take place, but it was the opposite 'substitution' from the one the anarchists feared. The militants substituted the inaction (or rather the bureaucratic action) of the workers' bureaucracies, which was the only 'action' the workers were willing to take, for their own action"⁶.

"On May 21, the second day of the occupation, the action committee militants found all the gates of the factory closed, and union delegates defended the entrances against 'provocateurs'"⁷.

The 1984–85 UK miners' strike brought the issue of the enterprise and class struggle up again, both practically and theoretically. As Wildcat argued: "Any workplace struggle can fall into the trap of corporatism **as long as it remains just a workplace struggle**. ... In the miners' strike ... the high points were when the whole of the working class in a particular area became involved – e.g. defence of pit villages against the police. 'Territory' includes workplaces and it is often strategically very important to disrupt, seize and/or

³ See "LIP and the Self-Managed Counterrevolution" by Negation, for a lengthy discussion of the politics, and political economy of self-management.

⁴ "Seize Power or Seize the Factory?"

⁵ F. Perlman and F. Gregoire, "Worker-Student Action Committees."

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

destroy them. Workplace occupations, for example, are an important opportunity for undermining the role of the workplace as an 'enterprise' separate from the rest of society – by inviting other proletarians into the site besides those who normally work there, by reappropriating resources such as printing and communications, by giving away useful products stored at the site..."⁸.

The real highpoints of class struggle are where workers *break out* of enterprises and struggle on the terrain of society. Examples include the Paris Commune of 1871, Kronstadt 1921. This stands in stark contrast to the activity of leftists of various types who are always trying *to get into* the factories.

Trade Unions, Factory Organisations and Soviets

The Third International argued that the workers movement had developed from a division into party, trade union, and co-operative into a division "which we are approaching everywhere" of party, soviets, and trade unions. The real movement in fact developed in a different way in the countries where the movement was most advanced, Russia and Germany. The actual form of the movement was a division into party, soviets and factory organisations. The factory organisations took on the form of factory committees in Russia, factory councils in Italy, and *Betriebsraete*, and later *Unionen* in Germany. The distinction between factory organisations on the one hand, and workers' councils on the other was sometimes blurred both in fact and in theory, but was stated most clearly in Bordiga's polemic against Gramsci. Gramsci had thrown himself enthusiastically into support of the factory council movement in Turin, identifying it as the beginning of a movement of soviets. Bordiga underlined the difference between factory councils, based in particular enterprises, and workers' councils, which grouped all proletarians territorially. He correctly saw that factory organisations could not play the same radical role as soviets, that they could not transform the whole of society. Bordiga saw that they had some of the same weaknesses as trade unions, such as sectionalism, and workerism, and so, wrongly, dismissed them as being essentially a new form of union. This dismissal is more understandable in the Italian context where factory councils were only allowed to elect trade union members as delegates. In Germany, where the communists in the factory organisations called for workers to leave the trade unions, such a dismissal would be much harder to make.

The council communists, like Gramsci, tended to confuse factory organisations with workers' councils. In fact at their worst, they adopted an extreme form of workerism that denied the existence of the proletariat outside of the factory. "Only in the factory is the worker of today a real proletarian... Outside the factory he is a petty-bourgeois..."⁹. On the other hand, the post WWI revolutionary movement in Britain called for *social soviets*, partly as a result of rising unemployment which expelled revolutionaries from the workplace. This may have influenced the position held by Sylvia Pankhurst who called for a system of soviets, which would group all proletarians, including those outside the enterprises, such as housewives¹⁰. In contrast to widespread confusion about the soviets, this represented an important recognition that they were *social* and *proletarian*, and not simply *workers* organisations.

Class composition

Soviets and factory organisations appeared at the end of a phase of capital accumulation based on the skilled factory worker and at the beginning of a phase based on the mass

⁸ Wildcat, "Outside and Against the Unions."

⁹ O. Rühle, "From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution."

¹⁰ B. Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst, Sexual Politics and Political Activism*

worker¹¹. Factory organisations tended to represent this sector of the class, the skilled worker. Soviets, or workers' councils, which originated in the Russian peasant commune¹², group proletarians territorially. In potential, they are the self-organisation not just of workers, but of the whole class, including groups that may be partially excluded from the workplace but still involved in struggle, such as (in some circumstances) soldiers, women and students.

At their best, factory organisations were fighting organisations for workers; they fought against the unions, which had become more conservative and been integrated into the state during the First World War. They expressed the development of the class in itself to the class for itself. Soviets were, at least potentially, fighting organisations of the whole class, and formed an alternate power to the bourgeois state. They thus represented the transition of the class for itself to the self-abolition of the proletariat, to a communist humanity.

Bordiga was correct to point out the deficiencies of factory organisations. Starting from the economic they cannot address the totality, or be the organisation of the class as a whole. But after making this valid critique, he dismisses them and fails to see what is positive in them as opposed to trade unions. Among their strengths were the following: the refusal of negotiation (by the Unionen), the breaking down of barriers between different trades, the ditching of the trade unions' reactionary leaders and bureaucracy, and the grouping of revolutionary and combative workers in an organisation with a radical programme. Even if social transformation cannot stop at the factory gates, struggle at the site of exploitation remains central to the subversive power of the proletariat. Factory organisations were formed by radical workers in a revolutionary situation, and represented a radical break with the unions that had been integrated into capital through years of peaceful, piecemeal action.

In Germany the Workers' Councils or *Raete* were dominated by the Social Democrats, the party of counter-revolution, which neutralised these councils, and prepared for the creation of the Weimar Republic. In this situation, the factory organisations provided a basis for revolutionary opposition. There is an irony of history here. The council communist tendency appeared where the workers' councils failed to make a revolution, and the council communists were characteristically organised in the factory organisations. This may account for the council communist confusion of factory organisations with workers' councils.

The formation of soviets in no way ensures the success of the revolution. The fact that soviets operate on the social terrain, rather than just the economic, may mean that they are even more a target of manipulation by political tendencies than are factory organisations (although the latter were far from being immune to such manipulation). In Russia and Germany, the proletariat formed both types of organisations (as well as parties) perhaps because no single organisational form proved adequate.

The opposition soviet/factory-organisation, that appeared in the German and Russian revolutions, has tended to be superseded in certain highpoints of class struggle. This can be seen in the examples of some struggles organised by mass assemblies, for instance in Spain in the period 1976-78. One particular instance of a conflict of this form was the struggle of dockworkers in Gijón, northern Spain between 1983 and 1985. The struggle was organised through an assembly that met in a disused cinema. All those involved in the struggle were involved in the assembly, irrespective of whether they were dockers, or miners or technical students or any old proletarian. Therefore, the assembly

¹¹ S. Bologna, "Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origins of the Worker's Council Movement".

¹² J. Camatte, *Community and Communism in Russia*.

was no longer workplace based, but grouped all the combative proletarians in a violent struggle on the social terrain.

Bordiga

Bordiga was a leading member of the left of the Italian Socialist Party, and for a time the head of the Italian Communist Party. After WWII, and until his death in 1970, he was associated with first with the Internationalist Communist Party and then the International Communist Party¹³. His work was more than the product of an individual but rather was important in expressing the self-conscious revolutionary movement in Italy after WWI.

At the time that "Party and Class" was written, Bordiga regarded the Bolsheviks, and the Third International as real communist parties. He was later to oppose the policy of *Bolshevization*, which ordered a mechanical unity, enforced by the "top executives", preferring an "organic centralism" in which all members were to participate actively. "It would be a fatal error to consider the party as dividable into two groups, one of which is dedicated to the study and the other to action; such a distinction is deadly for the body of the party, as well as for the individual militant"¹⁴. Later still he was to criticise Lenin. Nonetheless, in seeing the ICP, the existing formal party, as the essence of the proletariat as a revolutionary class, he retained elements of a Bolshevik position throughout his life.

But the Bolsheviks in fact were part of the left of the social democratic movement, and took up a revolutionary position only because the democratic route to power favoured by the majority of the Second international was not an option in Tsarist Russia. The Bolsheviks were revolutionary vis-a-vis Russian Autocracy but they retained the organisational and economic programme, that is, capitalist programme, of the Second International. After the October revolution, they quickly took up a counter-revolutionary position, first against the Russian masses and then against the proletariat internationally, including the revolutionary elements in the communist parties. In fact, Bordiga's attitude was more subversive than the Bolsheviks', no matter how much he viewed himself as in accord with Lenin. His idea of the party should not be confused with a pure substitutionist position.

For Bordiga, the party was seen first of all as a part of the class, that is, a *minority* not the whole class. Later on, he emphasised the party as an organ of the class, not simply a part, that is, as not being representative:

"With respect to the nature of the party, we maintain that it is an 'organ' of the working class. To maintain that the party is a 'part' and not an 'organ' indicates a concern to identify the party and the class in a statistical manner, and is symptomatic of an opportunistic deviation. The statistical identification of party and class has always been one of the characteristics of opportunistic workerism"¹⁵.

Bordiga saw class as a movement not a pure statistical fact. Here he follows the attitude of Marx who in asking at the end of the third volume of Capital "What constitutes a class?" rejects "the identity of revenues and sources of revenue" as a criterion. The "infinite fragmentation of interest and rank into which the division of social labour splits labourers as well as capitalists and landlords" would in that case imply an infinite number of classes. Far from being sociological categories, classes are dynamic, aligned against each other. In a central passage of "Party and Class" Bordiga writes:

¹³ See *The Italian Communist Left* for details of the various splits and name changes.

¹⁴ A. Bordiga, "Considerations on the party's organic activity when the general situation is historically unfavourable", 1965.

¹⁵ A. Bordiga, 1926, "*Intervento alla commissione politica per il congresso di Lione*". A slightly different translation of this passage appears in Gramsci, *Political Writings 1921-1926*.

“Instead of taking a snapshot of society at a given moment (like the old metaphysical method) and then studying it in order to distinguish the different categories into which the individuals composing it must be classified, the dialectical method sees history as a film unrolling its successive scenes; the class must be looked for and distinguished in the striking features of this movement. In using the first method we would be the target of a thousand objections from pure statisticians and demographers ... who would re-examine our divisions and remark that there are not two classes, nor even three or four, but that there can be ten, a hundred or even a thousand classes separated by successive gradations and indefinable transition zones. With the second method, though, we make use of quite different criteria in order to distinguish ... the class, and in order to define its characteristics, its actions and its objectives, which become concretised into obviously uniform features among a multitude of changing facts; meanwhile the poor photographer of statistics only records these as a cold series of lifeless data. Therefore, in order to state that a class exists and acts at a given moment in history, it will not be enough to know ... how many merchants there were in Paris under Louis XIV, or the number of English landlords in the Eighteenth Century, or the number of workers in the Belgian manufacturing industry at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. Instead, we will have to submit an entire historical period to our logical investigations; we will have to make out a social, and therefore political, movement which searches for its way through the ups and downs, the errors and successes, all the while obviously adhering to the set of interests of a strata of people who have been placed in a particular situation by the mode of production and by its developments.”

For Bordiga, consciousness appears first of all in small groups of workers. When the mass is thrust into action, these small groups lead the rest. The *material party* is the collection of small leading groups, the radical minorities. The movement that defines a class, also necessitates a party. But that party may exist *materially* but not *formally*. That is the political movement of the class is not necessarily grouped in a particular formal organisation, called a Party, with membership cards, aims and principals, an internal bulletin. The party may exist as a more diffuse movement, perhaps of several groups, all or none of whom may be called parties. Or it may consist of fractions of such groups, or of informal connections amongst individuals who are not members of any group. This aspect of Bordiga's view of the party was later developed by Camatte, in contrast to the organisational fetishism of some of the Italian left groups. It is clear that this standpoint is far removed from Kautsky's and Lenin's that socialist consciousness could only be brought to the workers “from without” by “bourgeois intelligentsia”¹⁶.

Bordiga argued that “the ‘collapse of the socialdemocratic parties of the Second International was by no means the collapse of proletarian parties in general’ but, if we may say so, the failure of organisms that had forgotten they were parties because they had stopped being parties.” That is, the formal party had ceased to be the material party. This phenomenon was to reoccur again with the degeneration of the communist parties.

In most situations, the members of the radical minorities are not all grouped in the same organisations. In the period following the Russian revolution, the different minority groups did in fact tend to cohere into a formal party. The Third International's decree that “in each country there must be only one Communist Party” formally expressed this tendency. However, following the degeneracy of the Russian revolution and the victory of the counter-revolution in Western Europe, this tendency to cohere reversed. The Russian party increasingly favoured the right wings of the various national sections of the International, and sought an accommodation with the capitalist powers, especially through an

¹⁶ See Lenin's *What is to Be Done?*

alliance with the Social Democratic parties. The left of the parties, sometimes the majority of the membership, from then on tended to break away from the CPs to form left communist groupings. The Communist Parties ceased to be revolutionary groupings and became Stalinist, capitalist parties. The material party has a dialectical relationship with the class movement, and cannot continue to exist as a mass organisation outside of a mass movement. Formal parties degenerate as the movement wanes, and the radical minorities have to regroup, as fractions or in separate organisations. In some respects, Bordiga is close to Pannekoek on this issue:

“The proletariat’s organisation – its most important source of strength – must not be confused with the present-day forms of organisations ... *The nature of this organisation is something spiritual – no less than the whole transformation of the proletarian mentality*”¹⁷.

Both echoed the sentiments of Marx at certain points: “The League, like the Society of Friends in Paris and a hundred other associations, was only an episode in the history of the party which grows everywhere spontaneously from the soil of modern society... Under the term ‘party’, I understand party in the great historical sense”¹⁸.

Bordiga described the development of the party thus: it originates dynamically from the activity of the class. Once formed it concentrates the revolutionary consciousness and will of the class. From here on the party leads the class, using other organisations merely as a transmission belt. The progression of this argument sees the party’s relation to the class slipping from dynamic product, to essence, to dominator, in a word to Bolshevism. The dialectical unity between class and party explicit at the origin of argument, gives way in the end to a simple hierarchy and chain of command. Undoubtedly, a centralised disciplined organisation is an essential element at certain points, such as the organisation of an insurrection¹⁹. Bordiga however, goes too far in putting forward the centralised form as the general form of the party. The material party is a product of the class, and can only remain so. The breaking of the two-way interaction between proletariat and party, and its replacement by the party’s monologue, signals the degeneration of the party.

Workers’ Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship

Bordiga points out that the interests of the class are not the same as one sector or trade. Therefore the interests of the class can only be expressed by a grouping of all the radical minorities issuing from all categories. This is the party. The party unites all tendencies of the class, both socially, by grouping different categories, and geographically by grouping different localities.

However, Bordiga does not go into detail as to how this unification may come about. In fact the formation of the class, as a class and also as a party, may involve incoherence, contradictions and conflicts between different sections of proletarians on the basis of pay, skill, work or non-work, sexual division of labour, “race”, and so on. These complex, but vital problems of *political re-composition* of the class have been a major focus of the autonomist Marxist current. The different ways in which sections of the proletariat struggle in their own interests, communicate their experience and fight for their needs within the wider class, as well as against capital, continually challenge the established truths of “revolutionary theory”. The contribution of the various “autonomist” currents is essential, but also problematic, as the willingness to go up against any “orthodoxy” also runs the

¹⁷ Pannekoek, “*Massenaktion und Revolution*”, 1912, in Bricianer, p. 126.

¹⁸ Marx to Freiligrath, 1860.

¹⁹ See for instance, “The Wilhelmshaven Revolt” for an insider account by a council communist of how a naval mutiny was organised in a strictly centralised fashion.

risk of abandoning class terrain completely²⁰. In any case, class unity can only be a product of struggle, and not a problem of statistical representation.

If only a minority of the class is conscious of its position, interests and revolutionary aim and possesses a will to achieve the aim, then the majority of the class does not possess these attributes. The democratic point of view that would put power in the hands of the majority of the class would put power in the hands of those without class consciousness or revolutionary will. But as Marx argued in the *German Ideology*, the “ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”, and the

“ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.”

Therefore a democratic power, even a democratic workers’ power would put power in the hands of capital. Communism rejects workers’ democracy and workers’ power, and supports only its own class movement. The communist minorities, that is, the material party, fights intransigently to realise communism.

Bordiga argued that internal party discipline was an antidote to degeneracy. This attitude was very mistaken as was shown by the degeneracy of both the Bolshevik party and the Italian Communist Party. This error was surprising as Bordiga correctly argued that “revolution is not a form of organisation”. In fact there are no guarantees against degeneracy. If the revolution fails, then mass organisations (party, council, factory organisation) cannot co-exist indefinitely with capital without accommodating to it and eventually being absorbed. For a formal party the choice is betrayal, diminution to an insignificant sect, or dissolution. No amount of internal discipline can avoid this. The forging of a disciplined centralised party, far from preventing the party from going over to the counter-revolution, in fact merely provided the counter-revolution with a disciplined centralised party.

Bordiga denounced syndicalist (and councilist) faith in economic organisations as democratic. He also pointed out that decentralisation of the economy was bourgeois (because separate *enterprises* are a specifically capitalist form). Organisation of workers in unions is accepted by the both democratic and fascist bourgeoisie, and both in theory and in practice.

Opposed to the overemphasis on economic struggle, Bordiga lays stress instead on the political act of the revolution, the destruction of the bourgeois state and its replacement by the dictatorship of the proletariat, which he identifies as a form of state. But communism has a critique of politics, both practical and theoretical. Marx:

“The more developed and the more comprehensive is the political understanding of a nation, the more the proletariat will squander its energies – at least in the initial stages of the movement – in senseless, futile uprisings that will be drowned in blood. Because it thinks in political terms, it regards the will as the cause of all evils and force and the overthrow of a particular form of the state as the universal remedy. Proof: the first outbreaks of the French proletariat. The workers in Lyons imagined their goals were entirely political, they saw themselves purely as soldiers of the republic, while in reality they were the soldiers of socialism. Thus their political understanding obscured the roots of their social misery, it falsified their insight into their

²⁰ The tendency associated with the journal *Race Traitor* have carried out some important work. See *How the Irish Became White*, Ignatiev. Another interesting tendency is Wages for Housework, and especially the writings of S. James and Dalla Costa. These have similar strengths, in looking long and hard at the conflicts within the proletariat, but similar weaknesses in tending to over-emphasise their own special interest group.

real goal, their political understanding deceived their social instincts”²¹.

The communist critique of politics itself derives from the real situation of the proletariat:

“the community from which the workers is isolated is a community of quite different reality and scope than the political community. ... The community from which his own labour separates him is life itself, physical and spiritual life, human morality, human activity, human enjoyment, human nature”²².

It is precisely Bordiga’s overemphasis on the political which results in a lack of interest in ongoing class struggles, and results, for example in a failure to adequately critique the trade unions. Bordiga saw revolution in the first instance as the transfer of state power from the bourgeoisie to the party. Any real social transformation was to begin only after this point. In contrast, the German–Dutch left sought a transfer of power within the factories from the bosses to the workers, neglecting the question of the state. Each of the communist lefts saw only half the picture. Neither state power nor workers control is a real foundation for social transformation. Revolution is the communisation of society, the development of class struggle through the re–appropriation of the whole of society, a dis–alienation in which the centralised political assault on the state is only one act, even if a decisive one. The proletariat aims neither to become the ruler of the state (rejecting a statist interpretation of “dictatorship of the proletariat”) nor ruler of the enterprise (rejecting self–management), but abolishes its own conditions of existence and so itself as a class.

Marx on Class

The Italian and German lefts, in the texts presented here each seem to have taken up only *one side* of the dialectical view of the proletariat analysed by Marx: “The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself”²³. The class, defined by common interests, exists as an *object*, as a factor of capital, but also with separate interests from, and against, capital. That is, the proletariat is (potentially) opposed to *capital* rather than specifically the bourgeoisie. This was important in the analysis of the Soviet Union, a society with capital, but without a (local) bourgeoisie as such. As Bordiga argued, “we are concerned about the extremely developed form of *capital*, not the *capitalist*. This director does not need fixed people”²⁴. Marx continues: “In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself.” Only in class struggle does the proletariat constitute itself as a *subject*, as an historical actor, only then does it really exist as an active factor of social development. The distinction between *class in itself* and *class for itself* is analogous to that made by the Italian autonomists in their analysis of *labour power* (factor of production) and *working class* (political composition). The French “ultra–left” made a similar distinction between *working class* (this time as factor of capital) and *proletariat* (as revolutionary subject). These different terminologies are obviously incompatible, but the real tendency of the proletariat is nonetheless recognised in each case.

The class is defined objectively as those separated from the means of procuring the necessities of life, and who have no choice but to repeatedly sell their life–activity in order to obtain them. “Labour–power finds itself in a state of separation from its means of production (including the means of subsistence as means of production of the

²¹ Marx, “Critical Notes on the Article ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian’”.

²² *ibid*

²³ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

²⁴ Bordiga, “Doctrine of the Body Possessed by the Devil”.

labour–power itself), and because this separation can be overcome only by the sale of the labour–power to the owner of the means of production”²⁵.

Bordiga summarised this condition with the phrase “without–reserves” to indicate the reproduction of the proletariat, and the cyclical, dynamic reproduction of poverty. The workers receive a wage, perhaps a high wage, but as soon as this wage is spent, they are back in the initial condition of having no way of living except through the sale of their life activity:

“With its primitive accumulation, capitalism empties everyone’s purses, houses, fields, and shops, and turns everyone into paupers, destitute, without–reserves, propertyless, in growing numbers. It reduces them to being, within Marx’s meaning, ‘wage slaves’. Poverty [*miseria*] grows and wealth concentrates, because there is a disproportionate increase in the absolute and relative number of property–less proletarians who must every day eat what every day they earn. The economic phenomenon is not altered if some day the wages of some of them, in certain trades, in certain countries, allow them the brothel, the cinema and, joy of joys, a subscription to *Unità*²⁶. The proletariat is not poorer if wages fall, as it is not wealthier if wages increase and prices go down. It is not wealthier when it works than when it is unemployed. Whoever has fallen into the class of wage workers [*salariaia*] is poor in an absolute way”²⁷.

This understanding of wealth and poverty as being something other than purely the level of consumption is suggestive of the situationist analysis of the “new poverty” existing among proletarians in modern societies alongside the refrigerators, colour TVs and package holidays.

Marx argued in the “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction”, that “the proletariat ... is ... formed ...from the mass of people issuing from society’s acute disintegration and in particular from the ranks of the middle class”. This identification of the middle class origin of the proletariat ties in with comments in the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” on the workers’ alienation from the product of their labour:

“...man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself created. In tearing away the object of his production from man, estranged labour therefore tears away from him his species–life...”

This idea that workers create themselves in the creation of their product is almost incomprehensible in really modern industry. Most workers hardly see the product they collectively produce. Where they are really directly involved in its production, then the division of labour is so acute, that they have no room to assert their individuality in the productive process. This was not true in Marx’s day. At this time, petty–bourgeois producers were being collected together to produce as proletarians for a single capitalist in manufacturing. Or else petit–bourgeois or manufacturing workers were being collected together in the new social institution of the factory. These new proletarians, issuing from the disintegration of middle–class society, would really have directly felt the alienation of the product of their labour, which previously they themselves would have owned, but which now was possessed by the capitalist. From this can be seen the importance of alienation, ahead of simple impoverishment in Marx’s theory. Alienation is still the crucial pre–condition for the proletariat, but today takes on yet more acute forms. Nowadays, the worker is alienated from their product to the degree that they hardly recognise it as their own product.

²⁵ Marx, *Capital*, volume II, chapter 1.

²⁶ The Communist Party daily paper.

²⁷ Bordiga, “*Marxismo e Miseria*”.

The process of producing yourself through your product is itself an almost alien concept. It belongs to another world.

Into the 21st Century

In discussing articles written in the 1920's or the 1940's, however important, and however emblematic of the real class movements of the time, particular limitations are set. Certainly, it is possible to look at differing tendencies and attempt to go beyond them in some way, but it cannot be ignored that they are expressions of a time now past. Capitalist society has developed enormously in the decades since the German and Italian Lefts analysed it, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Many differences could be pointed out, in respect to war, television, means of transport, the development of social democracy, the history of the "Soviet" Union, the end of colonialism. One important feature of the last couple of decades that is particularly relevant here is the development of the "new economy" of lean production, of flexibilisation, with its increase in temporary and contract labour, and general decrease in job security. These changes have been introduced by capital as way of optimising exploitation of labour in the short term.

These changes in the organisation of labour, together with other social, cultural and political changes, have as a corollary a decline in the self-identification of the worker with their work, a decline of a producer consciousness. Nowadays, at least in countries such as the US and the UK, it has become less common for people to identify themselves as a "factory worker" or a "printer" or even a "worker". Workers have less of a tendency to find meaning in their particular trade or particular industry. Instead, more than ever before, workers see work merely as a means to an end. Casualisation was promoted by capital as a way of weakening its "responsibilities" to workers, but it has also had the result that workers are far less likely to identify, however critically, with "their" boss, or "their" job. In this manner, capital has already started to dissolve part of what was meant by the term "working class" or even "proletariat" (if that is meant in a partly sociological sense). If that is the case, then what of "Party and Class", what of "the Dictatorship of the Proletariat"?

Communism always aimed at the abolition of all classes, through the proletariat's abolition of itself. Capitalism, as it has universalised itself, has always tended to dissolve classes (the petit bourgeoisie, the peasantry, the aristocracy, etc.). This dissolution of classes, in the sociological sense, has continued leaving us not with working class and bourgeoisie but with an ever growing proletariat and an increasingly proletarianised humanity facing capital and its functionaries (CEO's, directors, high-up state officials and so on), who as individuals are more and more disposable. Any attempt to resurrect a working class identity, a pride in the values of work, of the positive side of labour, is conservative, and anti-communist. Communism has always been the movement of those who are nothing and must be everything, of the alienated who can only liberate themselves by liberating the whole of society.

Concluding remarks

Bordiga and Pannekoek theorised the highest points of the proletarian movements in Italy and Germany respectively. Bordiga's tactical failings, (e.g. on the question of unions), like his strengths (such as the critique of democracy), are a product of the proletarian movement. The incompleteness of the Italian Left's critique, and its need for modification by the theses of the Dutch German Left, are a consequence of the national basis of its experience, and of the particular form that the class struggle took in Italy. Similarly, the texts of Pannekoek who analysed the movement in Germany, and was a major theorist of the KAPD, should not be treated as the ideas of an individual but as an expression of the movement of the German and Dutch working class. For all the ICP's internationalism,

they did not go through the same class struggles as those of the German movement, and so did not generate the same theorisation, especially in respect of unions. These tactical inadequacies in fact verifies elements of Bordiga's theory of the party. The party needs to group proletarians from all sections of the class and synthesise all radical tendencies in the class. The *national* basis of the ICP, and of the KAPD, is the cause of the particularity of their theory, including the limitations.

An examination of these two tendencies, amongst the most radical of the twentieth century, points beyond their respective limitations. Communism is neither "the power of the workers' councils" nor the dictatorship of the vanguard party, nor is it reliant on any other predetermined organisational form. Communism is neither the "self-activity of the workers" nor the "programme", but specifically a proletarian self-activity that re-appropriates or recreates the communist programme. What is important is not the form of organisation, but what exactly is being organised; the essential is *communisation*, humanity's collective re-appropriation and transformation of the whole of life now alienated through capital. But the issues discussed here, organisation (party, union, soviet), consciousness, class, cannot be solved at the theoretical level. It is possible to learn from the theory developed by previous class movements, but only a future movement can resolve or supersede the dilemmas that Pannekoek and Bordiga pose. "Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from premises now in existence"²⁸. The rejection of existing struggles in favour of purity of principal is a rejection of communism, of revolution. "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes"²⁹. Revolution is not the emergence into the real world of the utopias that live now only in literature or in people's heads. It is not the manifestation of some absolute principal or principals. Communism is the creation of humanity, a creation that is already underway, unfolding before our eyes. The proletariat does not simply "learn" from the struggles it makes. These struggles, rooted in necessity, are themselves an essential element of the communist movement, the transformation both of society and of consciousness. Pannekoek and Bordiga, despite their weaknesses, despite the change in circumstances in the years since these texts were written, remain important precisely because they were able to express the real movements of their time.

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Party and Class – Bordiga

From "Partito e classe", *Rassegna Comunista* no 2, April 15, 1921

The Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution approved by the Second Congress of the Communist International are genuinely and deeply rooted in the Marxist doctrine. These theses take the definition of the relations between party and class as a starting point and establish that the class party can include in its ranks only a part of the class itself, never the whole nor even perhaps the majority of it. This obvious truth would have been better emphasised if it had been pointed out that one cannot even speak of a class unless a minority of this class tending to organise itself into a political party has come into existence. What in fact is a social class according to our critical method? Can we possibly recognise it by the means of a purely objective external acknowledgement of the common economic and social conditions of a great number of individuals, and of their analogous positions in relationship to the productive process? That would not be enough. Our method does not amount to a mere description of the social structure as it exists at a given moment, nor does it merely draw an abstract line dividing all the individuals composing society into two groups, as is done in the scholastic classifications of the naturalists. The Marxist critique sees human society in its movement, in its development in time; it utilises a fundamentally historical and dialectical criterion, that is to say, it studies the connection of events in their reciprocal interaction. Instead of taking a snapshot of society at a given moment (like the old metaphysical method) and then studying it in order to distinguish the different categories into which the individuals composing it must be classified, the dialectical method sees history as a film unrolling its successive scenes; the class must be looked for and distinguished in the striking features of this movement. In using the first method we would be the target of a thousand objections from pure statisticians and demographers (short-sighted people if there ever were) who would re-examine our divisions and remark that there are not two classes, nor even three or four, but that there can be ten, a hundred or even a thousand classes separated by successive gradations and indefinable transition zones. With the second method, though, we make use of quite different criteria in order to distinguish that protagonist of historical tragedy, the class, and in order to define its characteristics, its actions and its objectives, which become concretised into obviously uniform features among a multitude of changing facts; meanwhile the poor photographer of statistics only records these as a cold series of lifeless data. Therefore, in order to state that a class exists and acts at a given moment in history, it will not be enough to know, for instance, how many merchants there were in Paris under Louis XIV, or the number of English landlords in the Eighteenth Century, or the number of workers in the Belgian manufacturing industry at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. Instead, we will have to submit an entire historical period to our logical investigations; we will have to make out a social, and therefore political, movement which searches for its way through the ups and downs, the errors and successes, all the while obviously adhering to the set of interests of a strata of people who have been placed in a particular situation by the mode of production and by its developments. It is this method of analysis that Frederick Engels used in one of his first classical essays, where he drew the explanation of a series of political movements

from the history of the English working class, and thus demonstrated the existence of a class struggle. This dialectical concept of the class allows us to overcome the statistician's pale objections. He does not have the right any longer to view the opposed classes as being clearly divided on the scene of history as are the different choral groups on a theatre scene. He cannot refute our conclusions by arguing that in the contact zone there are undefinable strata through which an osmosis of individuals takes place, because this fact does not alter the historical physiognomy of the classes facing one another.

Therefore the concept of class must not suggest to us a static image, but instead a dynamic one. When we detect a social tendency, or a movement oriented towards a given end, then we can recognise the existence of a class in the true sense of the word. But then the class party exists in a material if not yet in a formal way. A party lives when there is the existence of a doctrine and a method of action. A party is a school of political thought and consequently an organisation of struggle. The first characteristic is a fact of consciousness, the second is a fact of will, or more precisely of a striving towards a final end. Without those two characteristics, we do not yet have the definition of a class. As we have already said, he who coldly records facts may find affinities in the living conditions of more or less large strata, but no mark is engraved in history's development. It is only within the class party that we can find these two characteristics condensed and concretised. The class forms itself as certain conditions and relationships brought about by the consolidation of new systems of production are developed – for instance the establishment of big factories hiring and training a large labour force; in the same way, the interests of such a collectivity gradually begin to materialise into a more precise consciousness, which begins to take shape in small groups of this collectivity. When the mass is thrust into action, only these first groups can foresee a final end, and it is they who support and lead the rest. When referring to the modern proletarian class, we must conceive of this process not in relationship to a trade category but to the class as a whole. It can then be realised how a more precise consciousness of the identity of interests gradually makes its appearance; this consciousness, however, results from such a complexity of experiences and ideas, that it can be found only in limited groups composed of elements selected from every category. Indeed only an advanced minority can have the clear vision of a collective action which is directed towards general ends that concern the whole class and which has at its core the project of changing the whole social regime. Those groups, those minorities, are nothing other than the party. When its formation (which of course never proceeds without arrests, crises and internal conflicts) has reached a certain stage, then we may say that we have a class in action. Although the party includes only a part of the class, only it can give the class its unity of action and movement, for it amalgamates those elements, beyond the limits of categories and localities, which are sensitive to the class and represent it. This casts a light on the meaning of this basic fact: the party is only a part of the class. He who considers a static and abstract image of society, and sees the class as a zone with a small nucleus, the party, within it, might easily be led to the following conclusion: since the whole section of the class remaining outside the party is almost always the majority, it might have a greater weight and a greater right. However if it is only remembered that the individuals in that great remaining mass have neither class consciousness nor class will yet and live for their own selfish ends, or for their trade, their village, their nation, then it will be realised that in order to secure the action of the class as a whole in the historical movement, it is necessary to have an organ which inspires, unites and heads it – in short which officers it; it will then be realised that the party actually is the nucleus without which there would be no reason to consider the whole remaining mass as a mobilisation of forces. The class presupposes the party, because to exist and to act in history it must possess a

critical doctrine of history and an aim to attain in it.

In the only true revolutionary conception, the direction of class action is delegated to the party. Doctrinal analysis, together with a number of historical experiences, allow us to easily reduce to petty bourgeois and anti-revolutionary ideologies, any tendency to deny the necessity and the predominance of the party's function. If this denial is based on a democratic point of view, it must be subjected to the same criticism that Marxism uses to disprove the favourite theorems of bourgeois liberalism. It is sufficient to recall that, if the consciousness of human beings is the result, not the cause of the characteristics of the surroundings in which they are compelled to live and act, then never as a rule will the exploited, the starved and the underfed be able to convince themselves of the necessity of overthrowing the well-fed satiated exploiter laden with every resource and capacity. This can only be the exception. Bourgeois electoral democracy seeks the consultation of the masses, for it knows that the response of the majority will always be favourable to the privileged class and will readily delegate to that class the right to govern and to perpetuate exploitation. It is not the addition or subtraction of the small minority of bourgeois voters that will alter the relationship. The bourgeoisie governs with the majority, not only of all the citizens, but also of the workers taken alone. Therefore if the party called on the whole proletarian mass to judge the actions and initiatives of which the party alone has the responsibility, it would tie itself to a verdict that would almost certainly be favourable to the bourgeoisie. That verdict would always be less enlightened, less advanced, less revolutionary, and above all less dictated by a consciousness of the really collective interest of the workers and of the final result of the revolutionary struggle, than the advice coming from the ranks of the organised party alone. The concept of the proletariat's right to command its own class action is only an abstraction devoid of any Marxist sense. It conceals a desire to lead the revolutionary party to enlarge itself by including less mature strata, since as this progressively occurs, the resulting decisions get nearer and nearer to the bourgeois and conservative conceptions. If we looked for evidence not only through theoretical enquiry, but also in the experiences history has given us, our harvest would be abundant. Let us remember that it is a typical bourgeois cliché to oppose the good "common sense" of the masses to the "evil" of a "minority of agitators", and to pretend to be most favourably disposed towards the exploited's interests. The right-wing currents of the workers' movement, the social-democratic school, whose reactionary tenets have been clearly shown by history, constantly oppose the masses to the party and pretend to be able to find the will of the class by consulting on a scale wider than the limited bounds of the party. When they cannot extend the party beyond all limits of doctrine and discipline in action, they try to establish that its main organs must not be those appointed by a limited number of militant members, but must be those which have been appointed for parliamentary duties by a larger body – actually, parliamentary groups always belong to the extreme right wing of the parties from which they come. The degeneration of the social-democratic parties of the Second International and the fact that they apparently became less revolutionary than the unorganised masses, are due to the fact that they gradually lost their specific party character precisely through workerist and "labourist" practices. That is, they no longer acted as the vanguard preceding the class but as its mechanical expression in an electoral and corporative system, where equal importance and influence is given to the strata that are the least conscious and the most dependent on egotistical claims of the proletarian class itself. As a reaction to this epidemic, even before the war, there developed a tendency, particularly in Italy, advocating internal party discipline, rejecting new recruits who were not yet welded to our revolutionary doctrine, opposing the autonomy of parliamentary groups and local organs, and recommending that the party should be purged of its false elements. This method has proved to be the real antidote for reformism, and forms the basis of the doctrine and practice of the Third

International, which puts primary importance on the role of the party – that is a centralised, disciplined party with a clear orientation on the problems of principles and tactics. The same Third International judged that the “collapse of the socialdemocratic parties of the Second International was by no means the collapse of proletarian parties in general” but, if we may say so, the failure of organisms that had forgotten they were parties because they had stopped being parties.

There is also a different category of objection to the communist concept of the party's role. These objections are linked to another form of critical and tactical reaction to the reformist degeneracy: they belong to the syndicalist school, which sees the class in the economic trade unions and pretends that these are the organs capable of leading the class in revolution. Following the classical period of the French, Italian and American syndicalism, these apparently left-wing objections found new formulations in tendencies which are on the margins of the Third International. These too can be easily reduced to semi-bourgeois ideologies by a critique of their principles as well as by acknowledging the historical results they led to. These tendencies would like to recognise the class within an organisation of its own – certainly a characteristic and a most important one – that is, the craft or trade unions which arise before the political party, gather much larger masses and therefore better correspond to the whole of the working class. From an abstract point of view, however, the choice of such a criterion reveals an unconscious respect for that selfsame democratic lie which the bourgeoisie relies on to secure its power by the means of inviting the majority of the people to choose their government. In other theoretical viewpoints, such a method meets with bourgeois conceptions when it entrusts the trade unions with the organisation of the new society and demands the autonomy and decentralisation of the productive functions, just as reactionary economists do. But our present purpose is not to draw out a complete critical analysis of the syndicalist doctrines. It is sufficient to remark, considering the result of historical experience, that the extreme right wing members of the proletarian movement have always advocated the same point of view, that is, the representation of the working class by trade unions; indeed they know that by doing so, they soften and diminish the movement's character, for the simple reasons that we have already mentioned. Today the bourgeoisie itself shows a sympathy and an inclination, which are by no means illogical, towards the unionisation of the working class. Indeed, the more intelligent sections of the bourgeoisie would readily accept a reform of the state and representative apparatus in order to give a larger place to the “apolitical” unions and even to their claims to exercise control over the system of production. The bourgeoisie feels that, as long as the proletariat's action can be limited to the immediate economic demands that are raised trade by trade, it helps to safeguard the status-quo and to avoid the formation of the perilous “political” consciousness – that is, the only consciousness which is revolutionary for it aims at the enemy's vulnerable point, the possession of power. Past and present syndicalists, however, have always been conscious of the fact that most trade unions are controlled by right wing elements and that the dictatorship of the petty bourgeois leaders over the masses is based on the union bureaucracy even more than on the electoral mechanism of the social-democratic pseudo-parties. Therefore the syndicalists, along with very numerous elements who were merely acting in reaction to the reformist practice, devoted themselves to the study of new forms of union organisation and created new unions independent from the traditional ones. Such an expedient was theoretically wrong for it did not go beyond the fundamental criterion of the economic organisation: that is, the automatic admission of all those who are placed in given conditions by the part they play in production, without demanding special political convictions or special pledges of actions which may require even the sacrifice of their lives. Moreover, in looking for the “producer” it could not go beyond the limits of the “trade”, whereas the class party, by considering the

“proletarian” in the vast range of his conditions and activities, is alone able to awaken the revolutionary spirit of the class. Therefore, that remedy which was wrong theoretically also proved inefficient in actuality. In spite of everything, such recipes are constantly being sought for even today. A totally wrong interpretation of Marxist determinism and a limited conception of the part played by facts of consciousness and will in the formation, under the original influence of economic factors, of the revolutionary forces, lead a great number of people to look for a “mechanical” system of organisation that would almost automatically organise the masses according to each individual’s part in production. According to these illusions, such a device by itself would be enough to make the mass ready to move towards revolution with the maximum revolutionary efficiency. Thus the illusory solution reappears, which consists of thinking that the everyday satisfaction of economic needs can be reconciled with the final result of the overthrow of the social system by relying on an organisational form to solve the old antithesis between limited and gradual conquests and the maximum revolutionary program. But – as was rightly said in one of the resolutions of the majority of the German Communist Party at a time when these questions (which later provoked the secession of the KAPD) were particularly acute in Germany – revolution is not a question of the form of organisation. Revolution requires an organisation of active and positive forces united by a doctrine and a final aim. Important strata and innumerable individuals will remain outside this organisation even though they materially belong to the class in whose interest the revolution will triumph. But the class lives, struggles, progresses and wins thanks to the action of the forces it has engendered from its womb in the pains of history. The class originates from an immediate homogeneity of economic conditions which appear to us as the primary motive force of the tendency to destroy and go beyond the present mode of production. But in order to assume this great task, the class must have its own thought, its own critical method, its own will bent on the precise ends defined by research and criticism, and its own organisation of struggle channelling and utilising with the utmost efficiency its collective efforts and sacrifices. All this constitutes the Party.

Party and Class – Pannekoek

The old labour movement is organized in parties. The belief in parties is the main reason for the impotence of the working class; therefore we avoid forming a new party – not because we are too few, but because a party is an organization that aims to lead and control the working class. In opposition to this, we maintain that the working class can rise to victory only when it independently attacks its problems and decides its own fate. The workers should not blindly accept the slogans of others, nor of our own groups but must think, act, and decide for themselves. This conception is on sharp contradiction to the tradition of the party as the most important means of educating the proletariat. Therefore many, though repudiating the Socialist and Communist parties, resist and oppose us. This is partly due to their traditional concepts; after viewing the class struggle as a struggle of parties, it becomes difficult to consider it as purely the struggle of the working class, as a class struggle. But partly this concept is based on the idea that the party nevertheless plays an essential and important part in the struggle of the proletariat. Let us investigate this latter idea more closely.

Essentially the party is a grouping according to views, conceptions; the classes are groupings according to economic interests. Class membership is determined by one’s part in the process of production; party membership is the joining of persons who agree in their conceptions of the social problems. Formerly it was thought that this contradiction would disappear in the class party, the “workers” party. During the rise of Social Democracy it seemed that it would gradually embrace the whole working class, partly as members, partly as supporters. Because Marxian theory declared that similar interests beget

similar viewpoints and aims, the contradiction between party and class was expected gradually to disappear. History proved otherwise. Social Democracy remained a minority, other working class groups organized against it, sections split away from it, and its own character changed. Its own program was revised or reinterpreted. The evolution of society does not proceed along a smooth, even line, but in conflicts and contradictions.

With the intensification of the workers' struggle, the might of the enemy also increases and besets the workers with renewed doubts and fears as to which road is best. And every doubt brings on splits, contradictions, and fractional battles within the labour movement. It is futile to bewail these conflicts and splits as harmful in dividing and weakening the working class. The working class is not weak because it is split up – it is split up because it is weak. Because the enemy is powerful and the old methods of warfare prove unavailing, the working class must seek new methods. Its task will not become clear as the result of enlightenment from above; it must discover its tasks through hard work, through thought and conflict of opinions. It must find its own way; therefore, the internal struggle. It must relinquish old ideas and illusions and adopt new ones, and because this is difficult, therefore the magnitude and severity of the splits.

Nor can we delude ourselves into believing that this period of party and ideological strife is only temporary and will make way to renewed harmony. True, in the course of the class struggle there are occasions when all forces unite in a great achievable objective and the revolution is carried on with the might of a united working class. But after that, as after every victory, come differences on the question: what next? And even if the working class is victorious, it is always confronted by the most difficult task of subduing the enemy further, of reorganizing production, creating new order. It is impossible that all workers, all strata and groups, with their often still diverse interests should, at this stage, agree on all matters and be ready for united and decisive further action. They will find the true course only after the sharpest controversies and conflicts and only thus achieve clarity.

If, in this situation, persons with the same fundamental conceptions unite for the discussion of practical steps and seek clarification through discussions and propagandise their conclusions, such groups might be called parties, but they would be parties in an entirely different sense from those of today. Action, the actual class struggle, is the task of the working masses themselves, in their entirety, in their real groupings as factory and millhands, or other productive groups, because history and economy have placed them in the position where they must and can fight the working class struggle. It would be insane if the supporters of one party were to go on strike while those of another continue to work. But both tendencies will defend their positions on strike or no strike in the factory meetings, thus affording an opportunity to arrive at a well founded decision. The struggle is so great, the enemy so powerful that only the masses as a whole can achieve a victory – the result of the material and moral power of action, unity and enthusiasm, but also the result of the mental force of thought, of clarity. In this lies the great importance of such parties or groups based on opinions: that they bring clarity in their conflicts, discussions and propaganda. They are the organs of the self-enlightenment of the working class by means of which the workers find their way to freedom.

Of course such parties are not static and unchangeable. Every new situation, every new problem will find minds diverging and uniting in new groups with new programs. They have a fluctuating character and constantly readjust themselves to new situations.

Compared to such groups, the present workers' parties have an entirely different character, for they have a different objective: they want to seize power for themselves. They aim not at being an aid to the working class in its struggle for emancipation but to rule it themselves and proclaim that this constitutes the emancipation of the proletariat. The Social-Democracy which arose in the era of parliamentarism conceived of this rule

as a parliamentary government. The Communist Party carried the idea of party rule through to its fullest extreme in the party dictatorship.

Such parties, in distinction to the groups described above, must be rigid structures with clear lines of demarcation through membership cards, statutes, party discipline and admission and expulsion procedures. For they are instruments of power – they fight for power, bridle their members by force and constantly seek to extend the scope of their power. It is not their task to develop the initiative of the workers; rather do they aim at training loyal and unquestioning members of their faith. While the working class in its struggle for power and victory needs unlimited intellectual freedom, the party rule must suppress all opinions except its own. In “democratic” parties, the suppression is veiled; in the dictatorship parties, it is open, brutal suppression.

Many workers already realize that the rule of the Socialist or Communist party will be only the concealed form of the rule of the bourgeois class in which the exploitation and suppression of the working class remains. Instead of these parties, they urge the formation of a “revolutionary party” that will really aim at the rule of the workers and the realization of communism. Not a party in the new sense as described above, but a party like those of today, that fight for power as the “vanguard” of the class, as the organization of conscious, revolutionary minorities, that seize power in order to use it for the emancipation of the class.

We claim that there is an internal contradiction in the term: “revolutionary party.” Such a party cannot be revolutionary. It is no more revolutionary than were the creators of the Third Reich. When we speak of revolution, we speak of the proletarian revolution, the seizure of power by the working class itself.

The “revolutionary party” is based on the idea that the working class needs a new group of leaders who vanquish the bourgeoisie for the workers and construct a new government – (note that the working class is not yet considered fit to reorganize and regulate production.) But is not this as it should be? As the working class does not seem capable of revolution, is it not necessary that the revolutionary vanguard, the party, make the revolution for it? And is this not true as long as the masses willingly endure capitalism?

Against this, we raise the question: what force can such a party raise for the revolution? How is it able to defeat the capitalist class? Only if the masses stand behind it. Only if the masses rise and through mass attacks, mass struggle, and mass strikes, overthrow the old regime. Without the action of the masses, there can be no revolution.

Two things can follow. The masses remain in action: they do not go home and leave the government to the new party. They organize their power in factory and workshop and prepare for further conflict in order to defeat capital; through the workers’ councils they establish a form union to take over the complete direction of all society – in other words, they prove, they are not as incapable of revolution as it seemed. Of necessity then, conflict will arise with the party which itself wants to take control and which sees only disorder and anarchy in the self-action of the working class. Possibly the workers will develop their movement and sweep out the party. Or, the party, with the help of bourgeois elements defeats the workers. In either case, the party is an obstacle to the revolution because it wants to be more than a means of propaganda and enlightenment; because it feels itself called upon to lead and rule as a party.

On the other hand the masses may follow the party faith and leave it to the full direction of affairs. They follow the slogans from above, have confidence in the new government (as in Germany and Russia) that is to realize communism – and go back home and to work. Immediately the bourgeoisie exerts its whole class power the roots of which are unbroken; its financial forces, its great intellectual resources, and its economic power in

factories and great enterprises. Against this the government party is too weak. Only through moderation, concessions and yielding can it maintain that it is insanity for the workers to try to force impossible demands. Thus the party deprived of class power becomes the instrument for maintaining bourgeois power.

We said before that the term “revolutionary party” was contradictory from a proletarian point of view. We can state it otherwise: in the term “revolutionary party,” “revolutionary” always means a bourgeois revolution. Always, when the masses overthrow a government and then allow a new party to take power, we have a bourgeois revolution – the substitution of a ruling caste by a new ruling caste. It was so in Paris in 1830 when the finance bourgeoisie supplanted the landed proprietors, in 1848 when the industrial bourgeoisie took over the reins.

In the Russian revolution the party bureaucracy came to power as the ruling caste. But in Western Europe and America the bourgeoisie is much more powerfully entrenched in plants and banks, so that a party bureaucracy cannot push them aside as easily. The bourgeoisie in these countries can be vanquished only by repeated and united action of the masses in which they seize the mills and factories and build up their council organizations.

Those who speak of “revolutionary parties” draw incomplete, limited conclusions from history. When the Socialist and Communist parties became organs of bourgeois rule for the perpetuation of exploitation, these well-meaning people merely concluded that they would have to do better. They cannot realize that the failure of these parties is due to the fundamental conflict between the self-emancipation of the working class through its own power and the pacifying of the revolution through a new sympathetic ruling clique. They think they are the revolutionary vanguard because they see the masses indifferent and inactive. But the masses are inactive only because they cannot yet comprehend the course of the struggle and the unity of class interests, although they instinctively sense the great power of the enemy and the immenseness of their task. Once conditions force them into action they will attack the task of self-organization and the conquest of the economic power of capital.

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