

# The Irrational in the World of the Superstructure

---

Originally published: *Prometeo*, no. 19-20, first quarter 1973.

English translation: in [Bordiga Beyond the Myth](#), 2016, pp. 86-91.

Transcription/Markup: [Micah Muer](#), 2019.

---

How far can a misuse of language deform the thinking that reflects Marxist ideas and methodology? In assessing the role of irrationality in history, this is what happens when we question what is rational in human thought and action and, conversely, what is irrational. It is an ever present factor which sometimes dominates in the guise of a false appearance of rationality.

We are thus faced with a psychological, social and political problem which, to our knowledge, has not been given the importance it deserves in the extensive range of Marxist thought.

We do not intend to deal with this problem in depth but simply to raise the issue and critically examine what relevance it has, not just in theory, but also in political action.

This opportunity has arisen due to a critical, even if hesitantly formulated, comment by Giorgio Galli<sup>[1]</sup>, in his conscientious and intelligent review of my book dedicated to the complex personality of Bordiga<sup>[2]</sup> published in *Critica Sociale* on February 5, 1972, No. 3, under the title: "PCI - Historiographic Alternatives."

Galli puts it this way :

"It is true that, as Damen shows, Bordiga's position presents certain non-dialectical facets, an overestimation of rational action, which nevertheless is implicit in what Marx himself defined as "scientific socialism" within the framework of "historical materialism". But a dialectic that takes into account the dynamics of the world, which, as Damen himself says, "to a large extent obeys irrational impulses" is a dialectic that goes beyond what has been, until now, the conception of Marxism in its various interpretations, including the most revolutionary."

The exact terms of my analysis discussed by Galli can be found here:

"Bordiga lacked a true evaluation of the dialectic because his education was largely based on scientific facts which led him to see the world and life on the level of rational development when the reality of social existence and of revolutionary struggle often put it in a world which was largely shaped by irrational impulses. The methodology based on mathematical certainties, which belongs to science, is not always in agreement with a methodology based on the dialectic which is movement and contradiction and this is no small matter when it comes to the analysis and perspectives of revolutionary politics".<sup>[3]</sup>

From his remarks, it is clear that Galli has an implicitly materialist hypothesis, and thinks he sees in my formulation a hypothesis that could go beyond the formal dialectic, which does not see the constant relationship that must exist between the determining world and the world of the superstructure.

The first thing to clarify is that thinking that the dialectical relationship between cause and effect in any socio-political phenomenon is immediate is typical of an infantile materialism. In other words, that any given cause has an immediate and inevitable effect. Take for example, an objective situation of deep crisis in the system (as is the case today in the whole capitalist system), this must necessarily lead, according to a mechanical and automatic interpretation of the relationship with the superstructure, to a revolutionary solution, and with this in mind, we ought to prepare tactics and a strategy for revolutionary action that can count on the spontaneity of the masses.

This is the typical mindset of a political populism that pervades the self-proclaimed "left", from the extra-parliamentary left, whose myriad groups are too numerous to examine individually and too inconsistent for us to award them a decisive role in the crisis of the system, to the left and libertarian anarchist communist tendencies, or vulgar and messy Maoism. It is no coincidence that all these have flourished in a climate of imperialist domination, as elements that reflect the extreme paroxysm of its decomposition.

This mechanistic way of thinking about human affairs has always been very helpful to regimes in crisis, enabling them to catch their breath and buy time in the hope of patching up the fabric of their class privileges, against contrary laws of historical development. Does today's capitalism not come up against this contrary dynamic, deceiving itself that it can do violence to history?

We believe this outline of an argument deserves further examination.

In our time we certainly seem to have reached the highest degree of objective certainty in the domain of the natural sciences, both in its research and its discoveries. Science has achieved things far beyond what humans could have foreseen. Its technological

revolution affects all our activities, sweeping away the remains of the past, acting as a profound force for modernisation that even affects the handicraft tradition, which in the course of centuries has accumulated an unrivalled potential of beauty and wealth. The development of the process itself acquires absolute rationalisation of production. These objective certainties, indisputable and universal, are within our reach, but humanity itself does not always have the awareness needed to recognise them.

Amongst these certainties we include the production process which, for good reason, is the most rational manifestation of the whole economy: indeed, it is impossible to conceive large industrial monopolistic complexes without strict planning, both concerning machines, raw materials and labour; calculated down to the last minute and penny, not to mention long-term development and profit. However, if we delve into the complexity of this process, it is not difficult to find the causes of vast and deep contradictions. For example, the constant growth of technology against the limits imposed by the market or the progressive reduction in the employment of labour power, and more particularly the fundamental contradiction between the increase, driven by competition, in fixed capital (machines) and the “global” trend of declining profit, which throws the scientific nature of the system into turmoil and causes such stress for the owners of the means of production. It is no coincidence that Marxism considers this mode of production as anarchic; it is unrealistic and contradictory, and therefore irrational.

But the argument is expanded enormously if we move onto the terrain of the socio-political phenomena of the superstructure, the terrain on which human beings think and act.

We are talking here about the dialectical relationship between determining factors and the superstructure expressed in class terms. More precisely, about two historic classes which at this stage are in dialectical contradiction with each other, during the long period of crisis leading from capitalism to socialism, from a society conditioned and based on the exploitation of man by man to one founded on freedom.

There is no doubt that capitalism has reached the final stage of its historical cycle, but not everyone is aware of the seriousness of the crisis that has overtaken this perfect but complicated and delicate production tool, or that science applied to technique has given to those who hold economic power, and especially the owners of financial capital, the power to become masters of imperialist policy. But if science applied to technique has developed the unbounded productive capacity of capitalism, it is now called upon to cure the ills that afflict the capitalist system of production and distribution. However, since science has found no better cure than ever more advanced technology to restructure businesses it gives only the illusion of a revival. All it reproduces are the same ills they are trying to cure only on a grander scale.

And of all these capitalist afflictions, the worst is that it is becoming less able to make a normal profit. Hence the pace of concentration of large industrial complexes has increased in the different branches of production: the big fish eats the small hoping to survive; leading to further polarisation between finance capital, in the hands of those who exploit all possible forms of speculation, and the rapid collapse of small and medium industries, since neither the state nor individuals want to take the risk of investing capital in companies with an uncertain future.

This profoundly complex economy, sometimes ridiculous, at other times tragic, faces the incurably unstable future of a dying capitalism. It continues to suffer in agony only because the weakness and errors of the class historically called upon to overthrow it, allow it to continue. The truth is that capitalism is not experiencing a crisis of growth, where it is structurally able to open up a new process of development, but the antagonistic class, the proletariat, has not yet become aware of its own goals and the revolutionary violence required to take it on and overthrow it. Capitalism does not die of exhaustion or because the bourgeoisie has completed its historical task; it can continue to live, as in fact it does, although it no longer has anything to give regarding the economy or social and cultural development. And this interregnum between capitalism, which can only exist under ahistorical parasitic forms, and a proletariat, still incapable of imposing its class hegemony, is reproduced in the superstructure, throwing all established values into turmoil and tending to return to a past that we thought had disappeared.

Since the current crisis has reached the depths of its disintegrating influence on production, i.e. the sector that better reflects objective certainty in relation to the coordinated action of science and rationalisation than any other, it should lead, in the realm of the superstructure, to a great many upheavals in the socio-political structures, exacerbating class conflict and awakening the revolutionary consciousness of the masses. If this has actually happened, it has only been partial, limited, if not completely deformed, demonstrating that the thesis to which we have referred above, according to which the phenomena of the economic base impacts instantly on the surface, in the minds of men, in their relationships and in their business, is absolutely inappropriate and invalid. In fact, the phenomena of the economic structure are projected onto the field of social and political relations in a way whose timing and location is difficult to assess, if only because of the different levels of development between individual capitalists' experiences, or because the process of rising human consciousness and will is slow and uneven, and depends on a unifying action, the first and indispensable condition for the instigation of a movement that may then impact on the determining base upon which depends the material realisation of historical events.

It is not difficult to compare the validity of these phenomena with real elements of economic, social and political development.

In other words, these economic collapses, even if sudden, are not always inevitably accompanied by revolutionary solutions if favourable subjective conditions do not exist for the class which is historically called on to carry out this act of revolutionary subversion. On the terrain on which the dialectical contradiction of social and political forces move, the problem of amalgamating

collective consciousness to lead it towards a common goal is fraught with the greatest difficulties regarding its organisation, development, and solutions to problems that have been determined by the fundamental economic structure.

Taken as a whole, the working class is still bound more by a fictitious unity, of a sociological character, rather than welded to a political-economic basis. It is stratified and subdivided into different categories, and these in turn create contradictions in the world of work, in the degree of physical and mental exploitation and in the system of remuneration.

A class that thinks and acts in these categories is not yet a real class because it lacks awareness of its fundamental unity and its ultimate purpose. When it does act it obeys partial interests and immediate impulses as well as the union and political apparatuses that channel the mass movement into their parliamentary strategy, useful to both government and opposition parties. It is this background of irrationality which still pervades much of the working masses and the most irrational and perverse fact is they feel obliged to fight through increasingly feeble strikes and banal choreographed demonstrations not just for mistaken aims but even worse, aims that are against their own class interests.

## **The Tormented Maturation of Class Consciousness**

In this vast and wide range of class elements, ranging from individuals to groups and categories which sometimes seem to be totally separated, actions, reactions and consciousness arising from the effect of the economic crisis that threatens the whole system become so distorted and contradictory that it is not easy to evaluate them in a coherent way, not only as regards the economic and political but also, and especially, with respect to simple social psychology.

“The fact that you live and you may have an economic activity, that you procreate, that you make products, that you exchange them, determines a necessary objective concatenation of events, of development, a concatenation that is independent of your social consciousness, that can never comprehend it thoroughly. The higher goal of humanity is to comprehend this objective logic of economic evolution (development of social existence) in its main and general features, so that social awareness and the consciousness of the advanced classes of all capitalist countries adapt to it as clearly and distinctly as possible, with the most critical spirit.” (Lenin)

All this should be understood not in the sense of a linear development, which would lead to idealistic or mystical interpretations, but a “contradictory whole” that shows the true, revolutionary sense of the dialectical movement of the process of development.

“This conception is the only way to explain this self-dynamic as it is, that gives us the key to the ‘sharp turns’, the ‘solutions of continuity’, the ‘changes of direction’, it is the only one which allows us to understand the destruction of the old and the birth of the new.” (Lenin)

The proletariat is the only valid reference point in the dissolution of the traditional values of the culture in this phase of the bourgeois crisis; it is the historical bearer of the dialectic in concrete form. Engels regarded the German labour movement in the same way as the heir of German classical philosophy. In short, the modern proletariat appears as the only protagonist in this history, from the English industrial revolution to the current decadent and parasitic stage of the entire capitalist economy.

This explains why, in this historical period full of hard social and political struggles, this height of tension has not caused more than a diffused sense of agitation and revolt, with an indiscriminate use of violence, and why these agitations and revolts have failed in any case to take root in the deepest part of the class to express the basic essentials of irreconcilable class conflict.

This tormented maturation of a unitary class consciousness faces a long and difficult road and has not yet passed the stage of corporate, reformist demand movements in which the proletariat is still embroiled. The basic premise to attract workers back to the class struggle and revolutionary action is still missing.

Can the working masses achieve this by themselves? The advance of the industrial proletariat will achieve it, standing up for the entire class to the extent that they contribute to creating the conditions for the formation of a unifying, critical consciousness and a critique of the entire history of the labour movement, the fabric of the theoretical elaboration of the class revolution; of a body of doctrine that has matured in the fertile furrow of Marxism. These are conditions that presuppose the existence and formative work of the revolutionary party that will emerge at the right time out of the class itself.

It is for the party, and no one else, to assume the task of minimising the space between the rational and the irrational, which separates the working masses from the consciousness of what their class represents.

However it is not enough that the party has a valid framework, a solid doctrine and programme, if it does not have in mind these objectively pre-class areas which, as we have seen, are so vast and varied within the class itself and remain outside of its organisation. They have to be reduced when the time comes for active revolutionary practice.

If “all social life is essentially practical” and if “all the mysteries that divert theory to mysticism are solved rationally by human practice and understanding this practice” (Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*), then the importance and urgency of the problem presented

before the forces responsible for revolutionary action is clear, and consist of specifying and deepening the knowledge of the true nature of those grey areas that weigh on the class struggle and their possible and eventual use as “subsidiary” forces on the terrain of revolutionary strategy.

## Notes

[1]. Giorgio Galli (born 1928) is a well-known historian and political commentator with many books to his credit including a history of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). He chaired the 2009 meeting which launched the Archive of our late comrade Mauro Stefanini (who died in 2005). See <http://www.leftcom.org/en/adverts/2009-06-10/milano-archivio-mauro-stefanini>.

[2]. The book referred to is the 1971 version which was a much shorter version of the current work and entitled “Bordiga” with the subtitle “The Value and Limitations of an Experience in the History of the “Italian Left””.

[3]. See p. 25 of this publication for the full context [in the article [Amadeo Bordiga - Beyond the Myth and the Rhetoric](#), section “Bordiga’s limitations.” – MIA]