

Five Letters and an Outline of the Disagreement

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The letters which follow with their “Foreword” were published in *Prometeo* (No 3 April 1952) soon after the split from the Internationalist Communist Party of the group led by Bordiga. Onorio is the pseudonym of Onorato Damen, Alfa is Amadeo Bordiga.

Foreword

“You cannot eliminate one basic assumption, one substantial part of this philosophy of Marxism (it is as if it were a block of steel) without abandoning objective truth, without falling into the arms of bourgeois-reactionary falsehood.”

Lenin *Marxism and Empirio-criticism* (this English version taken from his *Collected Works* Volume XIII (1927-8 edition, Lawrence and Wishart)

We have reached a point in the discussion of disagreements in our organisation as a result of the different way of considering, from a Marxist standpoint, some problems inherent in the present period of the capitalist crisis. The publication of these five letters, which have the merit of initiating this indispensable theoretical clarification, has thus never been more necessary, nor more opportune.

The polite polemical encounter by letter between Alfa and Onorio rather than between x and y has no special value; what is important in these circumstances is the theoretical concern which animates it, the conviction of the contending parties to feel themselves equally faithful in interpreting the same doctrine.

What is certain however is that by publishing these writings we are not revealing any secret correspondence. We are not attempting some speculative polemic but start from the conviction, a conviction which is not ours alone. This is that when a revolutionary thinks and writes to explain to himself, to interpret and understand more deeply the problems of the revolutionary struggle, it ceases to be a personal activity and becomes the common patrimony of the class to which he belongs.

It is absurd to think that what one of us writes and maintains in private on these subjects should only be thought of as valuable and important from this point of view, and this ends if it is revealed and submitted to the outside, collective, critique of the party. This is especially so when these statements and theoretical elaborations relate to problems of strategy and tactics linked to the revolutionary party’s very reason for existence, both in the present and the very near future.

From reading these letters it appears clear that the basis of our disagreement lies, as ever, in a different evaluation of the Marxist dialectic, a different way of adhering to this doctrine. In reality differences of interpretation of historical materialism are as old as Marxism itself and it seems almost as if this disagreement gets new vitality with the appearance of every new generation of revolutionaries.

Is there a danger today that our party will be uprooted from its class terrain, from its ideology and its historic tasks through a false application of revolutionary theory? We reply without hesitation; yes, because it is only today that the extent and depth of the bourgeois world crisis that puts to the test the ideologies, the political programmes, the parties and the individual combatants, and which reveal in their true light both the correct and the weak aspects of any body of doctrine and any theoretical formulation. Under the pressure and course of events that which yesterday seemed secondary, marginal, redundant, and could be ignored and seen as a purely personal point of view, intellectual arrogance, at the same time paradoxically inoffensive and agreeable, is now pushed to the surface, clarified, almost makes itself a material force and is dialectically forced to show what it is, and what its critique is worth.

The proletarian party now makes this theoretical contribution its own and assimilates it, now rejects it as alien to its class nature, by refracting it through the prism of action. It continually compares any theory with past experience and the value it can draw from it, on condition that it is not just a fleeting and circumstantial idea and that it does not contradict its ultimate aims.

Overtuning Praxis ^[1]

Let's examine Alfa's schema which expresses his conception of the dialectic.

Descending curve or branch of an ascending curve? The first formulation is unacceptable if we attribute to it a gradualism which excludes "shocks, shakes, somersaults," the second "the branch of an ever ascending curve" is unacceptable if in this real world of economic things there is also no corresponding link to the rise or increased power of the contradictions which at the same time also have a tendency "to decline." In this case would capitalism be "moribund" for those of us who have learned from Lenin?

"On the whole, capitalism is growing far more rapidly than before; but this growth is not only becoming more and more uneven in general, its unevenness also manifests itself, in particular, in the decay of the countries which are richest in capital (Britain)."

Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (From *Lenin Selected Works* Moscow 1977 p. 728)

Bordiga's graph expressing "the branches of the ascending curves" does not indicate in any way the dialectical contradiction in which

"It is through its very progress that capital doubly prepares its final collapse... the economic progress of capital as it gets bigger bit by bit aggravates class antagonisms and economic and political anarchy throughout the world to the point where it provokes the revolt of the international proletariat against its dominion a long time before its economic evolution would have reached its final consequence: the absolute and

exclusive power of capitalist production in the world."

(Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*)

It is true that imperialism hugely increases and provides the means for prolonging the life of capital but at the same time it constitutes the surest means for cutting it short. This schema of the ever-ascending curve not only does not show this but in a certain sense denies it. It is on this false interpretation of the dialectical problem that the theory of the uselessness of creating a party in a counter-revolutionary period such as the present is based. It is a theory which diminishes the party, in its structure, its tasks and its action, when others have already built it. It limits the function of its press to a mere theoretical catalogue which mechanically repeats the past without shedding any light on why a revolutionary vanguard, solidly anchored in the life of the proletariat and its problems, which it links to the continuing history of the revolutionary struggle, is needed.

Starting from this understanding of revolutionary doctrine we arrive at the most recent novelty ... the dialectic of accepting a minimum of interest in practical action if it is justified by an adequate quantitative return, such as, for example, participation of the party in the electoral struggle would still be possible in spite of one's abstentionist convictions, if the objective means for a decent quantitative result existed. In relation to this Alfa's games and somersaults over abstentionist theory are significant. He insisted on the most rigid abstentionism before, and right up to, the Congress of Imola in the course of which he agreed to abandon "*aborto collo*" [against his will] this single well-known characteristic of the Neapolitan opposition; at Livorno he accepted elections *tout court* [without a quibble] until the Rome Congress; he returned to abstentionism when the political forces of the Party were in fact dispersed and with them the leadership of the Left of the Party, and today he is an abstentionist *maybe yes, maybe no* and for elections *maybe yes, maybe no* when he considers participation once again, if as a preliminary the certainty of numerical success were guaranteed.

Still within the framework of this interpretation ... of Marxism according to Bordiga;

"the analysis which claims that all the conditions for revolution exist but what is missing is a revolutionary leadership makes no sense. It is correct to say that the organ of leadership is indispensable but its appearance depends on the general conditions of struggle themselves, never on the genius or value of a leader or a vanguard."

This reasoning would be the fundamental argument to show the theoretical validity of his scheme relative to the overturning of praxis for which *just as determinism excludes for the individual the possibility of will or consciousness, the necessary conditions for action, the overturning of praxis uniquely allows them into the Party as a result of its general historical elaboration.*

In this scheme a mathematical logic prevails to the detriment of common sense, a determinism of "things" unconnected to the activity of human beings for whom it is mathematically certain that if a revolutionary leadership has defects on the political scene it is because the revolutionary conditions are not there; and vice versa, if the revolutionary conditions really exist then there will be no lack of revolutionary leadership. Put like this the dialectic of Marx is on the same level as ... the official policy of the Catholic Church which takes its evangelical creed from the preaching of Christ.

Let's make our thinking on this more precise. The terms of the schema in question have to be "historicised" in the sense that in the determinist "*prius*" [i.e. what has gone before] there are not only in play individual impulses produced by economic stimuli and appetites but that these stimuli and appetites have to be understood in the sense of the shifts and changes in the total process of the capitalist economy, in the level of development of the means of production, in their technical sophistication, in variations of the market, in its recurrent crises, in the growing domination of financial capital, etc. etc.

The formation and modification of human consciousness, its transformation into will and action, are reflections at the level of social and political life of what is produced in the sub-soil of the economy but between the determining factors and a world determined by the superstructure there is a relationship which in its turn reacts on the base as an indispensable element in completing any historical event. There is no geometric schema, nor any arithmetical calculation, which can close this relationship between the world which determines and that which is determined, in some formula which is forever true and valid which says that this impulse comes from the subsoil of the economy and that is from what is occurring in the superstructure.

In our case an adequate and timely crystallisation of revolutionary consciousness and the will to act does not always correspond to the objective conditions offered by the capitalist crisis. The first post-war crisis (1919) in Germany and Italy tragically showed us a proletariat instinctively brought to understand the need for a struggle for power but which lacked a revolutionary leadership. The history of workers' struggles is full of examples of favourable situations in which the proletariat missed the bus due to the presence of a Party not up to the task of leadership.

This is the focal point not only for interpreting the dialectic but also for the nature and function of the class party. The birth of the party does not depend, and on this we agree, "*on the genius or value of a leader or a vanguard*" but it is the historic existence of the proletariat as a class which poses, not merely episodically in time and space the need for the existence of its Party. The proletariat would return to the ranks of mere plebians if it lost its class character as the antagonist of capitalism; and its possibility as an exploited class which struggles for its own defence and liberation would be thwarted and rendered null and void if the motivation and physical forces for a revolutionary leadership were not produced from within it through its struggles.

But what, in reality, are the relations between party and class? We have to fight as foreign to Marxism the schema which rejects the existence of the Party in the period of counter-revolution and which is confined to a restricted vanguard reduced to the melancholy task of study; which foresees the appearance of the Party in the fire of the revolutionary assault and gives to the Party, and only to it, the function of subject in the overturning of praxis. We don't know, for how long and through what magical virtue, the body (constituted by the class) should remain without a head (the class Party).

In this schema, given the erroneous conception of the nature and function of the Party a totally catastrophic idea is precisely defined with the sudden appearance of the Party in the final period of the crisis of capitalism, leaping who knows how, from the head of Jove to resolve alone the miracle of overturning praxis. In this conception the Party is detached from the class and its genetic development as a whole, this Party to which individual workers and the labouring class stimulate through their consciousness and will, an accumulation of the necessary revolutionary

potential without which the return to the determining base would not be possible in the same way that a revolutionary outcome for a class detached from its Party would not be possible.

All this breaks the dialectical process that Marxism historically attributes to the class as the historic antithesis of the bourgeoisie; class antithesis not Party antithesis because the contradictions are class against class and not party against party because at the end the subversive force is the class and not the Party. The Party makes revolutionary activity more perceptible and gives it real force, it renders it more conscious, and points the way towards it. In this sense the Party is a Party of the class, in the class, not outside the class, and distinct from it. The dialectical overthrow is carried out by the class as a whole, and not by the Party in place of the class: except that there will be no shift from the class in itself towards the class for itself where the nerve centre preparing and leading it (i.e. the Party) is absent.

Nothing takes place automatically independently of human action. There exists no development of the superstructure (moral, juridical, philosophical, literary, artistic etc) which does not rest on economic development. *“But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic base.”* Engels’ *Letter of 1894*

Thus the question of the *“returning influence”* of the superstructure on the economic base and on the productive forces of society is made more precise with the statement that *“amongst the different series of social phenomenon there is an unending process of reciprocal action,”* cause and effect substitute themselves one for the other. The *“theory of reciprocal action”* was made clear and summed up in masterly fashion by Engels:

“People make their history themselves, only in given surroundings which condition it and [*in einem gegebenen, sie bedingenden Milieu*] on the basis of actual relations already existing, among which the economic relations, however much they may be influenced by the other political and ideological ones, are still ultimately the decisive ones, forming the red thread which runs through them and alone leads to understanding.” [*Letter of 1894*]

Where these two interpretations of historical materialism and the dialectical method diverge is inevitably the starting point for different ways of understanding the role of the party, of evaluating its immediate and long-term tasks and therefore of conceiving and carrying out its tactics and strategy.

Those who have the responsibility to lead the revolutionary party and who, when we examine the problems start from an interpretation based on an mechanical economism, you can be sure, will always remain waiting for the revolution until it is knocking on the door to warn us that the time has arrived to build the class party and proceed to the insurrection.

The theory which leads to the affirmation that there is nothing for the party to do in this period of counter-revolution is absolutely unacceptable, and which in a formally logical coherence is of the view that is it useless and damaging to proceed to the formation of the party or keep it going and this until the point where we no longer find ourselves faced with a radical reversal of the present relations of force between the two historic classes.

Faced with the present problems of imperialism and war the formal coherence of this arbitrary and mistaken interpretation of Marxism is also a departure from the fundamental line of class

analysis and revolutionary interests if it ends up desiring the victory of bourgeois forces which carry within them the future of capitalist progress. To flirt or have flirted with forms of dictatorship just to cock a snook at democratic forms pretends to ignore or forget that Lenin, with the small dispersed nuclei of the Bolshevik Party, insisted, right in the middle of the war and after the terrible collapse of the Second International, on the possibility, even in physical terms, of a revolutionary revival and victory.

Faced with the alternative of remaining what we have always been, or bending to an attitude of platonic and intellectualist aversion to American capitalism, and benevolent neutrality towards Russian capitalism only because it is not yet capitalistically mature, we don't hesitate to restate the classical position which internationalist communists take on all the protagonists in the second imperialist conflict, which is not to hope for a victory of one or other of the adversaries, but to seek a revolutionary solution to the capitalist crisis.

Faced with the alternative of saving the Party at all costs or accepting a leadership of men with ideas and methods which would force us, in the face of third world war, to repeat the political nullity, to abandon our place in the struggle and the liquidation of all organisational forms, as happened on the eve of the Second World War, we have no hesitation in reacting to this renewed deceitful attempt and to defend the party in the role which proletarian interests and revolutionary struggle have assigned to it.

This is what is led, and had to lead, to a theoretical conflict which we wanted to clarify here, even in the doctrinal domain. This is not just a theoretical question but in being such is at the same time a political conflict over tactics and strategy which are no longer working towards the same class objective on the line of the proletarian revolution.

[First Letter] Onorio to Alfa 6 July 1951

I have examined your edited document tracing your reasons for attacking certain theoretical and political positions prevailing in some international groups almost all coming from Trotskyism, and I'll say straight away that, in certain ways, I preferred your oral exposition in Rome to the written version, for its greater acuteness of analysis and perhaps also for its greater completeness.

I'll summarise some of my hurried observations for you.

In section 5 of your basic lines of orientation you state that in Russia the economy tends to capitalism and give the reason for it on page 8 where you write that

“The monetary, mercantile, income and ownership character of the predominant Russian economic fabric is not nullified by the statification of the big industries, services, etc.”

It looks to me as if you are not making clear here the idea of a soviet economy as a state capitalist structure in a world economy which has reached its highest stage of monopoly.

The tendency to an ever greater intervention of the state, which is characteristic in this economic period of the most highly industrialised countries, finds in the soviet economy its most complete, defined and organic expression. Being in the general line of development of

monopoly capitalism enabled Russia to miss out more than one stage, thanks to the October Revolution which allowed the most absolute centralisation of the economy within the orbit of the state. In addition, thanks to the Stalinist counter-revolution, it made use of this enormous centralised economic potential to massively increase the power of the state and open the way to this latest capitalist experience.

The protagonist of this historic period is therefore the state whose economy reproduces, on a wider scale perhaps, the methods and characteristics which really belong to capitalist production and distribution (wage labour, market, surplus value, accumulation etc...).

What is the new class which exercises its dictatorship through the means of this state? The enormous power of the soviet state cannot have failed to concretely resolve the problem of a homogenous and strong ruling class through the consciousness which it has of its own being and of the historic function which it is called upon to carry out. Further in section 5 of the basic lines of orientation on the:

“conveyance of class forces in every country to the terrain of autonomy in the face of all the states”

You entrust the supreme task to:

“Breaking capitalist power in the more advanced industrialised countries of the West who block the road to revolution.”

Which leads us to ask: is it only the most advanced industrialised economies of the West which stand in the way of revolution?

Further on, on page 3 still in the same argument you write:

“This confused and unfavourable outcome for the proletarian struggle at the same time as the unstoppable increase in highly concentrated capitalist industrialisation, both in its intensity in the countries where it started, as well as in its wider extension throughout the inhabited world, is to the advantage of the advanced countries through which the greatest force in modern imperialism, the American, tends, according to the nature and needs of any great concentration of metropolitan capital, of productive forces, of power, brutally smashing all territorial and social obstacles, to subject the masses of the entire world to its exploitation and oppression.”

We have to again ask ourselves: is it really only America, the greatest force of modern imperialism, which tends to subjugate, etc. the masses of the entire world?

In another step in another of your recent writings, which I don't however have to hand, you speak of a peaceful Russia in the face of a bellicose America.

“The leitmotif is therefore always the same: only through an error of soviet diplomacy or through a mistaken calculation by its politicians such as that in the last war with a political strategy – allowing the remnants of the great Communist International to be shamefully dissolved – (wasn't it already rotten to the bone and tied body and soul to imperialism?) which led to the reinforcement of western imperialist power which the

Russian government and state recognised too late as a greater threat than Germany to their now openly national interests.”

In short Moscow is seen as the centre of a mistaken, ineffectual policy, even from the point of view of pure national interests, and not as the centre of imperialism on a par with the USA with a Russian perspective for world domination.

The proletariat’s anti-capitalist revolution will not leave out, we would like to think, the soviet regime, and *it does not move according to some order of priority of capitalist countries to be overthrown, but strikes at the adversary when and how it can*, wherever it appears the weakest. In 1917 for example it struck international capitalism in Tsarist Russia which was certainly not considered ripe for socialism compared to Britain or Germany etc and we know very well why.

For the rest, I would stress the critical analysis which allows us to state the following: that the aversion to Stalinism of all the splits started more from an impulse to defend the individual, and national independence, rather than from the needs of the class and the concern to bring living and active material to the reconstruction of the international party of the proletariat.

[Second Letter] Alfa to Onorio 9 July 1951

I certainly appreciated the contribution of your observations to the international appeal proposed by me and I am responding immediately on the principal issues.

I take first your observation relating to page 3. You ask: Is it only America that tends to subject others, etc? – but you yourself have quoted my qualification: according to the nature and necessity of the greatest metropolitan concentration of capital, of forces of production and of power.

Therefore, not just America, but *any* concentration. Where, and what, do you find in the different historic stages of these concentrations? This is the point. We have to take into account: its territory and its resources, population, development of its industrial machinery, numbers of modern proletarians, colonial possessions as well as raw materials, human reserves, markets, historic continuity of its state power, outcome of the recent wars, progress in the global concentration of forces both in production and in armaments. And then we can conclude that in 1905 six great powers were on the same level or almost, in 1914 it was only Germany and England which competed against each other: today? If we examine all those factors we can see that America is the No. 1 concentration in the sense that, (way beyond the rest and it is beyond doubt that in any future conflict it will win) it can certainly intervene anywhere where an anti-capitalist revolution is victorious. In this historic sense I say that today the revolution, which can only be international, will waste its time if it does not take out the US state in Washington D.C.

[2] Does this mean that we are a long way from that? Okay.

We come then to the usual question: the analysis and definition of Russian society today. You know full well that I think that on this point one can and must say as little as possible, and that with circumspection. It is an elaboration carried out by the movement over a long period, it is a new given in history, the first example of a revolution which shrivels and disappears. I will give what contribution I can but I don’t believe in the existence of some high priest who can reply by

opening the Talmud and pointing to this or that verse. Naturally I said more about this in Rome and will say more about it in *Prometeo* in good time. You compare two things which are on different levels: in truth I am somewhat worried by such lack of understanding amongst all, truly all, I am not making a personal argument, who feel driven and predisposed to take on the task of leadership. The appeal has some value in a negative sense (like all the decisive propositions of Marxism which if not really negative are at least “alternative”) it is useful, in establishing demarcations between us and others you like to call “political” since that is an adjective you like. You can read in a few minutes that over several hours in Rome we dealt with problems which were on one side scientific analysis (I would say “research,” “examinations” as I am not keen on “analysis” even if it is fashionable) and on the other of tactical praxis. Both together, for greater force, completeness and detail.

I now come to Russia. I would like those who collaborate in defining the appeal to formulate positively the alternatives which they are proposing. Does the formula of the monopolistic and state capitalist phase appear complete to you? It is extremely undecided for me. You are applying it to the regime of Mussolini as well as to present day Britain and to Russia. Two different ways to arrive at similar positions? To be sure it is a good propaganda concept but for pity's sake let's avoid confusions. In what I say don't think I am identifying in what you have written the mistakes I am going to indicate, but you must precisely propose your version of the argument; you and any of the others who have made observations, work which I believe will be useful in that it is very different from the “material for the whole organisation,” with its usual this or that is stupid.

It is not accurate to say that the bourgeoisie was the protagonist in one period of capitalism and that the State is the protagonist today. Class and State are different things and ideas are not interchangeable. Before you still had the State, and after you still have the Class. The State is not the leading factor in economic facts but is derived from them: if politics don't arise from the economy but the economy from politics and the management of power then the Marxist interpretation of history is dead (and those who think that should say it clearly!) and the old theories, which still seem new to imbeciles, that history is created from the desires of the leaders, and the need of those who have wealth to rule, are back in fashion.

The same stupidity is more or less arrived at by those who ask: in the first phase the protagonists in the duel were the bourgeoisie and proletariat, now let's take a torch and go in search of the third ... man. A third class? They won't find it and so the response is: the State, just as those who were searching for the third man would say: here he is, it is this pair of trousers. Or rather the response is that the bureaucracy is the new class. What the devil does this mean? I don't know if you have my writings on this: all class regimes have had a bureaucracy: it cannot be “a class.” In our language the bureaucracy is one of the “forms of production” whilst the classes are forces of production, throughout history.

You will know among my texts (it would be useful if you would criticise them and raise objections) those in which it says that state capitalism doesn't mean the subjection of capital to the state but a further subjection of the state to capital.

Capital – capitalism – capitalist or bourgeois class – capitalist or bourgeois state. We are not mixing things up. We need historic order to make some sense in our heads.

Formerly there was already capital but not yet the rest. This capital began to concentrate forces of production (materials, men, machines) and capitalism started but the State was not yet bourgeois. Then came the bourgeois class, the union of all those who were high up in the new capitalist system of production but were low in the State. This class took power because capitalism needed very different *forms* from the old ones. We had a new State, with a new bureaucracy, and so on.

Marx (take him or leave him) pointed out that in “post-capitalism” (another stupid fashionable word): the proletariat takes power and ushers in socialism. The bourgeoisie and the bourgeois state oppose it.

What precisely is the class? A collection of people? That’s a bad way to put it. It is instead a “network of interests.” You don’t like my complicated formula of a meeting of interests? I see it as a wise step forward whilst I see little in the confused play on words: capital, State, bureaucracy.

When classes were still castes, and then orders, it coincided with fixed groups of people (of families). After the bourgeois revolution, despite the cardinal right of inheritance it was no longer so. A peer of France was a nobody across the Channel. A capitalist is a someone everywhere.

All these elementary things – which I don’t spell out as an adversary – it is just better to repeat them as you are being difficult – open up in the Russian question. Admittedly we don’t have enough facts (Marx could call on all the material in the British Museum, faithful picture of English capitalism, but we cannot set up in Moscow where we would find only fake documents) on the official definition of the dominant class in Russia. We cannot make a single step forward without the famous “bureaucracy.” I have already done a lot in recognising the existence of a strata of *entrepreneurs* without property titles to the means of production who benefit in an important way from profits. But the bureaucracy can also be like that in our countries, an instrument of the latter and their big businesses, like a business agent abroad.

The bureaucracy governs and gorges itself for itself alone? But what can this mean? The State personalised in a network of functionaries, the class – State? Nonsense.

To us, it is *Monsieur de la Palisse*^[3]. In state capitalism there are only bureaucrats in the population, even factory workers are functionaries. The Boss-State, an old anarchoid formula. However this is a text that I intend to write and this is not the place to say more on the Russian economic argument.

But you say to me, why are your guns just trained on the West? Anyone would think that the revolution need not take place in Russia. I accept the comment: I am going to say something to avoid this great misunderstanding. Though it is difficult to give the laws of the process for a failed revolution we can say that any further process can be nothing but a new class revolution.

I have never said or written otherwise. But we will also give here, though badly and in a great hurry and *ad usum Onorii*^[4], not “for all the organisation,” a little clarification. You are right that the texts must be done. It is better to do them than to argue.

Neither you nor I have the keys and levers to unleash the revolution in Washington or in Moscow and we cannot decide just what turn history will take. The revolution can begin anywhere, as in 1917. Fine. But was it an act of will or a product of history? What were the circumstances? Feudal regime, military defeat, split between the State and the bourgeois class etc, this is well known. And then we say “the *world* revolution can begin anywhere.”

Be careful that you too could be a Staliniser. It is Stalin who says the Russian proletarian revolution was born, grew and will live there on its own.

The question has therefore to be seen internationally. Just as with the economy, “this network of interests” which is the bourgeois regime, is international. So also in politics, the question of power is international. In the both senses these characteristics have gone on being clarified for a century.

Today the historical issue is this: the Stalinists put all their propaganda into attacking America, and on peace. The proletariat follows them and up to now that has been undeniable. You recognise, or at least concede, that it is important to make clear the danger of opposing them through liberalism, of persons or peoples, and not on a class basis.

We are talking about not just limiting ourselves to accusing Stalinism over its Russian nationalist errors but of basing ourselves on the anti-class nature of its position: 1944 all its forces with America, dissolution [of the Comintern in 1943 – translator] etc – 1951, all against America, in order to say you betrayed us then, and, as you rightly say, a long time before that.

It is already very daring (in the struggle against the terrible competition of misinformation in which the West and East compete) to “politically” say to the Stalinists: take care, you won’t beat America this way, we the defenders of the class will beat it, it can only be beaten by the world proletariat on an autonomous class basis with no relation *even to you*.

It is a useless bluff just to say: We put you both on the same level, one not a millimetre above the other and in one go we’ll make you both fall like ninepins with the same ball.

The Left must defend itself from the stupid accusation of not being able to make sense of history and of mumbling abstract theses: they must prove that it is the others who have not understood history.

After the period of national liberation which settled that any alliance should be pitilessly condemned, the explanation of capitalism’s survival had to be posed, not through the discovery of recipes such as the leading role of the State in the economy, but in the imperial relations of the great industrial apparatuses and in the continuing existence, not of territorial invasions of, nor of defeats in wars but of a State apparatus (the committee representing capitalist interests, as Marx rightly said, whether or not the State manages firms and shops) which is historically the most *continuous and persistent*.

Undoubtedly the concentration of power in Moscow is also an obstacle barring the way to revolution not only as the capital of proletarian corruption but also as a physical force in itself. But it has only been around for 34 years. Its territory and peoples are a mixture of social and economic types.

Germany and Japan are prostrate, France and Italy have been tremendously shaken. England itself is in a serious crisis.

And this is what makes America key. Another few years and the police of the UN will be effective and only a few minutes from every part of the world.

If possible we could drag the Big Moustache out of Moscow and put in his place say, in order not to offend anyone, Alfa: Truman who is already thinking about it will arrive within five minutes.

Have I made myself clear? If that is not the case then this means I myself have become stupid. This is not so serious, from the point of view of my dialectical Marxist convictions and not from voluntarism. I will do that little text, have no doubt.

[Third Letter] Onorio to Alfa 23 July 1951

I am replying, and in the same tone, as you wished.

The first observation which I am compelled to make is on the somewhat ... sour tone of your letter which the content, and perhaps the form, of my observations have unwittingly provoked. In writing to you I started from concern about how the international groups, for whom the address is intended, would respond to our way of posing if not resolving, but at least defining the limits of the objective and subjective possibilities, of the problems of the international revival of revolutionary groups.

Agreed about the “political” sense – are you happy now? – that led you to give a defined and, in a certain sense negative, value to the address. This is more appropriate if we don’t want to put off those who are coming closer to us and possibly could join us. But I don’t agree with your method of argument, even if it is polite, which has the need at times to create arguments which are sometimes fictitious and at others, completely arbitrary. You give these opinions your own meaning, and the way you engage in combat gives the impression that your formulations are the real or hidden opinions of those who contradict you. It’s fine to follow the thread of your own argument but take into account sometimes, and in an objective manner, what those you are discussing with are really saying.

I’ll follow the order of your letter of 9 July.

America as Concentration No. 1? The formulation is right on the condition that it is understood that international capitalism taken as a single whole, even if differentiated by unequal development, has in America “*the greatest metropolitan concentration of capital, of forces of production and of power.*”

But where do we get to when we translate this on to the level of tactics and political strategy? We get to your statement that:

“America is above all way beyond the rest and in all probability will win in any future conflict [*who would be able to stop it, I would add, and to what purpose?!]* so it can certainly intervene anywhere an anti-capitalist revolution is victorious.”

Defeat today might come about like that. But so what? Should for this reason proclaim that revolution in this or that country would be useless until the proletariat has done away with the state in Washington D.C.? We are not joking, even if what you write has to be understood historically.

I'll go back to what I said before on this argument.

“The proletarian revolution strikes its class enemies when and how it can, wherever they appear weakest.”

Do I really have to add for your benefit that the revolution, even if it breaks out in Roccacannuccia^[5], is always just one moment in the international revolution, yet you feel free to paraphrase just for me what Stalin would have said?

What is interesting though is the theoretical question raised here.

I would put it to you like this. Theoretically a revolutionary outbreak has to logically take place in some given concentration of power etc. etc. of the world capitalist order in which the accumulation of economic contradictions and the social antagonisms of capitalist domination have become more intense without the presumption, however, that this has “*economically reached the ultimate limits of its development.*”

At this point, instead of posing the problem as you do, in my view in a unilateral and static manner, of the suffocating intervention of the UN (and why not also that of the Cominform police who are no less interested in strangling the revolution?), we have to pose the other, historically more lively, problem which rests on the capacity and explosive potential of a first revolutionary outburst to spread in a world which is objectively ripe for socialism. It is the only way for the socialist revolution to concretely pose how to overcome Washington as well: in this sense and only in this sense “*the revolution is not its wasting time.*” But it surely is a waste if the revolution kicks its heels just waiting messianically for the conquest of power in the United States. The proletariat would certainly miss all the opportunities which the capitalist crisis will offer, no matter where, if it subordinates its international mission to the conquest of power in the United States.

On the basis of Bolshevik October we know that the dynamic towards the widening of revolutionary struggle inherent in any victorious radical overthrow of power, in part achieved, in part potential, cannot be measured scientifically in advance. It is a type of “atomic” reserve which every revolution carries within it. Does the psychological break widen it? The revolution breaks out, overcoming all obstacles with the world as its objective. In the opposite case the revolution is defeated, dies on its feet and “shrivels” as you say, and disappears. But this is the way, and it is the only way.

And let's come to the analysis and definition of Russian society today. You will note that on this subject I limit myself to the indirect formulation of questions and objections.

You write:

“It is not accurate to say that the bourgeoisie was the protagonist in one period of capitalism and that the State is the protagonist today.”

Have you fished this inaccuracy from my writing perhaps and then formulated it in such a clumsy manner? Would it not have been more correct and even more useful in clarifying things if you were forced to take in to account even critically the importance of the objection I feel I have to try to put to you. I'll repeat what I wrote on the "economy and State" discussion.

"The tendency to an ever greater intervention of the state, which is characteristic in this economic period of the most highly industrialised countries, finds in the Soviet economy its most complete, defined and organic expression etc. etc."

Further on:

"Being in the general line of development of monopoly capitalism enabled Russia to miss out more than one stage, thanks to the October Revolution, which allowed the most absolute centralisation of the economy within the orbit of the state and, thanks to the Stalinist counter-revolution, it made use of this enormous centralised economic potential to massively increase the power of the state and open the way to this latest capitalist experience."

The protagonist of this historic period is therefore the state whose economy reproduces, on a wider scale perhaps, the methods and characteristics which actually belong to capitalist production and distribution (wage labour, market, surplus value, accumulation etc...).

Forgive the length of the quotation but you compel me to show that no-one has confused and even less mixed up the terms "economy and State" and it is entirely useless to claim, as you do, that the State does not play a leading role in economic activity. It would have been better if you had instead refuted my argument.

The formula of the monopolistic period and state capitalism is extremely vague? But it is not mine and before anything else it was Lenin who stated that state capitalism, compatible with the dictatorship of the proletariat, had the task of acting as an intermediary between soviet power and the countryside and to establish their alliance. This was also Lenin who thought state capitalism was the dominant form of the soviet economy. This was 1921. In 1925 we turn to the words of Sokolnikov, a conscientious and honest witness:

"Our foreign trade is carried out like a state capitalist enterprise; our internal trade companies are equally state capitalist enterprises and the State Bank is in the same way a State enterprise. At the same time our monetary system is infused with the principles of the capitalist economy."

And from 1925 on? In "*Towards Capitalism or Towards Socialism?*" Trotsky wrote:

"In the face of the world capitalist economy the Soviet State behaves like a gigantic private owner."

Furthermore State industry united in a single trust is then effectively defined as "*the trust of trusts.*" It is thus a matter of knowing, the work cited comes from 1925, if "*with the development of the productive forces the capitalist tendency will increase at the expense of the socialist tendency.*" Recent history has proved the decisive prevalence of the tendency based on the commodity economy, which is, in short, capitalist.

If at this point the revolution shrivels, this does not mean that the trustified economy controlled by the State and with which the State gives it body has to decentralise and return to individual capitalism and its competitive regime. The instruments created by the technological evolution of the nationalised economy which should work for a more rapid realisation of socialism are, in fact, used to push on towards capitalism.

What do I mean when I say that the State gives substance to the trustified economy? I mean the tendency of imperialism to form that State which Lenin called the *rentier* State, the State of the usurers, where the bourgeoisie live by exporting capital and clipping *coupons*. Such a phenomenon, very visible in the US economy through the notable predominance of financial capitalism is common to the Russian economy itself even if it operates within a more restricted zone of influence.

“The world is divided into a small group of usurer States and a huge mass of debtor States.” (Lenin)

Manager State? Entrepreneur State? State subject to the economy? We are not talking about these but of considering certain phenomenon belonging to this phase of the economy which is financial capital, one of the levers of command manoeuvred mainly by the State, the policy of its export as an instrument of world domination, the organisation of a part of the economy on a permanent basis as a war economy, with the maintenance of two permanent armies, that of the bureaucrats and that of the military. All these phenomena come together in the State, the only unitary and potentially centralised organisation which can, and knows how to, resolve all the economic contradictions and social antagonisms whenever they reach their sharpest points in terms of force, violence and war. There is enough here, it seems to me, to show the imperialist State to be something more than its function as the representative committee of capitalist interests.

And like any capitalist phenomenon, even this one, the line of Marxist interpretation goes from the economy to the State and not vice versa. That capitalism still exists, and the apparatus of the most continuous and persistent State in history remains, is open to verification through the critical examination of Marxists. Those who have anything to say on this should say it ...

And we thus arrive at the ruling class in Russia. I asked myself and continue to ask myself: who is the new class in Russia which exercises its own dictatorship via the State? For my part I limited myself to the real and historically irrefutable statement that:

“The enormous power of the soviet state cannot have failed to concretely resolve the problem of a homogenous and strong ruling class through the consciousness which it has of its own being, and of the historic function which it is called upon to carry out.”

I can only agree about what you say on the role of the bureaucracy but your formula of a “*hybrid coalition and fluid association etc*” excludes from the present State the existence of a historically defined class and fits perfectly with your other formula of an economy which *tends* to capitalism. If it is tending towards capitalism it means that in Russia there is an economy that is not yet capitalist through which the ruling class expressing it is *tending* itself to become capitalist, and is not yet capitalist.

That the peasant economy *is tending* for the most part towards capitalism, I can agree; but that the trustified economy of the State tends to capitalism, absolutely no. It is this characteristically capitalist economic reality which inevitably produces the ruling class which is appropriate to it.

And here, it seems to me, is the key to all your thinking on the Russian problem. As a result, a socialist revolution in that country compared to the United States is not so urgent for you. Up to this point I don't think that the terms of our conversation have lacked clarity even if we have gone beyond the concerns of the international address.

[Fourth Letter] Alfa to Onorio 31 July 1951

I am replying to your letter of 22-23 July. I accept your proposal to remove any sharpness of tone.

First of all I also eliminate the accusation of having distorted your theses by formulating them in an exaggerated and erroneous way and I will force myself to return to your formulations and quotations just as you formulated them. It is not a bad method to attribute opinions which are slightly false to someone who contradicts you, rather it is a useful Marxist method, when it leads to greater clarity of important points, and especially when some elements, even at the highest level, have not taken them in after a great deal of time. I still say that I am a humble repeater and no more but I believe I have assimilated such a method well. Obviously, if the point made is a good one it is not so serious to have attributed to another a thesis that is not strictly theirs: in polemics democracy is of no interest to us. We don't have to win points for scholastic merit like in a school and still less make a general assessment to see who is best, because we have gone beyond that stage. A made-up dispute can be useful in taking things forward and, at times, the solution to an equation cannot be found by following normal procedures but by writing a deliberately false formula. Meanwhile no one has gone to gaol. Thus 'the bourgeoisie previously played a role whilst the State has now replaced it', are not words you sign up to, however there is a huge, more or less conscious, prejudice in circulation and it is useful to demolish it, a job that we can do together and does not redound to the merit or fame of any one author, etc.

And now some remarks. When I speak of an important capitalist centre of power which might rush to stamp out any attempt at revolution, I did not mean to forbid such attempts or to make a hierarchy of such attempts. I meant above all to highlight that the political movement, which has been allied to this centre of power in all the most decisive phases of its rise to hegemony, must be judged as counter-revolutionary by militant workers now, and always, even when in political debate it adopts theoretically communist and class positions which are no more than a joke. This is the point: for now we cannot carry out any attempt, neither in Pittsburgh nor in Casale. We have to work to rectify the approach of the class for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Why did I say we would see the UN and not the Cominform here? First of all the Cominform countries are in the UN. In second place, if I turn round I see the silhouette of *Mount Olympus* ^[6] and not that of a Soviet ship. I am absolutely convinced that troops will also land from that and I don't mind admitting it.

For the present, I have stopped to ask why you see the definition of the transitional phases of the Russian economy from one social type to another as the most important thing, and after that

I will clarify an ambiguity which perhaps I unintentionally provoked on the “meaning” of these transitional tendencies, or rather, this series of transitions.

The three following questions don’t form a single whole: is the Russian economy going in the right direction? Are the Russian Communist Party and the International following the right policy? Does the Russian state have the right international policy? I mean *right* in the revolutionary sense and I pose the questions generally as if one were posing them from 1919 to the present. It is clear that today we would answer in the negative to all three questions. But there is no condition which obliges us to reply to all three with a “yes” or a “no” and thus the economic issue is not decided by the other two.

As usual I will explain using historical examples. England’s anti-Jacobin war and its support for the feudal emigres. Which was the most progressive bourgeois economy in the world? England. Which was the country where the development of capitalism was not threatened by feudal counter-revolution. Idem (the same). But what was the English Government’s policy towards the struggle in France? Counter-revolutionary, no less than that of Austria or Russia, where the aristocracy were in power. What was the foreign policy of the English Government? Counter-revolutionary, it attempted to stop the Convention and Napoleon. We have not replied yes – yes – yes or no – no – no. We replied yes – no – no.

The 1917 revolution in Russia and the first, however primitive, communist measures. Communist struggle throughout the world, international struggle against the Germans and the Entente on every front: three revolutionary positions, yes – yes – yes. Was it an error to have started the world and European revolution in the least capitalist country only for it to end in defeat? We have said at least a hundred times that we wouldn’t dream of making that criticism!

The social and economic retreat of 1921 and abandonment of certain socialist forms (the strictly economic point later). We, all of us on the left, approved the justifications for the international revolutionary strategy: a step backwards to catch our breath: reply no – yes – yes. That is the internal social economy goes backward, the revolutionary struggle goes forward.

After Lenin’s death tactical deviations began from 1922 to, let’s say 1926, but there was no alliance with any bourgeois country in the world because they were all struggling against Russia: we in the Left were not happy with party policy: our reply no – no – yes.

Further degeneration, both in the domestic economy and in party policy, which became collaborationist and opportunist and in which the foreign policy of the Russian state finally made alliances with capitalists. We have finally reached no – no – no.

I wanted to establish that the yes and the no of the internal economic process does not automatically determine, by itself alone, the other two replies. The three responses taken together depend on an understanding of the international historic framework, in Marxist terms, dialectically.

This takes away a lot of the importance from the problem which seems to you – or seems to many – to be the key problem: what is the nature of the present Russian economy, of the new class etc. Its not that this is not an important problem it is only that its solution does not resolve all the other issues. Like the English economy, which was the most advanced in 1793 whilst it pursued the most reactionary foreign policy, so it could be that a country which had evolved

social and economic characteristics of socialism, could have a bourgeois party policy and make war. Whatever the truth about the economic process of Russia and its real “direction” the party and international policy of the Stalinists is equally fetid.

That is why, in the appeal to the workers, it is not so important for me to say: in Russia Citizen Capitalistov, at such and such an address, does nothing and pampers himself with caviar, vodka and Rubens paintings but: the policy of dissolving the [Communist – translator] parties, so the Americans and English could make their war all the better, stank as did the policy of the partisan fronts.

And now to your central point: state capitalism. This is exactly what one finds in Trotsky, Sokolnikov, Lenin and, of the rest, Marx and Engels a century ago: look at the *Fili* [\[7\]](#) one after another where I proved it some time ago. Now we can see what state capitalism is. But you go further, you speak of a state economy and the “*most absolute concentration of the economy within the ambit of the state.*” Now such a formula, I don’t say deserves many years in prison but I say stop to think that, from a Marxist point of view, the following terms are not well presented: society – production – economy – State. And now I’ll go over it and in doing so I don’t want to belittle anyone.

Let’s start by establishing another central point. Let’s allow for a series of the following economic types: a capitalism of free competition and personally owned firms – a capitalism of trusts, monopoly – financial parasitic capitalism – state direction of the economy – the statification of industrial and banking firms. Let’s then take the series of political power relationships: bourgeois parliamentary democracy – imperialism and totalitarian capitalism – revolutionary proletarian power – degenerating proletarian power – degenerated, and therefore capitalist, proletarian power (without a *third class* and not because there are only two classes in modern society).

So *I said* that the two series are not in parallel: they don’t have a one to one relationship as we say in mathematics. Any category of the first series can, in time x and in place y, coincide with any category in the second series.

I will begin to explain. What is it that we cannot get into the heads of democrats and libertarians, our *number one key Marxist point*: the dictatorship? What is the central argument? It is not only possible but inevitable that an hour, a year or five years after the destruction of bourgeois power, an economic cell, an enterprise structure of a bourgeois type will survive: we say one to mean eventually also the whole system. In these sectors of production there will not only be exploited wage workers but also a boss who appropriates a profit. Yet this does not take away from the fact that at the same time there is a full proletarian political power: it just means that the transformation of production has not yet reached that sector. It will be done later. Meanwhile the bourgeoisie is deprived of political and civil rights controlled, even if still tolerated, by the organs of the red dictatorship. And this? And is it for this alone that the dictatorship is justified and imposed? Fine. Therefore we can have a proletariat and revolutionary party in power which has good tactic at home and in the Communist International and at the same time a capitalist economic zone which even might include private enterprise.

Vice-versa, with a purely bourgeois power such as that in England we can have a totally statified industrial sector, or rather one which has not only passed from personal ownership to a

limited company then to an enterprise controlled by a trust to end up with the type in which the State is the owner and entrepreneur of the firm thus it is not just a concession, but it directs it economically, like for example the Tobacco Manufacture in Italy: every worker is an employee of the State. As I have said on numerous occasions, we have even more real communist organisational types under capitalist power, for example, the fire service: when something is burning no-one pays to put out the fire; if nothing is burning the firecrew are kept on all the same.

I say all this to oppose the idea, whoever the author, that points to the successive stages: private capitalism, state capitalism as a lower form of socialism, higher form of socialism or communism.

State capitalism is not a semi-socialism but a real and proper capitalism, it is the very outcome of capitalism according to the Marxist theory of concentration and it condemns the free market theory of a permanent regime of production in which the admirable game of competition forever puts within reach of all a new slice of capital.

The ownership of the means of production is not enough to discriminate between capitalism and socialism (see *Property and Capital* [8]) but we need to consider the whole economic phenomenon, or rather, who disposes of the product and who consumes it.

Pre-capitalism, the economy of individual producers: the product is that of the independent labourer; everyone consumes what they produce. This doesn't deny that examples of surplus production and therefore surplus labour are made to the detriment of multitudes of workers (at times united with strength in numbers but without the modern division of production) divided by caste, order and privileged power.

Capitalism: associated labour (in Marx *social* labour), division of labour produced at the will of the capitalist and not the worker, who receives money to buy on the market as much as he needs to maintain his strength. The whole mass of produced objects pass through the monetary form on the journey from production to consumption.

The lower stage of socialism. The worker receives from the unitary socio-economic organisation a fixed quantity of products which he needs in life and cannot have more of them. Money has ended but consumer goods, which can neither be accumulated nor exchanged, still exist. The ration card? In the lower stage of socialism it is the card for everyone without the use of money and without a market.

The higher stage of socialism and communism. In every sector the ration card has a tendency to be abolished and everyone obtains as much as they need. Someone wants to go to 100 cinema shows in a row? They can do so, even today. Will you telephone the fire brigade after you have set the house on fire? You can do it today but under communism there will be no insurance. However, then and now the mental health service is run according to the pure communist economy, i.e. free and unlimited.

Recapitulation:

Precapitalism: economy without money and with work complementing money. Parcelled out production.

Capitalism: Economy with totalitarian employment of money. Social production.

Lower stage of socialism: Economy without money and with ration cards. Idem (i.e. the same social production)

Higher stage of socialism or communism: Economy without either money or ration card. Idem.

State capitalism, which it would be cretinous to call “state socialism,” remains entirely within capitalism. Everyone becomes a state wage worker. Surplus value, exploitation, etc persist. **You** say so, and that’s exactly right but it is not enough to see things in these terms, they must be located in their precise locations of time and space etc.

Before I come to the process in Russia, a further word on things I have often said or rather repeated in my articles.

The payment of money wages defines capitalism. Surplus value is only a consequence deduced by Marx from it in argument, dialectically, **even and also** including the gratuitous assumption that exchange everywhere is always free and equal. There is no such thing as a wage labour regime which gives the undiminished fruits of labour in money to the labourer (he taught that to Lassalle). For two principal reasons: only commercial methods lead to capitalist accumulation and exploitation (C-M-C, M-C-M' etc); a deduction is always indispensable for social ends; maintenance, depreciation, improvements through unceasing investment in newly manufactured goods which become production goods.

In a commercial atmosphere there cannot be social advance without class exploitation. But the fact is as follows: the amount of surplus value the capitalist minority materially rakes off **is not** the preponderant phenomenon. It is the deduction ostensibly for social ends which becomes abnormal, mistaken, disproportionate and destructive.

The average working day throughout the world is ten hours.

The capitalists rake off half an hour.

Capitalism wolfs down six and half hours

The worker gobbles at best three hours.

Under state capitalism, and more in appearance than anything else, we get rid of the half hour. This isn’t important. But there is a greater concentration of the conditions which make it tremendously more difficult to recover the other six hours which have become seven or more. It would be more socialist to tie up all the capitalists and send them to Tahiti to exploit themselves for an hour and administer the other nine hours: after a short while we would need to work less hours a day.

Therefore in a certain sense I can agree with you that, starting from different points the capitalist countries and Russia have reached comparable situations as far as their economic tissue is concerned where the state accumulates, manages, and invests capital which has no private ownership. The concentration of power makes it easier to capitalise sectors which are still economically pre-capitalist. Good. However the power of the state never ceases to be used for

class ends even from the beginning when it was not *theoretically* interested in the economy. (A bourgeois economy arises on the basis of the free exchange of equivalents but this is not possible without a concrete force which is ready to strike at those who tend to exchange non-equivalents in the bourgeois legal sense; therefore the factor of the State is *always* decisive).

In bourgeois countries you will recall the description of Lenin which was valid right up until the First World War. Good here too. Let's turn to the creditor and debtor countries (not states) which invest abroad and the real explanation of parasitism. In the modern form this does not consist of coupon clippers or *rentiers* but of *big businessmen* and, as ever, entrepreneurs: but we are no longer talking of entrepreneurs in production who work on small margins but of very big businessmen with colossal waste and very frequent changes of personnel.

To my mind dirigisme ^[9] and modern state capitalism leave greater space than in the past for the brigandage of private initiatives or groups, in the class solidarity which the bourgeoisie has socially and politically had since it appeared, an ever more global solidarity, even in war.

Here is an "analysis" on which we could do well to work. Only that the mechanism can be, let's say, in Siberia, or in a group making profits in Canada ... via Tangiers or somewhere else.

I'll finish for now by looking at the process in Russia. I began with the remark that under the Tsar capitalism was only present in heavy and war industry: at bottom capitalism is born in a State form (the arsenals of absolute monarchies etc) the private factories only come along later...

The bourgeois democratic revolution would have been sufficient to give a greater impetus to the development of the capitalist tendency in all the other backward sectors of the economy: peasant, patriarchal, Asiatic etc. etc, artisanal, trading and such like. Naturally the October Revolution, carried out mainly by the industrial proletariat of the large cities, pushed the entire economy of the country further forward and therefore from then on at least nine tenths of pre-bourgeois Russian society *tend to capitalism* and could not tend towards socialism just through this mechanism.

But I spoke about that tenth of the economy which attempted to become socialist and then *had to take a step back towards capitalism*. Have these tendencies now all ended, and is it now capitalist? We could admit it but only from that point when it gave up any attempt to wait for the world revolution: the counter-revolutionary position was reached even if in Moscow ... the firemen cost nothing.

In 1919-20 in Leningrad ^[10] and Moscow you could take the tram free, that is to say not just workers going to and from work but anyone who wanted to get on didn't have to pay for a *ticket* or show a card. You didn't pay on the train either but you needed a ticket from a soviet organisation. The lower stage of socialism in this case.

The factory worker got a lot of things in kind amongst which was bread which was taken from the countryside even by force. Money had no value; everyone got a little money and bought something on the black market.

When NEP began Lenin explained; it's no good, we have to legalise the market, allow the peasantry, after paying tax in kind, to bring goods to the provincial market to exchange for industrial products, and pay factory workers in money. It's useless to go on whilst waiting for *the*

world revolution, and even in the big centres and in heavy industry we have to extinguish the little socialism that the Russian economy allowed, and fall back to capitalism. We don't have bourgeois bosses in the factories or their shares quoted on the London Stock Exchange. Which, Lenin said, perhaps makes this a socialist factor? This is still capitalism, but of the State. Even if it is a proletarian state which governs here the thing smells more of the rule of a bourgeois state.

Re-read your quotations and you will see that they correspond with what I am saying. Ever since then, it has accumulated and invested, spreading industrialism and capitalist potential always on the backs of the workers: you are right. It always takes the same form: capitalism. Of the State should we add? All right.

Wherever it is, and wherever the economic form of the market exists, capital is a *social* force. It is a *class* force. It has at its beck and call the political *State*. Its interests become ever more international, even when the agonising struggle of the central states brings about war. They form an impersonal network, have their own dynamic inertia which moves according to their own laws.

By making the idea of the present situation of such forces in the Russian context concrete I believe I am saying something which goes beyond the phrase "state capitalism" which in itself says *nothing*.

[Fifth Letter] Onorio to Alfa 6 October 1951

I am taking up the conversation at the point where your letter of 31 July left it and I have drafted some summary notes by way of conclusion. My criticism is addressed mainly to your statement that the revolution would be "wasting its time" if it had not first sought to do away with the most important centre of capitalism, universally identified today as the state of Washington D.C.

Here you agree with me, and you had no choice, that you don't mean to put a ban on revolutionary attempts elsewhere or to create a hierarchy of such attempts. In truth we Marxists don't talk of "prohibition" but of recognising that a revolutionary outbreak can come anywhere in the capitalist world and that it expresses – this is the main point – a capacity and explosive potential for extension which is the basis of revolutionary socialist strategy that leads it to spread abroad and to try to "do away with" the state of Washington D.C. All this has to be understood historically and not in order to avoid discussing its validity, both theoretically and politically. It isn't very convincing as a political argument aiming at the revolutionary preparation of those proletarians who have to judge the political trajectory of Soviet Russia (which allied with America in the most decisive period of its rise to hegemony) as counter-revolutionary. There can be no agreement with this argument which, put in this context seems like a purely political expedient to avoid the real problem which is the profound capacity for extension of any victorious revolution wherever the initial revolutionary victory takes place.

Incidentally I remember reading in our "*Battaglia*" something on this subject which tried to take an original position between our two viewpoints which will cease to diverge as soon as you accept that the revolution can break out in the face of a proletarian assault wherever capitalism seems weakest. This thesis, supported by the writer in "*Battaglia*," is a significant enough

example of the way in which the problem of revolution is posed: it starts with a political polemic in place of a dialectical examination.

In this the anti-Stalinist revolution is posed as “*conditio sine qua non*” because it makes the defeat of the state of Washington D.C possible. But it does not ask if this revolution, in so far as it is the work of the proletariat, resolves the fundamental class problem which is that of the destruction of the capitalist state which then allows the capitalist economy to pass to the level of socialist production and distribution. It isn’t mentioned because whoever wrote the article believes in a revolution devoid of material premises essential in a Marxist conception.

This is a throwback to motives of a purely idealist and voluntarist type which we thought had been definitely overcome at least within our small vanguard. The Anti-Stalinist revolution, due to the fact that it will be carried out by the proletariat, will have all the characteristics of an anti-capitalist one, otherwise it will just be reduced to a banal episode of a palace revolution and a mere changing of the guard.

And whilst we are applying dialectical method I'll pick up the thread of our conversation to say what I think about your “method” of dealing with the dialectic in history. It seems to me that your game of yes/no contradictions is totally devoid of formal dialectics; they may have some demonstrative value in the historical examples you quote in relation to your argument but they don’t fully satisfy the need for a dialectical evaluation of the revolutionary motives of the nascent bourgeoisie. The facts which you draw out of the British experience seem formally correct, but anyone who thinks and believes in a type of correspondence, which is not just temporal, between the movement of things in the subsoil and the movement of the social and political forces in the superstructure, thinks and believes according to the precepts of a mechanical determinism which is contrary to the historical materialism meant by Marx. It is, in other words, more “historical” than “materialist.” I remind you with Bukharin that

“...any contradiction between the productive forces and the economy are quickly smoothed out, it rapidly exercises its influence on the superstructure, then the superstructure in its turn on the economy and the productive forces and the circle starts again without interruption.”

In short we are not just talking about grasping the contradiction between an evolving English economy with a capitalist character and a corresponding anti-Convention and anti-Napoleon [\[11\]](#) policy of parties and Government.

The unfolding of the English industrial revolution had posed a problem of a political and social organisation as a revolutionary choice in bourgeois dress, whose progress was affirmed and measured by the quantity of economic, social and political forces of the old order which it defeated, and on their material capacity for resistance.

You asked yourself if the English industrial revolution had then been only English?

And so can we accept what you state that “all” the English superstructural forces were counter-revolutionary? For the most part what was dominant in English foreign policy was the need to struggle for hegemony on a continent which France threatened. This is very easy to explain but to say that it was in “toto,” no. In any case the struggle on a political level between the forces of the dying Ancien Regime and the new liberal forces expressed by the industrial revolution did

not mean dialectically that the bourgeois revolt would succeed. The movement of the Enlightenment had its first formulation in England after the Revolution of 1688 and it ended with the storming of the Bastille which was on the other hand a response, the first of a series of revolutionary responses, to the internationally posed demands of a nascent capitalism.

However, the line of historical development of the liberal movement is easily identifiable and we would fail to understand, both in its totality and its contradictions, the advance of England in the modern bourgeois world if we undervalue the vast and progressive conflict between the new and increasing forces of the liberal movement and the Ancien Regime, between the defenders of “*habeas corpus*” and the return of absolutism, between the world of strong medieval leftovers and the age of religious conflict, of the political privileges of landed property and the world of industry and commerce, the policy of the Government was by force of necessity counter-revolutionary in regard to the France of both the Convention and Napoleon.

And it is along this line of dialectical interpretation that we will arrive at a consciousness of the real reasons which were at the heart of the first workers’ movements: angry reactions against machines seen as the cause of unemployment, and the rise of the first workers’ unions which would lead to a large number of strikes.

There is, in a word, an expanding and assertive capitalist economy with a corresponding ruling class, the bourgeoisie, whose policy is both liberal and reactionary at the same time, progressive but also prudently conservative. Everyone knows that in every society, in the to and fro between the progressive and reactionary and in all historical periods, there is a tendency for tradition to prevail.

Some further observations on your way of applying the dialectic to the experience of Soviet Russia. You write:

“The social and economic retreat of 1921 and abandonment of certain socialist forms (the strictly economic point later). We, all of us on the left, approved the justifications for the international revolutionary strategy: a step backwards to catch our breath: reply no – yes – yes. That is the internal social economy goes backward, the revolutionary struggle goes forward.”

The replies you give “no – yes – yes,” can make sense if referring to the entire subjective condition of our political struggle back then. But if we had to respond to the same questions today there is no doubt that we would respond “no” to all three, i.e. it is not true that the social economy in the USSR was retreating and the revolutionary struggle was advancing. Now we know that the socialised economy within Russia was retreating and the revolutionary struggle did not advance after the death of Lenin onwards neither in the fatherland ... of socialism nor anywhere else.

The truth is that we of the Left showed that we were against the policy of the Party but we did not worry enough about linking the reasons for the decline of the world proletarian revolution to the retreat from socialism, and its disappearance from the economic and social organisations of the first proletarian revolution. The fault lies with us alone for preferring to turn ourselves in to assertors of the dialectic of words in place of a dialectic of things.

Agreed, there is nothing automatic in all this, there is only a backward development on the level of the superstructure towards bourgeois practices, the reflection of a return to a truly capitalist mode of production. This is why the hypothesis you have formulated is dominated by idealism.

“Like the English economy which was the most advanced in 1793 whilst it pursued the most reactionary foreign policy so it could be that a country which had evolved social and economic characteristics of socialism could have a bourgeois party policy and make war.”

If we are dealing with a present possibility, logic demands you refer directly to the Russian experience, if on the other hand we are dealing with a future possibility, the hypothesis is of no interest to us, because it has abandoned a Marxist analysis.

Finally, I freely acknowledge how our initially divergent arguments on the evaluation of state capitalism have, as is natural, come closer. It's only that the old police function of the state, rather than its interest in the economy, has greater emphasis in your vision of the bourgeois world, whilst in mine the state increases its power to the maximum, especially to protect the economy which it concentrates in itself against the competing and contradictory forces which have increased on both a national and international scale.

Since we both consider that state capitalism “*is to be found entirely and totally within capitalism*” we also draw from this the same conclusion on the process in Russia. For my part I hold to this with your own words which, in their turn, sum up what I have been writing to you on the Russian economy as state capitalist.

“Ever since then, it has accumulated and invested, spreading industrialism and capitalist potential always on the backs of the workers: you are right. It always takes the same form: capitalism. Of the State should we add? All right.

Wherever it is, and wherever the economic form of the market exists, capital is a *social* force. It is a *class* force. It has at its beck and call the political *State*.”

These are precise terms until 1900, the epoch which we usually make the start of the period of imperialist expansion. These terms remain true and current, even if, taken in isolation, incomplete, when the evolution of capitalism confers on the State the function of taking over from private initiative as the terminal point of such an evolution. It would be worth the effort to document the present development of certain sectors of the American economy to see this phenomenon, on which bourgeois observers have already remarked, in reality, in the characteristic realisation of state capitalism attributed to the powerful personality of the Kaiser. In talking of state economy it's not me who is going too far. These are the facts of the economy which is so dynamically ahead of us that sometimes we fall back on old economic schemas because when facts don't match with history we cease to be Marxists. We would not be true to our revolutionary understanding and “culture” if we too were backward on these issues.

We are not just dealing with a more or less sharp debate over a theoretical point but making clear and defining the character of the present period of capitalist development which poses the problem of a particular tactical and strategic vision for the revolutionary party and not some set of ... Trappist monks.

For Russia, which can't be left out of this reality, this is particularly important. According to your view its economy is tending towards capitalism; you say that nine-tenths of Russian pre-bourgeois society tends there, as is now that tenth of the economy which had attempted to become socialist and is now going backwards. Let's recognise that the tendency of the nine-tenths is on the right lines but what of the other tenth, even in the supposition that it was on the way to socialism, let's say though an inferior version, it cannot now tend to capitalism because it structurally cannot, in my view, return to the private entrepreneur but carries on functioning with the characteristics of a centralised economy within the ambit of the State which appears today as the "natural outlet of capitalism according to the Marxist theory of concentration." It is in this real world that we find the motives of a party and state policy which stinks, and which has no valid dialectical connection with either a historical or revolutionary point of view.

I don't want to conclude these remarks without giving my impression on what you have said, or rather, the way you have said it. What do I mean? When I re-read your writings after some time the strange feeling of astonishment and dissatisfaction gleaned from the first reading was still present and perhaps even more explicit. What is disconcerting is that there is in your writings a central motif, a fuzziness which doesn't fully make itself clear, and around it all a fringe of sparkling polemics, where it is not difficult to discern a tendency to minimise and make accommodations on any issue.

This central motif is a product of your conviction that the Soviet economy in its backward march towards capitalism, has not yet brought this u-turn to a conclusion, in simple terms it has not fully returned to capitalism.

All the rest is derived from this barely stressed conviction, in the formulation of a hypothetical country with evolved social characteristics which has a bourgeois policy of party and war, in the exhausting research into French and English history to find valid examples as proof, and finally the theory of Capitalist Concentration No. 1, the USA towards which all revolutionary efforts must be directed whilst the Russian concentration is to be dealt with later, and in a totally subordinate fashion thanks to the Proletarian Revolution. [\[12\]](#)

Why do I insist so much on this particular aspect of your interpretation? Because of the consequences which can be drawn from it on a more directly political level. In truth you don't accept that we treat the USA and Russia equally and not just at the moment.

It is impossible for the revolutionary party not to practice a policy of equidistance, especially if it is in a period where war has already been declared between a fully developed capitalist country like the USA, and a Russia which you make out is tending towards capitalism. It could be the theoretical premise for new ambiguous experiences. In every way this would profoundly disturb the strategic vision of the revolutionary party in the course of the next imperialist war.

If this final judgement may be inspired by the demon of polemic I would like to acknowledge it with pleasure.

Et de hoc satis. [\[13\]](#)

Notes

1. Damen is here responding to Bordiga's document "Theory and Action in Marxist Doctrine" which was published in the *Internal Bulletin* of the Internationalist Communist Party. It was an amended version of an "international address" Bordiga had made in April in Rome when Damen had been present. The article, including the graph Damen refers to, can be found in English at the [International Communist Party web site](#).
2. Both Bordiga and Damen keep referring to the "the state of Washington" thus to avoid confusion for US readers we have added D.C. where appropriate so as to make it clear that this is not the state in the North West corner of the USA. On the other hand no attempt has been made to alter the Italian habit of referring to "English" when they really mean "British" throughout the correspondence.
3. Jacques de Palisse was a feudal lord who died at the battle of Pavia in 1525. His fame rests more though on the nonsense verses and songs written about him after his death. "If he wasn't dead he would still be alive" being the most famous. Bordiga here appears just to be saying "nonsense" again.
4. "For the use of Onorio" i.e. for Damen's eyes only.
5. There is a real place called Roccacannuccia in Puglia (about 15 miles south of Lecce) but it has no connection with the term used here. It is common practice to use it to refer sarcastically to nowhere in particular.
6. American battleship then in the harbour in Naples, Bordiga's home town.
7. Bordiga is here referring to his own series of writings published in *Battaglia Comunista* under the rubric of *Il Filo Del Temp* (The Thread of Time).
8. Name of a series of articles by Bordiga published in *Prometeo* in 1948-9.
9. More than once Bordiga uses the Italianised version of the French "dirigisme" or "state direction of the economy" – a policy which can be traced back to Napoleon I and which he seems to see as a precursor of state capitalism.
10. Bordiga means Petrograd which retained that name until Stalin re "baptised" it after Lenin's death in 1924.
11. The Convention was the legislative body which, led by the Jacobins, dominated the French Revolution from 1792-4 and it was against this that the British Government originally declared the war (1793) which, with one brief respite (1802), continued until the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815.
12. Damen means here the October Revolution of 1917.
13. And on this, enough.