[3] See, for instance, *The Fundamentals of Revolutionary Communism*, International Communist Party, Paris, 1972 (in English).

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Notes on Trotsky, Pannekoek, Bordiga

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It may be interesting to examine these three men, not as individuals, but as standpoints, because in the eyes of many people who try to understand something in our time, they represent three different situations and analyses.

I

If one goes back to Trotsky's quarrel with Lenin in 1903-4 and in the following years, in the "Menshevik" period of his life, one must admit that he rightly saw the flaw in the Kautsky-Lenin view that "class consciousness" arises outside the workers' movement, and is then introduced into it by the "party." This is explained in *Our Political Tasks*, although it is considerably blurred by many other ideas. Trotsky refutes Lenin's conception from a democratic point of view: he does not see communism as the abolition of the commodity economy and the creation of a new world, but as the rule of the workers over society. Therefore he attacks Lenin for substituting the party for the proletariat. But Lenin's theory must be refuted from another angle: Lenin fails to grasp what Marx had tried to show. Transformed into a commodity, having all aspects of its life turned into commodities, the proletariat, when capital forces it to revolt (for instance, after a crisis), cannot avoid destroying the market economy and all its consequences on labour, personal relations, affective life, use of space and nature, representation, etc. Lenin, like all the militants of the Second International, failed to see that the communist program was *within* the proletariat. More generally, these people ignored the dynamics of capital, and what communism really is. All the contributions to the breakdown controversy (Luxemburg, Hilferding, etc.), most of which had a purely economic conception, saw the problem from the point of view of capital: why it could not work, and not from the point of view of the proletariat: how the revolt of the workers led to new social relations. This is not to say that communism only emerges out of the action of the workers. On the contrary, the workers only attack capital if it attacks them because of its inner problems (fall of the rate of profit, etc.). But it is not enough to understand economic crises; one also has to understand what they imply for the proletariat.

This was not understood at that time, owing to the overall stability and prosperity. But it led revolutionaries to make a series of mistakes. One of them was to misunderstand the workers' movement, which at that time could only be reformist, and also the social-democratic movement, which could only be evolutionary (with few exceptions). Only the collapse of the International in 1914 really taught them what social-democratic parties really stood for.

Trotsky's conception of the permanent revolution in Russia can only be studied in this context. He thought that, after the democratic revolution (which could only be made by the workers and peasants, as the bourgeoisie was too weak: Lenin agreed about that), the workers could not avoid going further, and would quickly take power for themselves – with the support of the small peasants – to introduce socialism. This is where Lenin did not agree. Now it is obvious that communism – as Marx and communist theory define it – was impossible at that stage in Russia, because of the huge pre-capitalist sector. Trotsky did not care about that, because to him socialism was equivalent to workers' power. This is what I mean about his democratic conception of the revolution. However, communism is a *transformation* of social life, not just its management by the masses.

Despite, or rather because of this conception, Trotsky was able to play a much larger role in the 1905 revolution (because he was much closer to the workers) than Lenin, whose centralist and rigid position in the 1903 split had alienated him from many active workers. Lenin also did not trust spontaneous movements. It is even possible that the 1905 events helped him modify his own position and become more efficient in the period from 1906 to 1914.

During the war, Trotsky's internationalism, like Luxemburg's, was not as radical, as the position Lenin expressed with his slogan: transform the imperialist war into a civil war.

After he joined the Bolsheviks, Trotsky clearly showed that he hardly understood what was going on. He had formerly identified socialism with workers' power; he now identified workers' power with party power. From this he concluded that Russia was building socialism. In *Communism and Terrorism* he stated that the duty of the worker was to obey the (workers') State and that socialism meant discipline and high productivity of labour. Lenin acted the same way, but he was at least aware of the notion of communism. He more or less realised that Russia was not socialist and could only be socialist with the help of Europe.

One must be very accurate on this question. Trotsky actually believed that capitalism *could* be avoided in Russia, even with no revolution in Europe. It is true that he did not go so far as to believe that Russia was completely socialist. This is why he had to invent the notion of an intermediate stage, neither capitalist nor socialist, and a fantastic theory of Bonapartism.

Trotsky took a very active part in the suppression of all opposition which had some communist content. His own opposition was opportunistic (alliance with Zinoviev in 1926) and he was afraid of becoming a threat to the State. He organised his own defeat. How many people know that in 1925-6 he refrained from all political activity for about a year and a half? There is no need to insist on this.

On the international level, he proved unable to understand the real efforts of communist minorities and he supported the Communist International in all its mistakes (activity within unions and parliament, "mass" parties, slogan of workers' government, etc.). After he was expelled from Russia, he was totally unable to establish any sort of useful contact with revolutionary groups. He refused to question the validity of the notorious "first four congresses of the Communist International." He was both a sectarian and an opportunist. He had an altogether administrative view of revolution. In France, for instance, he supported people who had neither proletarian ties nor revolutionary abilities, but were left-wing intellectuals. A list of all his political blunders would be amazing. Looking for a mass following, he urged his supporters to join socialist parties. He founded an International which had a program but no proletariat. He was always looking for a new magic device with which to go to the

masses, and always failed.

In fact he had no program. He must be regarded as an active militant, full of activity and ability, lacking a communist theoretical background. He was excellent in the midst of a rising movement, as in 1905, but he went completely wrong in a declining movement. Then he could become the worst bureaucrat if he was in power, or a troublemaker if he had no power. It is doubtful that he ever had a theory of his own, except for the theory of permanent revolution – and we do not know exactly what role Parvus played in the creation of this theory.

Trotsky only became an important figure as a symbol of the Russian revolution. After the defeat of the revolutionary movement, he remained important only because of the weakness of the communist minority.

II

Pannekoek (1873-1960) is not very well known in the West. A few years ago only a handful of militants or scholars had heard of him. His ideas and his past are coming back to life only because the present period is re-creating the conditions of his time – but with major differences which force us to correct his views.

Pannekoek was Dutch but most of his activity took place in Germany. He was one of the few socialists in the developed countries who kept alive the pre-1914 revolutionary tradition. But he only came to radical positions during and after the war. His 1920 text *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* is one of the best works of that period. Pannekoek saw that the failure of the Second International was not due to the failure of its strategy, but that the strategy was itself rooted in the function and the form of the Second International. The International was adapted to a precise stage of capitalism, in which workers asked for economic and political reforms. To make the revolution, the proletariat had to build organs of a new type, which would go beyond the old party/union dichotomy. On this he could not avoid a clash with the Communist International. First, because the Russians had never fully understood what the old International had been, and believed in organising the workers from above, without seeing the connection between Kautsky's "socialist consciousness" introduced into the masses, and Kautsky's counter-revolutionary stand; secondly, because the Russian State wished to have mass parties in Europe, capable of putting pressure on their governments to come to terms with Russia. What Pannekoek stood for was the real communist element in Germany. Soon it was defeated and various large Communist Parties appeared in the West. The communist left was reduced to small groups divided into different factions.

During the early 30's, Pannekoek and others tried to define communism. They had already, as early as the beginning of the 1920's, denounced Russia as capitalist. Now they went back to Marx's analysis of value. They stated that capitalism is production for value accumulation, whereas communism is production for use value, for the fulfilment of people's needs. But there has to be some planning: without the mediation of money, society will have to organise an accurate system of bookkeeping, in order to keep track of the amount of labour-time contained in every produced good. Precise accounting will see to it that nothing is wasted. Pannekoek and his friends were quite right to go back to value and its implications. But they were wrong to look for a rational accounting system in labour-time. What they propose is in fact the rule of value (since value is nothing but the amount of social labour-time necessary to produce a good) without the intervention of money. One may add that this was attacked by Marx in 1857, at the beginning of the *Grundrisse*. But the German (and Dutch) left communists did at least emphasise the heart of communist theory.

In the German civil war, from 1919 to 1923, the most active workers had created new forms of organisation, mainly what they called "unions,"[1] or sometimes "councils," though the majority of the workers' councils that existed were reformist. Pannekoek developed the idea that these forms were important, in fact vital to the movement, as opposed to the traditional party form. It was on this point that council communism attacked party communism. Pannekoek went on to develop this aspect more fully, until after the second world war he published *Workers' Councils*, which elaborates a purely councilist ideology. Revolution becomes a democratic process decided and controlled by the workers all the way through. Socialism is reduced to workers' management. As for the revolutionaries, they only have to correspond, set forth theory, circulate information, and describe what the workers are doing. But they must not organise in a permanent political group, try to define a strategy, or act accordingly, lest they become the new leaders of the workers and later the new ruling class. I tried to show how wrong this is in the chapter "Leninism and the Ultra-Left," first published in 1969 as a pamphlet.

From the analysis of Russia as State-capitalist, Pannekoek turned to the analysis of those who, in western countries, act as the representatives of the workers *within* capitalism, first of all the unions.

Pannekoek was familiar with the direct forms of resistance of the proletariat against capital, and he understood the triumph of counter-revolution. But he misunderstood the general context of the communist movement: its basis (transformation of the worker into a commodity), its fight (centralised action against the State and the existing workers' movement), its objective (creation of new social relations where there is *no economy* as such). He played an important role in the reformation of the revolutionary movement. We have to see the limits of his contribution, and then integrate it into a general re-formulation of subversive theory.

III

Bordiga (1889-1970) lived in a different situation. Like Pannekoek, who had fought against reformism before the war and even left the Dutch socialist party to create a new one, Bordiga belonged to the left of his party. But he did not go as far as Pannekoek. At the time of the first world war, the Italian party had a somewhat radical outlook, and there was no possibility of a split. The party even opposed the war, though in a more or less passive way.

When the Italian C.P. was founded in 1921, it broke with the right of the old party, and also with its centre. This fact displeased the Communist International. Bordiga led the party. He refused to take part in elections, not as a matter of principle but of tactics. Parliamentary activity can be used sometimes, but never when the bourgeoisie may use it to divert the workers from the class struggle. Later Bordiga wrote that he was not opposed to using the parliament as a tribune when this was possible. For instance, at the beginning of fascism, it made sense to try to use it as a tribune. But in 1919, in the midst of a revolutionary movement, when insurrection and its preparation were the order of the day, taking part in elections meant reinforcing bourgeois lies and misconceptions about the possibility of change through parliament. This was an important issue for Bordiga, whose group in the socialist party had been called the "abstentionist faction." The Communist International disagreed with this. Considering it a matter of tactics and not of strategy, Bordiga decided to obey the C.I., because he thought discipline was necessary in such a movement. But

[1] In this context the German word for "union" has nothing to do with trade-unions (which are called Gewerkschaften in German). The "unions" actually fought the trade-unions.

he kept his position.

The united front tactics were another bone of contention. It seemed to Bordiga that the very fact of inviting the socialist parties to common action would create confusion among the masses, and hide the irreconcilable opposition of these counter-revolutionary parties to communism. It would also help some communist parties which had not really broken with reformism to develop opportunistic tendencies.

Bordiga opposed the slogan of workers' government, which merely created confusion in theory and in practice. To him, the dictatorship of the proletariat was a necessary part of the revolutionary program. Today we can see that he was right on these two issues. However, unlike Pannekoek, he refused to explain these positions in terms of the degeneration of the Russian State and party. He felt that the C.I. was wrong, but that it was still communist.

Unlike the Communist International, Bordiga adopted a clear stand on fascism. He not only regarded fascism as another form of bourgeois rule, like democracy; he also believed one could not choose between them. This issue has been debated frequently. The Italian left's position is usually distorted. Historians often considered Bordiga responsible for Mussolini's rise to power. He is even accused of being unconcerned by the suffering of the people under fascism. In Bordiga's view, it is not true that fascism is worse than democracy, nor that democracy creates better conditions for the proletarian class struggle. Even if democracy were to be considered a lesser evil than fascism, it would be stupid and useless to support democracy in order to avoid fascism: the Italian (and later, German) experience showed that democracy had not only been powerless in the face of fascism, but had called fascism to its rescue. Afraid of the proletariat, democracy actually bred fascism. The only alternative to fascism was therefore the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Another argument was made later by the left – by Trotskyists, for instance – to support the anti-fascist policy. Capital needs fascism: it can no longer be democratic. So if we fight for democracy, we are in fact fighting for socialism. This is how most left-wing people (in fact, nearly all of them) justified their attitude during the second world war. But just as democracy breeds fascism, fascism breeds democracy. History has demonstrated that what Bordiga argued in theory has been realised in practice: capitalism replaces one with the other; democracy and fascism succeed each other. Both forms have been mixed and intermingled since 1945.

Of course the Communist International could not tolerate Bordiga's opposition, and between 1923 and 1926 he lost the control of the Italian Communist Party.[2] Although he did not quite agree with Trotsky, he took Trotsky's side against Stalin. At the Executive Committee of the Communist International in 1926, he attacked the Russian leaders: this was probably the last time someone publicly attacked the C.I. from within at such a high level. Yet here it is important to note that Bordiga failed to analyse Russia as capitalist and the C.I. as degenerated. He did not really break with Stalinism until a few years later.

Bordiga was in prison from 1926 to 1930, and during the 1930's he stayed away from the very active politics of the emigration. But his influence was strong and his friends were very active in theoretical work.

The 1930s were dominated by anti-fascism and popular fronts, which led to preparations for a new world war. The tiny emigrant Italian left argued that the next war could only be imperialist. The fight against fascism through support of democracy was seen as material and ideological preparation for this war.

[2] When he still held the majority, he resigned in favour of Gramsci, out of discipline.

After the beginning of the war, there was little opportunity for communist action. The Italian and German left both adopted an internationalist stand, whereas Trotskyism chose to support the allied powers against the Axis. At that time, Bordiga still refused to define Russia as capitalist, but he never believed – as Trotsky did – in supporting whatever side the Soviet Union would be allied with. He never agreed with the defence of the "Workers' State." One must bear in mind that, when Russia together with Germany invaded and partitioned Poland in 1939, Trotsky said this was a positive event, because it would alter Polish social relations in a socialist way!

In 1943, Italy changed sides and the Republic was created, providing opportunities for action. The Italian left created a party. They felt that the end of the war would lead to class struggles similar in nature to those at the end of the first world war. Did Bordiga really believe this? He apparently understood that the situation was completely different. The working class was this time totally under the control of capital, which had succeeded in rallying it around the banner of democracy. As for the losers (Germany and Japan), they were to be occupied and thus controlled by the winners. But Bordiga did not in fact oppose the views of the optimistic section of his group, and he kept this attitude until his death. He tended to keep aloof from the activity (and the activism) of his "party," and was mostly interested in theoretical understanding and explanation. Thus he helped create and perpetuate illusions with which he disagreed. His party lost most of its members in a few years. At the end of the 1940's it was reduced to a small group, as it had been before the war.

Most of Bordiga's work was theoretical. A considerable part of it dealt with Russia. He showed that Russia was capitalist and that its capitalism was not different in nature from the western one. The German left (or ultra-left) was wrong on that question. To Bordiga, the important thing was not the bureaucracy, but the essential economic laws which the bureaucracy had to obey. These laws were the same as the ones described in *Capital*: value accumulation, exchange of commodities, declining rate of profit, etc. True, the Russian economy did not suffer from over-production, but only because of its backwardness. The ultra-left believed that Russia had altered the basic laws described by Marx. It insisted on the control of the economy by the bureaucracy, to which it opposed the slogan of workers' management. Bordiga said there was no need for a new program; workers' management is a secondary matter; workers will only be able to manage the economy if market relations are abolished. Of course this debate went beyond the framework of an analysis of Russia.

This conception became clear in the late 50's. Bordiga wrote several studies on some of Marx's most important texts. In 1960 he said that the whole of Marx's work was a description of communism. This is undoubtedly the most profound comment made about Marx. Just as Pannekoek had returned to the analysis of value around 1930, Bordiga returned to it thirty years later. But what Bordiga developed was an overall conception of the development and dynamics of exchange from its origin to its death in communism.

Meanwhile, Bordiga retained his theory of the revolutionary movement, which included a misconception of the inner dynamics of the proletariat. He thought that workers would first gather on the economic level, and alter the nature of the unions; they would then reach the political level, thanks to the intervention of the revolutionary vanguard. It is easy to see here the influence of Lenin. Bordiga's small party entered unions (i.e., C.P.-controlled unions) in France and Italy, with no results at all. Although he more or less disapproved of this, he took no public stand against such disastrous activity.

Bordiga kept alive the core of communist theory. But he could not get rid of Lenin's views, that is, the views of the Second International. Therefore his action and his ideas had to be contradictory. But today it is not hard to understand all that was – and still is – valid in his work.

IV

There are too many legends about those who tried to resist, and to keep alive the revolutionary tradition during the long counter-revolution we have experienced since the beginning of the 1920's. Since theory is a necessary and indispensable part of subversion (any social movement wants to understand what it is doing), and since the Marxist tradition is the most accurate one, and in fact the only valid one, it is useful to come to terms with the tendencies represented by Trotsky, Pannekoek and Bordiga.

The first thing to know is what they actually represent. Trotsky was the leader of a faction *within* the Russian State, and only became an oppositionist because he was expelled from the inner circle of Russian leaders. As we mentioned, he always regarded himself as a citizen of the Soviet Union, and its interests were more important to him than those of the proletariat. Inside Russia, he was against any opposition which had a real proletarian content, whatever its short-comings, such as the Workers' Opposition (1920-1), the Workers' Group (1921-2), or even the Democratic Centralists. Outside Russia, he never tried to see what the European left communists (whether from Italy, Germany, or other countries) really were. He died without having learned anything. There is hardly anything in his work which can be used by us nowadays. A lot of people were attracted by his prestige, and still are. But anyone looking for something truly radical, and trying to ask the fundamental questions, must go beyond him. He was a revolutionary, and an excellent one, in one part of his life. But he belongs to the past.

Pannekoek and Bordiga are different in nature. They are products of the best elements in the revolutionary wave in Europe after the first world war. Surely there must be similar militants in other parts of the world, at least in the highly developed countries – in Japan, for instance. It would be instructive to investigate this.

Pannekoek understood and expressed the resistance of the proletariat to counter-revolution on an immediate level. He saw the unions as a monopoly of variable capital, similar to ordinary monopolies which concentrate constant capital. He described the revolution as the taking-over of life by the masses, against the productivist, hierarchic, and nationalist view of Stalinist *and* social-democratic "socialism" (largely shared by Trotskyism, and now by Maoism). But he failed to grasp the nature of capital, or the nature of the change communism would bring about. It its extreme form, as expressed by Pannekoek at the end of his life, council communism becomes a system of organisation where councils play the same role that the "party" plays in the Leninist view. But it would be a serious mistake to identify Pannekoek with his worst period. All the same, one cannot accept the theory of workers' management, especially at a time when capital is looking for new ways of integrating the workers by proposing joint participation in its management.

This is precisely why Bordiga is important: because he regarded all of Marx's work as an attempt to describe communism. Communism exists potentially within the proletariat. The proletariat is the negation of this society. It will eventually revolt against commodity production merely to survive, because commodity production is forced to destroy it, even physically. The revolution is neither a matter of consciousness, nor a matter of management. This makes Bordiga very different from the Second International, from Lenin, and from the official Communist International.

But he never managed to draw a line between the present and the past.[3] Now we can.

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