[29] Amadeo Bordiga – Beyond the Myth and the Rhetoric.

[30] "The brain of society: notes on Bordiga, organic centralism, and the limitations of the party form" - C. Derrick Varn.

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The 1950s and 60s: Damen, Bordiga, and the Passion for Communism

International Communist Current
2016

Published in International Review 158, Spring 2017. Online at https://en.internationalism.org/international-review/201609/14092/1950s-and-60s-damen-bordiga-and-passion-communism. This red texts version has slight changes to the formatting (e.g., capitalization, punctuation).

Prior to our excursion into the attempts of Spanish anarchism to establish "libertarian communism" during the war in Spain of 1936-39, we had published the contribution of the Gauche Communiste de France on the state in the period of transition[1], a text based on the theoretical advances of the Italian and Belgian left fractions in the 1930s, while already advancing beyond their conceptions in several respects. The GCF was part of a certain resurgence of proletarian political organisations in the wake of the Second World War, but by the early 1950s, the proletarian milieu was facing a serious crisis as it became increasingly evident that the profound defeat suffered by the working class had not been dispersed by the war – on the contrary, the victory of democracy over fascism had further exacerbated the disorientation of the proletariat. The end of the counter-revolution which had begun in the 1920s was still a long way ahead.

In our book *The Dutch and German Left*, particularly chapter 11, "The Communistenbond Spartacus and the 'councilist current' (1942-50)" we looked at the significant developments that took place in a part of the Dutch communist left: the attempt by the Communistenbond Spartacus to open up to discussions with other currents (such as the GCF) and to re-appropriate some of the old positions of the KAPD – this was a turn away from the anti-party ideas developed in the 30s. However, these advances were fragile and the basically anarchist ideas which had been adopted by the majority of the Dutch-German left in reaction to the degeneration of Bolshevism soon returned in force, contributing to a long-drawn out process of dispersal into mainly local groups focused on the immediate struggles of the workers.

In 1952, the GCF broke up: partly the result of a mistaken diagnosis of the historic course, leading to the conclusion that a third world war was imminent and to the departure of Marc Chirik, the most influential member of the GCF, to Venezuela; and partly due to a combination of personal tensions and unexpressed political differences. Marc fought against these difficulties in a series of "letters from afar," in which he also tried to outline the tasks of revolutionary organisations in the historic conditions they now encountered, but he was unable to halt the disintegration of the group. Some of its former members joined the Socialisme ou Barbarie group around Cornelius Castoriadis, of which more in a later article.

[1] "In the aftermath of World War Two: debates on how the workers will hold power after the revolution".

In the same year, a major split took place between the two major tendencies within the Internationalist Communist Party in Italy – tendencies which had existed more or less from the beginning but which had been able to establish a kind of Modus Vivendi when the party was going through a euphoric phase of growth. As the retreat in the class struggle became increasingly obvious, the organisation, faced with the demoralisation of many of the workers who had joined it on a superficial activist basis at the beginning, was inevitably compelled to reflect on its future tasks and direction.

The 1950s and early 60s was thus another dark period for the communist movement, which faced a real prolongation of the deep counter-revolution that had descended on the working class in the 30s and 40s, but this time dominated by the image of a triumphant capitalism which appeared to have recovered – perhaps definitively – from the catastrophic crisis of the 30s. It was the triumph, in particular, of US capital, of democracy, of an economy which passed relatively quickly from post-war austerity to the consumer boom of the late 50s and early 60s. Certainly this "glorious" period had its shadow side, above all the relentless confrontation between the two imperialist giants with its proliferation of local wars and the overarching threat of a nuclear holocaust. Along with this, in the "democratic" bloc, there was a real surge in paranoia about communism and subversion, exemplified by the McCarthyite witch-hunts in the USA. In this atmosphere, revolutionary organisations, where they existed at all, were even more reduced in scale, even more isolated than they had been in the 1930s.

This period thus marked a profound rupture in continuity with the movement that had shaken the world in the aftermath of the First World War, and even with the courageous minorities which had resisted the advancing counter-revolution. As the economic boom continued, the very idea that capitalism was a transient system, doomed by its own inner contradictions, appeared far less evident than it had done in the years 1914-1945, when the system seemed to be caught up in one gigantic catastrophe after another. Perhaps marxism itself had failed? This was certainly the message being pushed by any number of sociologists and other professional bourgeois thinkers, and such ideas would soon penetrate the revolutionary movement itself, as we saw in our recent series on decadence[2].

All the same, the generation of militants who had been steeled by the revolution or by the fight against the degeneration of the political organisations it had created had not altogether vanished. Some of the key figures of the communist left remained active after the war and into the period of retreat in the 50s and 60s, and for them, despite everything, the perspective of communism was by no means dead and buried. Pannekoek, though no longer linked to an organisation, published his book on workers' councils and their role in the construction of a new society[3]; and right into his old age he remained in contact with a number of the groups that appeared after the war, such as Socialisme ou Barbarie. Militants who had broken with Trotskyism during the war, such as Castoriadis and Munis, maintained a political activity and tried to outline a vision of what lay beyond the capitalist horizon. And Marc Chirik, though "unorganised" for over a decade, certainly did not abandon revolutionary thought and inquiry; when he returned to organised militant life in the mid-60s, he would have clarified his views on a number of questions, not least on the problems of the transition period.

[2] "The post-war boom did not reverse the decline of capitalism".

[3] *Workers' Councils*. See also the article referenced in footnote 1.

We will return to the writings of Castoriadis, Munis and Chirik in subsequent articles. We think it is valid to talk about their individual contributions even though the work they carried out was nearly always done in the context of a political organisation. A revolutionary militant does not exist as a mere individual, but as part of a collective organism which, in the final analysis, is engendered by the working class and its struggle to become conscious of its historical role. A militant is by definition an individual who has committed him or herself to the construction and defence of a political organisation, and who is thus motivated by a profound loyalty to the organisation and its needs. But – and here, as we shall see below, we part company with the conceptions developed by Bordiga – the revolutionary organisation is not an anonymous collective, in which the individual sacrifices his personality and thus abandons his critical faculties; a healthy political organisation is an *association* in which the individuality of different comrades is harnessed rather than suppressed. In such an association, there is room for the particular theoretical contributions of different comrades and, of course, for debate around the differences raised by individual militants. Thus, as we have found throughout this series, the history of the communist programme is not only a history of the struggles of the working class, not only a history of the organisations and currents that have drawn the lessons from these struggles and elaborated them into a coherent programme, but also of the individual militants who have led the way in this process of elaboration.

Damen and Bordiga as revolutionary militants

In this article, we return to the work of the Italian communist left, which before the war, in the shape of the Fraction in exile, had made such an irreplaceable contribution to our understanding of the problems of the transition from capitalism to communism. This contribution had also been constructed on the marxist foundations laid down by the left current in Italy during the preceding phase, the phase of imperialist world war and of the post-war revolutionary wave; and after the second imperialist war, the theoretical legacy of the Italian left did not disappear in spite of the errors and schisms that afflicted the Internationalist Communist Party. And throughout this whole period, whether we are examining the question of the transition period or other issues, it is impossible to ignore the interaction, and often the opposition, of two leading militants of this current – Onorato Damen and Amadeo Bordiga.

During the stormy days of war and revolution from 1914 to 1926, Damen and Bordiga demonstrated very clearly a capacity to stand against the dominant order that is the hallmark of a communist militant. Damen was jailed for agitating against the war; Bordiga fought tirelessly to develop the work of his fraction inside the Socialist Party and then to push for a split with the right wing and the centrists and the formation of a communist party on solid principles. When the new Communist International itself embarked upon an opportunist course in the early 1920s, Bordiga was again in the front line of opposition to the tactics of the United Front and the "Bolshevisation" of the CPs; he had the immense courage to stand up at the meeting of the CI's Executive Committee in Moscow in 1926 and denounce Stalin, to his face, as the gravedigger of the revolution. That same year, Bordiga himself was arrested and exiled to the island of Ustica[4]. Damen meanwhile was also active in resisting the attempts of the CI to impose its opportunist policies on the Italian party, which had initially been dominated by the left. Along with Fortichiari, Repossi and others he

[4] On Ustica, he encountered Gramsci who had played a central role in imposing the CI's line in the Italian party and pushing Bordiga out of the leadership. By now Gramsci was already ill and despite their considerable differences Bordiga didn't hesitate to take up the defence of his basic needs, and to work with him in the formation of a marxist educational circle.

formed the Comitato di Intesa in 1926[5]. During the fascist period he went through more than one episode of confinement and exile, but he was not silenced, leading a prisoners' revolt in Pianosa.

At this juncture, however, there was a difference in the reaction of the two militants which was to have very long term consequences. Bordiga, placed under house arrest and obliged to abjure all political activity (how mild the fascists seemed then!), avoided all contacts with his comrades and concentrated entirely on his work as an engineer. He recognised that the working class had suffered a historic defeat, but did not draw the same conclusion from this as the comrades who formed the Fraction in exile. The latter understood that it was as necessary as ever to maintain an organised political activity, even if it could no longer be in the form of a party. Thus at the time of the formation of the Italian Fraction, and all through the extremely fertile decade that followed, Bordiga was entirely cut off from these theoretical developments[6]. Damen on the other hand maintained contacts and regrouped a number of comrades from the Fraction on their return to Italy with the idea of contributing to the formation of the party. These included militants like Stefanini, Danielis and Lecci, who had remained faithful to the essential positions of the Fraction throughout the 30s and the war. In 1943, the Partito Comunista Internazionalista (PCInt) was proclaimed in the north of Italy; the party was then "re-founded" in 1945 following a somewhat hasty regroupment with elements around Bordiga in the south of Italy[7].

As a result, the unified party, formed around a platform written by Bordiga, was from the very beginning a compromise between two tendencies. The one around Damen was much clearer on many basic class positions and these were to no small extent connected to the developments undertaken by the Fraction – for example, the explicit adoption of the theory of the decadence of capitalism and the rejection of Lenin's position on national self-determination.

In this sense – and we have never hidden our criticism of the profound opportunism involved in the formation of the party from the very beginning – the "Damen" tendency showed a capacity to assimilate some of the most important programmatic gains made by the Italian Fraction in exile, and even to take on some of the key questions raised within the Italian Fraction and advance towards a more worked out position. This was the case with the union question: within the Fraction, this had been an unresolved debate, in which Stefanini had been the first to defend the idea that the unions had already been integrated into the capitalist state. Although it cannot be said that the position of the Damen tendency has ever been totally consistent on

[5] This text was recently re-published in English as a pamphlet by the Internationalist Communist Tendency.

[6] The practical problems facing Bordiga during this period were certainly considerable: he was followed by two police agents wherever he went. Nevertheless there was also a voluntary element in Bordiga's isolation from his comrades and Damen, in a kind of obituary written shortly after Bordiga's death in 1970, is sharply critical of Bordiga at the level of political comportment: "His political behaviour, his constant refusal to take on a politically responsible attitude, has to be considered in this particular climate. Thus many political events, some of great historic importance, such as the Trotsky-Stalin conflict and Stalinism itself were disdainfully ignored without an echo. The same was true for our Fraction abroad in France and Belgium, the ideology and the politics of the party of Livorno, the Second World War and finally the alignment of the USSR with the imperialist front. Not a word, not a line on Bordiga's part appeared throughout this historic period which was on a wider and more complex level than the First World War." From Bordiga – Beyond the Myth and the Rhetoric. A study of Bordiga's "years of obscurity" has been published in Italian: Arturo Peregalli and Sandro Saggioro, *Amadeo Bordiga. – La sconfitta e gli anni oscuri (1926-1945)*. Edizioni Colibri, Milan, November 1998.

[7] See the following articles: "The Second Congress of the Internationalist Communist Party", "The Italian Fraction and the French Communist Left".

the union question, it was certainly clearer than what became the dominant "Bordigist" view after the 1952 split.

This process of clarification also extended to the tasks of the communist party in the proletarian revolution. As we have seen in previous articles in his series[8], the Fraction had, despite some lingering notions about the party exercising the dictatorship of the proletariat, essentially gone beyond this position by insisting that a key lesson of the Russian revolution was that the party should not become entangled with the transitional state. The Damen tendency went even further and made it clear that the task of the party was not to exercise power. Its 1952 platform, for example states that "no time and for no reason should the proletariat surrender its role in the struggle. It should not delegate its historical mission to others or transfer its power to other – not even its own political party."

As we show in our book *The Italian Communist Left*, these insights, quite logically, were linked to certain developments on the question of the state:

> "Much bolder was the position that the PCInt took up on the question of the state in the period of transition, where it was visibly influenced by *Bilan* and *Octobre*. Damen and his comrades rejected the assimilation of the dictatorship of the proletariat with the rule of the party, and in the face of the proletarian state called for the widest democracy in the councils. They did not rule out the hypothesis, verified at Kronstadt, of confrontations between the workers' state and the proletariat, in the which case the communist party should be on the site of the latter: 'The dictatorship of the proletariat can in no sense be reduced to the dictatorship of this party, even if this is the party of the proletariat, the intelligence and guide of the proletarian state. The state and the party in power, as organs of such a dictatorship, bear the seeds of the tendency towards compromise with the old world, a tendency which as the Russian experience shows develops and strengthens through the momentary inability of the revolution in a given country to spread, by linking itself to the insurrectionary movement in other countries. Our party a) would have to avoid becoming the instrument of the workers' state and its would have to defend the interests of the revolution even b) in confrontations with the workers' state; c) would have to avoid becoming bureaucratised, by making its directive centre or its more peripheral centres a field of manoeuvres for the careerism of functionaries; d) would have to prevent class politics being thought out or carried out through formalist and administrative criteria[9].'"

However, the most crucial insight of the Fraction – the notion of the fraction itself, the form and function that the revolutionary organisation must take on in a period of defeat in the class struggle – was entirely lost on the Damen tendency, as was the closely connected notion of the historic course, the necessity to understand the global balance of forces between the classes that can undergo profound alterations within the epoch of decadence. Unable to make a real critique of the momentous error made in 1943 – the constitution of a "party" in one single country in a period of profound

[8] See in particular "Communism Vol. 3, Part 4 – The 1930s: debate on the period of transition".

[9] See p. 164 in the English edition. These insights into the potential dangers emanating from the "proletarian" state seem to have been lost, judging by the surprise the delegate of the PCInt/*Battaglia Comunista* expressed, at the Second Congress of the ICC, after reading a proposed resolution on the state in the period of transition which was based on the insights of the Fraction and of the GCF. The resolution was eventually adopted at the Third Congress: "Resolution on the State in the Transition Period". See also "The period of transition: Polemic with the PCInt-Battaglia Comunista".

counter-revolution – the Damenists compounded the mistake by theorising the party as a permanent necessity and even as a permanent reality. Hence, despite quickly shrinking to a "mini-party," the original emphasis of the regroupment of 1943-45 on building up a presence within the working class and giving a decisive lead in its struggles remained, at the cost of what was really needed: a focus on theoretical clarification about the necessities and possibilities of the period.

The opposing tendency around figures like Bordiga and Maffi was, in general, much more confused about the most important class positions. Bordiga more or less ignored the acquisitions of the Fraction and advocated a return to the positions of the first two congresses of the Third International, which for him were based on Lenin's "restoration" of the communist programme. An extreme suspicion of opportunist "innovations" to marxism (which, it's true, were beginning to flourish in the soil of the counter-revolution) led him to the notion of the "invariant" programme which had been fixed in stone in 1848 and only needed to be disinterred when it was periodically buried by the opportunists and traitors[10]. As we have often pointed out, this notion of invariance is based on a highly "variant" geometry, so that for example Bordiga and his followers could both affirm that capitalism had entered its epoch of wars and revolutions (a fundamental position of the Third International) and yet polemicise against the notion of decline as being founded on a pacifist and gradualist ideology[11].

This questioning of decadence had important repercussions when it came to analysing the nature of the Russian revolution (defined as a dual revolution, not unlike the councilist vision), and in particular when to came to characterising the struggles for national independence which were proliferating in the former colonies. Mao, instead of being seen for what he was, an expression of the Stalinist counter-revolution and a real product of capitalist decay, was hailed as a great bourgeois revolutionary in the mould of Cromwell. Later on the Bordigists were to come out with the same appreciation of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and this deep incomprehension of the national question was to cause havoc in the Bordigist party in the later 1970s, with a sizeable element abandoning internationalism altogether.

On the party question, on the errors of the Bolsheviks in the running of the Soviet state, it was as if the Fraction had never existed. The party takes power, wields the state machine, imposes the Red Terror without mercy ... even the important nuances of Lenin on the need for the working class to be wary of the bureaucratisation and autonomisation of the transitional state seem to have been forgotten. As we argue in a previous article in this series[12], Bordiga's most important contribution on the lessons of the Russian revolution in the post World War Two period, "Force, Violence and Dictatorship in the Class Struggle" (1946), certainly contains some insights on the problem of degeneration, but its rather dogmatic anti-democratism didn't enable it to recognise the problem of the party and state substituting for the proletariat (see final note below).

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[10] In his preface to *Russia and Revolution in Marxist Theory* (*Russie et Révolution dans la Théorie Marxiste*), Spartacus 1975, Jacques Camatte shows that the Bordiga of the revolutionary years after World War One did not defend the notion of invariance, referring in particular to the first article in the collection, "The Lessons of Recent History," which argues that the real movement of the proletariat can enrich theory, and which openly criticises certain of Marx's ideas about democracy and some of the tactical prescriptions in the *Communist Manifesto*: "the system of critical communism must naturally be understood in liaison with the integration of historical experience subsequent to Marx's *Manifesto*, and, if necessary, in an opposite direction to certain tactical behaviours by Marx and Engels which proved to be wrong."

[11] "The post-war boom did not reverse the decline of capitalism".

[12] "In the aftermath of World War Two: debates on how the workers will hold power after the revolution".

However: even though the Bordiga tendency also never openly put into question the formation of the party in 1943, it was able to understand that the organisation had entered into a far more difficult period and that different tasks were on the order of the day. Bordiga had been sceptical about the formation of the party in the first instance. Without showing the slightest understanding of the notion of the fraction – indeed, he rather buried his own experience of fraction work prior to the First World War under his subsequent theorisations about the formal and the historic party[13] – there was a certain understanding that simply maintaining a routine of intervention in the immediate struggle was not the way forward, and that it was essential to return to the theoretical foundations of marxism. Having rejected the contribution of the Fraction and other expressions of the communist left, this work was not completed, or even attempted, with regard to the key programmatic positions. But when it came to certain more general theoretical questions, and particularly those relating to the nature of the future communist society, it seems to us that during this period it was Bordiga, rather than the "Damenists," who has left us with the most important legacy.

The passion for communism: Bordiga's defence of the 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts

The book *Bordiga et la passion du communisme*, a collection of writings put together by Jacques Camatte in 1972, is the best testimony to the profundity of Bordiga's reflections about communism, in particular two major presentations given at party meetings in 1959-60, which are dedicated to Marx's *1844 Economic and Political Manuscripts*: "Commentaries on the 1844 Manuscripts" (1959-60), and "Immutable tables of the communist theory of the party" (page references are to the first text unless indicated).

This is how Bordiga places the 1844 MS within the corpus of Marx's writings:

> "Another very vulgar commonplace is that Marx was a Hegelian in his youthful writings, that it was only afterwards that he became the theoretician of historical materialism, and that, when he was older, he became a vulgar opportunist. It is a task of the revolutionary marxist school to make it clear to all its enemies (who have the choice to accept everything or reject everything) the monolithism of the whole system from its birth to the death of Marx and even after him (the fundamental concept of **invariance**, the fundamental rejection the '**enriching**' evolution of the party doctrine)" (p. 120).

Here we have both the strengths and weaknesses of Bordiga's approach in one paragraph. One the one hand: the intransigent defence of the continuity of Marx's thought and the repudiation of the notion that the 1844 MS are the product of a Marx who was still essentially idealist and Hegelian (or at least Feuerbachian), a notion that has been associated in particular with the Stalinist intellectual Althusser and which we have already criticised in earlier articles in this series[14].

For Bordiga, the 1844 MS, with their profound expose of capitalist alienation, and their inspiring description of the communist society that will overcome it, already indicate that Marx had made a qualitative break with the most advanced

[13] "Considerations on the party's organic activity when the general situation is historically unfavourable".

[14] See in particular: "The alienation of labour is the premise for its emancipation", The study of Capital and the foundations of Communism.

forms of bourgeois thought. In particular, the 1844 MS, which contain a large section devoted to the critique of the Hegelian philosophy, demonstrate that whatever Marx had assimilated from Hegel in matters of the dialectic, his rupture with Hegel – which meant overturning him, "turning him on his head" – and the adoption of a communist world outlook, take place at exactly the same moment. Bordiga emphasises in particular Marx's rejection of the very starting point of the Hegelian system: the individual "I."

> "What is clear is that for Marx Hegel's error is to build his whole colossal speculative edifice, with its rigorous formalism, on an abstract basis, 'consciousness'. As Marx would say many times, you have to begin from being, and not from the consciousness it has of itself ... Hegel is shut in on himself, from the beginning, in the vain eternal dialogue between subject and object. His subject is the 'me' extended in an absolute sense..." (p. 119).

At the same time, it is evident that for Bordiga, the 1844 MS provide evidence for his theory of the invariance of marxism, an idea which we think is contradicted by the real development of the communist programme which we have traced throughout this series. But we will return to this question later on. What we share with Bordiga's view of the 1844 MS is, above all: the centrality of Marx's conception of alienation, not only to the MS, but to the whole of his work; a number of fundamental elements in Bordiga's conception of the dialectic of history; and the exalted vision of communism which, again, Marx never repudiated in his later work (although he did, in our view, enrich it).

The dialectic of history

Bordiga's references to the concept of alienation in the 1844 MS inform his whole view of history, since he insists that "the highest degree of man's alienation has been reached in the current capitalist epoch" (p. 124). Without abandoning the understanding that the emergence and development of capitalism, and the destruction of the old feudal mode of exploitation, is a precondition for the communist revolution, he pours scorn on the facile progressivism of the bourgeoisie which vaunts its superiority over previous modes of production and ways of experiencing the world. He even suggests that bourgeois thinking is in certain senses empty in comparison with the much derided pre-capitalist viewpoints. For Bordiga, marxism has demonstrated that "your affirmations are empty and inconsistent lies, much more clearly so than the most ancient opinions of human thought which, you, bourgeois, believe you have buried once and for all under the fatuousness of your illuminist rhetoric" (p. 168). Consequently even when both bourgeoisie and proletariat formulate their critique of religion, there is again a rupture between the two class standpoints: "even in the cases (not general) where the ideologues of the bourgeoisie dared to break openly with the principles of the Christian church, we marxists do not define this superstructure, atheism, as a platform common to the bourgeoisie and the proletariat" (p. 117).

With such affirmations, Bordiga seems to connect his thought with some of the "philosophical" critics of the marxism of the Second International (and, by extension, of the official philosophy of the Third) such as Pannekoek, Lukács and Korsch, who rejected the idea that, just as socialism is the logical next step in historical evolution and only requires the "taking over" of the capitalist state and economy, so historical materialism is simply the next step in the advance of classical bourgeois materialism. Such views are based on a profound underestimation of the antagonism between the bourgeois and proletarian world outlooks, the unavoidable necessity for a

revolutionary rupture with the old forms. There is continuity, of course, but it is anything but gradual and peaceful. This way of approaching the problem is entirely consistent with the idea that the bourgeoisie can only see the social and natural world through the distorting lens of alienation, which under its reign has reached its "supreme" phase.

The slogan "Against immediatism" features more than once in the sub-headings of these contributions. For Bordiga it was essential to avoid any narrowing of focus to the present moment of history, and to look beyond capitalism backwards as well as forwards. In the current epoch, bourgeois thought is perhaps more immediatist than ever, more than ever fixated on the particular, the here and now, the short term, since it lives in mortal fear that regarding present-day society with the eye of history will enable us to discern its transient nature. But Bordiga also develops a polemic against the classical "grand narratives" of the bourgeoisie in its more optimistic age: not because it was grand, but because the bourgeoisie's narrative deformed the real story. Just as the transition from bourgeois to proletarian thinking is not merely another forward step, so history in general is not a straight line going from darkness to light, but is an expression of the dialectic in movement: "The progress of humanity and of knowledge in the much tormented homo sapiens is not continuous, but moves through great isolated leaps punctuated by sinister and obscure plunges into social forms degenerating to the point of putrefaction" (p. 168). This is no accidental formulation: elsewhere in the same text he says "the banal conceptions of the dominant ideologies see this path (of human history) as a continuous and constant ascent; marxism does not share this vision, and defines a series alternating between rises and descents, interlaced by violent crises" (p. 152). A clear answer, one would think, to those who reject the concept of the ascendance and decadence of successive modes of production....

The dialectical vision of history sees movement as resulting from the clash – often violent – of contradictions. But it also contains the notion of the spiral and the "return at a higher level." Thus the communism of the future is, in an important sense, a **return** of man to himself, as Marx puts it in the 1844 Manuscripts, since it is not only a rupture with the past, but a synthesis of everything that was human within it: "man returns to himself not as he began at the origin of his long history, but finally having at his disposal all the perfections of an immense development, acquired in the form of all the successive techniques, customs, religions, philosophies whose useful sides were – if we can be permitted to express ourselves in this way – imprisoned in the zone of alienation" (p. 125).

A more concrete example of this: in a short article about the inhabitants of the island of Janitzio in Mexico[15], written in 1961, and included in Camatte's collection, Bordiga develops the idea that "in natural and primitive communism" the individual, still linked to his fellow human beings in a real community, does not experience the same fear of death that emerged with the social atomisation engendered by private property and class society; and that this provides us with an indication that in the communism of the future, where the individual's destiny will be linked to that of the species, the fear of personal death and "any cult of the living and the dead" will be overcome. Bordiga thereby confirms his continuity with that central strand of the marxist tradition which affirms that in a certain sense "the members of primitive societies were closer to the human essence" (p. 175) – that the communism of the distant past can also be understood as a pre-figuration of the communism of the

[15] "In Janitzio they're not afraid of death".

future[16].

What communism is not

Bordiga's defence of the 1844 MS is, to a large extent, a long diatribe against the fraud of "really existing socialism" in the countries of the eastern bloc, which had gained a new lease of life in the wake of the "anti-fascist war" of 1939-45. His attack was mounted at two levels: negation and affirmation. Negation of the claims that what existed in the USSR and similar regimes had anything whatever to do with Marx's conception of communism, first and foremost at the economic level; affirmation of the fundamental characteristics of communist relations of production.

According to one version of a ubiquitous joke from the old USSR, an instructor in the party school is lecturing Young Comsomol members on the key question: will there be money in communism?

> "Historically, comrades, there are three positions on this question. There is the right wing, Proudhonist-Bukharinite deviation: under communism, everyone will have money. Then there is the ultra-left, infantile deviation: under communism, no one will have money. So what then is the dialectical position of Marxism-Leninism? It is clearly this: under communism, some people will have money, and others won't have any money."

Whether Bordiga was acquainted with this joke or not, his response to the Stalinists in his *Commentaries* goes in a similar direction. A preface to one of the Stalinist editions to the 1844 MS points out that Marx's text contains a polemic against Proudhon's theory of equal wages, the implication being that for the authentic marxism practised in the USSR, under socialism there must be *unequal* wages. But, in the ensuing section headed "Either wage labour or socialism," Bordiga points out that in the 1844 MS as well as in other works such as *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *Capital*, Marx actually "refutes the Proudhonist vacuity which conceives of a socialism where wages have been conserved, as they are conserved in Russia. Marx is not hitting out at the theory of equality, but on the existence of wages. Even if you could level them, wages are the negation of socialism. Even more so, not levelled, not equal, they are even more evidently the negation of socialism" (p. 129).

And the following section is headed "Either money or socialism": just as wage labour persists in the USSR, so must its corollary: the domination of human relations by exchange value, and thus by money. Returning to the deep critique of money as an expression of alienation between human beings, which Marx, citing Shakespeare and Goethe, developed in the 1844 Manuscripts and returned to in *Capital*, Bordiga insisted that "the societies where money circulates are societies of private property; they remain inside the barbaric prehistory of the human species" (p. 137).

Bordiga in fact demonstrates that the Stalinists have more in common with the father of anarchism than they would like to admit. Proudhon, in the tradition of a "crude communism" which Marx already recognises as reactionary at the point that he himself embraced communism, envisages a society in which "annual revenue is socially divided in equal parts among all members of society, who have all become waged workers." In other words, this notion of communism or socialism was one in which the misery of the proletarian condition was generalised rather than abolished, and in which "society" itself becomes the capitalist. And in response to those – not only the Stalinists, but also their leftwing apologists, the Trotskyists – who denied

[16] See also a previous article in this series: "The Mature Marx – Past and Future Communism".

that the USSR could be a form of capitalism because it had (more or less) got rid of individual owners of capital, Bordiga replies: "The question where are the capitalists has no meaning. The response has been there since 1844: society is an abstract capitalist" (p. 132).

The polemical target of these essays is not restricted to the overt defenders of the USSR. If communism abolishes exchange value, it is because it has abolished all forms of property[17] – not only state property as in the programme of Stalinism, but also the classical anarcho-syndicalist version (which Bordiga also attributes to the contemporary Socialisme ou Barbarie group with its definition of socialism as workers' management of production): "land to the peasants and the factories to the workers and similar pitiful parodies of the magnificent programme of the revolutionary communist party" (p. 178, "I"). In communism the individual enterprise must be abolished as such. If it continues to be the property of those who work in it, or even of the local community around it, it has not been truly socialised, and the relations between the different self-managed enterprises must necessarily be founded on the exchange of commodities. We will return to this question when we look at the vision of socialism developed by Castoriadis and the Socialisme ou Barbarie group.

Like Trotsky in the visionary concluding passages of *Literature and Revolution*[18] – who, in 1924, is unlikely to have had knowledge of the 1844 MS – Bordiga then ascends from the sphere of the negation of capitalism and its alienation, from an insistence on what socialism is not, to the positive affirmation of what humanity will be like in the higher stages of communist society. The 1844 MS, as we pointed out in an early article in this series[19], are full of passages describing how relations between human beings and between humanity and nature will be transformed under communism, and Bordiga quotes extensively from the most significant of these passages in his two texts, most notably where they deal with the transformation of relations between men and women, and where they insist that communist society will permit the emergence of a higher stage of conscious life.

The transformation of relations between the sexes

Throughout the 1844 MS Marx repudiates the "crude communism" which, while attacking the bourgeois family, still regards woman as an object and speculates about a coming "community of women." On the contrary: Bordiga quotes Marx the degree to which the relationship between man and woman has become humanised is a measurement of the real advance of the species. But at the same time, under capitalism, woman, and the relation between the sexes, will remain a prisoner of commodity relations.

After resuming Marx's thinking on these questions, Bordiga digresses for a moment on the problem of terminology, of language.

> "In citing these passages, it is necessary to alternate between the word **man** and the word **male** to the extent that the first word indicates all the members of the species... When a half century ago the estimable marxist Filippo Turati made an enquiry into feminism, that miserable bourgeois deviation founded on the atrocious submission of woman in societies of

[17] A rather clear exposition of Bordiga's conception of socialism can be found in an article by Adam Buick of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, who, for all their other faults, have always understood very clearly that socialism means the abolition of wage labour and money.

[18] "Trotsky and the culture of communism".

[19] "Communism: the real beginning of human society". This article, like others in the series, also refers to Bordiga's writings on communism.

> property, he responded with these simple words: woman... is man. That means: she will be in communism, but for your bourgeois society she is an animal, an object" (p. 150).

Feminism a bourgeois deviation? This is a position strongly rejected by those who argue that there can be a "socialist feminism" or an "anarcha-feminism." But from Bordiga's standpoint, feminism has a bourgeois starting point because it aims at "equality" of the sexes inside the existing social relationships; and this leads logically to the demand that women should be "equally" able to fight in imperialist armies or rise to becoming company directors and prime ministers.

Communism did not need the addition of feminism or even "socialist feminism" to have been, from the beginning, an advocate of the solidarity of men and women in the here and now, but this can only be realised in the **class** struggle, in the **fight against** capitalist oppression and exploitation and **for** the creation of a society in which the "original form of exploitation" – that of woman by man – will no longer be possible. More than this: marxism has also recognised that the female of the species – because of her double oppression and her more advanced moral sense (linked in particular to her historic role in the rearing of children) – is often in the vanguard of the struggle, for example in the revolution in 1917 in Russia, which began with demonstrations of women against bread shortages, or more recently in the massive strikes in Egypt in 2007. Indeed according to the anthropological school of Chris Knight, Camilla Power and others, which identifies with the marxist tradition in anthropology, female morality and solidarity played a crucial role in the very emergence of human culture, in the primal "human revolution"[20]. Bordiga is in accord with this way of looking at things in the section of the *Commentaries* headed "Love, a universal need," when he argues that the passive function assigned to women is purely a product of property relations, and that in fact "in nature, love being the basis of reproduction, women is the active sex, and the monetary forms of love are revealed to be **against nature**" (p. 156). And he continues with a summary of how the abolition of commodity relations will transform this relationship: "In communism without money, love will, as a need, have the same weight for both sexes and the act which consecrates it will realise the social formula that the other's human need is my human need, to the extent that the need of one sex is realised as the need of the other."

Bordiga then explains that this transformation will be based on the material and social changes introduced by the communist revolution: "This cannot be proposed simply as a moral relationship founded on a certain physical connection, because the passage to a higher form of society is effected in the economic domain: the care of children is no longer just the concern of the two parents but of the community." It is from this starting point that future humanity will be able to break through the limitations imposed by the bourgeois family.

Conscious life at another level

In an earlier article in this series[21], we argued that certain passages in the 1844 MS only make sense if we see them as anticipations of a transformation of consciousness, of a new mode of being, which communist social relations will make possible. The article looked at some length at the passage from the chapter "Private Property and communism" where Marx talks about the way in which private property (understood in its broadest sense) has served to restrict the human senses, to obstruct – or, to use

[20] "Woman's role in the emergence of human culture", and Women's role in the emergence of human solidarity.

[21] "Communism: the real beginning of human society".

a more accurate term from psychoanalysis, repress – human sensual experience; consequently communism will bring with it the "emancipation of the senses," a new bodily and mental rapport with the world which can be compared with the "inspired" state experienced by artists at their most creative moments.

Towards the end of Bordiga's text "Tablets of stone" there is a section headed "Down with the personality, that is the key!" We will take up this question of "personality" later on, but we want first to look at the way Bordiga, in his interpretation of the 1844 Manuscripts, envisages the alteration of human consciousness in the communist future.

He begins by affirming that in communism we will "have left behind the millennia-old deception of the lone individual facing the natural world, stupidly called 'external' by the philosophers. External to what? External to the 'I', this supreme deficiency; but we can no longer say external to the human species, because the species man is internal to nature, part of the physical world." And he goes on to say that "in this powerful text, object and subject becomes, like man and nature, one and the same thing. We can even say that everything becomes object: man as a subject 'against nature' disappears, along with the illusion of a singular me" (p. 190).

This can only be a reference to the passage in the "Private property and communism" chapter where Marx says

> "it is only when objective reality universally becomes for man in society the reality of man's essential powers, becomes human reality, and thus the reality of his own essential powers, that all objects become for him the objectification of himself, objects that confirm and realize his individuality, his objects, i.e. he himself becomes the object."

Bordiga continues:

> "We have seen that when you pass from the individual to the species, the spirit, this absolute unfortunate, is dissolved into objective nature. The individual brain as a poor passive machine is replaced by the social brain. What's more, Marx points to a collective human sense that has gone beyond the isolated corporal sense."

And he goes on to quote the 1844 Manuscripts on the emancipation of the senses, insisting that this also indicates the emergence of a kind of collective awareness – what we might term a passage from the "common sense" of the isolated ego to the communising of the senses.

What do we make of these conceptions? Before dismissing them as science fiction, we should remember that while, in bourgeois society above all, we often take the ego to be the absolute centre of our being ("I think, therefore I am"), there is also a long tradition of thought that insists that the ego is only a relative reality, at best a particular fraction of our being. This view is certainly central to psychoanalytical theory, for which the adult ego only emerges through a long process of repression and division between the conscious and unconscious part of ourselves – and is, furthermore, the "sole seat of anxiety"[22] because, caught as it is between the demands of external reality and the unfulfilled urges buried in the unconscious, it is constantly preoccupied with its own overthrow or extinction.

It is also a view that has been put forward in a number of the "mystical" traditions east and west, although it was probably most coherently developed by Indian

[22] Freud, *New Introductory Lectures*, London 1973, p. 117.

philosophy, and above all by Buddhism with its doctrine of "anatta" – the impermanence of the separate self. But all these traditions tend to concur that it is possible, through directly penetrating the unconscious mind, to **surpass** the everyday ego-consciousness – and thus the torment of perpetual anxiety. Shorn of the ideological distortions that inevitably accompanied these traditions, their most lucid insights do raise the possibility that human beings are capable of attaining another kind of consciousness in which the world around us is no longer seen as a hostile other, and the focus of awareness shifts, not merely intellectually, but through a direct and very bodily experience, from the isolated atom to the standpoint of the species – indeed, the standpoint of something even more than the species: of nature, of an evolving universe, becoming conscious of itself.

It is difficult to read the above passages by Bordiga and conclude that he is talking about something entirely different. And it is important to note that Freud, in the opening sections of *Civilisation and its Discontents*, acknowledged the reality of the "oceanic feeling," this experience of erotic unity with the world, although he could only see it as a regression to the infantile state prior to the emergence of the ego. However, in the same section of the book, he also accepts the possibility that the mental techniques of yoga can open the door to "primordial states of mind which have long been overlaid." The question for us to raise theoretically – and perhaps for future generations to investigate more practically – is whether the age-old techniques of meditation can lead only to regression, a collapse back into the undifferentiated unity of the animal or the infant; or whether they can be part of a dialectical "return become conscious," a self-aware exploration of our own minds. In which case the instances of the "oceanic feeling" point not only to the infantile past, but towards the horizon of a more advanced and more universal human consciousness. This was certainly the view adopted by Erich Fromm in his study *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism*, for example when he writes about what he calls the "state of non-repressedness," defined as "a state in which one acquires again the immediate, undistorted grasp of reality, the simpleness and spontaneity of the child; yet, after having gone through the process of alienation, of development of one's intellect, non-repressedness is return to innocence on a higher level; this return to innocence is only possible after one has lost one's innocence[23]."

Against the destruction of the environment

But Bordiga's theoretical writings during this period did not only pose the question of man's relationship with nature at this very "philosophical" level. He also raised it in his far-sighted reflections on the question of capitalist catastrophes and the problem of the environment. Writing on contemporary disasters like the flooding of the Po

[23] Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism*, 1960, p. 91 of the 1986 Allen and Unwin edition. Fromm, a descendant of the Frankfurt School who has also written extensively about the early writings of Marx, considers that, taken to its logical conclusion, the true goal of psychoanalysis (which could only be attained on a wide scale in a "sane society"), is not simply to relieve neurotic symptoms or to subordinate the instincts to intellectual control, but to make the unconscious conscious and thus reach the non-repressed life. He thus defines the *method* of psychoanalysis in relation to this goal: "it examines the psychic development of a person from childhood on and tries to recover the earlier experiences in order to assist the person in experiencing what is now repressed. It proceeds by uncovering illusions within oneself about the world, step by step, so that parataxis distortions and alienated intellectualisations diminish. By becoming less of a stranger to himself, the person who goes through this process becomes less estranged to the world; because he has opened up communication with the universe within himself, he has opened up communication with the universe outside. False consciousness disappears, and with it the polarity conscious-unconscious" (ibid p. 107). Elsewhere (p. 105) he compares this method with that of Zen, which uses different means, but also proceeds through a series of smaller realisations or "satoris" towards a qualitatively higher level of being in the world.

valley in 1957 and the sinking of the liner *Andrea Doria* in the year before, Bordiga again brings to bear his specialist knowledge as an engineer and above all his deep rejection of bourgeois "progress" to show how its drive to accumulate contains the seeds of such catastrophes, and ultimately of the destruction of the natural world itself[24]. Bordiga is particularly vehement in his articles about the frenzy of urbanisation which he could already discern in the post-war reconstruction period, denouncing the cramming of human beings into ever more limited urban spaces and the accompanying philosophy of "verticalism" in construction. He argues that this reduction of human beings to the level of ants is a direct product of the needs of accumulation and will be reversed in the communist future, reaffirming Marx and Engels' demand for overcoming the separation between town and country:

> "When, after the forcible crushing of this ever-more obscene dictatorship, it will be possible to subordinate every solution and every plan to the amelioration of the **conditions of living labour**, to fashion with this aim everything that has come from **dead labour**, from **constant capital**, from the **infrastructure** that the human species has built up over the centuries and continues to build up on the earth's crust, then the brutal verticalism of the cement monsters will be made ridiculous and will be suppressed, and in the immense expanses of horizontal space, once the giant cities have been deflated, the strength and intelligence of the human animal will progressively tend to render uniform the density of life and labour over the habitable parts of the earth; and these forces will henceforth be in harmony, and no longer ferocious enemies as they are in the deformed civilisation of today, where they are only brought together by the spectre of servitude and hunger" (published in "Space against cement" in *The Human Species and the Earth's Crust* (*Espèce Humaine et Croûte Terrestre*, Petite Bibilotheque Payot, p. 168).

It is also worth noting that when Bordiga, in 1952, formulated a kind of "immediate revolutionary programme," it included demands for halting what he already saw as the inhuman congestion and pace of life brought about by capitalist urbanisation (a process that has reached much greater levels of irrationality since then). Thus the seventh point out of nine calls for "halting construction of houses and workplaces in the big cities and even the smaller ones, as a starting point for the uniform distribution of the population in the countryside. Reduction of the speed and volume of traffic and forbidding it when it is useless" (in a future article we intend to come back to the other demands in this "programme," because they contain a number of formulations which can, in our view, be strongly criticised).

It is interesting to note that, when it comes to demonstrating why all this so-called progress of the capitalist city was nothing of the kind, Bordiga had recourse to a concept of decadence which he tends to throw out of window in other polemics – for example in the title "Weird and Wonderful Tales of Modern Social Decadence"[25]. Such a term is on the other hand entirely consistent with the general view of history we noted above, where societies can "degenerate to the point of putrefaction" and go through phases of ascent and descent. It is as if Bordiga, once removed from the "narrow" world of contending political positions, and obliged to return to the basics of marxist theory, had no choice but to recognise that capitalism, like all previous modes

[24] See the collection *Murdering the Dead: Amadeo Bordiga on capitalism and other disasters*, Antagonism Press, 2001. See also our article Flooding: the shape of things to come which looks at Bordiga's notion of the role of destruction in capitalist accumulation.

[25] "Weird and Wonderful Tales of Modern Social Decadence".

of production, must also enter an epoch of decline – and that this epoch has long been upon us, regardless of the marvels of capitalism's "growth in decay" which are smothering humanity and threatening its future.

The problem with "invariance"

We must now return to Bordiga's notion that the 1844 MS provide evidence for his theory of the "invariance of marxism." We have argued on various occasions that this is a religious conception. In a stinging polemic with the Bordigist group that publishes *Programma Comunista*, Mark Chirik noted the real similarity between the Bordigist concept of invariance and the Muslim attitude of submission to an immutable doctrine[26].

The target of this article was, it's true, mainly the epigones of Bordiga, but what did Bordiga himself say about the relationship between marxism and the sources of "invariant" doctrine in the past? In a seminal text titled precisely "The Historical Invariance of Marxism"[27], he writes:

> "Consequently, despite the fact that the ideological legacy of the revolutionary working class, unlike that of the classes that preceded it, does not assume the form of revelation, myth or idealism, but of 'positive' science, it nonetheless needs a stable formulation of its principles, and even of its rules for action, that performs the role and possesses the efficacy that dogmas, catechisms, tablets of law, constitutions and guide-books such as the Vedas, the Talmud, the Bible, the Koran or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights once performed and possessed. The profound errors with regard to form and substance in those compilations did not deprive them of their enormous organizational and social power (at first a revolutionary power, then a counterrevolutionary power, in dialectical succession); what is more, in many cases these 'deviations' contributed precisely to the creation of this power."

In his *Commentaries*, Bordiga was already aware of the accusation that such ideas led him back to the religious world-view:

> "When, at a certain point, our banal contradictor ... says that we are building our mystique, himself posing as a mind who which has gone beyond all fideism and mysticism, when he holds us in derision for kneeling down to the Mosaic or talmudic tablets of the Bible or the Koran, to gospels and catechisms, we reply to him .... that we do not consider as an offense the assertion that we can indeed attribute to our movement – as long as it has not triumphed in reality (which in our method precedes any ulterior conquest of human consciousness) – the character of a mystique, or, if you want, a myth.
>
> "Myth, in its innumerable forms, was not a delirium of minds whose physical eyes were closed to reality ... but was an irreplaceable step in the single road to the real conquest of consciousness" (p. 169).

Bordiga is right to consider that mythical thought was indeed an "irreplaceable step" in the evolution of human consciousness, and that the Bible, the Koran, or the Declaration of Human Rights were, at a certain stage of history, authentically

[26] *International Review* no. 14, "A caricature of the Party: the Bordigist Party".

[27] The Historical "Invariance" of Marxism.

revolutionary products. He is also right to recognise that adherence to such "tablets of the law" became, at another stage in history, counter-revolutionary. But the mechanism through which they became counter-revolutionary in new historical circumstances was precisely the notion that they were unchanging and unchangeable. Islam, for example, considers its revelation purer than that of the Jewish Torah because it is argued that while the latter had been subject to subsequent revision and editing, not a single word of the Koran had been altered from the moment the angel Gabriel dictated it to Mohammed. The difference between the marxist view of the communist programme and myth or religious dogma is that marxism sees its concepts as the historical product of human beings and thus subject to confirmation or refutation by succeeding historical growth or experience, and not as a once and for all revelation from a superhuman source. Indeed, it insists that mythical or religious revelations are themselves products of human history, and thus limited in their scope and clarity even at their highest points of achievement. In accepting the idea that marxism is itself a kind of myth, Bordiga loses sight of the historical method that he is able to use so well elsewhere.

Of course it is true that the communist programme itself is not infinitely malleable and does have an unchanging core of general principles such as the class struggle, the transient nature of class society, the necessity for the proletarian dictatorship and communism. Furthermore, there is a sense in which this general outline can appear like a sudden flash of inspiration. Hence Bordiga can write:

> "A new doctrine cannot appear at just any historical moment, but there are certain quite characteristic – and even extremely rare – eras in history in which a new doctrine can appear like a blinding flash of light; if one has not recognized the crucial moment and fixed one's gaze on this terrible light, in vain would one have resort to the candle stubs with which the academic pedant or the combatant of little faith attempts to illuminate the way forward" ("Historical invariance of marxism").

Quite possibly Bordiga has in mind the incredibly rich phase of Marx's work which gave rise to the 1844 MS and other fundamental texts. But Marx for one did not regard these texts as his final words on capitalism, the class struggle, or communism. Even though, in our view, he never abandoned the essential content of these writings, he regarded them as "first drafts" which had to be developed and given a more solid grounding by further research, itself closely connected to the practical/theoretical experimentation carried out by the real movement of the proletariat.

Bordiga, in the *Commentaries* (p. 161) also points to a specific passage in the 1844 MS as proof of invariance. This is where Marx writes that "The entire movement of history, just as its [communism's] actual act of genesis – the birth act of its empirical existence – is, therefore, for its thinking consciousness the **comprehended** and **known** process of its **becoming**."

And Bordiga adds that the subject of this consciousness cannot be the individual philosopher: it can only be class party of the world proletariat. But if communism is, as Marx says, the product of the entire movement of history, then it must have begun to emerge long before the appearance of the working class and its political organisations, so that the source of this consciousness must be older than both – just as, within capitalist society, it is also wider than the political organisations of the class, even if they are generally its most advanced expression. Moreover, since communism can only become clear to itself, "comprehended and known" when it becomes proletarian communism, surely this is further evidence that communism and communist

consciousness is something that evolves, that it is not static, but is a process of becoming – and thus cannot be invariant.

Individual and species

The critique of individualism has a long history in marxism, going back to Marx's criticisms of Hegel and in particular his assault on Max Stirner; and in arguing against the philosophical standpoint of the isolated thinker, Bordiga is on solid ground, citing the *The German Ideology's* cutting remark on Saint Max that "**philosophy** stands in the same relation to the study of the actual **world** as **masturbation** to **sexual love**." And as we have seen, the idea that the ego is in some sense an illusory construct also has a long pedigree. But Bordiga goes further than this. As already noted, the section of "Tablets of Stone" (*Tables immuables*) which we cited earlier, where Bordiga predicts that communist humanity will be able to access a kind of species or cosmic consciousness, is headed "Down with the personality, that is the key!" It is as if Bordiga wants the individual human being to be *subsumed* in the species rather than realised through it.

The experience of a state of awareness which goes beyond the ego tends to be a peak experience rather than a permanent state, but at any rate, it does not necessarily abolish the personality. Personality as a mask, perhaps, personality as a kind of private property, personality as the outward face of the illusion of an absolute ego – one could argue that this form of personality will be transcended in the future. But nature itself has a need for diversity if it is to move forward, and this is no less true for human society. Even the Buddhists did not argue that enlightenment made the individual vanish. There is a Zen story which recounts how a student approached his teacher after hearing that the latter had achieved satori, the lightening flash of illumination. The student asks the master "how does it feel to be enlightened?" To which the master replies: "As miserable as ever."

And in the same section of "Tablets of Stone" ("Tables immuables"), Bordiga cites the "splendid expression" from the 1844 MS: that mankind is a being who suffers, and that if he does not suffer, he cannot know joy. This fleshly, mortal, individual human being will still exist in communism, which for Marx is "the only society in which the original and free development of individuals ceases to be a mere phrase" (*German Ideology*, "The free development of individuals").

These are of course questions for the far future. But Bordiga's suspicion of the individual personality has far more immediate implications for the question of the revolutionary organisation.

We know that Bordiga made a trenchant critique of the bourgeois fetish of democracy, based as it is on the false notion of the isolated citizen and on the real foundation of a society atomised by commodity exchange. The insights he developed in *The Democratic Principle* and elsewhere enable us to expose the essential vacuity of the most democratic structures of the capitalist order. But there comes a point in Bordiga's thinking where he loses sight of what was authentically "progressive" in the victory of commodity exchange over all the older forms of community: the possibility of critical, individual thought without which "positive science" – which Bordiga still reclaims as the standpoint of the proletariat – would not have emerged. Applied to Bordiga's conception of the party, this line of thought leads to the concept of the "monolithic," "anonymous" and even "totalitarian" organisation – all which terms have been used approvingly in the Bordigist canon. It leads to theorising the negation of individual thought and thus of internal differences and debates. And as with all totalitarian regimes, there is always at least one individual who becomes anything

but anonymous – who becomes the object of a personality cult. And this is precisely what was justified within the post-war Internationalist Communist Party by those who saw in Bordiga the "brilliant leader," the genius who could (even when he was not actually a member of the party!) come up with answers to all the theoretical problems posed to the organisation. This was the aberrant way of thinking attacked in the GCF's article "Against the Concept of the Brilliant Leader"[28].

Bordiga's contribution

We have sometimes criticised Bordiga's idea that a revolutionary is someone for whom the revolution has already happened. In so far as it implies the inevitability of communism, those criticisms are valid. But there is also a truth in Bordiga's dictum. Communists are those who represent the future in the present, as the Communist Manifesto puts it, and in this sense they measure the present – and the past – in the light of the possibility of communism. Bordiga's "passion for communism" – his insistence on demonstrating the superiority of communism over anything that class society and capitalism had engendered – enabled him to resist the false visions of capitalist and "socialist" progress that were being drummed into the working class in the 1950s and 60s and, perhaps most importantly, to demonstrate in practice that marxism is not in fact an invariant dogma but a living theory, since there is no doubt that Bordiga's contributions on communism enrich our understanding of it.

Earlier in this article we referred to Damen's obituary of 1970, which sought to assess Bordiga's overall political contribution[29]. Damen begins by listing all the things "we owe to Bordiga," above all the immense contribution he made in his "classic" period on the theory of abstentionism and the relationship between party and class. But, as we have seen, he quite rightly does not spare Bordiga from criticism over his withdrawal from political activity from the late 20s to the early 40s, his refusal to comment on all the economic and political dramas that fill this period. Examining his return to political life at the end of the war, Damen is also scathing about Bordiga's ambiguities about the capitalist nature of the USSR. He could have gone further and showed how Bordiga's refusal to recognise the acquisitions of the Fraction led to a clear political regression on key issues such as the national question, the unions, and the role of the party in the proletarian dictatorship. But what is missing from Damen's text is an appraisal of the real contribution to our understanding of communism which Bordiga undertook in his later years – a contribution which the communist left still needs to assimilate, not least because it has subsequently been taken up by others with dubious agendas, such as the "communisation" current (of which Camatte was one of the founding fathers), who have used it to produce results which Bordiga himself would certainly have disowned. But that will require a further article, and before we get there, we want to look at the other "theories of proletarian revolution" which were being developed in the 50s, 60s and 70s.

Post-scriptum (final note):

As pointed out in a recent article by C Derrick Varn on the blog Symptomatic Commentary, "The brain of society: notes on Bordiga, organic centralism, and the limitations of the party form,"[30] Bordiga seemed reluctant to abandon the notion of the party not only persisting but even acting as the incarnated "social brain" during the

[28] "Against the concept of the 'brilliant leader'".

[29] Amadeo Bordiga – Beyond the Myth and the Rhetoric.

[30] "The brain of society: notes on Bordiga, organic centralism, and the limitations of the party form" - C. Derrick Varn.

higher phase of communism.

C D Ward