

Communism is the Material Human Community: Amadeo Bordiga Today

Goldner, Loren
1991

This red texts version is based on what is available on Goldner's website at <http://breaktheirhaughtypower.org/communism-is-the-material-human-community-amadeo-bordiga-today/>. It has been proofread against the text as it appears in the journal Critique, a PDF of which can be found at [https://libcom.org/files/goldner1995\(1\).pdf](https://libcom.org/files/goldner1995(1).pdf).

For many decades, revolutionary Marxists have understood the social realities of the Soviet Union, China and other so-called “socialist” societies to be the negation of Marx’s project of working-class and human emancipation. Many theoreticians, beginning with Rosa Luxemburg in her 1918 *The Russian Revolution*, and followed by Mattick, Korsch, Bordiga, Trotsky, Shachtman or CLR James (to name only a few), have devoted major energies to settling the famous “Russian question”: the specific meaning, for Marxists, of the defeat of the Russian revolution and the international success of Stalinism. The variety of views developed in this debate seems to confirm above all the characterization of Winston Churchill, very far from Marxism and the left, for whom the Soviet system was a “riddle wrapped in a mystery within an enigma”. The contemporary heirs of the theories of the “degenerated workers’ state”, “state socialism”, “bureaucratic collectivism”, “state capitalism” or the “transitional society” all have their analyses and explanations – many of them self-consoling – of the post-1989 devolution of the Eastern bloc. With the tempered optimism characteristic of the Marxian tradition, most of these currents tended to assume (as did this author) that the moribund Stalinist bureaucracy’s immediate major contender for power would be the revolutionary working class, fighting at last for real socialism. Few foresaw – most particularly, but not only, the Trotskyists, for whom the Eastern bloc ostensibly rested on foundations socially superior to the West – that the main contenders for the post-Stalinist succession would not be revolutionary Marxism but a blindly pro-Western neo-liberalism inspired by von Hayek and Milton Friedman, and resurgent authoritarian rightist currents of interwar vintage (with ex-Stalinists prominent in both currents). Even fewer foresaw that the demise of the social foundations of Stalinism would entail a profound crisis of Marxism itself. As the crisis of the Eastern bloc calls forth not soviets and workers’ councils but blood-and-soil populism, murderous nationalism, regionalism, religious fundamentalism and anti-Semitism (authoritarian currents that are far ahead of any remaining left opposition in channeling anti-IMF, anti-market sentiments), it becomes clearer than ever before that most conceptual frameworks available to revolutionary Marxists, East and West, for understanding world history since 1917 are profoundly in need of re-examination.

The following article is written as a modest contribution to that re-examination. It presents, for consideration, the little-known views of the Italian Marxist Amadeo

Bordiga (best remembered, when remembered at all, as one of the “ultra-lefts” denounced by Lenin in *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*), on the nature of the Soviet Union, and more generally considers the thesis that the **agrarian question**, fundamental for Bordiga in the characterization of capitalism, is the actual, little discussed key to the history of both Social Democracy and Stalinism, the two deformations of Marxism that have dominated the 20th century. It puts forward the thesis that European (and above all German) Social Democracy itself, even when it spoke an ostensibly Marxist language, was a statist distortion of the Marxian project, and more a school for a higher stage of capitalism, the emergent Keynesian welfare state. It argues that what is disappearing today is the long statist detour in working-class emancipation, which was actually much more about a substitute bourgeois revolution for the industrialization of backward societies than about socialism or communism. It contends, finally, that any maintenance of the traditional rose-tinted view of historical German Social Democracy prior to the triumph of “revisionism” must lead to a complete impasse and absence of vision for the contemporary period. History, ever in advance of theory, is clearing away the debris of the statist legacy of Social Democracy and Stalinism. Today, the question of how the Marxian project became entwined, from the 1860’s onward, with the statist project of Enlightened absolutism and its version of *Aufklärung* is more pressing than ever. Even more pressing, of course, is the question of how it can extricate itself.

Attempts to focus on the centrality of the agrarian question in the Soviet experience are, in themselves, hardly new. Figures like Barrington Moore, within academia, developed such a focus long ago¹. But the mood of the 1960’s, when Moore’s book appeared, was still very much focused on industrial development as the essence of capitalism, and because Moore otherwise seemed to echo a more pallid version of Trotsky’s theories of permanent revolution and combined and uneven development, his work made no particular impact on the Marxist discussion. Adam Ulam, even farther from Marxism, had written, in the Cold War, about the real content of the Marxist movement being the agrarian question²; his objective was to discredit “Marxism” (which he equated with Soviet ideology) by showing that it was the product of underdevelopment, not of capitalism. Gerschenkron, historically much richer than Ulam, also seemed to be a shadow of Trotsky³.

Undoubtedly the most important 20th century book influencing Marxist views on the agrarian question, within the revolutionary anti-Stalinist milieu, is Preobrazhensky’s *New Economics*, which, whatever its flaws, is essential to understanding the fate of the international left opposition⁴. Preobrazhensky’s concept of “socialist accumulation” off the peasantry is in turn heavily indebted to Rosa Luxemburg’s *Accumulation of Capital*; Preobrazhensky posits that the “workers’ state” can consciously and humanely realize what, historically, the capitalist state had realized blindly and bloodily – the transformation of the agrarian petty producers into factory workers. (It was left to Stalin to realize this transformation consciously and bloodily.)

On the margins of this discussion, where most of the Western left is concerned, have been the ideas of the fascinating character of Amadeo Bordiga. First General Secretary of the PCI, and, with Gramsci, its most important founder, Bordiga was the last Western revolutionary who told off Stalin to his face (in 1926) as the gravedigger of the revolution and lived to tell the tale. He was ousted from the PCI in the same

¹ B. Moore, *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*, (Boston, 1966).

² A. Ulam, *The Unfinished Revolution*, (New York, 1960).

³ A. Gerschenkron. *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, (Boston, 1962).

⁴ E. Preobrazhensky, *The New Economics*, (Oxford, 1965), Ch. II.

year and took several thousand “Bordigists” with him. In 1928 the “Italian Communist Left” (as they called themselves) voted Trotsky the “head of the international left opposition” and there ensued a lengthy exchange between Bordiga and Trotsky, which ended in a generally complete failing out circa. 1931-32. But Bordiga is one of the most original, brilliant and utterly neglected Marxists of the century. (His legacy could never be made palatable by the postwar PCI in the way that Gramsci’s was.) He remained in Italy through the war (once he had been ousted and calumniated by the Comintern in the usual fashion, he was left alone by Mussolini and pursued a career as an engineer). But it is in some sense after World War 2 that Bordiga’s work, where the present is concerned, becomes truly interesting. He lived in virtual obscurity until 1970, and even wrote a couple of articles on the upsurge of 1968. His mission after the war was, in his view, to salvage the “theoretical lessons” of the worldwide revolutionary surge of the 1917-1921 period. He felt, like almost all anti-Stalinist revolutionaries in 1945, that this required a settling of accounts with the “Russian enigma”, and he wrote three books (never translated into English but they are in French) on the Russian revolution and the Soviet economy⁵. He also wrote a 3-volume history of the Italian Communist Left (a term designating his own faction; the history unfortunately ends in 1921) and many little pamphlets and tracts⁶. Much of his stuff is turgid and unreadable, but also well worth the trouble. What is unusual, and strangely contemporary, about Bordiga’s view was, quite simply, his theory that capitalism equals the agrarian revolution. He probably developed this view in the pre-1914 period; some of his earliest articles are about the French and Italian Socialists’ positions on the agrarian question⁷. It is not always easy to follow Bordiga’s trajectory; he believed in “revolutionary anonymity”, abhorred the cult of personality, and often did not sign his written work, including his books. A Bordigist assessment of the Russian Revolution was published under the title *On the Margins of the 50th Anniversary of October 1917* in 1967⁸. It is something outside the universe of discourse of the conventional Stalin-Trotsky-(state capitalist) polemics in the U.S., Britain, France and Germany. (For example, Bordiga never uses the term “state capitalism”, and rarely uses the term “Soviet Union” in recognition that the soviets were destroyed there long ago). For him, it was just Russian capitalism, not notably different from any other. Bordiga had a refreshing desire to want to “de-Russify” the preoccupations of the international revolutionary movement. He said that the workers’ movement had been rocked by counter-revolutions before in history (i.e. after 1848 with Louis Napoleon) and that there was nothing special about Russia. On the other hand, his 25-year preoccupation with the Russian economy belies that *sang froid*. (Of further interest is the fact that, in 1945, he had predicted a long period of capitalist expansion and workers’ reformism, due to end in the next world crisis, beginning in 1975)⁹. Bordiga’s analysis of Russia (as developed after 1945) is as follows. While his faction had totally supported Trotsky in the faction fight of the 20’s, largely for reasons related to Soviet/Comintern foreign policy, the Bordigist analysis took its distance from the super-industrialization strategy of the Left Opposition, for ultimately “Bukharinist” reasons. He felt after 1945 that only something like Bukharin’s strategy had any hope of preserving the international revolutionary character of the

⁵ Cf. bibliographical notes above.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The mature statement on the link between the agrarian question and capitalism is in A. Bordiga, *Mai la merce...*, 1979.

⁸ Cf. *Bilan d’une révolution, Programme communiste*, Nos 40-41-42, Oct. 1967-June 1968, cited in bibliographical notes.

⁹ The evolution of Bordiga’s prediction of a major world crisis in 1975 is presented in F. Livorsi, op. cit. pp. 426-444.

regime, (which to Bordiga was more important than Russian industrialization) because it would not destroy the Bolshevik party. Bukharin said in the 1924-28 faction fights that the implementation of Trotsky's leftist "super-industrialization" strategy could only be carried out by the most elephantine state bureaucracy history had ever seen¹⁰ When Stalin stole the left's program and put it into practice, he completely confirmed Bukharin, as Trotsky himself acknowledged in a backhanded way after most of his faction in Russia had capitulated to Stalin¹¹. Bordiga took more seriously perhaps than even Trotsky the idea of the international character of the revolution and of the Soviet regime; to him the idea of "socialism in one country" was a grotesque abomination of everything Marxism stood for, which it of course was. In his final confrontation with Stalin in Moscow in 1926, Bordiga proposed that all the Communist Parties of the world should jointly rule the Soviet Union, as a demonstration of the supra-national reality of the workers' movement¹². This proposal was, needless to say, coolly received by Stalin and his friends.

But this is just the beginning. Bordiga's writings on the capitalist nature of the Soviet economy, in contrast to those produced by the Trotskyists, focus to a great extent on the agrarian sector. He wanted to show how capitalist social relations existed in the *kolkhoz* and in the *sovkhos*, one a cooperative farm and the other the straight wage-labor state farm¹³. He emphasized how much of agrarian production depended on the small privately owned plots (he was writing in 1950) and predicted quite accurately the rates at which the Soviet Union would start importing wheat after Russia had been such a large exporter from the 1880's to 1914.

The reasons leading Bordiga to downplay the industrial sector and to emphasize agriculture, as I said, came from theoretical and strategic concerns that pre-dated the Russian revolution. Once again, for Bordiga, capitalism was first of all the agrarian revolution, the capitalization of agriculture. Bordiga had a different appraisal of Bukharin from the typical revolutionary opponent of Stalinism because of these concerns. He introduced a novel distinction between Lenin and Trotsky. Most people who distinguish between Lenin and Trotsky are Stalinists and Maoists. But, Bordiga totally turns the tables on the Stalinists. Bordiga, using a formulation of Lenin's, called the Russian Revolution "a dual revolution"¹⁴ in which the political seizure of power by the proletariat made possible the completion of the tasks of the bourgeois revolution, above all the destruction of pre-capitalist social relations in agriculture. The great prototype of the latter was undoubtedly August 1789 in France. Trotskyists had always said that in April 1917 "Lenin became a Trotskyist" by accepting the theses of permanent revolution. But Lenin had actually disagreed with Trotsky on nuances, and this showed up in his 1920-1922 formulations on the nature of the new

¹⁰ For a distilled discussion of Bukharin's critique of Preobrazhensky, cf. *Bilan d'une révolution*, pp. 139-140. Against the super-industrializers of the left, Bukharin said that the working class would be "obliged to construct a colossal administrative apparatus ... The attempt to replace all the petty producers and small peasants by bureaucrats produces an apparatus so colossal that the expense of maintaining it is incomparably greater than the unproductive expenditures resulting from the anarchic conditions of petty production: in sum, the whole economic apparatus of the proletarian state not only does not facilitate but actually hinders the development of the productive forces. It leads directly to the opposite of what it is supposed to do." (ibid)

¹¹ The "Bukharinist" aspect of Trotsky's assessment of the Stalinist "left" turn after 1928 is noted in *Bilan d'une révolution*, op. cit., p, 148.

¹² This intervention was made at the Sixth Enlarged Executive Committee Plenum of the Comintern in 1926. ibid. p. 38.

¹³ On the capitalist nature of the *kolkhoz*, cf. *Bilan d'une révolution*, pp. 172-179.

¹⁴ Bordiga's notion of the "dual revolution" is scattered through his writings. For one example cf. A. Bordiga, *Russie et révolution...*, p. 192 and ff.

regime, above all his remarkable speeches to the 1921 party congress, in his polemics against the First Workers' Opposition and their charge that the Soviet state was "state capitalism". In reply, Lenin said that state capitalism would be a tremendous step forward from what Russia actually was, which was a petty producer capitalism with a working-class political party controlling the state ¹⁵. For Bordiga, once this **political** expression of the working class was destroyed by Stalinism, **all that was left** was petty producer capitalism. Lenin's use of the term "workers' state with bureaucratic deformations", in the early 20's was quite different from Trotsky's use of the same term in 1936. It is not possible or necessary here to recapitulate the whole evolution of who said what on this question. What lurks behind these differing strategic and tactical judgments are two opposed conceptions of Marxism. What is important is that for Trotsky and the Trotskyists, the permanent character of the revolution was congealed in "property forms" and later was expressed in the growth of the productive forces ¹⁶. For Bordiga, the growth of the productive forces was merely proof of the bourgeois character of the Soviet phenomenon. He turned the Stalinists on their head by saying that Trotsky's problem was not his "underestimation" of the peasantry, but his **overestimation** of the possibility that the peasants, and the agrarian revolution of petty producers, could have anything to do with a proletarian revolution ¹⁷.

In Bordiga's conception, Stalin, and later Mao, Ho, etc. were "great romantic revolutionaries" in the 19th century sense, i.e. **bourgeois** revolutionaries. He felt that the Stalinist regimes that came into existence after 1945 were just extending the bourgeois revolution, i.e. the expropriation of the Prussian Junker class by the Red Army, through their agrarian policies and through the development of the productive forces. To the theses of the French ultra-left group "Socialism or Barbarism" who denounced the regime, after 1945, as state capitalist, Bordiga replied with an article "*Avanti Barbati!*" ("Onward Barbarians!") that hailed the bourgeois revolutionary side of Stalinism as its sole real content¹⁸. (One does not have to agree with Bordiga to acknowledge that this was a more coherent viewpoint than the stupidity of the Trotskyists' analysis after 1945 that saw the Stalinists in Eastern Europe, China or Indochina as quavering "reformists" eager to sell out to imperialism.)

The advance of Bordiga's framework over Trotsky's is above all his critique of the assumption, smuggled into Trotskyism and the work of those who work off Trotskyism, that Stalin and Stalinism represents a "center" between the Bukharinist right and a Trotskyist left. One can only imagine how the victory of the Bukharinist "right" in the industrialization debate could have done more damage to the international workers' movement than the triumph of the Stalinist "center" actually did. Yet anyone who wishes to draw an uncritical line of Marxist continuity through Trotsky after 1924 tacitly accepts this "left to right" spectrum and its consequences.

Trotsky wrote in 1936 "Socialism has demonstrated its right to victory, not on the pages of *Das Kapital*, ... but in the languages of steel, concrete and electricity" ¹⁹. Extending the theory of permanent revolution from the formation of soviets (1905, 1917) to state property forms to the development of the productive forces themselves

¹⁵ V.I. Lenin, *The Tax in Kind (The Significance of the New Policy and Its Conditions)* in *Collected Works*, Vol. 32, pp. 329-369, presents Lenin's analysis of the relationship between petty-producer capitalism and state capitalism in 1921.

¹⁶ Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, (New York, 1972), p. 8.

¹⁷ This is the formulation of *Bilan d'une révolution*, p. 95.

¹⁸ Cited in Grilli, op. cit., p. 282.

¹⁹ Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, (New York, 1972), p. 8.

(i.e. the proof of the deformed socialist character of the regime being its ability to develop industry in the “era of imperialist decay”), Trotsky culminated what I call the “substitute bourgeois revolution” character of Second and Third International Marxism.

Postwar Trotskyists (for whom Trotsky is of course not responsible) saw the industrialization of the Stalinist regimes during the period when the Third World was showing no signs of development anywhere as the definitive proof of their deformed socialist character. Against this attitude, Bordiga said: “One does not **build** communism”. The task of the “development of the productive forces” is not the task of communists. He also added: “It is exactly right that the ‘foundations of socialism’ are being built in the Soviet Union”; for him, this was precisely the proof of the bourgeois character of the regime.

One important example of a current which broke from the pro-Stalinist bias of Trotskyism without examining the legacy of the 1920s faction fight was the Shachtmanite tradition and its “bureaucratic collectivist” analysis. Their 1940’s version at least, sees a world-conquering dynamism for Stalinism²⁰, socialism’s rival to succeed capitalism for an epoch, which history has more recently shown to be false. For the Shachtmanite critique, moreover, the whole emphasis is placed on the question of “democracy”, which for them is essentially everything. Socialism is effectively conceived as “democratic collectivism”, so its absence, and the absence of the surface of capitalism [sic] forms, must be **“bureaucratic** collectivism”**. **In other words, this tradition’s whole disagreement with Stalinism and then Trotskyism revolved around the fact that what happened in Russia after 1917 or 1921 was anti-democratic. Of course that was tremendously important, but its influence is to tacitly accept the whole “line of continuity” through Trotsky and Trotsky’s** Lenin, and ignore the insight of Bukharin and his prediction about the state.** In other words, the whole perspective (the Shachtmanite tradition is deeply oblivious to the Marxian critique of political economy) revolved the counterposition bureaucracy/democracy and therefore, like Trotsky, smuggled in a whole notion of “tasks” of the bourgeois revolution that had crept into Second and Third International Marxism. Except for Bordiga, no one in the anti-Stalinist revolutionary left cited the drive to “develop the productive forces” themselves as proof that the Soviet Union was not a workers’ state of some kind; with the Trotskyists, of course, it’s the definitive proof, in the framework of nationalizations and planning, that it is.

But Bordiga added even more. Engineer that he was, Bordiga displayed a kind of theoretical rigidity which was both exasperating and effective in allowing him to see things differently. He essentially believed that the “communist program” had been set down once and for all by Marx and Engels in 1847 in the Manifesto and confirmed in the following year by the appearance of the communist current in the French and other workers’ movements. He essentially thought that Marx and Engels had worked out an “invariant” methodology and that “innovators” were always sooner or later, clever bourgeois philistines on the road to Bernsteinism or something like that. But this touching stand on principles set down in 1848 led him to astounding conclusions about a whole dimension of the Marxist tradition that, once again, has largely been lost. Bordiga believed that everything important had been said about the Russian question by Marx’s death in 1883²¹. To wit: Marx’s

²⁰ Cf. Shachtman, Max. *The Bureaucratic Revolution* (New York, 1962), for the most thorough statement of this view.

²¹ Cf. Bordiga, *Russie et révolution dans la théorie marxiste*, pp. 226-297, for a discussion of the evolution of Marx’s thought on the Russian commune and Russia’s lost “historical chance” to skip the capitalist phase.

correspondence with the Populists in the 1870's, the two cubic meters of notes on Russian agriculture he left at his death (he didn't finish *Capital* because in the last decade of his life he became fascinated by the agrarian question in Russia), and the various new prefaces to the Manifesto and other writings from the 1878-1883 period that reflected his involvement with Russia. (He had even concealed the extent of this from Engels, who became furious when he read that work on the Russian question had been the real reason for the incompleteness of *Capital*)²². The important things for Bordiga were Marx's discovery of the Russian commune, and the belief Marx entertained between 1878 and 1881 that on the basis of the commune Russia might literally skip the capitalist phase of history, might even do so in the absence of a revolution in the West, and that the peasants, **prior** to the capitalization of agriculture, might be central to the process. Marx wrote (in the famous letter to Vera Zasulich) that "If Russia follows the path that it took after 1861 it will miss the greatest chance to leap over all the fatal alternatives of the capitalist regime that history has ever offered to a people. Like all other countries, it will have to submit to the inexorable laws of that system"²³ By his death, Marx had decided that Russia had missed the chance, and told the Russian Populists so. For Bordiga, the preceding quote was the Marxist legacy on the "Russian question", and "the whole bloody process of capitalist accumulation" a prophecy fulfilled by Stalin. This whole side of Marx's relation to Russia largely slipped into dusty archives and footnotes for 80 or 90 years though it has been revived in recent years by figures such as Jacques Camatte and Teodor Shanin²⁴.

One can hardly portray Bordiga honestly without mentioning his attitude toward democracy. He proudly defined himself as "anti-democratic" and believed himself at one with Marx and Engels on this. (Its relation to the agrarian question will become clear.) Bordiga's hostility toward democracy had nothing to do with Stalinist gangsterism. Indeed, he saw fascism and Stalinism as the culmination of bourgeois democracy²⁵! Democracy to Bordiga meant above all the manipulation of society as a formless mass. To this he counterposed the "dictatorship of the proletariat", implemented by the communist party founded in 1847, based on the principles and **program** enunciated in the manifesto. He often referred to the spirit of Engels' remark that "on the eve of the revolution all the forces of reaction will be against us under the banner of 'pure democracy'". (As, indeed, every factional opponent of the Bolsheviks in 1921 from the monarchists to the anarchists called for "soviets without Bolsheviks".) Bordiga absolutely opposed the idea of revolutionary content being the product of a democratic process of pluralist views; whatever its problems, in light of the history of the past 70 years, this perspective has the merit of underscoring the fact that communism (like all social formations) is above all about **programmatic content** expressed through forms. It underscores the fact that for Marx, communism is not an ideal to be achieved but a "real movement" born from the old society with a set of programmatic tasks²⁶. In the New Left atmosphere of the 1960s, in

²² On Marx's deep involvement with the problem of Russian agriculture in the last decade of his life, cf. Teodor Shanin's essay "Late Marx" in T. Shanin, ed. *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, New York, 1983. Also J. Camatte, *Bordiga et la révolution russe...*, pp. 15-23.

²³ Marx's letter of November 1877 is published in German in Maximilien Rubel, ed. *Marx-Engels: Die russische Kommune* (1972), pp. 49-53. (Our translation in text).

²⁴ Cf. note 22.

²⁵ The analyses of Italian fascism in 1921-24 by Bordiga's faction, undoubtedly authored in part by Bordiga himself, are available, in *Communisme et fascisme*, (Ed. Programme communiste, 1970).

²⁶ As Marx said in the Manifesto, communism is not an ideal to be realized; it is on the contrary "nothing but the real movement unfolding before our eyes". For a discussion of communism as the "real movement", cf. Jean Barrot, *Le mouvement communiste*, (Ed. Champ Libre, 1972).

which “economic questions” were virtually assumed to have been obviated by the “affluent society”, the debate revolved around the almost exclusive counterposition bureaucracy/democracy and “forms of organization”²⁷, leading to a methodological formalism that was of little use when, after 1973, world economic crisis changed all the rules of struggle. In another context, Bordiga, when pressed to identify the capitalist class in his Russian capitalism said that it existed in the interstices of the Russian economy, as a class **in formation**. For him, the idea of “state capitalism” was nonsensical because the state could only be a medium for the interests of a class; for “the state” to do anything like establish a mode of production was an abandonment of Marxism. For Bordiga, the Soviet Union was a society **in transition to capitalism**²⁸.

This critique of formalism again had political consequences. It was tied to Bordiga’s notion of the role of the communist party. Bordiga resolutely opposed the Comintern’s turn to the right in 1921; as General Secretary of the PCI, he refused to implement the “united front” strategy of the Third Congress. He refused, in other words, to fuse the newly formed PCI, dominated by “Bordigism”, with the left wing of the PSI from which it had just broken away. Bordiga had a completely different view of the party from the Comintern, which was adapting to the revolutionary ebb announced, in 1921, by the Anglo-Russian trade agreement, Kronstadt, the implementation of the NEP, the banning of factions and the defeat of the March action in Germany. For Bordiga, the Western European CPs’ strategy of fighting this ebb by absorbing a mass of left-wing Social Democrats through the “united front” was a complete capitulation to the period of counter-revolutionary ebb he saw setting in. This was the nub of his critique of democracy. For it was in the name of “conquering the masses” that the Comintern seemed to be making all kinds of programmatic concessions to left-wing Social Democrats. For Bordiga, program was everything, a gate-receipt notion of numbers was nothing. The role of the party in the period of ebb was to preserve the program and to carry on the agitational and propaganda work possible until the next turn of the tide, not to dilute it while chasing ephemeral popularity. One can argue with this conception, which can lead to the closed world of the sect, as the Bordigists indisputably became. But it has the merit of underscoring another truth to which the Trotskyist wing of the international left opposition and its heirs have been blind: when the “mass” parties outside Russia swallowed Stalinism whole in the mid-1920s, the foundations had been laid by the 1921 turn. It is hardly necessary to accept Bordiga’s anti-democratic viewpoint to see this: he completely missed, and dismissed, the role of soviets and workers’ councils in Russia, Germany, and Italy. But on the “sociological” consequences of the 1921 united front for the future of the Western CPs – their “Bolshevization” after 1924 – Bordiga was right and the Comintern was wrong. **Because historically, the social base of much post-1924 Stalinism had entered the Western CPs through the “united front” tactic of 1921**²⁹. Bordiga provided a way of seeing a fundamental degeneration in the world communist movement in 1921 (instead of in 1927 with the defeat of Trotsky) without sinking into mere empty calls for “more democracy”. The abstract formal perspective

²⁷ For a critique of the formalism which flows from seeing the problem of socialism as a problem of “forms of organization”, cf. the essay of Jean Barrot *Contribution a la critique de l’ideologie ultra-gauche (Leninisme et ultragauche)*, in his *Communisme et question russe* (Ed. de la Tête de feuilles, 1972), pp. 139-178.

²⁸ This is elaborated by L. Grilli, op. cit. p. 38.

²⁹ A parallel in Russia itself was the “Lenin levy”, whereby the party was flooded with malleable, inexperienced or simply careerist members easily manipulated by the Stalinists against the remnants of the Old Guard. The international counterparts of this transformation of the Communist International were figures such as Cachin in the PCF or Thälmann in the KPD.

of bureaucracy/democracy, with which the Trotskyist tradition treats this crucial period in Comintern history, became separated from any content. Bordiga throughout his life called himself a Leninist and never polemicized against Lenin directly, but his totally different appreciation of the 1921 conjuncture, its consequences for the Comintern, and his opposition to Lenin and Trotsky on the united front issue illuminates a turning point that is generally obscured by the heirs of the Trotskyist wing of the international left opposition of the 1920's.

Bordiga's idea that capitalism equals the agrarian revolution is the key to the 20th century; it's certainly the key to almost everything the left has called "revolutionary" in the 20th century, and it is the key to rethinking the history of Marxism and its entanglement with ideologies of industrializing backward regions of the world economy.

Bordiga obviously does not provide the key to the "de-Russification" of the "lenses" through which the international revolutionary movement sees the world. But developed further, his focus on the agrarian question does. Into the mid-1970's, the "Russian question" and its implications was the inescapable "paradigm" of political perspectives on the left, in Europe and the U.S., and yet 15 years later seems like such ancient history. This was a political milieu where the minute study of the month-to-month history of the Russian revolution and the Comintern from 1917 to 1928 seemed the key to the universe as a whole. If someone said they believed that the Russian Revolution had been defeated in 1919, 1921, 1923, 1927, or 1936, or 1953, one had a pretty good sense of what they would think on just about every other political question in the world: the nature of the Soviet Union, of China, the nature of the world CPs, the nature of Social Democracy, the nature of trade unions, the United Front, the Popular Front, national liberation movements, aesthetics and philosophy, the relationship of party and class, the significance of soviets and workers' councils, and whether Luxemburg or Bukharin was right about imperialism.

To merely enumerate the major events of world history since 1975 is to see how profoundly the way we see the world has changed; we need only conjure up the 1980's realities of Thatcher's Britain, Reagan's America, Mitterrand's France, Gorbachev's Russia, Teng's China, i.e. the "neo-liberal" (in the von Hayek/von Mises sense of that term) tidal wave that has overwhelmed the statism of Social Democracy, Stalinism, Keynesianism and Third World Bonapartism. A thorough knowledge of the Russian Revolution from 1917 to 1928 and the "world view" derived from it seems a poor guide to China's post 76-evolution, Russia under Gorbachev, the appearance of the NICS, the China/Vietnam/Cambodia war, the collapse of the Western European CPs, the utter containment of the British Labour Party, the American Democratic Party and the German SPD by the right, the evolution of Mitterrand to neo-liberalism, or the appearance of significant "anti-statist" currents even in mercantilist regimes like Mexico or India. One might well add to this list a workers' movement in Poland with a heavy dose of clericalist nationalism and the revival of fundamentalism in Islam, Judaism and Christianity, de-industrialization, high tech and gentrification. None of these events discredit Marxism, but they do discredit the virtually universal penchant of the Western left, into the 1970's, to view reality through lenses inherited from the Russian Revolution and its fate.

The best of the heroic phases of German Social Democracy and Russian Bolshevism was not enough to serve as a guide to this new reality, even though, on the face of things, a consequential "Third Camper" had never had any illusions about the statist political formations in demise from the mid-1970's onward. Yet such a "Third Camper", accepting Lenin's *Imperialism* and a nexus of other prognoses from the first

three congresses of the Comintern, shared with the Stalinists subterranean assumptions about the inability of the capitalist world market to industrialize any part of the Third World, and was equally thrown into disarray by the emergence of the NICs³⁰. But there is disarray on a deeper level, one that strikes at the heart of a revolutionary identity derived from the 2nd and 3rd Internationals. For if one “maps” the militant mass communist parties or regimes existing in Europe between 1920 and 1975, they coincide almost exactly with a map of enlightened despotic states between 1648 and 1789. That is: France, Germany, Russia, Spain, Portugal, Sweden (the most important Scandinavian CP, the only one to survive World War II as anything more than a sect). Mass CPs are absent in Britain, the U.S., Holland, Switzerland, (and the Anglophone “settler states” like Australia, New Zealand, Canada). The apparent exception is the PCI. But Italy spawned the prototypes of enlightened absolutist statecraft with its important local mercantilist city states, and regionally the PCI’s bases of strength seem to correlate with different regional experiences during the historical phase of the *ancien regime*. Finally, the PCI was and is the most “social democratic” of the big Western CPs after 1956; that is of course the reason it is the only one left.

The connection between the presence of an enlightened despotic state in 1648 and a mass CP or Stalinist state in 1945 is **the agrarian question**. These states, with France as the prototype, were created to accelerate the **capitalization of agriculture**. Consciously or not, they were doing to their peasantries something like what the Soviet state was doing to the Russian peasants from 1928 onward, and what liberal capitalist regimes did in the 19th century. The enlightened absolutist states looted the peasants, through taxation, as a source of accumulation. These methods were a response to the successful civil societies already brought into existence in the “Calvinist” countries, whose success rested on the earlier capitalization of agriculture, above all and first of all in England. **Capitalism is first of all the agrarian revolution**. Before it is possible to have industry and cities and urban workers, it is necessary to revolutionize agricultural productivity to have the surplus to free labor power from the land. Where this had not been accomplished by 1648 (the end of the Thirty Years’ War and hence of the wars of religion), it had to be done by top-down statism. This created the continental mercantile tradition that, after the French Revolution, persisted into the 20th century as a more mature mercantilism. This characterized Louis Napoleon’s Second Empire (1852-1870) and above all Bismarck’s Prussia and Prussia-dominated Germany³¹. The latter, in particular, was copied by all the “late developers” all over the world after German unification in 1870, starting with Russia.

Here, Barrington Moore’s framework (now put into perspective), comes into focus: the decade of the 1860’s was a fundamental conjuncture. It saw the U.S. Civil War, the unification of Germany, the unification of Italy, the Russian serf emancipation, and the Meiji Restoration in Japan. One can add for good measure the Second Empire industrial development of France and the creation of the Third Republic, but it is secondary. It seems that if a country was not “internally reorganized” by 1870, it had no chance of being in the “inner circle” of significantly industrialized countries in 1914. Second, of the five countries mentioned (once again setting France aside) four by 1933 had totalitarian/authoritarian mercantile states. Of the major countries, only those which participated significantly in the **first** North Atlantic capitalist

³⁰ On the rise of the New Industrial Countries and their impact on ideology worldwide, cf. Nigel Harris, *The End of the Third World*, (London, 1986).

³¹ On the mercantile tradition and its impact, cf. Roman Szporluk, *Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx versus Friedrich List*, (Oxford UP, 1988).

economy (Britain, France, the U.S.) escaped authoritarian mercantile solutions in the 1830's, and **only** the U.S. of the five that reorganized in the 1860's. (This is an important clue to the centrality of the pre-industrial historical experience.) Why were the 1860's such an apparent cut off point? The answer seemed to be: the 1873 world depression, and particularly **agrarian** depression³². When the U.S., Canada, Argentina, Australia and Russia came onto the world grain market as major exporters, it essentially recreated the counterposition of 1648 all over again: the continental states, reacting to the agrarian depression of 1873-1896, all had to move to protectionism to preserve their national agricultures. The most important case was Germany's "Iron and Rye" alliance of industrialists and Junkers of 1879 which finalized the subjugation of German capitalism and liberalism to the Junker dominated Prussian/German state. But comparable scenarios were acted out in France, Iberia, Italy, and in the Austro-Hungarian empire. The emergence onto the world agricultural market of the U.S., Canada, Argentina and Australia drew a line around the existing core of advanced capitalist development for over a century. By 1890 it was cheaper to ship wheat from Buenos Aires to Barcelona than to ship it 100 miles over inland transport. The agricultural sectors of the continental mercantilist states became internationally unviable. The impact of this state of affairs on the development of the workers' movement has not merited the attention it deserves.

The revolutionary tradition saw socialism/communism as growing essentially out of the explosion of the Third Estate after the French Revolution: in Babeuf, the Enrages and other radical elements who appeared to the left of the Jacobins; above all, in the revolution of 1848 in France and the rest of Europe (including the Chartists who peaked in England in 1848). History seems persuasive: the line from 1793-1794 to 1917-1921 passes from France to Germany to Russia in the French revolutions of 1830, 1848 and the Commune; in the rise of the SPD up to 1914; in the Russian 1905 and 1917; climaxing in the failed world revolutionary upsurge of 1917-21 with near revolutionary situations in Germany, Italy, England, Spain, and insurrectionary strikes in almost every other part of the world. This latter is the peak of the "classical workers' movement". CLR James has talked in terms of the need to reconstitute the historical moment of the breakdown of the German-Russian front in 1917-1918; i.e. that in the failure of the German revolution and the defeat of the world revolutionary wave, the world revolution had its finest hour to date. This trajectory is the framework of Lenin-Trotsky orthodoxy. If the German revolution had saved Russia from isolation, the 20th century would have taken a completely different course. That view of history was a very useful "heuristic device" to avoid all the pitfalls of Social Democracy, Stalinism, Maoism, and Third Worldism. To live within that tradition, whether as a Trotskyist, a Third Camper, or an ultra-leftist, is to measure history from the vantage point of the German and Russian soviets of 1917-1921. It is not at all a bad benchmark for historical judgment; it is certainly superior to the Keynesian welfare state, the Stalinist successes in the first Five Year Plan, or labor-intensive agrarian communes in China as a notion of socialist society. But it leads to an impasse. It leads one to viewing history as a strategist for the Comintern in 1920, of taking up where the Central and Eastern European revolutions against the Hohenzollerns, Hapsburgs and Romanovs left off. Yet an historical chasm separates those revolutions, and their dual character, from the present³³. The **dual** nature of

³² For a discussion of the post-1873 impact of the agrarian depression, cf. Hans Rosenberg, *Grosse Depression und Bismarckzeit*, (Berlin, 1967).

³³ The Dutch ultra-leftist Herman Gorter confusedly, but correctly, already in 1921 grasped the absence of an agrarian question for Western workers as the essence of the difference between the Russian revolution and any possible revolution in the West, a difference minimized by Lenin in *Left-Wing Communism*,

the October revolution was that of a revolution in which historical tasks of the bourgeois revolution were realized under the leadership of the working class, after which the proletarian political content was completely snuffed out by Stalinist counter-revolution. To draw the line of “continuity” uncritically through Lenin and Trotsky, as the exact extensions of Marx in the early twentieth century, to make the Russian Revolution the touchstone of the 20th century (“the turning point of history where history failed to turn”, as someone put it) is to “buy into” a whole view of history, before and since 1917. It is above all to accept a mythology about German Social Democracy as a revolutionary Marxist formation prior to some date, whether 1890, or 1898, or 1914, when the SPD was taken over by “revisionism”. If there is one single myth at the bottom of the outlook informed by “the best of German Social Democracy and Russian Bolshevism” which has now become problematic, it is that rose tinted view of the early SPD. It is through that view that the international left was colonized by the lenses of *Aufklärung* which originated in the civil service of the enlightened despotic states.

One can see this impasse on several levels. Let us begin with the “vulgar”, non-Marxist materialism that was the bread and butter of the classical workers’ movement, originally centered in the SPD, later in the Bolshevik Party, of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Internationals.

As many people asked themselves after discovering the *1844 Manuscripts*, the *Grundrisse*, the Hegelian “fingerprints” in *Capital*, the “Theses on Feuerbach”, Lukacs, Korsch, etc., how could the classical workers’ movement have been taken over by “vulgar Marxism”? Why does pre-Kantian materialism (i.e. materialism that, unlike Marx’s, has not passed through the dialogue with German idealism and Feuerbach) seem so similar to the 18th century materialism of the Anglo-French Enlightenment, i.e. the ideology of the bourgeois revolution? How does one arrive at a **Marxist** explanation of the historical hegemony of vulgar Marxism, since Marxism rejects out of hand the psychological/moralistic judgment that “they had the wrong ideas”? The answer did not seem so complicated: if the materialism of the classical workers’ movement centered in the SPD from 1860 to 1914, and extended by the Russian Revolution, was epistemologically little different from revolutionary materialism of a bourgeois character, it must be that the **classical workers’ movement in Central and Eastern Europe was an extension of the bourgeois revolution**. Placing oneself in the position of the admirers of the heroic early SPD, it is hard to think of any other explanation that makes sense. This is, after all, not so very far from Trotsky’s theory of combined and uneven development: where the bourgeoisie is weak and unable to take on the *ancien regime*, the task falls to the working class. (Trotsky’s effort was to believe that the working class was making the socialist revolution.) This “vulgar Marxism” provided the “world view” expressed in the popular pamphlets of the late Engels, and the writings of Bebel, Kautsky, William Liebknecht, the pre-revisionist Bernstein, and Plekhanov – the grey eminences of the Second International, who educated Lenin and the Bolsheviks. It should never be forgotten that Lenin did not begin to see through Kautsky and the SPD “center” of orthodoxy until 1910-1912, and in 1914 could not believe the newspaper reports that the SPD had voted for war credits. He was that close to these influences. He wrote *Imperialism* to explain the collapse of the SPD; Trotsky later added the “absence of revolutionary leadership” to explain the defeat in Western Europe after the war. Raya Dunayevskaya’s portrait of Lenin rushing to the Zurich library in September 1914 to read Hegel’s *Logic*³⁴ to understand the debacle of the SPD may or may not be

an Infantile Disorder. Cf. H. Gorter, *Offener Brief an den Genossen Lenin*, Berlin 1921.

apocryphal; nevertheless, the “late Lenin” had no impact on official Marxism after 1917, including in the Fourth International. The philosophical views of Lukacs and Korsch were laughed out of the Comintern in 1923. In the more intellectually astute milieu in the US left of the mid-1960’s, (prior to the wave of translations from French, German and Italian after 1968) perhaps the most sophisticated English-language text available on the question of the philosophical background of Marxism was Sidney Hook’s *Towards an Understanding of Karl Marx*. This was not anyone’s fault; it merely reflects the fact that the impact of the discovery of the early writings of Marx, of the real extent of his debt to Hegel, of the critique of vulgar materialism in the “Theses on Feuerbach”, and of works like the *Grundrisse* really only got beyond small circles of specialists in the 1950’s and 1960’s. But there had to be a historical **reason** for that; it wasn’t just a question of what was published when and where (the *Grundrisse*, for example, was first published in only 200 copies in German in Moscow in 1941).

But the key to this ideological anachronism in Marxist and working-class history clearly cannot be, as we said above, that “they had the wrong ideas”. The answer has to lie at deeper levels of the history of accumulation and how it shaped class struggle internationally. Once again the Bordigist tradition unearthed perspectives quite marginal to the general debates of the 1960’s and 1970’s, perspectives that I think tie together the agrarian question, the periodization of capitalist accumulation, the real historical role of Social Democracy and Bolshevism, and the historic link between enlightened absolutism in the 17th century and mass-based Communist Parties in the 20th.

The most interesting perspective developed to illuminate these questions was that of the “neo-Bordigists”, French currents influenced by Bordiga, but not slavishly; the best of them attempted to synthesize Bordiga, who was oblivious to the historical significance of soviets, workers’ councils, and workers’ democracy, and who placed everything in the party, with the German and Dutch ultra-left who glorified workers’ councils and explained everything that had gone wrong after 1917 in terms of “Leninism”.

All of the French currents put at center stage a text of Marx which, in the long run, may be more important than all the other new material that started to come to light in the 1950’s and 1960’s: the so-called “Unpublished Sixth Chapter” of Vol. I of *Capital*³⁵. It is not known why Marx removed it from the original version of Vol. I. But it is a materialist “Phenomenology of Mind”. Ten pages suffice to refute the Althusserian claims that Marx forgot Hegel in his “late period”. But the affirmation of the continuity with Hegel’s method is the least of it; the fundamental categories elaborated in the text are the distinctions between absolute and relative surplus value and what Marx calls the “extensive” and “intensive” phases of accumulation, corresponding to the “formal” and “real” domination of capital over labor. These are introduced in a very theoretical way; Marx doesn’t attempt to apply them to history generally. But the French ultra-left started to periodize capitalist history around exactly these distinctions. “Extensive” and “intensive” phases of capitalist history are not unique to Marxists; they have also been used by bourgeois economic historians as descriptive devices. One current summarized the distinction in its essence as “the phase which de-substantiates the **worker** to leave only the **proletarian**”³⁶. In that

³⁴ Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution*, (New York, 1975), Ch. 3.

³⁵ The *Unpublished Sixth Chapter* is the appendix of the new English translation of *Capital*, Vol I (New York, 1976), published by Penguin.

³⁶ Cf. the pamphlet of the French group Negation *LIP and the Self-Managed Counter-Revolution* (Eng-

sentence is the condemnation of the whole Gutman school of the new labor history. The transition to “intensive” accumulation in the 6th chapter, is presented to the “reduction of labor to the most general capitalist form of abstract labor”, the concise definition of the mass production labor process of the 20th century in the advanced capitalist world. The new labor history is one long nostalgia song for the phase of formal domination.

The “Unpublished Sixth Chapter” also sheds light on the “Hegel renaissance” in Marxism, and why serious interest in the Hegelian background of Marx had appeared first in Germany in the 1920’s (Lukacs, Korsch, the Frankfurt School) and had only taken hold in France in the 1950’s. In fact, **vulgar** Marxism had only become a fashionable ideology in France – in the intelligentsia – in the 1930’s and 1940’s, i.e. during the Popular Front and Resistance. What could explain this 30-year gap between France and Germany? The obvious answer had to be the great superiority of Germany in industrial development in the 1920’s, which France began to rival in the 1950’s. There seems to be some connection between “Hegelianized” Marxism and the conditions of what we called “intensive accumulation” and “real domination”. It is also curious that Italy had a sophisticated, much more “Germanized” Marxist culture well before France. This must also be related in some way to Italy’s status as a political “late comer”, in contrast to France’s participation in the first North Atlantic capitalist economy and the bourgeois revolutionary wave of 1770-1815. The Jacobin tradition in France, expressed through the rationalism associated with Comte, Saint Simon, and Guesde, the Kantian idealism of Jaures, or the rationalism of even the anarchist tradition (with its belief in anti-clericalist science) or finally the “positivisme laïque et republicain” of the Third Republic remained **beneath** the level of post-Kantian German thought. Italy was “Germanized” in the 1890’s; France only in the 1930’s and 1940’s.

The Lenin-Trotsky tradition divides the history of capitalism into two phases, separated by World War I, inaugurating the “epoch of imperialist decay”. The theoretical sources of this theory come from the “monopoly capital” discussion prior to World War I: Hobson, Hilferding, Lenin. It was popularized for an epoch by Lenin’s *Imperialism*. Capitalism in the heyday of the Second International looked different from the system described in Marx (it is important to remember that Vols. 2 and 3 only became available in the 1880’s and 1890’s; most socialist militants’ relation to “Marxist economics” has come from Vol. I and more realistically from popular pamphlets like “Wages, Prices and Profits”.) Capitalism seemed to be moving away from a “competitive” or “laissez-faire” phase to a phase of cartels, monopolies, imperialism, state guidance, the emergence of finance capital, arms races, colonial land grabs: all the elements Hilferding called “organized capitalism” *circa*. 1910. World War I marked the turning point. The Russian Revolution showed that, in Lenin’s phrase, “the proletarian revolution lurks behind every strike”, and the 1917-1921 period very nearly seemed to confirm that. Then came, after an ephemeral stabilization, 1929, world depression, fascism, Stalinism, and World War II, followed in turn by incessant wars of national liberation. Who, in 1950, could deny that this was the “epoch of imperialist decay”? These very real phenomenon cemented a whole world view, first codified in the early years of the Comintern: the continuity with the Kautskyian vulgar Marxism of the pre-1914 period, the “monopoly capital” characterization of the epoch, most ably expressed by Bukharin, Trotsky’s theories of permanent revolution and combined and uneven development, and the Congress’ characterization of the epoch as that of “imperialist decay”. This, at least, was condensed expression of that

lish trans. by Black and Red, Detroit, 1975).

heritage as it was recaptured in the best attempts of the late 60's and early 70's to re-link with the revolutionary potential of the German-Polish-Russian corridor of 1905 and 1917-1921. This periodization of modern history allowed one to see the world "from Moscow in 1920" and this, again, made the unraveling of the history of the Russian Revolution and of the Comintern from 1917 to 1928 so central and so apparently full of implications. In that history was the philosopher's stone, whether Trotskyist, Shachtmanite, or ultra-leftist. This was the viewpoint of those who, into the mid-1970's, had no illusions about Social Democracy, Stalinism, or Third World Bonapartism, i.e who opposed them from the vantage point of revolutionary workers' democracy of the soviet/worker council variety. On one level, this seemed a perfectly coherent explanation of the world into the mid-1970's. Had not the highest expression of the revolutionary workers' movement taken place in Germany and Russia? Had not everything since been disaster and bureaucratic nightmare? Bordiga anticipated this attitude when he wrote, sometime in the 1950's, that "just because social evolution in one zone (by which he meant Europe and the U.S.) has come to the next to the last phase does not mean that what happens on the rest of the planet is socially of no interest". For this world view, (shared in that period by the author) what was happening on the rest of the planet was precisely **socially** of no interest. Who could seriously propose China or North Korea or Albania, or the national liberation movements and their states, as models for American or European workers? But such a view, while correct, was not adequate.

Why not?

Because it ignored two realities already well underway in the mid-1970's: the double movement of Third World industrialization and technology-intensive ("high tech") development in the advanced sector that were about to crash down around the Western working class movement, upon which the whole earlier perspective rested. In 1970, in the midst of Stalinist, Maoist and Third World euphoria over peasant-bureaucratic revolutions, it was right and revolutionary to look to the Western working class as the only class that could actually end class society. It was necessary to reject that Third Worldist hogwash then, as it is necessary to reject its (quite enfeebled) remnants today. But what has changed since then is of course that de-industrialization in the West and industrialization in the Third World (two sides of the same coin) have created real workers' movements in the Third World itself, South Korea being the most recent important instance. Into the mid-70's the world looked pretty much like what could be extrapolated from the early, heroic Comintern view sketched above. The countries that were the core of world industry in 1914 (Western Europe, the U.S. and Japan), were still the core. In terms of the earlier discussion, if a country had not been "internally reorganized" by the 1860's it wasn't going to be in the "industrial club" in 1914 and still wouldn't be circa 1975. Further, the percentage of workers in manufacture in the advanced industrial counties, which had peaked at circa 45% in Germany and England circa 1900-1914, was still close to that figure for the advanced capitalist zone as a whole in the early 70's. What had changed in the interim? Clearly, the advanced capitalist world had gone from a (very rough) breakdown of its work force, in 1900-1914 of 45% in industry, 45% in agriculture, 10% in white-collar services, to 40-45% in industry, 5-10% in agriculture, and 40-45% in white-collar services (not to mention the creation of a large arms sector that had only barely come into existence around the turn of the century). What did this indicate? It indicated that the "story" of capitalist development was as follows. In 1815-1914 the phase of "classic" or "competitive" capitalism, the system had primarily transformed peasants into workers, at least in England, the U.S., France and Germany. In

the post-1914 period (in reality beginning circa 1890) the new phase of “organized” capitalism, “monopoly” capitalism, the “epoch of imperialist decay” continued to deplete the rural populations of the Western world (and Latin America, the Caribbean, southern Europe and Africa), but to accomplish what? Instead of continuing to expand the industrial work force, it used the greatly increased productivity of a stagnant percentage of the work force to support an ever-growing white collar “service sector” (and arms production). But to return to the basic theme, Communist Parties start to erode and be superseded by integrated Social Democratic type parties precisely when the agrarian population of the country in question is reduced to a trivial (5-10%) of the work force. This is what has happened, for example, in France and Spain in the last 15 years.

This is what has not happened in Portugal, precisely because small producer agriculture remains a very significant percentage of the Portuguese work force. This is the backdrop to the transformation of the PCI. It is what happened long ago in northern Europe and the United States. It is, finally, the strict parallel to the problems encountered in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union when the “extensive” phase of accumulation is completed and it is time to move to the intensive phase which the West arrived at through the crisis of 1914-1945. In short, from enlightened absolutism in the 17th century to Communist Parties in the 20th century, the problematic is that of the extensive phase of accumulation – the transformation of peasants into workers. The ultimate implication of this is that a society is only fully capitalist when a trivial percentage of the work force is employed in agriculture, i.e. that a society is only fully capitalist when it has moved from the extensive/formal to the intensive/real phase of accumulation. This means, in short, that neither Europe nor the United States in 1900 were as capitalist as the socialist movement thought they were, **and that the classical workers’ movement, in its mainstream, was first and foremost a movement to propel capitalism into its intensive phase.**

In sum, capitalism means first of all the agrarian revolution.

The agrarian question has had multiple meanings in the history of the international left. It has arisen in connection with the peasant revolutions that accompanied the French and Russian revolutions; the capitalization of agriculture in the U.S. South through the Civil War; the agrarian depression after 1873; the emptying of the European countrysides after World War II. Undoubtedly, these are seriously distinct phenomena that should not be lumped together cavalierly. But let us focus on intensive accumulation linked to the reduction of the agrarian workforce to 5-10% percent of the population as the definition of a “fully capitalist” society. A fully capitalist agriculture is an American-style mechanized agriculture. The “agrarian question” in this sense, was not solved in France in 1789 but in 1945-1973. The connection between agriculture and intensive accumulation in industry is the reduction of the cost of food as a percentage of the worker’s bill of consumption, creating buying power for the consumer durables (such as the automobile) at the center of 20th century mass production.

Let us summarize, and then return, one more time to Bordiga and the neo-Bordigists. Vulgar Marxism was an ideology of the Central and Eastern European intelligentsia linked to the workers’ movement in a battle to complete the bourgeois revolution (Second and Third International Marxism). Its parallel to pre-Kantian, pre-1789 bourgeois materialism is not the result of an “error” (“they had the wrong ideas”) but a precise expression of the real content of the movement that developed it. That content makes sense ultimately in the framework of a periodization of capitalist

history that complements the Lenin/Trotsky “epoch of imperialist decay” with the concepts of extensive/formal domination and intensive/real accumulation. The whole Lenin/Hilferding 2nd International theory of “organized capitalism” and “monopoly capitalism” is then, an occultation of the transition from extensive to intensive. The “official Marxist” outlook, therefore is the outlook of a nascent state elite, in or out of power, whose movement results in another form of capitalism (real domination) and calls it “socialism”. What is compelling about such an analysis is that it avoids moralizing and offers a “sociological” explanation for an “epistemology”. Once again it means that this social stratum that held an *Aufklärung* form of materialism because it was a proto-state civil service in a development regime, and that its **economics**, codified in the Leninist theory of imperialism, were also the economics of that stratum. It is not real Marxism, because it tends to replace analyses of relations and forces of production with (ultimately Dühringian) analyses of “force”. From Lenin and Bukharin via Baran and Sweezy to Bettelheim and Amin to Pol Pot (recognizing tremendous discontinuity and degeneration but also continuity) the “monopoly capital” theory is the theory of state bureaucrats. It is fundamentally anti-working class. It sees the Western working class’s reformism as the expression of super profits’ from imperialism, and it obscures the difference of interests between the state bureaucratic elite and the peasant and working classes in the underdeveloped countries where it holds power.

The French neo-Bordigists, specifically Camatte, showed that it was in Russia above all that Marxism, in phases, was transformed from a theory of the “material human community”, **a real movement** that is “born” from mature capitalism **into something that is “built”** in backward proto-capitalism. This is seen by the contrast between the “Marxist position” on the Russian question developed by Marx in 1878-1883 and the Bolshevik polemic with the last phase of Populism in the 1890’s. Whatever Marx may have entertained in his study of the Russian commune as the possible base for an immediate “leap” to communism, he never would have written, as Trotsky wrote in 1936, that “socialism now confronts capitalism in tons of steel and concrete”. This is not to say that there is no basis for this productivist discourse in Marx’s work; it is simply to say that the gulf that separates Marx from all 2nd, 3rd (and 4th) International Marxism is precisely that he is beyond “pre-Kantian” materialism and way beyond “monopoly capital” economics that both express a state civil service view of the world. In the battle between Lenin and the Populists in the 1890’s, the battle to introduce this truncated 2nd International “Marxism” into Russia, the whole pre-1883 dimension of the Marxist analysis of the “Russian question”, unearthed by Bordiga, was totally lost in a productivist chorus. The linear, mechanistic affirmation of “progress” that is the core of Enlightenment historical thought, which was taken over into a “stage” theory of history by vulgar Marxism, has no feel for the Russian agrarian commune, as Marx did. The *Gemeinwesen* (material human community) telos of communism is suppressed for productivism. Once in power, the Bolsheviks took the reproduction schema and categories of Vol. I of *Capital* and translated them into their manuals for economic planning without noticing that this was a “Ricardian” description of capitalism which Marx undermines in Vol. III. This paved the way for the “steeleater” ideology of the Stalinist planners after 1928. There is already a world between Marx and the 2nd International, and later the Bolsheviks, expressed in “philosophy” and in “economics”, and these differences express different “social epistemologies” rooted in the outlooks of two different classes, the working class and the state civil service. It is in this sense that it is meaningful to say that the best of German Social Democracy and Russian Bolshevism are hopelessly entwined with the state. A renewal of revolutionary vision can no longer

identify them as direct heirs, but as a detour whereby Marxism fused with a statist discourse foreign to itself.

We, in the West today, unlike the revolutionaries of 1910, live in a totally capitalist world. There is no capitalization of agriculture to accomplish, no peasant question for the workers' movement. At the same time, in the midst of a deepening world economic crisis of 1930's proportions, all the old revolutionary visions have evaporated, and the sense of what a positive world beyond capitalism would look like is less clear than ever. (Recent history provides many examples of negative alternatives.) Yet, when we understand that much of what is collapsing today is ultimately the legacy of the Enlightened absolutist state and its modern extensions, we can see that many of the conceptual tools in use until quite recently were tools for the completion of the bourgeois revolution, developed by movements ultimately headed by state civil servants, real or potential. By freeing Marxism of this statist legacy we can at last start to understand the world from the vantage point of "the real movement unfolding before our eyes" (*Communist Manifesto*).

Bibliography

One objective of this article was to make the person and ideas of Bordiga better known in the English-speaking world. Unfortunately, many of the sources upon which the article draws were published only in Italian or French, by obscure left-wing publishers, many of which no longer exist. They are thus, aside from the writings of Bordiga himself, virtually impossible to obtain. Readers who wish to acquire the available writings of Bordiga, in various languages, can contact the Partito Comunista Internazionale, Via Mazzini 30, Schio, Italy.

The important writings of Bordiga are as follows. *Struttura economica e sociale della Russia d'oggi* (Edizioni il programma comunista, 1976) is his major work on the Russian economy. A large part of it was published in French under the title *Russie et révolution dans la théorie marxiste* (Ed. Spartacus, 1975).

This was followed by a complete translation, *Structure économique et sociale de la Russie d'aujourd'hui* (Editions de l'oubli, 1976, 2 vols.) The *Storia della sinistra comunista* (Ed. il programma comunista), the history of Bordiga's faction from 1912 to 1921, appeared in 3 successive volumes beginning in 1964. Shorter but fundamental theoretical statements are *Proprietà e capitale* (Ed. Iskra, Florence 1980) and *Mai la merce sfamerà l'uomo: la questione agraria e la teoria della rendita fondiaria secondo marx* (Ed. Iskra, 1979) A French collection of some of Bordiga's shorter texts, including his commentaries of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, were edited with a preface by Jacques Camatte in *Bordiga et la passion du communisme* (Ed. Spartacus, 1974).

There is, to my knowledge, no adequate comprehensive study of Bordiga. Two works which avoid the worst errors and earlier calumnies are A. de Clementi, *Bordiga* (Turin, 1971) and a biography by a PCI intellectual, Franco Livorsi, *Amadeo Bordiga* (Rome, 1976). A presentation of Bordiga's views on the Soviet phenomenon is Liliana Grilli, *Amadeo Bordiga: capitalismo sovietico e comunismo* (Milan, 1982). The best overall presentation of Bordiga and his theories as they influence the present article are in Jacques Camatte, *Bordiga et la révolution russe. Russie et nécessité du communisme* in the journal *Invariance*, Année VII, Serie II, No. 4. A critical appreciation of the Bordigist faction is *La Gauche Communiste d'Italie*, published in 1981 by the Courant Communiste International. An overall "Bordigist" view of the Russian revolution and its aftermath is a special triple issue of *Programme communiste, Bilan d'une révolution* (Nos. 40-41-42, Oct. 1967-June 1968), the theoretical journal of one of the then-contending Bordigist parties. I have not

been able to ascertain if the views expressed in this issue were written or approved by Bordiga himself.

Two further works of interest which draw critically on Bordiga are Jean Barrot, *Le mouvement communiste* (Ed. Champ Libre, Paris, 1972), and Jacques Camatte, *Capital et Gemeinwesen: Le 6e chapitre inédit du capital et l'oeuvre économique de Marx* (Ed. Spartacus, Paris 1978).

Much information on Bordiga in his period of greatest mass influence is in the quasi-official history of the Italian Communist Party by Paolo Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano, Vol. I, Da Bordiga a Gramsci* (Turin, 1967). This work, like that of Livorsi, is to be used with caution.

Table of Contents

Why not?	15
Bibliography	18

I read somewhere that Amadeo Bordiga, Italian Communist, said something along these lines to Stalin's face: If the Soviet Union is the homeland of all proletarians and the revolution, then let it be governed by a joint committee of international communist parties! This is from memory and I'm sure the wording is wrong. I thought I read the quote a few years back in this text by Loren Goldner - "Communism is the Material Human Community", however, all I find is this: Bordiga was the last Western revolutionary who told off Stalin to his face (in 1926) as the gravedigger of the Founder of the Communist Party of Italy in 1921, Amadeo Bordiga is little known today, even among scholars of that country's Marxist traditions. Fifty years after his death, the first English-language collection of his writings shows why Bordiga shouldn't be overlooked. Amadeo Bordiga. Our new issue, "Biden Our Time," will be out soon. We'll discuss the last four chaotic years of US politics, what happened in November, and what to expect from the incoming Biden administration. Get a \$20 discounted print subscription today! The CIA's Secret Global War Against the Left. Branko Marcetic. Goldner's "Communism is the Material Human Community: Amadeo Bordiga Today. Buick's Bordigism. Bourrinet's The Bordigist Current. Bordiga's Considerations on the Party's Organic Activity when the General Situation is Historically Unfavorable. French Left (Socialisme ou Barbarie and the Situationist International): Castoriadis's On the Content of Socialism: Part One. Preface to the Swedish edition of Communism is the Material Human Community: Amadeo Bordiga Today (Riff-Raff) Loren Goldner, 2002 The core of the following text was actually written in 1988, before the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and was then slightly modified for its first publication in English (1991) to briefly take note of the 1989-91 events. It is in the same new historical optic that Amadeo Bordiga re-emerges into view as one of the most brilliant, and forgotten, Marxists of the 20th century.