

Gramsci's Prison Notebooks

Gramsci and Trotsky

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In June 1930 Alfonso Leonetti, Paolo Ravazzoli, and Pietro Tresso – three of the eight members of the Executive of the Italian Communist Party – were expelled.

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Stalin was imposing in Italy his “Third Period” line which had led the German Communist Party to denounce the Social Democrats as “social fascists” and dismiss the threat of Hitler taking power (it said “fascism” was already in power, and another form of “fascism” could thus be no new threat; and anyway, “after Hitler, our turn next”).

Italian fascism had been in power since 1922, and since about 1926 had snuffed out all legal labour-movement activity in Italy. Leonetti, Ravazzoli, and Tresso wanted to campaign for bourgeois-democratic demands against the fascist regime, and to challenge social democracy with united-front proposals rather than complacently declaring that social democracy was already dead and the future was single combat between the Communist Party and fascism.

The three formed the “New Italian Opposition”, the first Italian Trotskyist group.

Since 1927 the Italian CP had been led by Palmiro Togliatti, an ingenious and supple-spined politician who remained in post and in line with Stalin until his death in 1964. Before Togliatti the main leader had been Antonio Gramsci.

Since 8 November 1926 Gramsci had been isolated, in fascist jails; but his brother Gennaro could visit him. According to Antonio Gramsci’s orthodox Communist Party biographer, Giuseppe Fiori: *“Antonio... supported the attitude of Leonetti, Tresso, and Ravazzoli... and rejected the International’s new policy”*.

Gennaro went back to Togliatti, in exile, “and told him Nino [Antonio] was in complete agreement with him... Had I told a different story, not even Nino would have been saved from expulsion”.

Antonio Gramsci was cold-shouldered by the CP until he died in 1937, and taken up again as a hero only later, in the 1950s, when Togliatti could safely use him as a symbol of a “national” orientation without clashing with Moscow.

In 1932, trying to rouse the German workers’ movement to united action against Hitler, and to learn the lessons of the crushing of the Italian workers by fascism, Trotsky cited Gramsci as a model of

sober revolutionary-socialist politics. “Italian comrades inform me that with the sole exception of Gramsci, the Communist Party wouldn’t even allow of the possibility of the fascists seizing power... Once the proletarian revolution had suffered defeat... how could there be any further kind of counterrevolutionary upheaval? The bourgeoisie cannot rise up against itself! Such was the gist of the political orientation of the Italian Communist Party”.

Gramsci and Trotsky had met when Gramsci went to Russia between May 1922 and December 1923, for the Fourth Congress of the Communist International and other meetings.

In 1922 Gramsci was still deferring to Amadeo Bordiga, the main leader of the Italian Communist Party, and Bordiga’s opposition to political united-front tactics and to broadening out the CP. But Gramsci’s writings in 1919 and 1920 had shown a more dialectical turn of mind. As Frank Rosengarten records, to Trotsky and others, Gramsci “seemed... to be the man best suited to liberate the Italian party from the fruitless rigidities of... Bordiga”.

Trotsky later told another Italian Communist: “We had to press hard to convince him [Gramsci] to take a combative position against Bordiga and I don’t know whether we succeeded”.

“Hard”, from a Trotsky fresh from the Russian civil war and convinced that failure to shift to united-front policies could wreck the young Communist Parties and bring isolation and collapse to the Russian workers’ republic, meant *hard*. Gramsci was probably bruised, but over the next years he started arguing for united-front policies and against Bordiga. In his *Prison Notebooks* he continued to explore the issue. His agreement with Ravazzoli, Leonetti, and Tresso in 1930 reflected a conviction by then long and solidly held.

Trotsky at the Fourth Congress also gave Gramsci another theme which he would explore in the *Prison Notebooks*: the differences for revolutionary-socialist politics between a Western Europe with densely-organised civil societies, where socialists would have to tackle “heavy reserves” of the bourgeoisie before revolution, and a more loosely-knit Russia. Some writers on Gramsci have claimed that he deduced from that difference a policy for richer capitalist societies of gradual advance through cultural diffusion, in place of the activist party politics of the Bolsheviks in Russia. That deduction would have been as out of character for Gramsci as for Trotsky.

Trotsky: “In Europe we have a process differing profoundly from that in our country, because there the bourgeoisie is far better organised and more experienced, because there the petty-bourgeoisie has graduated from the school of the big bourgeoisie and is, in consequence, also far more powerful and experienced; and, in addition, the Russian Revolution has taught them a good deal...

“[In Russia] the big bourgeoisie and the nobility had gained some political experience, thanks to the municipal dumas, the zemstvos, the state Duma, etc. The petty bourgeoisie had little political experience, and the bulk of the population, the peasantry, still less. Thus the main reserves of the counter-revolution – the well-to-do peasants (kulaks) and, to a degree, also the middle peasants – came precisely from this extremely amorphous milieu. And it was only after the bourgeoisie began to grasp fully what it had lost by losing political power, and only after it had set in motion its counter-revolutionary combat nucleus, that it succeeded in gaining access to the peasant and petty-bourgeois elements and layers...

“In countries that are older in the capitalist sense, and with a higher culture, the situation will, without doubt, differ profoundly. In these countries the popular masses will enter the revolution far more fully formed in political respects... The bourgeoisie in the West is preparing its counter-blow in advance. The bourgeoisie more or less knows what elements it will have to depend upon and it builds its counter-revolutionary cadres in advance...

“It will hardly be possible to catch the European bourgeoisie by surprise as we caught the Russian bourgeoisie. The European bourgeoisie is more intelligent, and more farsighted... The revolutionary proletariat will thus encounter on its road to power not only the combat vanguards of the counter-revolution but also its heaviest reserves...

“But by way of compensation, after the proletarian overturn... the European proletariat will in all likelihood have far more elbow room for its creative work in economy and culture than we had in Russia... This general proposition must be dissected and concretised with regard to each country depending upon its social structure...”

Gramsci wrote an essay on Italian futurism included in Trotsky's book *Literature and Revolution*. Later, “the positions that Gramsci was to take on the relations between art and politics in the *Prison Notebooks* are... remarkably similar to those taken by Trotsky in the years 1923 and 1924, when he... led the campaign... to ‘reject party tutelage over science and art’.” (Rosengarten)

From Moscow, Gramsci went to Vienna, where he worked with Victor Serge, an activist in the Left Opposition to Stalin which emerged, around Trotsky, in 1923-4. Serge recalled in his memoirs that Gramsci was wary of the flood of careerist recruits brought into the Russian CP by Stalin and his allies after Lenin's death in the same way that the Left Opposition was.

“Trained intuitively in the dialectic, quick to uncover falsehood and transfix it with the sting of irony, [Gramsci] viewed the world with exceptional clarity. Once, we consulted together about the quarter-million workers who had been admitted at one stroke into the Russian Communist Party on the day after Lenin's death [in 1924]. How much were these proletarians worth, if they had had to wait for the death of Vladimir Ilyich before coming to the Party...

“When the crisis in Russia [between the Left Opposition and Stalin] began to worsen, Gramsci did not want to be broken in the process, so he had himself sent back to Italy by his Party”. (Taking his seat in the Italian parliament, won in the April 1924 election, must have been the main motive. Gramsci may well also have been glad to get further afield from the Comintern centre).

Gramsci and Trotsky were both revolutionary Marxists. *Yet Gramsci was not a Trotskyist, and Trotsky was not a Gramscian*. What were their differences, and what can we learn from them?

In February 1924 Gramsci had declared that the Left Opposition stood for “a greater measure of involvement on the part of the workers in the life of the party and a lessening of the powers of the bureaucracy, in order to assure to the revolution its socialist and working-class character”.

In a letter sent to Stalin's Central Committee just before he was jailed in 1926, Gramsci still protested at Stalin's bureaucratism, and for that reason the pliant Togliatti, then living in Moscow, suppressed

the letter. But Gramsci now also went along with the demagogic argument from Stalin and Bukharin that the Joint Opposition of 1926-7 (drawing in Zinoviev and Kamenev as well as the 1923 Oppositionists) represented an economistic or workerist failure to understand the concessions necessary to the peasantry.

“In the ideology and practice of the opposition bloc is being fully reborn the entire tradition of social democracy and syndicalism which has thus far prevented the Western proletariat from organising itself into a ruling class”.

Gramsci was wrong on that: Stalin's turn within two years to murderous terror against both the peasantry and the working class is ample proof.

In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci continued to conflate Trotsky's ideas with very different ones. “[Trotsky] can be considered the political theorist of frontal attack in a period in which it only leads to defeats”.

Was Gramsci conflating Trotsky with the people in the early Communist Parties who said that revolutionary principle demanded a permanent “offensive”? But Trotsky had been the main polemicist against them?

Was he conflating Trotsky with Trotsky's ally in the 1926-7 United Opposition, Zinoviev, who in 1924-5 (in alliance, then, with Stalin) had pushed a blustering ultra-left line onto the Communist International? Zinoviev had declared in January 1924: “What is Italian Social Democracy? It is a wing of the Fascists. Turati is a Fascist Social Democrat. Could we have said this five years ago? ... Ten years ago we had opportunists, but could we say that they were Fascist Social Democrats? No. It would have been absurd to say it then. Now, however, they are Fascists. ... The international Social Democracy has now become a wing of Fascism.” But Trotsky had been the main polemicist against that line, too, and the formation of the United Opposition represented a sharp shift by Zinoviev.

Was he conflating Trotsky's ideas with those of Bordiga, who in 1926 was the most vocal supporter from outside Russia of the United Opposition, bravely confronting Stalin face-to-face at the Executive of the Comintern in that year? Although Trotsky respected Bordiga, he thought differently from him on issues like the united front.

Even more oddly, Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks* referred back to Trotsky's speeches at the Fourth Congress of 1922, and then dismissed Trotsky with a sneer. “However, the question was outlined only in a brilliant, literary form, without directives of a practical character”.

Trotsky had explained very well the “directives of a practical character”, and the folly of permanent “frontal attack” – *including to the initially-resistant Gramsci himself*.

The early German Communist Party, explained Trotsky, “still felt as if it were a shell shot out of a cannon. It appeared on the scene and it seemed to it that it needed only shout its battle-cry, dash forward and the working class would rush to follow. It turned out otherwise...”

“The working class had been deceived more than once in the past, it has every reason to demand that

the party win its confidence... the need [was] for the Communists to conquer, in experience, in practice, in struggle, the confidence of the working class..

“A new epoch [of communist activity was necessary] which at first glance contains much that is, so to speak, prosaic, namely – agitation, propaganda, organization, conquest of the confidence of the workers in the day-to-day struggles”.

The Communist Parties had to learn again, and adapt, much that was of enduring value from the tactics of the pre-1914 Marxist movement.

“Some comrades told us: And where is the guarantee that this organisational-agitational-educational work will not degenerate into the very same reformism, along the road travelled by the Second International? No guarantees are handed us from the outside. The guarantees arise from our work, our criticism, our self-criticism and our control”.

United-front tactics were central to the “prosaic” work.

“We must conquer the confidence of the overwhelming majority of the toilers. This can and must be achieved in the course of struggle for the transitional demands under the general slogan of the proletarian united front”.

In his writings on Germany in the 1930s, Trotsky would further explain that in advanced capitalist countries, with dense civil societies, the united front “from above” – agitation and organisation around demands directed at established reformist leaderships – was almost always an essential component. “Under the conditions existing in advanced capitalist countries, the slogan of ‘only from below’ is a gross anachronism, fostered by memories of the first stages of the revolutionary movement, especially in Czarist Russia”.

Why did Gramsci “forget” all that? Trotsky was on the defensive in 1925, waiting quietly for a better occasion to rouse revolutionary opinion against Stalinism. Maybe that disoriented Gramsci. We cannot know. In the *Prison Notebooks* – written, of course, in conditions when Gramsci had access to only a few of Trotsky’s writings, and those with difficulty – Gramsci left his odd depiction of Trotsky as an ideologue of reckless “frontal attack” only asserted, not argued.

Frank Rosengarten conjectures that in 1924-6 two “considerations weighed heavily on Gramsci and impelled him towards the condemnation of Trotskyism as factious and insubordinate”. One was “the need to create a compactly organised, tightly disciplined, and ideologically unified Communist Party in Italy”; the other, “his belief that the dispute in the Soviet Union were to go on without a resolution of some sort, it would spell the doom of the entire Third International”.

Gramsci went along for a while with early Stalinism. Maybe he did so because he could not yet see the issues clearly, did not want to be evicted and politically marginalised on grounds he was not sure of, and so could see no other choice. “I don’t know yet” was not a permissible stance in the Comintern of 1926.

“The authority of the Central Committee between one congress and another”, he obediently wrote,

“must never be placed under discussion... the party wants to achieve a maximum of collective leadership and will not allow any individual, whatever his value, to oppose himself to the party”.

Trotsky was, surely, much sharper and clearer about Stalinism than Gramsci ever was.

1930 would show that, even if for one reason or another some attitudes to Trotsky “stuck” from 1926, Gramsci never *went over* to Stalinism. His *Prison Notebooks* argue for an open, intellectually-alive revolutionary socialist party.

Both Gramsci and Trotsky emphasised, thought about, and wrote about the question of *the revolutionary socialist party* much more than other Marxists of their epoch.

“If the theoretical structure of the political economy of Marxism rests entirely upon the conception of value as materialised labour”, wrote Trotsky, “the revolutionary policy of Marxism rests upon the conception of the party as the vanguard of the proletariat”. (The word “vanguard” then had none of the militarist connotations brought to it by decades of Stalinism, any more than its French equivalent “avant-garde” had. In the 1870s the Jura anarchists had entitled one of their papers *The Vanguard*. It meant pioneering, forward-looking).

Gramsci wrote that the central question in politics was “developing the concept of hegemony – as has been done in practice in the development of the theory of the political party...”; and that “the protagonist of the new Prince [the “hegemonic apparatus” of organisations, alliances, and activities that could enable the working class to vanquish capitalism] could... only be the political party”.

We must beware of anachronism. Neither of them was concerned to dispute the view, common today after the disorienting work of Stalinism, that it could make sense to be a revolutionary-socialist activist but organise only on the trade-union or campaign level and not on that of revolutionary-socialist party-building. That stance would have seemed to them too nonsensical to argue with. Socialist revolution is an aim which requires organised collective activity to bring it about. To think that you can be a serious revolutionary socialist and not organised into a socialist group is as foolish as thinking that instead of organised strike action you can make do with individual workers taking odd days off in random fashion.

They knew of activists who claimed that their organisations were not really “parties”, but considered that just a verbal foible.

Gramsci: “Parties may present themselves under the most diverse names, even calling themselves the anti-party or the ‘negation of the parties’; in reality, even the so-called ‘individualists’ are party men, only they would like to be ‘party chiefs’ by the grace of God...”

Trotsky: “French syndicalism... was and is, in its organisation and theory, likewise a *party*... [Only] the party of revolutionary syndicalism fears the aversion felt by the French working class for parties as such. Therefore it has not assumed the *name* of party and has... attempted to have its members... take cover behind the trade unions”.

They knew also of sympathisers who were not yet ready to take on the commitment of party

membership. This is how Trotsky responded to one of them, Maurice Paz, a French lawyer who thought himself Trotskyist but said his busy law practice ruled out full organised activism:

“I am neither a fanatic nor a sectarian. I can very well understand a person who sympathises with the communist cause without leaving his milieu. Assistance of this sort can be very valuable for us. But it is the assistance of a sympathiser.

“I discussed this question in a letter to my American friends. [Max] Eastman had written to me, without mincing words himself, that such was his personal situation. He designates himself a ‘fellow-traveller’, does not aspire, in his own words, to any leading role in the movement of the Opposition, and is content to assist it. He does translations, he has turned over his copyrights... etc. And why? Because he cannot give himself entirely to the movement. And he has acted correctly.

“If you don’t want to enter the lists, wait quietly, keep a friendly neutrality”.

The question for both Gramsci and Trotsky was not *whether* to work to build a revolutionary-socialist party, but *what sort of party, and how*.

Both had led mass parties. Trotsky then had to go through a period of working with small nuclei. He did what was necessary. “The different strata of the mass mature at different times. The struggle for the ‘maturing’ of the mass begins with a minority, with a “sect”, with a vanguard. There is not and cannot be any other road in history”.

Gramsci, in a passage in the *Prison Notebooks* where he appears to be thinking about the risk of fascist repression pulverising his party, also saw the building of a clearly-defined and educated activist core as primary:

“This element is endowed with... the power of innovation (innovation, be it understood, in a certain direction, according to certain lines of force, certain perspectives, even certain premises)... This element [could not] form the party alone; however, it could do so more than the first element considered [i.e. the eventual relatively-loose mass membership]... The existence of a united group of generals who agree among themselves and have common aims soon creates an army even where none exists...”

“The criteria by which the [activist core] should be judged are to be sought 1. in what it actually does; 2. in what provision it makes for the eventuality of its own destruction... the preparation of... successors”.

There is nothing in Gramsci’s writings comparable to Trotsky’s explanation, in *Lessons of October* that “a party crisis is inevitable in the transition from preparatory revolutionary activity to the immediate struggle for power. Generally speaking, crises arise in the party at every serious turn in the party’s course...” – from which it follows that the party has to develop a breadth of education and pluralism of cadre to allow for rapid shifts in balance and in leadership.

But some questions were studied more by Gramsci than by Trotsky.

In 1922 Trotsky had argued that revolutionary-socialist parties needed to relearn “prosaic... organisational-agitational-educational work”, and for “criticism, self-criticism, and control” to stop the resulting *inevitable and even proper* conservatism of “habits and methods of work” becoming noxious. Trotsky left much to develop on what that “criticism, self-criticism, and control” in “prosaic” work would mean.

He explained the difference between a transitional-demand approach, and that of the old minimum/maximum programme scheme of the pre-1914 Marxists; but the overwhelming focus of Trotsky’s writings from 1917 to 1940, was on sketching how a Marxist organisation (and, from the late 20s, a *small* Marxist organisation) could fluidify a miscoagulated labour movement in *acute crises*. Many of his explanations of transitional demands were closely interwoven with pictures of acute crisis, and difficult to unweave for use in other times.

Explosions and catastrophes followed fast on each other. From the early 1930s, Trotsky was convinced both that capitalism was in intractable agony, and that the USSR was so acutely unstable that it could be assessed only as a temporary concatenation of elements bound to fly apart, one way or another, very soon.

All that was for good reason, but “one-sided”.

Gramsci, stuck in prison, developed a longer-term focus on processes of preparation. “The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organised and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed, and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware”.

What were the necessary elements of “criticism, self-criticism, and control” in that “systematic and patient” activity?

Gramsci discussed philosophy and perspectives. There was a drift in the pre-1914 Marxist movement – by no means universal, but eventually dominant – to split perspectives into two levels.

On one level, capitalism would move forward economically, creating larger and more concentrated working classes and bringing on itself worse and worse crises. On another, the educational and organisational work of the socialists, instructing workers in the truths derived from statistical observation of economic development, would make the labour movement stronger. Socialist revolution would come when the two lines met in a definitive capitalist crisis and a majority-supported socialist movement.

Gramsci: “In politics the assumption of the law of statistics as an essential law operating of necessity is not only a scientific error but becomes a practical error in action... Political action tends precisely to rouse the masses from passivity, in other words to destroy the law of large numbers. So how can that law be considered a law of sociology?...”

With a big revolutionary party, “knowledge... on the part of the leaders is no longer the product of

hunches backed up by the identification of statistical laws, which leaders then translate into ideas and words-as-force... Rather it is acquired by the collective organism through 'active and conscious co-participation', through 'compassionality', through experience of immediate particulars, through a system which one could call 'living philology'..." ["philology" is the study of how languages or words develop historically].

"Only to the extent to which the objective aspect of prediction is linked to a programme does it acquire its objectivity: 1. because strong passions are necessary to sharpen the intellect and help make intuition more penetrating; 2. because reality is a product of the application of human will to the society of things... therefore if one excludes all voluntarist elements, or if it is only other people's wills whose intervention one reckons as an objective element in the general interplay of forces, one mutilates reality itself".

As he showed in his writings on schooling, Gramsci was not a naive enthusiast of learning-by-doing. He recognised the necessity of formal "instruction". But he integrated it as an element within a "philosophy of praxis" which, even if it has serious lacunae, is far more enlightening than what became the Stalinist scheme of a "Marxist philosophy" based on alleged iron laws of natural development.

Gramsci was developing themes first sketched by Antonio Labriola, a late 19th century philosopher who gradually, as a maverick on the fringes of the socialist movement, developed a supple and imaginative version of Marxism as "philosophy of practice". (Trotsky, in his autobiography, cited Labriola as his own first teacher in Marxist method; but thereafter Trotsky wrote about philosophy only when he felt forced to by urgent constraints of polemic).

Teaching, so Labriola, had argued, is "an activity which generates another activity". Gramsci reconceptualised the way in which a revolutionary socialist party must strive to educate the working class as the activity of a collective "democratic philosopher" and "permanently active persuader".

He argued that political polemic must proceed differently from military battle, in which wisdom is to seek the opposition's weakest points. "On the ideological front... the defeat of the auxiliaries and the minor hangers-on is of all but negligible importance. It is necessary to engage battle with the most eminent of one's adversaries... if the end proposed is that of raising the tone and intellectual level of one's followers and not just... of creating a desert around oneself by all means possible".

Where the Catholic church had kept together learned people and a mass following by "imposing an iron discipline on the intellectuals", the socialist movement must avoid "restricting scientific activity" and instead organise a continual process of intellectual interchange and levelling-up.

Much of Trotsky's attention was focused on frantic short-term alternatives of revolution and catastrophe. The pre-1914 Marxist movement had tended to see capitalist development as linear evolution. Gramsci developed another concept, "passive revolution", or "revolution/restoration", of processes in which a ruling class extends itself and reshapes society by absorbing or decapitating other elements.

Trotsky had discussed this sort of possibility of "reactionary progress" in earlier writings.

“Theoretically, to be sure, even a new chapter of a general capitalist progress in the most powerful, ruling, and leading countries is not excluded. But for this, capitalism would... have to strangle the proletarian revolution for a long time; it would have to enslave China completely, overthrow the Soviet republic, and so forth”.

By 1938, under the pressure of events, Trotsky had drifted into a too-absolute “negativism” about capitalism, which he saw as able only to descend deeper into chaos. In parallel, his urgent search for revolutionary recompositions of the labour movement had drifted into an unrealistic overestimation of the possibilities for small socialist groups to find ways to “switch the points” (as he once put it) for the “train” of an already-existing but misled socialist workers’ movement.

In some passages of the Transitional Programme, therefore, as in the famous one about the “crisis of humanity” being “reduced to the crisis of leadership”, the prospect of revolution appears in almost mystical form, as a sudden apocalyptic coming-together of elemental mass working-class rage and a revolutionary leadership prepared by pure willpower. “The harsh and tragic dialectic of our epoch is working in our favour. Brought to the extreme pitch of exasperation and indignation, the masses will find no other leadership than that offered to them by the Fourth International”.

Perhaps Trotsky had no choice but to make this “error”, or else resign himself to defeatism in a situation where the labour movement faced dramatic short-term choices to mobilise for revolution, or be crushed. For sure, abstracted, crudified, and dogmatised versions of his vision would contribute to much sectarian posturing in the decades that followed. They would overwhelm Trotsky’s subtler explanations:

“Agitation is not only the means of communicating to the masses this or that slogan, calling the masses to action, etc. For a party, agitation is also a means of lending an ear to the masses, of sounding out its moods and thoughts, and reaching this or another decision in accordance with the results. Only the Stalinists have transformed agitation into a noisy monologue. For the Marxists, the Leninists, agitation is always a dialogue with the masses.

But in order that this dialogue give the necessary results, the party must estimate correctly the general situation within the country and outline the general course of the immediate struggle. By means of agitation and probing the masses, the party must bring into its concepts the necessary corrections and exactitude...”

Against the sectarian posturing – not Trotsky’s, but in a certain sense Trotskyist – Gramsci has much to teach us. The activity of a revolutionary socialist party, he explained, has to be something much more than juxtaposing itself, with a supposedly “finished programme”, to elemental revolt. It is a process of continual dialogue, intervention, reorganisation, readjustment, and transformation both of the mass labour movement and of the party itself.

In an economistic, barebones-Marxist scheme, he wrote, everything “appears as a moralistic accusation of duplicity and bad faith, or.... of naivety and stupidity. Thus the political struggle is reduced to a series of personal affairs between on the one hand those with the genie in the lamp who know everything and on the other those who are fooled by their own leaders but are so incurably thick that they refuse to believe it”.

Thinking is often warped by a belief in “objective laws of historical development similar in kind to natural laws, together with a belief in a predetermined teleology like that of a religion: since favourable conditions are inevitably going to appear, and since these, in a rather mysterious way, will bring about palingenetic events [regenerating events, i.e., revolutions], it is evident that any deliberate initiative tending to predispose and plan these conditions is not only useless but even harmful. Side by side with these fatalistic beliefs however, there exists the tendency ‘thereafter’ to rely blindly and indiscriminately on the regulatory properties of armed conflict...

“In such modes of thinking, no account is taken of the ‘time’ factor, nor in the last analysis even of ‘economics’. For there is no understanding of the fact that mass ideological factors always lag behind mass economic phenomena, and that therefore, at certain moments, the automatic thrust due to the economic factor is slowed down, obstructed or even momentarily broken by traditional ideological elements – hence that there must be a conscious, planned struggle to ensure that the exigencies of the economic position of the masses, which may conflict with the traditional leadership’s policies, are understood. An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies...”

This article draws on Peter Thomas’s talk on “Gramsci and Trotsky” to the AWL London Forum, 29 June, and on Frank Rosengarten’s article, “The Gramsci-Trotsky Question”, *Social Text* #11, 1984-5.

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