

# Introduction to the 1974 edition of Amadeo Bordiga's "Economic and social structure of Russia today"

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It is still difficult to write a true biography of Bordiga (1889-1970) because some periods of his life remain obscure (particularly the one from 1928 to 1944, which is characterized by a withdrawal of political activity), as are the many relations he had with various revolutionaries such as A. Gramsci, the German "leftists" (with whom he contacted in 1920 before going to attend the Congress of the Communist International in Moscow), the Russian opponents, etc... Such a biography would require an in-depth study of the various left-wing currents and revolutionary movements of the early 20th century. All the elements are not yet in place to undertake such a task, to the extent that it would be really necessary. At the end of the preface to a book by Bordiga entitled *Bordiga and the Passion for Communism* (*Cahiers Spartacus*), I indicated some essential biographical references. On the other hand, one can find, but in Italian, important information about his activity until 1928 in *Storia del partito comunista italiano* de P. Spriano (Ed. Einaudi), as well as in the book by A. De Clemenți, *Bordiga* (*ibid.*).

We can also find some comments on the Italian left, of which he was one of the founders, as well as on his relationship with this movement and with the International Communist Party, which became the International Communist Party (ICP), in numbers 6,8 and 9 of *Invariance* (Series I).

Another element makes it even more difficult to carry out a study on A. Bordiga: it is the dispersion of his work. Moreover, the fact that all post-1945 literature was published in anonymous form facilitated the conspiracy of silence, as it was difficult for most of those who wanted to study his thought to locate what he actually wrote. It is what he published after the Second World War that is most interesting and original. It is a vast work, but with many repetitions, because it was a work of explanation and training of activists, in the perspective of the restoration of Marxism. It is constituted by the minutes of the various I. C. P. meetings, which took place approximately every three months. A. Bordiga wrote them as they went along to ensure that the newspaper was published every fortnight. However, from one issue to another, comrades sometimes asked for explanations on specific points or simply expressed their incomprehension. A. Bordiga was then led to reconsider what he had previously written.

Concerning what he called the "Russian question", he wrote a lot, as early as 1915, as it was indicated in *Bordiga and the Russian Revolution: Russia and the necessity of communism* (*Invariance*, No. 4, Series II). However, it was in the period 1954-1957 that he dealt with it the most. More than all his other works, it is linked to a party activity; in fact, he was under pressure from the militants who demanded clarification of the Russian enigma, as well as to respond to the various theories interpreting the revolution of 1917, and which tended, according to A. Bordiga, to call Marxism into question, that he was forced to approach the study of this revolution and its extensions in the contemporary world.

Thus, after having written *Dialogue with Stalin* (1952) - reply to the XIX Congress of the P. C. R. In 1953 to 1957 (*Capitalismo classico, socialismo romantico; L'ours et son grand roman ; Fiorite primavera del Capitale ; Stalin-Malenkov: toppa, non tappa*).

Between 1954 and 1955 he wrote: *Russia and Revolution in Marxist Theory*, account of the meeting of Bologna (published in issues 21 to 23 of 1954 and 1 to 8 of 1955 *Il Programma Comunista*), which will soon be published by UGE Publishing - 10/18, with a preface: *The Russian Revolution and the Theory of the Proletariat*.

Between 1955 and 1957 appeared, again in the same newspaper, *Economic and Social Structure of Russia Today* (Premisse in No. 10 of 1955, first part: *The struggle for power in the two revolutions* in Nos. 11 to 23 of 1955 and 2 and 3 of 1956, second part: *Development of production relations after the Bolshevik revolution* in issues 4,15 to 18, then 20 to 26 of 1956 and 1 to 12 of 1957): Only this last part is published here, it is the most important and the one that corresponds best to the general title. The translation is not absolutely complete. We have left out certain passages which are obviously repetitions, either in relation to the text itself or in relation to the first part, which we will publish very soon. However, in order to give the reader a better idea of A. Bordiga's positions, we have summarized all the untranslated passages.

The writing of the *Development of Production Relations after the Bolshevik Revolution* was interrupted by the XXth Congress of the RCP, in which A. Bordiga wrote *Dialogue with the Dead*, which modified somewhat the Bordigian demonstration. From then on he insisted more on the coming of the Russians' admission of the capitalist nature of the U.S.S.R. This Congress raised all the doubts that various comrades might have had on this subject. Another question arose then: will this confession really be made, and what will be its impact on the proletariat?

The "Russian question" was therefore approached at a time when the USSR was going through a critical phase, the end of the Stalinist era, on which many had great hopes, thinking that a new course was in action: democratization that would allow the emergence of new forces. A. Bordiga did not glorify the Khrushchevian liberation, the questioning of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that of the preponderant role of the party, as a return to a revolutionary moment, but as a revealing abandonment of the old links with the revolutionary tradition.

All the reforms that took place from 1958 onwards, and especially during the 1960s, only reinforced this position; everything meant that the admission of the capitalist nature of the USSR in its totality and unequivocal explanation was imminent. He also answered the question mentioned above: this admission is necessary for a revolutionary revival because it will expose a mystification that inhibits the proletariat. In some cases, the moment of admission was conceived as equivalent to the moment when the crisis that inevitably had to hit Russia breaks out.

In order to appreciate what Bordiga wrote about the Soviet economy, it is necessary to take into account the following: for him what was decisive (in this particular case) was the political factor. From the moment the USSR first linked its fate to that of Nazi Germany and then what were then called Western plutocracies, there could no longer be any doubt about its capitalist nature. For him, the problem of the economic and social nature of this country was determined by the task of the proletariat: finding the fastest way to develop capitalism in order to be able to bring it down more

quickly (with the help of the international proletariat); the way somehow to retract it. This is why, in 1960, he characterized the Khrushchevian measures as follows: "The dismantling of the last appearances of centralized control of the State, the supreme trench by means of which the proletarian revolution could have defended itself against the assault of the capitalist mode of production" (*Il Programma Comunista*, n°3, 1960). Basically, for Bordiga, the most important moment was not this one but that of 1926, the year in which the debate within the PCR on the future of Russia took place, and which saw the triumph of the Stalinist theory of the construction of socialism in a single country, marking the break with the fundamental internationalist vision of Marx and Engels. But, at that time, the edification of capitalism could not necessarily lead to the complete establishment of capitalism, since events, either in the West or within the USSR itself, could still alter the meaning of global development (cf. Letter from Bordiga to Korsch, 1926). The alliance with Hitler, and then with the Western democracies, as we have pointed out, meant that there was only one possible outcome to this development of the capitalist mode of production desired by the Russian proletariat. Bordiga claimed in the 1950s that the Russian state had been bought by US dollars: the final phase of the reabsorption of the Russian revolution.

In approaching the study of the USSR in 1954, it was not Bordiga's intention to demonstrate that this country was not a socialist country, but to try to explain the involution of the revolution, its reabsorption, and the mode of development of capital in this area with its original characters (see *Russia and revolution in Marxist theory*). But this was not so clear to the members of the PCI, who refused to accept the "diagnosis": the revolution of 1917 engendered capitalism. Indeed, such a diagnosis could give rise to a "revisionist doubt on the doctrine", hence Bordiga's demonstration based on the following theoretical assertions, to which he will constantly return and which are more important than the result of the demonstration:

- In spite of the final defeat, the Russian revolution constitutes an indisputable verification of Marxism, the theory of the proletariat.
- Importance, as we have already pointed out, of the political factor, necessary to transform certain economic and social relations; to destroy obstacles to the development of productive forces. The Russian revolution is paradigmatic, not in all its components, but in this way: it showed the decisive role of the political intervention of the proletariat (organized in party form) in the economic and social transformation after 1917. This is the most complete confirmation of Marx's theory of praxis (his thesis on Feuerbach), which Bordiga represented with the help of his diagram of the reversal of praxis (Rome Meeting, 1950).
- There is continuity in economic and social development throughout Lenin's lifetime. Bordiga denies that what has been called war communism was communism; the measures taken by the Bolsheviks are those applied by besieged cities. He does not deny, however, that there has been a movement of fundamental rejection

of mercantile and classist forms. On the other hand, and as a result, the NEP cannot be defined as a retreat; in fact, the measures of the NEP are anticipated by those recommended by Lenin in *The impending catastrophe* and the means to avert it.

- This reaffirmation of the continuity of Lenin's work from *Two Tactics* to the *April Theses*. For what is essentially stated in these two books is that in Russia it is a question of knowing how the proletariat must conduct bourgeois democratic revolution, how it can intervene in a transformation process that cannot be immediately communist. That is why he considers that the socialist character of the October Revolution stems from the fact that it stopped the imperialist war and, above all, that it created the Communist International.

These statements themselves are understandable only on the basis of the following presuppositions, which are fundamental criteria and form the backbone of all Bordiga's work:

- Socialism is not built; only the impediments to its development are destroyed.
- Socialism is only possible at the international level.
- It can only be said that the capitalist mode of production disappears when there is no longer wage labour, mercantilism (of which wage labour is an expression), anarchy of production, enterprises; all things never eliminated in Russia.

It was on this basis that Bordiga categorically rejected theories of state capitalism and bureaucratic capitalism, particularly that of Chaulieu, now Castoriadis, which explained everything by the existence of a new class: bureaucracy.

While indicating that capitalism, in 1956, is fully developed in the USSR, Bordiga does not deny the peculiarities, the original characteristics, of economic development but he explains them on the very basis of Marxist theory, without resorting to new theories or to what some people called the enrichment of Marxism, which he considered - and criticised - as so many resurrections of pre-Marxist theories. A fundamental element that we have already mentioned and which, according to Bordiga, largely explains the peculiarities of modern Russian society, is the fact that the capitalist mode of production could be established thanks to an intervention of the proletariat; this in perfect coherence with Marx's perspective of 1848-51.

It is in order to truly gather what may be contradictory with what has happened in the West that Bordiga manages to resume the analysis of the capitalist mode of production. Hence his study of the enterprise without capital, and especially his assertion of the possibility of building the capitalist mode of production without a capitalist class. The intervention of the proletariat would have made it possible, at the beginning, to skip, in some way, moments of the future of capital, so that the USSR would have

been, in some respects, ahead of the West, while the fear of the proletarian movement would have led to the introduction of hybrid forms, which, such as the kolkhoze, are capable of chaining the class struggle. This study, he had undertaken it since the end of the war, in the magazine *Prometeo*. It was *Property and Capital* which unfortunately never ended. Bordiga published only the outline of the last chapters (1952). It is one of the most interesting aspects of his analysis of the economic situation of the USSR. It is from there that we started to understand what fictitious capital was, and finally arrive at the assertion that capital is only a representation. It is also, at the outset, one of the essential components of our critique of organization and our assertion that at the present time any political organization, religious (the Catholic church for example), is or is being transformed into a racket (see *Invariance*, No. 2, Series II).

It should also be added that, unfortunately, at Bordiga, these explanations on the future of the capitalist mode of production had only a polemical value, and not a positive value. Indeed, the demonstration that the capitalist mode of production can develop without a capitalist class allowed him to respond to supporters of bureaucratic capitalism by showing them the vanity of exhibiting a new protagonist: the bureaucratic-class. But from there he did not deduce that if it were so, the capitalist mode of production could itself exceed the classes, absorbing them, putting all men into slavery. Bordiga is therefore a point of departure, but not a point of arrival, because through his investigations he tends to call into question the simplistic Marxist scheme which has nothing to do with the work of Marx. This also explains why he could not individualize any perspective of the capitalist mode of production outside the crisis. For him, all the new forms of industrial kolkhozianism, a form of micro-production, which makes it possible to safeguard the family and ensure the so-called emancipation of women; cf. the last chapter of the *Economic and Social Structure...*) to a crisis which manifests itself in a latent way, and which should erupt in 1975-80. It will no longer be able to spare Russia, as it did in 1929. It is not there, however, that the revolution will be able to emerge, but in Germany and in all the zones or industrial countries that circumscribe it; Russia will only intervene in a second time, as a reserve of productive forces: this is what he affirmed in an article about the fortieth anniversary of the Russian revolution.

In the course of his critical analysis of Soviet society, he indicated the characteristics of communism; to this end, he repeated what he had already stated in the *Dialogue with Stalin* and in the *Dialogue with the Dead*, about the destruction of value, mercantilism, etc... But he adds some more immediate concrete data such as the immediate reduction of working time, the drastic regulation of construction with a view to destroying cities and the prohibition of all private car traffic (which he had said as early as 1953, long before the fashion of zero growth and the apology of cycling).

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Since 1957, a host of reforms have been implemented in the USSR, whose economic and social structure has evolved along the lines envisaged by Bordiga. Moreover, as he

had said from the beginning, she was not able to catch up with the USA, as Khrushchev wanted. From 1965 onwards, the enterprise tended to be recognized as a commercial unit and not only as a production unit; credit penetrated in multiple ways throughout the entire economic network; urbanization, necessary for the domestication of people, became widespread; pollution and the degradation of nature, denied by official propaganda, became increasingly serious (cf. the case of Lake Baikal, the scarcity of sturgeon eggs in the lower Volga river, the greater frequency of forest fires, etc.); an increasingly frequent call for economic mechanisms to force individuals to produce or to consume (more and more of the ruble) has led some economists and Bordiga to say that this implies a weakening of the state, etc...

The most striking confirmation is the prediction of the inability of Russian agriculture to feed the population. The good harvest of 1973 is by no means the beginning of a reversal because an essential characteristic of Russian agriculture is precisely that it presents cyclical periods of good harvests separated by several years of bad years.

On the other hand, it does not seem, contrary to what he said, that the kolkhoz form is unrootable, if not by revolution. Indeed, the number of kolkhoz decreased in favour of the sovkhoz and as a result of the loss of young men and women attracted to the city (urbanization). The phenomenon of micro-production remains very powerful. Workers and employees of the sovkhozes were also entitled to a small plot of land and private production has not yet lost its importance. But this is not an unusual phenomenon, since in the last century German workers still had a small plot of land to supplement their wages. As long as capital does not really dominate in agriculture and has not transformed man's eating habits, it cannot eliminate this element of autonomy of human beings; basically there is a cheaper production for it. When, on the other hand, fixed capital has developed sufficiently socially, it can also take over this area of production and thus make people totally dependent.

Bordiga underestimates the oppression suffered by the Kolkhozian peasants. He sees only the exploitative character that they can have vis-à-vis the proletarians of the cities, by demonstrating that one class of producers can exploit another. Moreover, in the genesis of this form, it does not take into account an important phenomenon: the invasion of American agricultural products following the 1914 war, a phenomenon clearly foreseen by Engels as a consequence of a war between European countries. The phenomenon persists and is growing stronger today, after the so-called crisis linked to the Kippur war.

The 1914-18 war and the Russian revolution brought about a complete upheaval in the world market - the most complete expression of the crisis, according to Marx. It was therefore necessary to have another organization of this one. For this to happen, the old domination of England had to be liquidated and the domination of the United States ordained. New polarities appeared that were difficult to establish, which led to a significant decline in world trade between the two wars. This had a considerable influence on the Russian economy. Agriculture could no longer produce for export and had to be reorganised for the internal market. However, even the richest peasants

could no longer recover what they had previously obtained because of the ruin of the economy and, in particular, they could not obtain the necessary agricultural machinery. This meant that in any case it was difficult for another type of agriculture to flourish (taking into account the historical and social particularities of Russia); one way was blocked. Otherwise the Bolsheviks, determined to develop more progressive capitalist forms (Lenin had already dreamed in 1907 of an American- style agriculture), would have tried this way which would have enabled them to obtain the capital necessary for the development of the industry.

This theorization on the kolkhoz derives from an essential assumption: the theory of the proletariat. Bordiga explains the emergence of this hybrid form by the fear inspired by it. Indeed, by limiting the production of proletarians, this form would hinder the strengthening of the proletariat and simultaneously create an enemy, an antagonist, which would increase the power of state autonomy. It also led him to assert that the Kolkhozians took direct advantage of the latter, while they also had to endure its oppression; he generally neglected the repression suffered by the peasants and other sections of the population to exalt only proletarian struggles. This attitude has another theoretical foundation: Bordiga accepts the Bolsheviks' thesis on the impossibility of skipping the phase of capitalist development and on the irremediable disappearance of the commune (Obchtchina). However, the force of inertia opposed to the emergence of the capitalist mode of production would reside - as Lenin says - in the existence of a mass of peasants living in an economy often defined as petty-bourgeois. So everything that strengthens peasants inhibits not only the capitalist mode of production but also the advent of socialism.

One can conceive of another explanation, which is largely complementary: the birth of the kolkhoze is linked to the inability of the capitalist mode of production to settle in the Russian countryside. Indeed, the entire history not only of the 1917 Russian revolution and its extensions, but also that of previous years, shows the enormous difficulty of establishing the capitalist mode of production in the Russian geo-social area, which confirms the position of populists such as Danielson. In order to establish itself, the capitalist mode of production had to resort to despotism. To this end, it only had to perfect that of the time of the tsars. The revolution - as was the case for France - resulted in a considerable strengthening of the state. However, this does not yet explain both the difficulties of setting up capital and its relative development. In countries such as Russia, where the community has been powerful, capital can only penetrate from the moment when it can substitute itself for the latter; that is, when it has been able to establish its own material community; the substitution cannot be immediate, hence the frightening coercive intervention of the State. This external intervention can only disappear once the economic mechanisms have been internalized and make individuals carry out what is necessary for the life process of capital. This has also happened in Western countries such as England and France, during what Marx calls primitive accumulation. But in the case of Russia, however, this is disproportionately high, as a result of the greater obstacles to the establishment

of capital; these obstacles are geographical, climatic, as well as spiritual (the absence of any representation compatible with that of capital).

Thus what Solzhenitsyn describes in *The Gulag Archipelago* confirms this thesis (after many other more ancient testimonies such as that of Ante Ciliga). It requires not only a despotism, a terror, but an absurd element in the manifestation of it so that no fraction of Soviet society can feel safe and, so to speak, live on the margins. This is where the strictly classist explanation turned out to be insufficient: the dictatorship must not be carried out on a single class but on the whole population, and it is here that the role of the State in the Russian area is proving to be more important than in the West, which is a distinctive feature. But this external aspect of the dictatorship will diminish there, while it will worsen in the West as a result of the ever-increasing despotism of capital.

We can now situate convergence theory. It is false insofar as it postulates that it is based on two different modes of production, capitalism and communism, which, each in its own way, would generate forms that go beyond them, but would converge first in what has been defined as an industrial society, then a post-industrial society. But it is true in the sense that there is indeed a tendency to achieve the same kind of domination. Convergence takes place within the capitalist mode of production. On the one hand, we start from the individual (liberal capitalism) who loses more and more substance to be nothing more than an undifferentiated quantum of capital, as it becomes a material community; on the other hand, we start from the more or less autonomous and more or less despotic community (cf. China) and, thanks to the mediation of the State, there is a registry of the material capital community in these areas. The individual has not been empowered in previous periods and, under the domination of capital, will undergo the same undifferentiated particle reduction subject to the field of capital. It is obvious that these vast transformations are not painless; Nazism and Stalinism converged in the realisation of the real domination of capital. Since 1917, there has been a despotic osmosis between the two historically different areas. The assistance they are currently providing is seen very well in the crisis of the global monetary system. The USSR and China are not doing anything to make it worse. On the contrary, they play a stabilizing role.

In so doing, we are moving towards greater integration of the Eastern countries. This was what Bordiga predicted and, for him, the moment of the realisation of a homogeneous world market - could only be the moment of the crisis that would not spare the USSR during the years 1975-80. Here again, we can see that he said was right, even though we no longer consider the crisis according to his criteria. However, this crisis, in our opinion, will not necessarily mean the opening of an active revolutionary cycle, because during the struggles provoked by the various economic imbalances, we can have a more powerful realization of the despotism of capital, with the elimination of old representations such as national states and gold. The crisis has been going on for a long time if we refer to Marxist data, yet there has been no social upheaval. Even a more catastrophic period for the life cycle of capital can be overcome if men and

women do not question their domestication and the old representations that imprison them.

Bordiga's study of Russia has a great historical interest and contains many elements of understanding of Russian society, but what is perhaps most important is still the assertion that the question of whether the USSR is economically speaking capitalist or socialist is secondary. The Russian counter revolution, he added, is not the first counter revolution that Marxism experienced; what is needed is to restore Marxism in order to be able to tackle another revolutionary cycle.

Nowadays it is clear that the debate on the economic and social nature of the USSR is of little importance; the same goes for the question of admission, because of the convergence phenomenon. What is required of us is no longer the restoration of Marxism. It has been fully implemented. The real domination of capital forces us to envisage a different way out from the one that has hitherto been sought within a development of productive forces.

In the period of total confusion of the post-war years, when the criteria determining the capitalist mode of production and communism were totally perverted, Bordiga's merit was to be able to maintain the pole of the future, communism, even if, at the present time, we conceive it differently.

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Here, for the first time in English, is Camatte's introduction to the 1974 edition of Bordiga's, and the Italian Left's, long study on the nature of the Russian revolution. Camatte provides a very brief outline of the perspective that Bordiga took on in order to answer this question. Camatte also provides his own commentaries on the nature of capital today. Camatte took a stance similar to anarcho-primitivism in later life.

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