

**Amadeo Bordiga**

**Weird and Wonderful  
Tales of Modern Social  
Decadence**

## ANDREA DORIA

The safety of sea travellers seemed with reason to have been assured both historically and scientifically for the future by the first application of mechanical motors to ships, and all the more so with the construction of metal hulls. After a century and a half of technical "improvement", the safety of the passenger is now relatively greater than compared with the old wooden sailing boats which were prey to both wind and sea. Naturally the "conquest", the most idiotic one, is speed, even if special clippers in about 1850 won the "blue ribands" from steam ships, while there was -- then too -- not insignificant playing the cotton exchange between Boston and London. The faster the thief, the more a thief; but a quicker fool is no less a fool.

Nevertheless the period of the greyhounds of the sea lies behind us: it corresponded to the period after the First World War. Even before this war huge tonnages had been reached: the Titanic, which went down by the bows in 1912 (1), was over 50,000 tons. It is true that the speed during its maiden voyage, during which it struck an iceberg, did not exceed 18 knots. After a half-century there have been only two cases of liners on the North Atlantic (be they French, English, German or Italian) much over 50,000 tons: since the last war the largest launched was the United States (53,000 tons). The two exceptions are the English "Queen Mary" (81,000 tons) and "Queen Elizabeth" (84,000 tons), keels laid before the war and still in use (2). The brand new American ship took the blue riband from the English one which in turn had won it from the French "Normandie" in 1938, the latter being destroyed in the war. Sailing speeds in

the last period have risen above 30 knots: the Andrea Doria, the largest post-war Italian ship along with its sister ship Colombo (the pre-war Rex was 51,000 tons) was 29,000 tons but with a good top speed.

Thus the race to have the biggest ship, which was the prelude to the great disaster, has ceased, but so too that for the fastest speed which so enthralled Italy during the fascist period. The reason is that the person in a hurry can take the plane which, with its small crew, does not kill off more than fifty a go: the sea crossing (with sun and fine weather on the southern route preferred after the Titanic disaster) is more a pleasure trip or cruise -- the hugely powerful engines required to thrust these massive giants at enormous cost (one knot is gained and a few hours are knocked off the crossing, wasting thousands of extra horse-power and increasing fuel consumption in proportion) at a rate of knots, are no longer requested by passengers and do not suit the company. Thus the logic of the situation now shows that it is best to build middle size middling speed ships for the passengers who are not at the summit of (economic and political) business dealings who are not forced to fly. The newspapers told us that the unfortunate passengers saved from the Andrea Doria did not want to return by air: once bitten, twice shy, by the great civilisation of technology....

Besides, if visibility is bad, it is still a good idea to go slowly, even if there is radar aboard, as always.

This is not the central question, that instead is the extreme fragility of the Doria's hull as shown by the collision with the

not so heavy or fast Stockholm, whatever one may say about the ice breaking prow which could mechanically make a deep hole, but less lacerating and much shorter. Evidently the Doria broke, probably because it was too weak throughout its structure, its ribs and backbone. Only by supposing that a long longitudinal section of the hull came away can we explain why so many air-tight floatation compartments (closed for the fog) collapsed and so many vital parts too -- machines, oil tanks and so forth.

It is not only with ships that the mania of modern technology is oriented towards economising on the structure, using light metal sections with the pretext of ever more modern materials with miraculous strength, guaranteed more by insolent advertising and *lungae manus* than the checks run by the bureaucratised laboratories and standards institutions. Just as with the construction of land vehicles, the ship produced by modern technology which has developed is not as solid as that of 50 years ago. The wonderful ship thus broke up and sank in record time, contrary to the experts' predictions. With a rough sea and less passing ships, it could have become a massacre.

There is another reason apart from the builders' false economies. It is known that for nationalistic and demagogic reasons the Italian state (who does not know that after Holy Russia, the largest dose of "socialist" industry is to be found in Vatican Italy, even though Palmiro (3) is not altogether happy?) was both the buyer and the producer of the ship (both the Compagnia Navigazione Italia and the Ansaldo shipbuilders belong to the state). It is well known that steel costs more in

Italy and labour too (the worker eats less here, but national assistance grabs the lot). Ordering the ship from a Dutch or German yard would have cost a quarter less, but Palmiro would have had fewer votes. The Italian engineers had an interest in, and orders to be, stingy with the steel.

They were not stingy enough though with the decorative and luxurious architecture. One of the symptoms of the worldwide decline of technology is that architecture kills engineering. All civilisations go through this stage, from Nineveh to Versailles.

Old sea dogs moaning on the Genova quayside told reporters this. Too many saloons, swimming pools, playing areas, too many decks above the waterline -- ah, the inimitable line, the slender outline of Italian ships -- too much weight and space put into the superstructure, that is that half skyscraper which stands above the waves, full of windows flooding out light where the luxury class has a good time. This all at the expense of the quickwork, the part in contact with the water, whose size and strength provide stability, flotation, course correction after wandering, resistance to attacks by the sea, collisions with mountains of ice, and those with ships from countries where steel costs less and, perhaps, technology has sold out less to wheeler-dealing politics ... as yet.

All this, grumble the old sailors, is at the expense of safety. More or less vulgar luxury or the safety of the human lives on board, this is the anti-thesis. But could such an antithesis hold back Civilisation and Progress!?

However, when steerage class is unsafe and the crew too, not even first class, with the most expensive tickets, is either. The rhetoric goes on about modern discoveries, high technology, the extolled unsinkability, the resistance to collision with ice, rocks, Stockholms.

It was the same story with the rehabilitation of the great cities, from which, as Marx and Engels stated from the time of the gutter of Paris, Haussmann, the poor had and will have everything to lose and nothing to gain. The upper bourgeoisie was told by clever technicians and speculators that epidemics do not know class divisions, even in a rich man's house one can die of cholera. So get on with it, Demolition Joe! So now when the ship goes down, so too do the first class passengers, half clad like the poor devils, hardly togged up in their dinner jackets. Safety is therefore vital to all: one cannot simply say stuff it like in a mine where only the scapegoats of labour and a handful of engineers go, but without the precursors of decorations: after all it's dark down there.

The ruling class, in its turn incapable of struggling against the devil of business activity, superproduction and superconstruction for its own skin, thus demonstrates the end of its control over society, and it is foolish to expect that, in the name of a progress with its trail indicated by bloodstains, it can produce safer ships than those of the past.

And in fact the eddies around the sad hull of the Andrea Doria had scarcely stilled when the nationalised economy, the perfect hothouse of modern private business dealing and parasitism,

announced that it would be ready to produce another one, changing only, for reasons of superstition, the name! They boast that since the cost will rise to about one third more than that of the old ship, they will economise on design, calculations and trials! The decorators will, most certainly, do as good business as before, and the machine to thief money from the man in the street has already been set in motion. Just as after the Second World War, during the reconstruction, strengthened by all the resources of modern advanced technology, "the business deal of the century" came about, thus too the shipbuilding and shipping "crisis" is resolved (for which a new law was being prepared) with the order for a new ship. After the ramming by the Stockholm, and perhaps a few more litres of alcohol consumed by its officers, the wise and well-meaning vote of our Democratic Parliament was verified.

No one will think, no one will legislate, no one will vote for tearing up the old calculations and for redesigning the hull and its structure, the only part of the ship that is quickwork, forking out five million more for steel and five million less for pandering artifices. This will not be the case while "socialist" and enterprise production, even if by the state, is the slave of mercantile and competitive considerations, between the "flags", that is, between the bands of business criminals, which is the same thing. And whoever were to do so would be "depreciating" the unsunk Colombo.

## MARCINELLE

While the series on the agrarian question and the theory of ground rent according to Marx was being published in these columns (4), there was the disaster at Ribolla which caused 42 victims against the now certain 250 at Charleroi. Exactly the same economic theory of absolute and differential rent can be applied to the extraction of minerals from the subsoil and to the development of hydroelectric power as to agricultural land. One "works" a mine just as one works a farm. We called the paragraph of the exposition Ribolla, or differential death.

In the capitalist world's economy, all consumers of the produce of nature pay a higher price for it than for the product of labour. For the latter, they pay for the labour and for a margin of surplus-labour that competition, as long as it lasts, tends to reduce. And bourgeois society offers this product to its members at a lower price than that obtaining in previous societies which were little involved in manufacturing.

The produce of land, in the same way, are paid for by the consumer according to the labour and the surplus-labour, established on the basis of the "worst land". But, in this case, one also pays a third part: rent, that is the award for the monopoly over land, to the landowner, the third force in the "model" bourgeois society. The least fertile land dictates the market price to all consumers of foodstuffs. It thus follows that the monopoly landowner of richer land adds on to the absolute rent (the minimum) the differential rent, rent due to lower labour costs, so that the market pays the same price.

As population and consumption grow, society has to put new land under the plough and to use all available areas, be they fertile or sterile. The limits of physical extent determine the monopoly and the two forms of ground rent.

Hard as this theory may seem to some, it is the crux of marxism and only those who have not digested it believe that the theory of imperialism was simply tacked on to marxism, a study made solely of competitive capitalism. The theory of ground rent contains all that is in the theory of modern imperialism, monopoly capitalism, the creator of "rents". Even in largely manufacturing fields, one can thus say, like Lenin, that the capitalism of profit plus rents is parasitic.

Clearly the theory shows that nothing changes if this rent, based on traditional or very new sources, is handed over to the state, that is, the capitalist society organised as a power machine: this occurs so as maintain its commodity, monetary and business basis. Before Marx, Ricardo proposed this, then Marx criticised it from the very beginning in a thorough and overall manner.

The lignite seams of Ribolla are among the least productive, while those of anthracite in Belgium are the most productive, and capitalism can never invest where there is no differential rent in more expensive installations to increase production and safeguard miners' lives, unlike in the best mines in France, the Netherlands, England, Germany and America.

With today's economy nor is it permitted to close those mines, which remain in the condition Zola described in *Germinal* of the white horse that never sees the light of day and which communicates with a strange language of darkness with the two miners condemned with him by "bourgeois society". Can Progress be held back by a lack of coal?

Now there is a super-national Coal Community (5), like the iron and steel one, among the states which have nationalised the underground wealth in parallel with Italy. So, according to the fascist school, we have reached the outer bounds of ultramonopoly to fix on a scale of differential rent, low at Ribolla and Marcinelle, an absolute rent base. But this will certainly remain insufficient to buy new plant.

When the burnt out electrical wiring in the pits caused fire to break out, not only did the machinery and the bodies of the men burn, but also the coal of the precious, albeit poor geological deposit. It burnt because' the tunnels the men dug bring in oxygen from the air, that is why old tunnels are sealed off with concrete walls. Thus there was the technical alternative: send down oxygen for those who were dying and their foolhardy rescuers, or close it because every ton of oxygen consumes about half a ton of coal. The miners shouted at the specialised technicians brought from Germany: you have come not to save our workmates, but the mine! The solution, if the maddened shouts of the survivors had not been raised too high would have been simple: close all the entrances!

Without oxygen everything falls silent: the oxidisation of coal and the analogous process in man, which we call life.

Besides, and its not the revolutionary press which says so!, according to a very old tradition, which is certainly even older that the capitalist social system, until the miner emerges, living or dead, from the terrible mouth of the mine, the system continues to pay his full wages, even triple time. The miner has to stay down only eight hours, so if he does not come up then, it is supposed that he is working another shift. When the corpse is pulled out and identified, the shift ends and the family will only receive a pension, below the sum for single shifts. It is therefore important that the company, private, state or community, brings out the bodies all the same: it seems that this is the reason why the women shouted that the closed coffins on which were placed a few recognisable objects for identification did not allow them to see if they contained the remains of men or of the deposits.

Get all the survivors out, then close the entrance forever! Commodity society will never be able to say this, so it fogs the issue with enquiries, funeral masses, the bonds of fraternity in which one can discern only the fraternity of the chain gang, crocodile tears and promises of legislation and administration to attract others "without reserves" to ask to take their places in the funereal lift cages: hats off to technology! It is difficult to change the type of cultivation after a long period, and the theory of rent prohibits leaving the last, the most dangerous, mine closed: it is this theory which dictates to a slave and usurer society the maximum rhythm in the mad worldwide

dance of the coal business, it being precisely the geological limits to its future horizon which, as they narrow, thrust it into the monopoly economy, into the massacre of the producer, into thieving from the consumer.

The detective story of Marcinelle touched the world's soul. For how many more eight hour shifts would the "missing" in the heart of the earth, like those yesterday at the bottom of the Atlantic, consume wealth from the civil bourgeois economy, which from every pulpit shouts its glorious thrust towards a greater well-being? When will one at last be able to take them off the wage ledger and, having prayed to God one last time, forget them?

## **THE SUEZ CANAL**

Blood did not flow, and it was clear from the very first that it would not flow for the third act of the bourgeois trilogy of the August Bank Holiday, which shaded with dark deeds the rosiest of bourgeois manifestations, the holiday, the vacation, the emptiness in the emptiness of this world of builders from operettas, of those who sweat over stealing from their neighbour.

We could never credit it that there is a single marxist who for one second saw in Nasser a new historical protagonist, and the world in consternation and turned upside down by a simple gesture, by a bold discovery of the latest little caesar, or pharaoh, as the case may be? What a man! He cracked the whip over France, England and America with the skill of a

genius: the nationalisation of the canal! All this done by changing the guard from King Farouk, who could only ship million dollar odalisques, to a simple colonel who could get into the knickers of Marianne and Albion.

The problem of Suez too can be understood if we take the colonel as, leaving off now with pseudo-sexual remarks, the arsehole he is, by applying the theory of rent.

Suez was a still honourable operation, even glorious, of the young bourgeoisie, alongside those considered as epochal by the Communist Manifesto. Perhaps it was one of the last: when the encore was attempted at Panama, it swiftly collapsed into the filth of hyperscandal, and Old Europe laid down Lesseps's arms and those of his technicians after the first attempt.

Lesseps could have been a follower of Saint-Simon and the idea of the Suez Canal was accepted a century ago as a socialist one. He cheered the utopianists, but doubtlessly, as in the marxist conception, the enterprise of capitalism aimed at linking the world and far-flung corners are to be considered as premises for its socialist transformation. The idea goes back to Napoleon I who had technical studies made, backed, according to some, by the philosopher and great mathematician Leibnitz. It is no chance event that Napoleon attempted his destruction of English maritime and imperial domination right in Egypt. But even older civilisations had thought of the work: Senwosret, pharaoh of Egypt, even got round to performing it, and if Herodotus is correct, 120,000 workers died in the attempt made by another pharaoh. The Caliphs abandoned the idea put

off by the fear that they would open the way to the Byzantine fleet. After the discovery of the sea route to India in the fifteenth century, it was the Venetians' turn, those precursors of modern capitalism, but the Turks were opposed.

The work lasted from 1859 to 1868, employing mainly French and Ottoman capital, facing English hostility. The graveyards of the white and Arab workers were notorious: the English denounced the enlisting of thousands of impoverished fellahs as slavery and the case was decided by Napoleon III. The French engineers of the time, who were fighters and not just businessmen, freed of the army of navvies, then employed huge machines and undertook the task. The concession offered by the Egyptian government should have been for 99 years from the day the canal was opened. During this period, it should have received fifteen percent of the company's profits. It is not the case to repeat here the story of the business manoeuvres and international stock-jobbing by which the Viceroys of Egypt, subjects of the Sultan in Constantinople, were defrauded of their rights to a portion of the shares which passed by various means to British capital and government and, in fact, to the Royal Family.

It remains that it was a concession and the property of the whole works, several times enlarged and improved, should be passed to the Cairo government in 1968, without any payment.

One should be extremely wary of dealing with "right" in this struggle between buccaneers and sharks of the largest tonnage.

What is important are the economic concepts. The initial capital was 200 million French Gold Francs. This now would be worth 60 billion French Francs, or 100 billion lire.

The present value of the shares, leaving aside their thirty per cent fall after Nasser's decree, which nevertheless assured their prominence on the stock market, (one should then say on the day of the decree) the capital of the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez is quoted at £70 million, or 90 billion French Francs. The valuations are not at the exchange rate: in U.S. Dollars they are 200 million, for the former, and 250 million for the latter, and in Italian Lire 120 billion and 150 billion respectively, all in round figures.

Last year's company takings were 35 billion French Francs with a profit of a good 16 billion: 45 per cent! In Lire about 55 and 25. But Nasser valued them at 100 million Dollars! 60 billion Lire net.

Such great fruitfulness cannot all be profit of industrial capital, apart from its already declared amortisation, which seems to be covered by huge reserves formed by the company heads. It is not a productive concern: the ships of passage pay a toll of 300 to 600 Lire per ton dead-weight, but they do not take away anything saleable on the open market: payment for a service, not for goods. Obviously the maintenance, caretaking, management and administrative costs of the canal represent a very small part of the takings. The rest is rent. It is absolute in that it is derived from a monopoly which could close Suez or Port Said. It is, moreover, differential in that it represents the

navigation costs via the worse route, the endless rounding of the Cape of Good Hope.

Who collects this rent? The "landlord" of the land through which the canal was cut, without the permission of whom one would not have been able to open the first excavations in 1859. This question of property becomes a question of sovereignty for Nasser. For us, this terminology is without meaning. For us marxists, rent goes to who makes a monopoly work. This is not even anti- juridical: in classical Roman law theory "the basis of ownership is occupation". The same that, since the world began, is the source of political sovereignty.

By this standard, the English are silly and equally foolish is Nasser. The former kept until a few years back garrison troops in the canal zone to defend it. In fact, during the two world wars, German ships and those of her allies were not allowed to pass. London was about to close the door during the Italian-Ethiopian War and Mussolini had his fine moment -- he blackmailed the English by demonstrating his willingness to attack the Mediterranean fleet. But one cannot be led to believe that those who play the fool can also make history: the candidate for the lunatic asylum, Nasser stands many cubits shorter.

Could the English dream of withdrawing the garrison and keeping the rent? Could the French dream of as much?

Greater silliness lies on the Egyptian side who thought that sovereignty was their ace of spades, taking this in its

metaphysical sense in which the sovereignty of a tiny country weighs the same as that of a giant.

Nasser had wagered on Russia, one of the giants. It is for this that we consider him a fool. The newspapers published on the eve of the London Conference, before Shepilov, marvellous to behold, turned up in coat and tails, that the Russians at their Twentieth Congress had abandoned another of Stalin's mistaken theories, that of the international political predominance of large states over smaller ones (6), and the liberation of the latter from the function of subject, satellite or vassal states. Oh poor little states! This is not a theory created by Stalin, which Stalin can have the passing whim of abandoning, or that his will-readers can put out of the way! And it is not the little Cairo Colonel who can put a new theory in its place: the holy sovereignty of the statelets, even the pocket handkerchief ones. Or (this is the biggest laugh) that America is bound to accept a similar theory, that it even propagates it, or Russia, champion of the opposing principal: that of the big fish which eats the little one.

The fact and the historical law is that the big states carve up the world at their pleasure, with general war or with (God forbid it) peaceful coexistence between them (the big fish) and that the small states are like soft plasticine for world relief maps in their hands. They have dominated history for millennia, for two centuries of European history above all, and in a striking manner in the last two great wars, only the seating of some of the big fish changes: Japan and Germany, and new ones are put there, like China.

Nasser did not go to the conference. So be it. But London must have frightened him just because Russia sat there. Russia defends the same principal as the others: who gives a damn about sovereignty over the two banks of these world routes which are nodes in the international trade network? Since when there ceased to be a single imperial dominator, as when Albion made its way (for us it is life as well as a way, the undeformed Mussolini replied) along the Mediterranean and all the Mediterraneans, the dominators have been the three or four bigs in turn, for whom Nasser counts less than a corporal. They will give Suez to him. Or whoever wins the next (twenty years off) third world war without counting a red cent if little Egypt had fought with the winners or the losers.

Hitler, an expression of rather more serious forces, was urged by them to make a huge thrust as far as Crete. The aim and place were Suez; he came to understand (or someone did for him) that the goal was more Suez than Dunkirk, from which they held back. Big does not eat big. Happy little Nasser. Do not leave the rank of foodstuffs.

### **TO YOU, OLD MOLE!**

These twenty years will pass and shall we little animal-men, we tricked and intoxicated consumers, we makers of increasingly unpleasant and useless efforts, let them pass seated in front of the radio or the screen to hear humbug and tittle-tattle from technicians, experts, specialists, managers, diplomats, politicians, scoundrels and adventurers, without having learnt

anything, or forgetting more and more what the working class already well knew at the time the century of Suez began?

Good, very good, then that the isthmuses have been crossed with huge cuts (Suez remains the longest, if not the most complex, at 160 kilometres -- twice Panama) and that the network of international links circles and circles again the mercantile world of convenient capitalism, like that of the retarius which immobilised the barbarian gladiator for the coup de grace. A missing proletariat now tears up the Internationals, but capital is damned to rebuild them across oceans and continents. Well, very well, then that the great powers are very few and leave in blind impotence the small and numerous, wrapping them in the other inextricable, unslackening net of falsity, lies, fraud and philistine and bigoted obscurantism, under the false glitter which has become unsupportable for its stench, of technology, science, philanthropy and the drive towards well-being. Good, then that the centres of this school of superstition and corruption are ever decreasing in number and more easily seen from every corner of the world.

While they propagate their false beliefs of all their countries and religions; rereading us with false puritanism and obscene blasphemy their bibles of Christ, Mammon and Demos, we too can repeat our classical verses and demonstrate that we have known since before the canal was cut that the result would have been a dizzying concentration of wealth and power, imperial totalitarianism, monopolistic oppression, the Party state, the holy alliance of the capitalist monsters, all the more reinforced by the world wars. Good, the dictatorship of Capital,

of Militarism, of Business, of Fascism, blessed endlessly by priests of every denomination. Let us open our bible:

"But the revolution is thorough. It is still journeying through purgatory. It does its work methodically. (...) it had completed one half of its preparatory work; it is now completing the other half. First it perfected the parliamentary power, in order to be able to overthrow it. Now it has attained this, it perfects the executive power, reduces it to its purest expression, isolates it, sets it up against itself as the sole target, in order to concentrate all its forces of destruction against it. And when it has done this second half of its preliminary work, Europe will leap from its seat and exultantly exclaim: Well burrowed, old mole." (7)

With the historical radar of Marx's theories, on whose screen one cannot read lies, by the observers who have not swallowed the alcohol of the intoxicating bourgeois ideology, in the fog of the depths off Nantacket, in the dark of the walled tomb of the living in Marcinelle, in the bitterness of the slime of the stagnant ponds of the Arabian Desert, while the forces of the Revolution seem to be hiding and Great Capital carouses in the bright sunlight, we have again found, at his inexhaustible work, the Old Mole who undermines the curse of the infamous social forms, who prepares for the not near, but most certain, destructive explosion.

## Footnotes:

(1) Erroneously given as 1906 in the text.

(2) Both have since been retired. The former is now a University, the latter was destroyed by fire.

(3) i.e. Togliatti

(4) Cf. il programma comunista nos. 21-3, 1953 and 1-12, 1954. The series is republished as *Mai la merce sfamera l'uomo* (Milan, 1979). In this volume see pp. 259-61 as regards Ribolla.

(5) i.e. The European Coal and Steel Community.

(6) Reference to the Russian Foreign Minister at the conference to settle the Suez affair, The Twentieth Party Congress was in February 1956. The Suez affair was finally settled in Rome in 1958 with payment of compensation.

(7) "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon" in Marx Engels Collected Works Vol. XI, Moscow, 1979, p. 185.

Il programma comunista no. 17, 1956