

Amadeo Bordiga

**Teaching old dogs new
tricks: Counter-theses
and theses**

From the Series, “*On the Thread of Time*” Historical Counter-theses and Theses²

Counter-thesis I

Towards the end of the 19th century, society was divided into two opposed classes: the bourgeoisie, who owned the means of production, and the proletarian wage workers.

Thesis I

According to Marx, there are three classes in the fully industrialized countries: the capitalists of industry, commerce and banking; landowners, at least where there is a free market in land; and wage earning workers.

In every country, but especially in the ones where industry is only partially developed and in the period when the bourgeoisie has not yet seized political power, there are yet other classes that exist to one degree or another, such as the feudal aristocracy, the artisans and the peasant smallholders. First the bourgeoisie, then the proletariat, began to have a historical impact at different times in different countries: in Italy in the 15th century,

in the Netherlands in the 16th century, in England in the 17th century, in France in the 18th century, in Central Europe, America, Australia, etc., in the 19th century, in Russia in the 20th century, in Asia today. From this fact one may deduce that it is necessary for us to distinguish between parts of the world that are very different from one another, characterized by highly distinct correlations of forces in the class struggle.

Counter-thesis II

The proletarians are indifferent to and have demonstrated their lack of interest in the revolutionary struggles of the bourgeoisie against feudal power.

Thesis II

The proletarian masses participated in insurrections all over the world to overthrow feudal privileges and absolutist powers. In various countries and historical periods, the majority of the working class naively believed that the attainment of bourgeois democratic demands would also benefit poor citizens. There was a fraction that clearly saw that the bourgeoisie who were struggling for power were exploiters but, influenced by reactionary socialism, they sought to form an alliance

with the feudal counterrevolution out of hatred for the employers. The most advanced fraction took up the correct position: there are no common demands “for civilization” in general that unite the employers and the workers, but the bourgeois revolution is not for that reason any less necessary, whether for clearing the way towards large scale production based on the cooperation of great masses of people that will allow for the raising of the standard of living and an increased consumption for the most impoverished layers of society, or for laying the groundwork for the future social management, proletarian at first, of new forms of production. Consequently, the workers fought alongside the big bourgeoisie against the nobility and the clergy, and also (see the *Manifesto* of 1848) against the reactionary petty bourgeoisie.

Counter-thesis III

Wherever bourgeois victory has been followed by a counterrevolution (feudal and dynastic restoration), the struggle was of no interest to the workers because it was a battle between two of its enemies.

Thesis III

In every armed struggle for and against restoration (such as, for example, the coalitions against the French Revolution and the Republican revolutions of 1830 and 1848) the proletariat has fought and must fight in the trenches and at the barricades alongside the bourgeois radicals. The dialectic of class struggle and civil wars has shown that this help was necessary for the victory of the industrial and landowning bourgeoisie; immediately after their victory, however, the bourgeoisie ferociously turned against the proletariat, which was seeking social reforms and power. This is the only schema of the inevitable succession of revolutions and counterrevolutions: the insurrectionary assistance historically rendered by the proletariat for the bourgeoisie is the precondition for the proletariat to be capable of one day overthrowing the power of the bourgeoisie after a series of revolutionary attempts.

Counter-thesis IV

Every war between feudal and bourgeois states, and every insurrection for national liberation from the yoke

of foreign powers, has been a matter of indifference to the working class.

Thesis IV

The formation of nation-states based on racial and linguistic similarities was at first the optimal condition for replacing feudal production with capitalist production, and every bourgeoisie fought for this goal before the reactionary nobility was overthrown. This form of organization into nation-states (this was above all the case in Europe) was for the workers a necessary stage, since it was impossible to attain internationalism (proclaimed from the start by the first workers movements) without transcending the narrowly localized production, consumption and concerns that were typical of the feudal epoch.

Thus, up until 1870—the period when this organization into nation-states was completed—the proletariat had a class interest in fighting for the liberty of France, Germany, Italy and all the little countries of the Balkans. During their alliance in armed action, class ideologies were sorted out and the workers turned away from nationalism and patriotism. For the future of the proletarian movement, the victories against the Holy Alliance, against Austria in 1859 and 1866 and, last of all,

against Napoleon III in 1870, were of the greatest importance; on the other hand, the defeats inflicted on the enemies of the Holy Alliance were viewed as setbacks by Marx and Engels in all their works, as Lenin would recall in his theses on the war in 1914. All these criteria are valid for the contemporary “East”.

Counter-thesis V

From the moment that the bourgeoisie was in power in all the continents populated by the white race, wars have been wars of imperialist rivalry. Not only is it the case that no workers movement has any interests in common with any of the belligerent governments, and that the workers struggle must be prosecuted to the point of defeatism, but the victory of one or the other of the belligerents has no influence on the subsequent development of the class struggle and the proletarian revolution.

Thesis V

According to Lenin, beginning in 1871, after the period of “peaceful” capitalism, wars were imperialist wars: their ideological acceptance constituted betrayal. In 1914, every workers party, both in the Entente and in the

Central Powers, should have fought against the war in order to transform it into a civil war, above all taking advantage of a military defeat. Despite the fact that all alliances with the bourgeoisie in armed actions, regular or irregular, were therefore excluded, the problem of the effects that different military outcomes might have must, however, be taken into consideration. It cannot be maintained that, when such immense forces clash, the victory of one will have the same effects as the victory of the other. In general, one can say that the military victory of the oldest, wealthiest and most politically and socially stable bourgeois states is the least favorable outcome for the proletariat and its revolution.

There is a direct connection between the unfavorable course of the proletarian struggle of the last 150 years, which is three times as long as Marxism had predicted for victory, and the series of victories of Great Britain in the wars against Napoleon, first, and then against Germany, later. The bourgeois power of England has been stable for three centuries, and while Marx expected that the American Civil War would weaken it, that conflict did not engender a force capable of challenging Europe for power, but rather one that would later come to the aid of English power. If the United States has gradually assumed a central position in world capitalism,

this was not after a direct conflict with England, but thanks to the wars it fought on the side of England.

In 1914 Lenin clearly pointed out that the defeat of the Czarist armies would be the most favorable solution because it would hasten the outbreak of the class struggle in Russia, and fought with all his resources against those who considered that the victory of Germany over the Anglo-French forces was the most unfavorable scenario, while always directing equally harsh criticism at the German social-chauvinists.

Counter-thesis VI

The Russian Revolution was only the outbreak of the proletarian revolution in the country where the bourgeoisie was weakest and from which the struggle could spread to the other countries.

Thesis VI

It is obvious that the proletarian revolution can only be victorious on an international scale. It can and it must, however, begin wherever the relation of forces is most favorable. The thesis according to which the revolution must begin in the country where capitalism is most highly

developed and must then spread immediately to other countries is purely defeatist. In its refutation of the opportunist position, Marxism poses the historical problem in the most distinct manner.

In 1848, Marx did not think that the class revolution would begin in industrial England, despite the violent struggle associated with Chartism. He thought that the French proletariat would unleash the battle through its involvement in the republican revolution. Above all, he thought that the double revolution in Germany, where feudal institutions were still in power, would be a point of support, and he translated the strategy of the German proletariat into precise political directives: First in alliance with the liberals and the bourgeoisie, then immediately afterwards, against them.

For at least twenty years, and especially after 1905 when the Russian proletariat entered the fray as a class, the Bolsheviks had harbored such a perspective in Russia. This strategy was based on two elements: the decadence of the feudal institutions that would be attacked despite the cowardice of the Russian bourgeoisie, and the necessity of a military defeat that, like the one suffered against Japan, would provide a second opportunity for revolution. Closely connected by virtue of doctrine and organization with the workers parties of the bourgeois

countries for many years, the proletariat and its party had the following mission: to take over the struggle for the liberal revolution against Czarism and the emancipation of the peasants from the Boyars, and then the seizure of power by the Russian working class.

History is littered with the wreckage of defeated revolutions: some were defeated because they did not succeed in seizing power, others because armed repression dislodged them from the power they had seized (the Paris Commune), others were defeated without military repression due to the destruction of their social structure (the Italian Communes). In Germany, the double revolution was militarily (and, to an even greater extent, socially) victorious with regard to the first part of its task, but unsuccessful with regard to the second part. In Russia, the double revolution was victorious in the two military phases of the civil war and in the first social-economic phase but was defeated in the second social-economic phase, that is, the passage from capitalism to socialism, not as a result of a military defeat, but due to the defeat of the proletariat outside of Russia (1918-1923). The efforts of Russian power today are not directed towards socialism, but towards capitalism, which is making revolutionary progress throughout Asia.

The historical shift that could have had Germany as its center in 1848 and Russia in 1917 can probably no longer be interpreted as a domestic national crisis. One cannot think, for example, that China—which is nonetheless undergoing a transition from the feudal stage to the bourgeois stage—could have an analogous worldwide influence.

Since then, for the new international revolutionary stage to commence in any particular location, the weak link can only be constituted by a capitalist country that loses a war.

Counter-thesis VII

It is clear that the formation of totalitarian systems in the capitalist countries has nothing to do with the counterrevolutionary restorations of theses II and III. It is a predictable consequence of the economic and social concentration of the forces of production. It is therefore a backsliding into betrayal to consider the need for an alliance of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie to restore liberalism in economics and politics, or to adopt the method of struggle of the partisans. It is also erroneous to support, in the case of a conflict between bourgeois states, the camp that is opposed to an attack on Russia,

for the purpose of defending a regime that arose, after all, from a proletarian victory. Even though that is true, it must be maintained that the outcome of the Second World War, regardless of which side won, cannot have any influence on the perspectives for the resumption of the proletarian class struggle.

Thesis VII

The historical problem is not entirely resolved with the assertion that the justification of the Second World War as a “crusade”, as a conflict of “ideologies”, or as the defense of democracy against fascism, is just as harmful as the analogous claims in 1914 concerning liberty, civilization and national interests. All these formulas are disguises by means of which both sides dissimulated the goal of conquest of markets and economic and political domination. All of this is true but it is not sufficient. The end of capitalism will only come in the form of a series of explosions of the unitary systems of the territorially-based class states. It is this process that must be investigated and, if possible, accelerated. Since the onset of the epoch of imperialist wars this acceleration cannot be accomplished by means of the political and military support of the proletariat for the state. This fact does not however, diminish the importance of understanding the

situation of the proletariat and adapting the strategy of the International of the revolutionary parties to it. Russian policy has replaced this principled orientation with cynical state maneuvers in a new system of power: this is the proof that this power is part of the constellation of the capitalist powers of the world. This is the basis upon which the movement of the proletarian class will have to begin. And the first stage of this difficult process is: to understand.

When the war broke out, Moscow signed a pact with Berlin: this historical reversal, accompanied by Marxist arguments about the imperialist and aggressive nature of the war waged by London and Paris, in which the self-proclaimed communist parties were called upon not to participate, will never be subjected to the criticism it deserves.

Two years later, Moscow entered into an alliance with London, Paris and Washington, and devoted all its propaganda to proving that the war against the Axis was not an imperialist campaign but an ideological crusade for freedom and democracy.

It is of the utmost importance for the proletarian movement that it not only establish that the revolutionary directives have been abandoned in these

two stages but it must also emphasize the historical fact that in the second stage the Russian state, while always consolidating its forces and resources for its domestic capitalist development, has collaborated in the conservative outcome of the war by preventing, with an enormous contribution of military force, the catastrophe at least for the London government that emerged for the hundredth time intact from the storm of war. Such a catastrophe would have been an extremely favorable condition for the collapse of the other bourgeois states, beginning with Berlin, and for the outbreak of revolution throughout Europe.

Counter-thesis VIII

In the current conflict between America and Russia (with their respective satellites) the only thing that has to be considered is the fact that the two imperialisms must be equally fought, and ruling out the possibility that the victory of one or the other—or even a lasting compromise peace—could create substantially different conditions for the rebirth of the communist movement and the world revolution.

Thesis VIII

This equivalence is not just a false but also an insane position if it is not limited to condemning all support for the capitalist states in an eventual third world war, all participation in partisan actions on one side or the other, and all renunciation of the autonomous defeatist actions of the proletariat when it is capable of engaging in them. It will never be possible to get a clear view of the road that leads to the world revolution (a view that is necessary even when history tramples the favorable possibilities for the short term, without which the Marxist party does not exist) without posing the question of the absence of a revolutionary class struggle between the capitalists and proletarians in England and America, where industrialism is most powerful. The answer to this question is inseparable from the evidence of the success of these states in all their imperialist enterprises aimed at the exploitation of the rest of the world.

The power systems in America and England have no other goal than the preservation of world capitalism and are prepared by an extensive period of historical experience for pursuing precisely that goal. They are taking unmistakable steps towards social and political totalitarianism (another inevitable premise of the final

confrontation) and in their satellites we have a situation characterized by mature bourgeois regimes. In the Soviet Bloc we find the opposite conditions: these are European and non-European territories where the most recently formed bourgeoisie is still engaged in the social and political struggle against feudal remnants, the state formations are young and have a less solid underlying structure. On the other hand, this Bloc cannot use the democratic lie except for foreign consumption and has already exhausted the resources of totalitarian, one-party rule, thus abbreviating the cycle. This Bloc will obviously be affected by any crisis that strikes the formidable capitalist system centered in Washington, a system that embraces five-sixths of the economies that are ripe for socialism and of the territories where a pure proletariat is found.

The revolution will have to pass through a stage of civil war in the United States; such a civil war would be postponed for at least half a century by an American victory in another world war.

In view of the fact that the undegenerated Marxist movement today possesses insignificant forces, its task cannot be to dispatch vast forces to shatter from within either one of these systems, a task that devolves upon it in principle. Basically, what the Marxist movement must

attempt to do is to unite the proletarian groups (regardless of their minority status) that understand the leading role played by Moscow and the Moscow-controlled parties in the last thirty years in the consolidation of capitalist power in the highly organized systems. Through a political error at first, and through the contribution of millions upon millions of victims after that, they have made the most powerful contribution to the success of the criminal subjugation of the masses by the perspective of the welfare state and freedom in the framework of the capitalist regime and “western Judeo-Christian civilization”.

The way that the proletariat led by Moscow in the NATO countries fights this accursed civilization is for the latter the greatest success and the best guarantee, unfortunately, even with regard to the predictions concerning the unleashing of a war that could come from the East.

Economic Counter-theses and Theses

Counter-thesis I

The cycle of the capitalist economy tends towards a constant reduction of the standard of living of the workers, who are only allowed what is indispensable to keep them alive.

Thesis I

The doctrine of the concentration of wealth in increasingly larger units with regard to volume but with diminished numbers of workers is always valid. The theory of increasing pauperization, however, does not mean that the capitalist system of production has not increased the production of consumer goods by progressively increasing the degree to which it satisfies the needs of all classes. Marxist theory holds that in doing so, the anarchy of capitalist production wastes nine-tenths of its hundred-fold multiplied energies, mercilessly expropriating all the small-scale owners of businesses that produce consumer goods and enormously increasing the number of people without reserves whose wages allow them to live from one day to

the next, thus leaving the majority of humanity without any defense against the phenomena that are inherent to capitalism, economic and social crises and the appalling destructive effects of wars, and without any defense against the capitalist policy of intensified class dictatorship, predicted more than a century ago.

Counter-thesis II

Capitalism is abolished as soon as the worker receives the part of the surplus value that was stolen from him (the entire product of his labor).

Thesis II

Capitalism will be abolished, not when the ten percent of the product that is consumed, but rather the ninety percent that is squandered by economic anarchy, is returned to the working class collectivity. This is not achieved by way of a different way of accounting for exchange values but by abolishing the commodity character of consumer goods, abolishing money wages and centrally organizing productive activity in general.

Counter-thesis III

Capitalism will be abolished when there is an economy in which the groups of producers will have control over and exercise management of every enterprise and will have free agreements between the enterprises.

Thesis III

A system of commodity exchange between free and autonomous enterprises, as has been advocated by the cooperative movement, the syndicalists and the libertarians, has neither any historical possibility of existing nor any socialist character at all. It is even retrograde with respect to the numerous sectors that are already organized on a general scale in the bourgeois epoch in accordance with the requirements of technological developments and the complexity of social life. Socialism or communism means that all of society constitutes a single association of producers and consumers. Any system based on individual enterprises would perpetuate the internal despotism of the factory and the anarchy in consumption in the context of a mass of labor power that is today at least ten times larger than is necessary.

Counter-thesis IV

The direction of the economy by the state, the management of enterprises by the state, is not socialism but modifies the character of the kind of capitalism that was studied by Marx, and therefore modifies the perspective of its downfall by characterizing a third, unexpected force, of post-capitalism.

Thesis IV

The neutrality of the state was nothing more than a demand proclaimed by the bourgeoisie against the feudal state. Marxism has demonstrated that the modern state does not represent all of society but only the ruling capitalist class and that the state is an economic force in the hands of capital and of the capitalist class. State capitalism and economic planning are also forms that reflect the submission of the political state to the capitalist enterprise. These forms show the basic outline of the long-foreseen final conflict between classes, a conflict that is not a clash between numbers and statistics but between material forces: the proletariat organized in a revolutionary party against the existing state.

Counter-thesis V

Now that the unexpected character of today's economy is an accepted fact, if Marxism wants to continue to have any validity it must seek a third class that will take power after the bourgeoisie (a human group composed of possessors of capital, a group that has now disappeared), but which is not the proletariat. This class that governs and that enjoys privileges in Russia is the bureaucracy. In America it is the managerial class, that is, the technical and administrative directors of the enterprises.

Thesis V

Every class regime has had its administrative, judicial, religious and military bureaucracies. These bureaucracies taken as a whole constitute an instrument of the class in power, but their members do not constitute a class because a class is the totality of those who have identical relations with the means of production and consumption. The class of slave owners had already begun to break apart—it could not feed its own slaves (see the *Manifesto*)—when the imperial bureaucracy was still in power and fighting against the anti-slavery revolution and mercilessly repressing it. Much later, the aristocrats were brought to misery and the guillotine

even though the military and clerical structures of the state were still fighting for the *Ancien Régime*. The bureaucracy in Russia cannot be defined without arbitrarily distinguishing between the big bosses and the rest of the bureaucrats: in state capitalism everyone is a bureaucrat. This alleged Russian bureaucracy, just like its counterpart, the American “managerial class”, is nothing but a lifeless tool without any history of its own, at the service of world capital against the working class. The conclusions towards which class antagonism is tending correspond to the Marxist perspective of the economic, social and political facts, and not to any other previous perspective, much less to a new elaboration that is the product of today’s dismal atmosphere.

Philosophical Counter-theses and Theses

Counter-thesis I

Because economic interests determine everyone's opinions, in today's society the bourgeois party represents the capitalist interest and the party composed of workers represents socialism. All problems are resolved by means of the consultation, not of all the citizens—that is a bourgeois-democratic lie—but of all the workers, given that their interests are the same and that most of them generally have a clear view of their future.

Thesis I

In every epoch, the ruling opinions, culture, art, religion, philosophy, are determined by the situation of men in relation to the productive economy and by the social relations that are derived from the productive economy. Thus, in every epoch, particularly at its peak and at the heart of its historical cycle, all individuals tend to have opinions that are not only not derived from eternal truths or spiritual enlightenment but are alien to the interest of the individual, of the category or the class,

because they are largely modeled on the interests of the ruling class and the institutions that serve the latter.

It is only after a long and arduous conflict of interests and of necessities, after long physical struggles, provoked by class conflict, that a new opinion and doctrine of the oppressed class is formed that attacks the ideological defenses of the established order and calls for its violent destruction. Even long after the physical victory, which is the prelude to a long process of dismantling traditional influences and lies, only a minority of the class in question is capable of solidly holding to the road of the new historical course.

Counter-thesis II

Class interest determines class consciousness and consciousness determines revolutionary action. The inversion of praxis means the opposition between the bourgeois doctrine according to which every citizen must form a political opinion on the basis of ideal or cultural reasons and act in accordance with this view, even against his group interests, and the Marxist doctrine according to which the group and class interests are the interests that dictate each person's opinion.

Thesis II

The inversion of praxis according to the correct view of Marxist determinism means the following: each individual acts according to the determinations of the environment (which are not restricted to physiological needs but also include the countless influences of the traditional forces of production), he tends to possess a consciousness that is more or less suitable for his own action and his motives for action. The same is true of collective actions that arise spontaneously under the influence of material conditions, before they are formulated on the ideological level. On the other hand, the class party groups the advanced elements of the class and of society who possess the doctrine of the historical course of the future. The party, which does not act capriciously or according to momentary enthusiasms but which proceeds rationally, is therefore alone in its active intervention in a “conscious” or “deliberate” way, as the philosophers would say. The conquest of class power and the dictatorship are functions of the party.

Counter-thesis III

The class party constructs the doctrine of the revolution. Faced with new situations and events it transforms it (the doctrine) according to the needs and the requirements or tendencies of the class.

Thesis III

Theory is nothing but the prediction of a series of events that have not yet taken place but concerning which it is possible to discern their preconditions and premises in previous reality. A historical struggle of the class revolution and the party that represents that struggle are real facts and not doctrinaire illusions to the extent that the body of a new theory has formed when the class has made its historical appearance within a new constellation of the forms of social production. A high degree of continuity in time and space of the doctrine and of the class party is the proof of the correctness of revolutionary foresight.

Every physical defeat of the forces of the revolution is followed by a period of development that takes the form of revisions of parts of the theoretical corpus under the pretext of new information and new events.

The entire revolutionary schema is revealed to be correct only when, and only if, it is confirmed throughout the historical course that after each defeat the forces are reconstituted on the same basis and on the same program established when the “declaration of the class war” was announced (1848).

All attempts to construct new and different innovations of the theory are for Marxists equivalent to a confession of treason, as is proven not by philosophical or scientific elaborations, but by a totality of historical experiences derived from the age-old struggle of the modern proletariat.

The explanations provided in these concise notes may be found in numerous texts of the party and in the reports of its congresses and meetings. The fact that we are seeking to put an end to dangerous improvisations does not mean that this labor can be considered to be the monopoly or the exclusive task of any individual or group. It is possible that the arguments could be more carefully organized and made more clear and convincing. By means of study and activity it is possible to improve them in seven years, devoting seven hours a week to the task.

If those who seek to multiply stages are now beginning to appear in greater numbers, it can be said that such people appear every five hundred years, according to the expression once used by the cold Zinoviev—and he used it with reference to Lenin!

As for us, they do not make the grade: we calmly await the day when they will be embalmed.

Amadeo Bordiga
(1952)

Source: “Para poner los puntos sobre las ies! Contratesis y tesis históricas”, *El Programa Comunista*, no. 43, December 1995 (a Spanish translation of the second part of an article originally published under the title, “Le gambe ai cani”, in *Battaglia Comunista*, no. 11, November, 1952).

Translated from the Spanish translation in August 2014, obtained online

at:<http://www.sinistra.net/lib/upt/elpros/nuta/nutaqlobos.html>

- 1. “Teaching Old Dogs New Tricks” is an attempt to translate the original title of this article in Italian, “Raddrizzare le gambe ai cani” (“Straightening the Dog’s Legs”) which is part of a saying in Italian, “Non si possono raddrizzare le gambe ai cani” (“You can’t straighten a dog’s legs”), corresponding to the English language saying, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” [American Translator’s Note].
- 2. The Spanish translation upon which this English translation is based omitted the first part of this article, in which Bordiga discusses: the fate of the Italian revolutionary movement after World War One, subject to a military state of siege as well as the “decomposition of the revolutionary movement of the Third International” after 1922; the rise of “totalitarian

bourgeois parties” throughout Europe; the policy of “inter-classist blocs” imposed by Moscow; the resulting “counterrevolutionary disaster”; the efforts of the journals *Prometeo* and *Battaglia Comunista* to preserve communist theory and methods of action; and the tendencies towards cynicism and impatience that led to innovations and revisions in Marxist theory [American Translator’s Note].