

Amadeo Bordiga

**The Historical Cycle of
the Political Rule of the
Bourgeoisie**

Parallel with the development in time of the capitalist mode of production, we have to consider that of the forms of political power of the bourgeois class.

As Engels says, there have been two great discoveries upon which scientific communism is based, both of them made by Marx. The first consists in the determination of the law of surplus value, according to which the accumulation of capital is based on the continuous extortion of part of the labor power of the proletariat. The second is the theory of historical materialism, according to which the modalities of economic relations and of production provide us with the cause and the explanation of political events and of the entire superstructure of opinions and ideologies that characterize the different epochs and the various types of society.

Thus, the founders of this new theoretical method did not appear in the messianic guise of pure ideologists revealing new principles, devoted to enlightening and rallying the masses; to the contrary, they are scientific investigators of the data offered by past history and by the real structure of contemporary society, who, by endeavoring to liberate themselves in this investigation from all the obscurantist influence of the prejudices of the past, attempt to found a system of scientific laws

that are capable of correctly representing and explaining historical evolution, and, in the scientific rather than the mystical sense of the word, predict the major outlines of future developments.

While the bourgeois class was becoming powerful, in a struggle that lasted for centuries, in the field of productive organization and the economy, and at the same time was successfully dislodging the feudal and theocratic class from its dominant position in the governmental apparatus of the state, the reflection of that formidable clash of interests, which unfolded in an open contest between armed forces until the final revolutionary assault that allowed the bourgeoisie to seize power, also took the form of a battle of ideas and theories.

The old ruling classes erected their doctrinal superstructure upon the principles of revelation and authority, since it is upon principles such as these that laws and social customs are raised that facilitate the control of the subjugated masses by an oligarchy of warriors, nobles and priests. The source of the truth proceeded from ancient and unchanging tablets, dictated by minds and forces superior to human reason, the founding norms of collective existence, and more recently, in the old texts of sages and masters, to which

one necessarily resorted in order to deduce from the letter of the verses and passages the interpretation of every new question of human knowledge and labor.

The nascent revolutionary bourgeoisie took up the weapon of the critique of the principle of authority, a critique developed by modern philosophical thought. It struck out boldly in every direction and, casting doubt on every traditional conception, it proclaimed the rule of human reason against the rule of authority: it undermined religious dogma in order to subvert the framework of the feudal state, which was based on the monarchical principle of divine right and on the class solidarity that united the landowning nobility and the ecclesiastical hierarchies.

It thus constructed a new, modern ideological framework that it sought to present as universally applicable and definitive, as the triumph of the truth over the lie of religious and absolutist obscurantism. This new ideological framework, however, viewed from the perspective of the Marxist critique, is nothing but a new edifice that corresponds to the new class relations and the new requirements of the class that assumed power.

In the political field, the bourgeoisie led the revolutionary assault on state power, and then used the

latter to break the last fetters that stood in the way of the development of the economic forces that the bourgeoisie expressed.

The struggle developed as a civil war, a class war between the white guards of the old feudal regime and the revolutionary phalanxes of the bourgeoisie.

In the classical aspects of the French revolution it was the Third Estate—“the bourgeoisie”—that first demanded to play a role in public affairs, which up until then had been the monopoly of the aristocracy and the clergy, reactionary classes that were soon the object of proposals to radically exclude them from all political influence.

A new ruling minority, that of the owners of the factories and workshops, and of the great merchants, replaced the old privileged minority. Actually, however, this substantive aspect of the assault of the bourgeoisie was not openly declared by the thinkers and the parties of the new regime; instead, even they did not understand it, although they acted in accordance with the meaning of the irresistible pressure of powerful new class interests.

This entire movement, in which the bourgeoisie utilized in its struggle the forces of the masses of the population

composed of poor people and workers—“the Fourth Estate”—was likewise characterized by the fact that, with regard to its ideological content, the bourgeoisie boasted of its having been inspired by principles conducive to the general interest; and, once again, these principles were not interpreted and presented as transitory forms superimposed on a particular new course in social relations, but rather as absolute and universal values that regulate the development of humanity. The superstition of the old mythologies was ridiculed, and in the name of scientific doubt, freedom of criticism and reason, a new mythology of general concepts and values was proclaimed, and the revolutionary declarations of the victorious bourgeoisie spoke of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, they proclaimed the advent of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity as the birthright of all men.

In any event, in this historical new course, the Fourth Estate, the great mass of workers who had been sacrificed in old and new ways to the well-being of the privileged castes, was neither capable of possessing the weapons of critique needed to understand the real scope of this new course, nor was it capable of any hesitation in its support for the revolutionary bourgeoisie in its heroic outlaw phase during its struggle against the positions of the past.

In that phase, for bourgeois politics, its philosophical demands that called for freedom of opinion and political activity for all, were not at all contradicted by the use in their struggle of all the means of dictatorship and terror against the armed remnants of the forces of the old regimes in the civil war, and in wars of aggression far from its borders. The atheist and encyclopedist bourgeois *sans-culotte* saw no contradiction at all between the Crusade for the new God Liberty and the systematic employment of the guillotine as a means by which his class enemy was deprived of his freedom to defend his ancient privileges. The nascent proletariat believed in the promise of freedom for all, but nevertheless helped the bourgeoisie, once it took power, to carry out its merciless repression of counterrevolutionaries.

Thus, the first phase of bourgeois political rule consisted in the armed revolutionary struggle for the conquest of power, and in the exercise of a class dictatorship in order to extirpate all the remnants of the former social organization and repress any reactionary attempts to restore the old system.

This first phase of the bourgeois political regime, with the complexity of its aspects in the different modern

countries, and with the typical succession of reactionary absolutist coups, followed by new revolutionary waves that ended with the collapse of the absolutist regimes, was generally followed in the modern world and in the countries with a high level of economic development by a second, long phase, in which the horrors and the excesses of the revolution seemed to be relegated to the background, and the new ruling class, having solidly established its political control over society, could boast in the most exaggerated terms concerning the alleged consonance between its management of the world and the whole metaphysical apparatus of its ideological concepts of liberty, justice and equality.

In the pure law there are no longer any separate castes, all citizens theoretically possess the same relation with the state, and possess the same right to delegate to its institutions the representatives they prefer and who best reflect their opinions as well as their interests.

The parliamentary system of bourgeois democracy was then experiencing its golden age, and proclaimed that after the fundamental promulgation of juridical and political equality the path was open, without the need for further revolutionary upheavals and without repeating the tragedy of the terror, for all developments

leading toward a better way for people to coexist and a better social condition.

After the passage of a couple of generations, the revolutionary proletarian critique had already radically exposed this gigantic lie. Political and juridical liberty correspond to the real economic measure of relations, the freedom to sell one's own labor, which is effectively a condition of cruel necessity for most men, one that presents no other alternative besides starvation.

In politics, the state is not the expression of the will of the majority of the people, but rather the committee of the interests of the ruling bourgeois class, and the parliamentary mechanism can only respond in favor of the interests of that class.

In philosophy, the rule of reason is nothing but a fraud, since the free use of the human brain, as uprooted as it may seem to be from the prohibitions of the excommunications of the priests and the rigors of the absolutist police, is nothing but an illusion, insofar as the denial of the possibility and the freedom to satisfy the material, physiological requirements that are the preconditions for the dynamics of the individual is itself a merciless limitation on the free use of that organ.

According to the romantic depiction of the bourgeois literature of this arcadian period, in every village there is the light-quenching “priest”, but also the light of “the teacher”; but the lie of democratic educationism and culturalism resides in the fact that one cannot expect from man, that he should first have a free and consciously-arrived-at opinion, and then he should obtain the possibility of satisfying his interests and his appetites; because the scientifically logical way is instead just the opposite, since man will first have to eat and then he can form a proper opinion.

Apart from the critique of the proletarian revolutionaries, reality was dispersed into the limbo of ghosts of the past, in that hypocritical framework of democratic ideology. While the clashes between the classes, at odds in each country because of their opposed interests, never subsided, despite all the panaceas of the bourgeois representative system, the development of the new monopolistic economic forms of capitalism and the struggle for colonies plunged entire populations into terrible crises and bloody massacres that far surpassed those of the epoch of the rise of the revolutionary bourgeoisie.

Capitalism not only logically needs armed violence to clear the way for historical development, but it employs and produces violence in every phase of its development.

As the power of industrial production rose, the army of labor grew in numbers, and at the same time the critical consciousness of the proletariat became more necessary, and its organizations also became stronger, the ruling bourgeois class, in parallel with the transformation of its economic praxis from liberal to interventionist, needed to abandon its method of apparent tolerance for political ideas and organizations, and instead adopt a method of authoritarian and totalitarian government; and this is the general meaning of our present period. The new leadership of the bourgeois administration of the world takes advantage of the undeniable fact that all human activities, as an effect of the progress of science and technology, are unraveling, and declining from a condition characterized by the autonomy of isolated initiatives, typical of less modern and less complex societies, towards the institution of increasingly more concentrated networks of relations and of interdependence in every domain that are gradually enveloping the entire world.

Private initiative has performed its prodigies and has broken its previous record, set by the intrepid

adventures of the first great navigators, with its rash and implacable colonization projects in the most distant corners of the world. Now, however, it gives way before the predominance of the formidable interconnections of coordinated activity, in the production of commodities, in their distribution, in the management of collective services, in scientific inquiry in all fields.

It is unthinkable that there should be any autonomy of initiative in a society that possesses air travel, radio-communications, movies, and television, all of which are discoveries that have exclusively social applications.

The government policies of the ruling class, for several decades now and at an increasingly faster rate, are evolving towards forms of strict control, one man leadership, and highly centralized hierarchical structures.

This stage and this modern political form, the superstructure that was born from the monopolist and imperialist economic phenomenon, which was foreseen by Lenin since 1916 when he said that the political forms of the most recent capitalist phase can only be characterized by tyranny and oppression, this phase that is generally tending to replace classical democratic liberalism in the modern world, is nothing other than fascism.

It is an enormous political and historical mistake to confuse this rise of a new political form imposed by the times, which is the consequence and inevitable precondition of the survival of the capitalist system of oppression, with the breakdown of that system's internal class structures, that is, with a reactionary return of the social forces of the feudal classes, which would therefore threaten to replace bourgeois democratic forms by restoring the despotism of the "*ancien régime*"; notwithstanding the fact that the bourgeoisie has already nullified the feudal classes as a military factor and largely annihilated the world in which these feudal social forces lived.

Anyone who possesses even the slightest understanding of the meaning of this erroneous interpretation and still even minimally adheres to its concerns and suggestions, is alien to the framework and politics of communism.

The new form by which bourgeois capitalism will rule the world, unless it is overthrown by the revolution of the proletariat, is making its appearance via a process that is not deciphered with the banal and scholastic methods of philistine criticism.

As for the Marxists, they have never given serious consideration to the objection that the first example of proletarian power, which was supposed to have been established in a highly advanced industrial country, instead arose in the feudal Russia of Czarism because the succession of class cycles is an international phenomenon and involves the play of forces on a world scale, which is manifested locally wherever favorable historical conditions are present (war, defeat, the prolonged survival of decrepit regimes, an effectively organized revolutionary party, etc.).

We should be even less surprised that the manifestations of the transition from liberalism to fascism should present the most varied transitional forms among the various peoples, since it is a matter of a less radical transition, in which it is not the ruling class that is changed, but only the form of its rule.

Fascism can be defined from the economic point of view as an attempt on the part of capitalism to control and limit its own development, an attempt whose purpose is to curtail, with centralized discipline, the growth of the most alarming aspects of economic phenomena that threaten to render the system's contradictions irremediable.

From the social point of view one can define fascism as an attempt on the part of the bourgeoisie, born from the philosophy and psychology of absolute autonomy and individualism, to provide itself with a collective class consciousness, and to oppose its own political and military formations and frameworks to the challenge posed by the class forces that were ominously developing in the proletarian class.

Politically, fascism constitutes the stage during which the ruling class denounces as useless the schemas of liberal tolerance, proclaims the one-party method of government, and liquidates the old hierarchies devoted to the service of capital, which were too habituated to the use of the methods of the democratic con game.

Basically, fascism, in terms of its ideology (and thus revealing not only that it is not a revolution, but also that it is not even a secure and universal historical resource of the bourgeois counterrevolution), does not renounce, because it is incapable of doing so, flaunting a display of a mythology of universal values, yet nonetheless, having dialectically inverted their terms, transforms them into the liberal postulates of class collaboration, it speaks of nations rather than of class, it proclaims the juridical equality of individuals, it always passes off its own state

framework as one based on the social collective as a whole.

The underpinnings of the new bourgeois mythology will no longer be Liberty and Equality, but Nation, Fatherland, Race and an almost deified State.

Whenever any theoretical and philosophical obstacles arise, they will be used by the bourgeois philistine in his quest to prevent the realistic and scientific unmasking of his ideological apparatus composed of supreme and superhuman spiritual values, which are always assumed to be innate to the human mind, or produced by an accommodating divinity, by the hypocritical prescriptions of oppressors of all kinds.

In all of its forms—economically with monopoly capital and state capitalism, socially with the open attack on the class formations of the class of the revolutionary proletariat, politically with the more or less expedited suppression of the clownish palaver of multiple parties and of the motley complexion of the parliamentary milieu, ideologically with the employment of the whole bag of tricks of alleged universal ideals and of a calling to a higher mission—capitalism will pass through this phase everywhere, knowing that it is confronted by the alternative of dispersing and impeding the advance of

the revolutionary class, or having to fall in the final catastrophe.

An initial historical manifestation of this third phase may be found in Italy, certainly not due to the particular characteristics of the development of Italian capitalism, but rather due to the convergence of international historical conditions that have affected the vicissitudes of Italian history: a victorious war with consequences not unlike those that follow a lost war; an economic crisis caused by high population density and the lack of markets for an outlet for commodities and labor power; a conscious advance with regard to an autonomous and extremist politics of the exploited class; a relative historical instability of the state apparatus, etc.....

Another manifestation of this same third phase, but with an entirely different outcome in one sense, has unfolded in Germany, where capitalism, upon the framework of a powerful productive structure that remained intact after Germany lost the war, has attempted to speed up the process in order to catch up to rival capitalisms, when the latter have squeezed German capitalism in a steel vise, within which the pressure of the contesting social forces has reached the boiling point; where the historical dilemma exposed by Lenin to the world in 1919 was most inexorably posed: world organization of the economy by

capitalism or by labor—dictatorship of the bourgeoisie or dictatorship of the proletariat.

Lenin made it clear that anyone who, in their economic analysis, nourishes the illusion that monopoly and statist capitalism can return to the liberal capitalism of the first classical form, is a reactionary. Similarly, we may now clearly say the same thing about anyone who pursues the miracle of a reaffirmation of the democratic liberal political method as opposed to that of the fascist dictatorship, with which, at a certain point of capitalism's development, the bourgeois forces crush, with a tactic of open, frontal assault, the autonomous organizations of the proletarian class.

The doctrine of the proletarian party must instill into its very foundations the condemnation of the thesis that affirms that, confronted by the fascist political phase of bourgeois rule, it should call for the restoration of the democratic parliamentary system of government, whereas, to the contrary, the revolutionary perspective holds that the bourgeois totalitarian phase will rapidly fulfill its task and be overthrown by the revolutionary outburst of the working class, which, far from shedding any tears for the irremediable end of the fraudulent bourgeois liberty, will proceed to use its power to crush the Freedom to own property, to oppress and to exploit,

the rallying cry of the bourgeois world from the time of its heroic birth amidst the flames of the anti-feudal revolution, to its further development in the pacifist phase of liberal tolerance, until our current phase in which it removed its disguise in the final battle for the defense of institutions, privileges and the right to exploit enjoyed by the employing class.

The fascists lost the war; fascism, however, was victorious. Despite the large-scale employment of democratic propaganda, the capitalist world, having preserved, even in this tremendous crisis, the integrity and historical continuity of its powerful state units, will now have to undertake a major effort to dominate the forces that pose a threat to it, and will implement an increasingly more closed system of control over economic processes and of the immobilization of the autonomy of any social or political movement that might threaten to disturb the constituted order. Just as the Legitimist victors over Napoleon had to inherit the social and juridical framework of the new French regime, the victors over the fascists and the Nazis, in a process of greater or lesser duration, and of greater or lesser clarity, will confirm by virtue of their actions, although they will deny this with hollow ideological proclamations, the need to administer the world, which has been so

tremendously altered by the second imperialist war, with the authoritarian and totalitarian methods that were first tested in the defeated countries.

This fundamental truth, rather than being the outcome of arduous and seemingly paradoxical critical analyses, is being openly expressed with greater frequency with each passing day in the organizational work that is being conducted for the economic, social and political control of the world.

The bourgeoisie, which was once individualist, nationalist, Manchesterian, and isolationist, now holds its world congresses, and just as the Holy Alliance attempted to stop the bourgeois revolution with an absolutist International, now the capitalist world is trying to create its International, which can only be centralist and totalitarian.

Will the capitalist world successfully perform its essential historical mission, which, under the aegis of the suppression of the resurgence of fascism, consists instead, and in fact increasingly more obviously, in repressing and shattering the revolutionary power of the proletarian International?

Amadeo Bordiga

1947

Originally published under the title, “Il ciclo storico del dominio politico della borghesia” in the journal, *Prometeo*, no. 5, January-February 1947.

Translated in August 2014 from the Spanish translation published in the journal, *La Izquierda Comunista*, no. 3, November 1995. Spanish translation available online at: <http://www.sinistra.net/lib/bas/promet/veji/vejiacacis.html>.