

Following Claude Bourdet's article on The French Left (U & LRI) a leader of the Italian Socialist Party contributes the first of two articles on . . .

The Italian Left

Lelio Basso

SOME brief remarks on the formation of the Italian

state will be necessary if the present situation is to be seen in perspective.

Italian unity was not the work of a fully fledged bourgeoisie which required wider markets for the sake of its industrial expansion and had the ability to take the lead in the development of a modern state. What happened to the Italian bourgeoisie is rather similar to what happened to the Russian proletariat. Its intellectual vanguard, relying on experiences of other countries and on theories worked out for different historical situations, went faster than actual Italian conditions warranted. There was the experience of the British and French bourgeoisie, who had reached power after many centuries of their country's existence as a unified state, and many years of capitalist economic growth. There was the experience of the German middle classes, who, spurred by the real needs of production, effected the Customs Union—the prelude to the political union of Germany—which was to furnish the framework for a thoroughgoing capitalist development. From these, Italian political thought derived its orientation towards the belief that Italian free trade and political unity would likewise maximise welfare and prosperity, thus enabling Italy to reach the level attained by other countries. Inspired by this ideology, the Italian bourgeoisie realised national unity and established itself in power. But the necessary preconditions for its proper working were lacking: particularly capital accumulation, and its corollary, the entrepreneurial ethos, technological preparation, adequate manpower, a credit system, good means of communication, and, in general, all the sub-structure essential to accelerated economic development. The unified bourgeois state, therefore, not only failed to bring about the expected progress and prosperity, but was faced with immense tasks for which the bourgeoisie was quite unprepared. For lack of the means and the capacity needed to face the risks of comprehensive capitalist growth—both the risks of international competition and of sharper social conflicts with a rising working class—the Italian bourgeoisie adopted a facile solution which allowed them assured profits without any risks. From this stems the traditional policy of the Italian ruling class, which can be summed up as follows:

(a) The simplest guarantee of profit without risk was provided by the domination of the state apparatus, and its manipulation by private interests: bank speculations, building, railway transport, military and civil contracts, protectionist tariffs, underpinning commercial enterprises. Naturally, as a result of this, there grew up a host of lesser privileges for the bureaucracy, the middlemen, and the large number of politicians and hangers-on. Gradually the state became a veritable consortium of the privileged—some greater, some lesser—all linked together by strong bonds of solidarity. The former enriched themselves; the latter just made do (but this in itself is already a great deal in a country where people died and still die of hunger). It is worth emphasising again the Italian bourgeoisie took power still fresh from the pre-capitalist milieu—the milieu of patents, patronage, and perquisites. Still worse was the fact that the new state, on this unmaturing

capitalist base, made immediate claim to great power status with all this implied in inflated military expenditure, colonization and imperialism. Italy's military and colonial policy, which did not answer to any expansionist need, was totally disproportionate to the very poor resources of the country.

(b) The example of other countries had shown that industrialisation involved economic and political pressures from the masses, and required higher educational levels, which likewise increased their independence. True, the expansion of productive capacity had enabled the middle classes of other countries to overcome these tensions by creating an integrated industrial pattern of life and by a gradual raising of living standards. Equilibrium was re-established at a higher level, permitting a larger measure of democracy. But the weakness of our bourgeoisie, its fear of losing state protection, its fear of losing control of the masses led it to fetter industrial and educational progress, under the illusion that they would thus avoid in Italy the birth or the intensification of the "social problem".

(c) An inevitable result of this was the paralysis of democratic development. The ruling class, determined to retain firm control of civil power, always tended towards the idea of a single party government. This party was to represent a compromise between the interests of the great and small privilege-holders, and was designed to force into the backwaters of social life, into misery and ignorance, all those who were excluded from the privileges—the great majority of citizens. It was to exclude from political life, if it did not make illegal, all parties which claimed to defend their interests.

This has been a long run tendency for the Right ever since Italian unification. The Right, which held power after unification, represented a rather thin stratum of the well-to-do, largely made up of the greater landowners. Their power was being challenged by emergent financial and industrial interests, strengthened by unification, allied with the Southern middle classes. A coalition of these interests, who were excluded from power, kept the Left alive and enabled it to form a government in 1876, but the result of this was not a reversal of policies, but only a widening of the privileged circle. It was the leader of the Left himself, Depretis, who launched the slogan of *transformismo*: a call to transform the old parliamentary alignments in order to give life to a new single formation in which the old and the new interests were fused. On this social basis, the *transformismo* of Depretis was followed by the personal dictatorship of Crispi, which further emphasised the repressive and anti-popular tendencies of the ruling classes. To the rising mass movement the government replied from 1893 to the close of the century with emergency legislation. The Socialist Party, founded in 1892 had already been declared illegal, and was dissolved two years later. The pattern of social tension was temporarily modified as Italy shared in the boom of the later nineties. Mass emigration from the poorer regions not only eased the population pressure, but, through the remittances of the emigrants to their families, created income supports for many in the most depressed social strata. In these conditions police repression was

replaced by a policy of concessions to the workers in the privileged regions, and particularly in certain protected industries. Giolitti, who ruled Italy from the close of the century to the first world war, originated the strategy of admitting a privileged segment of the working class into the state circle, and thus dividing them from the depressed and illiterate masses. Giolitti's master stroke was to manipulate *transformismo* and political interest groups to ensure that the backward south returned to parliament members docile to the government, who supported its policy of favouring the North and strengthening the privileged industries and the aristocracy of labour. The dichotomy between the two Italys was thus continually deepened, with the result that the continued backwardness of the South restricted the growth of the home market and enabled the northern industries to establish positions of monopoly under state protection. This was the origin of the most typical social contradiction of modern Italy: the anachronistic co-existence of vast under-developed regions, where capitalism has the aspect of colonial exploitation, with strong capitalist industrial concentrations with marked tendencies to oligopoly—a concentration which prospers above all through its hold on the state and administrative apparatus.

The 1914-18 war accentuated this tendency. Industrial and banking enterprises established closer relations with the bureaucracy within the framework of the war economy, an economy in which risks were further minimised by the absence of foreign competition. Peace, when it came, threatened to upset the equilibrium. The Italian economy was too weak and unstable to undergo reconversion to the productive and competitive risks of peacetime. It suffered very severely from the crisis of 1921; the largest organization of heavy industry (Ansaldo Ilva) and one of the major banks (Banca Italiana di Sconto) collapsed. At the same time, the emergence of mass parties in conditions of universal suffrage, destroyed the basis of Giolitti's parliamentary equilibrium, which did not allow for large parties. In the 1919 elections the two great parties, the Socialist and the Catholic, obtained more than half the parliamentary seats, making impossible the formation of a majority government on the old pattern.

Deprived of its "management" of parliament, and of the climate of economic prosperity which had upheld it in the country, "Giolittism" was of no more use to the Italian ruling class, which now preferred to deal with the crisis by a totalitarian seizure of power, by Fascism. Fascism, as I have already implied, crystallised the political evolution of the Italian ruling class: a single party, controlled by the great vested interests, the masses excluded from all participation in political life, the capitalist economy underpinned by state action. This action achieved its strongest expressions in autarchy, in corporatism, the suffocation of any possible class conflict, state control of labour relations, and the salvage operations of government agencies for the big companies hit by the slump of the thirties.

One can therefore state that fascism, far from being, as Benedetto Croce thought, a parenthesis in the democratic evolution of Italy, and a break with the past, was the continuation and culmination of certain old tendencies operating under new conditions: i.e., the arrival of monopolistic capitalism, the exacerbation of the Italian class struggle after the First World War, the economic crisis of 1921. Mack Smith was therefore right when, in his study of the origins of fascism, he placed it as just one phase in the drift towards a single party system, towards the absence of an alternative government, which had always characterised Italy.

"Another grave constitutional defect," he wrote, "lay in the fact that there never existed a united and compact parliamentary opposition, and that very little heed was paid to the usefulness of such an opposition. Following a tradition which dates back to the Risorgimento, there never was a strong opposition party which could present an alternative programme to public opinion." (Talk on B.B.C., 20th October, 1922, reprinted in *Occidente* 1953, vol. 1, p. 42.)

As for the economic development of Italy in this period, one cannot, in a brief article, give many figures for comparison: perhaps one will be sufficient as a pointer. From 1871 to 1935 the number of agricultural workers remained more or less static, about 8.5 millions, with a percentage decline (taking into consideration the increase in population) from 58% to 47% of the active population. About the same time (1936) the percentage of agricultural workers relative to the active population had shrunk in Germany to about 27%, in the U.S.A. to about 20%, in Britain to less than 6%. The long-run tendencies of the Italian economy can thus be outlined: very little industrialisation; an under-capitalised agriculture supporting a labour force in excess of its economic potential; and agriculture, therefore, absolutely incapable of supporting the combined demands of rent of farm, entrepreneurial profit, and the wages of a too numerous working population. The inevitable result: widespread poverty among both small cultivators and the wage labourers, unemployment and under-employment.

The Christian Democrats

How much has all this changed since the fall of fascism? Unfortunately, it must be admitted that, despite the parliamentary regime, it has only been possible to introduce a few reforms—insufficient to alter the general trends; in some cases, the situation has been made even more serious.

In the first place, the social forces governing the country have remained the same. Representatives of the same privileged interests who ruled Italy during fascism, have, in the post-war period, reached a compromise with the one great organized power in Italy which could call on vast mass support for a conservative social policy—that is, the Catholic Church. With its principal base in Italy it seeks to exercise a special control over the life of the Italian state and to intervene decisively in its politics, fighting any socialist or communist movements. The tendencies of Catholic social doctrine, from which fascism had borrowed its corporatism; the Church's desire to slow the pace of industrialisation and urbanisation as destructive to the foundations of the Christian family; its desire for a paternalist regulation of social relations—all these tendencies of the Church represent, at the same time, the ideal framework within which the Italian bourgeoisie can maintain their rule, for the reasons we have discussed. In Italy Christian democracy is based essentially on this compromise between the ruling class and the Catholic Church. But the Christian-democrats have to take into account the needs of the vast middle class, which cannot be absorbed into the still limited industrial sector, and who have careers where protection of the ruling party facilitates entry; of the peasant masses whose obedience to the Catholic hierarchy guarantees their political allegiance, but who, without minimum reforms and political concessions would become susceptible to other political ideals; lastly, that of the working classes, or at least a part of them, especially in cases where state preference to the big monopolies has allowed the creation of privileged areas and strata.

Taking all this into account, it can be stated that Christian Democracy is for the most part the continuation of the traditional Italian policy because it allows the same social forces, essentially the few large groups which dominate Italian capitalism, to subordinate the economic development of the country to their own private income. It follows from this that the traditional evils of our country remain with us.

In the first place, Italy is still divided into two parts, clearly differentiated economically, socially and culturally. One generally speaks of North and South, but actually the underdeveloped parts of Italy extend to the Central regions and to some areas of the North. Therefore, there are in Italy today some very modern industries, some of the most advanced in Europe, and zones of very great poverty. To solve this unbalance, an active policy of economic development is necessary, which in turn would only be possible through strong State intervention in favour of rapid industrialisation, since private capital tends to flow into regions where there already exists a well-developed capitalist economy. Not only for economic, but for political reasons, the Italian ruling class impedes the development of backward areas: differentiation and division in the social and economic situations of different groups of workers impedes the formation of a party or united movement which might embrace the entire left.

In fact, it is clear that at least the immediate interests of the workers in the big modern industries are very different from those of the agricultural workers and the unemployed; and I think it may be easy to induce these privileged workers to break Trade Union and political solidarity with the great mass of unskilled workers. But besides this section of privileged workers, who might fall into opportunist policies, the policy of the ruling class tends to keep on the lowest rungs of the social ladder a vast number of the sub-proletariat, poverty-stricken and illiterate, with no class consciousness: an easy prey for the parties of the extreme Right (Monarchists, neo-Fascists) or for the Christian Democrats.

Unemployment and illiteracy

Permanent unemployment is not only an expression of the backwardness of a large part of Italy where the chances of work do not increase with the increase in population, but is also deliberately willed by the ruling class to break the resistance of the workers. The fact that from the South and the countryside there flows to the industrial centres of the North a population in search of work, constitutes an element of pressure on the employed workers, weakening their bargaining position vis-a-vis their employers: they know that if they were given notice they would stand the risk of a long period of unemployment. Unemployment together with poverty and ignorance are still the instruments of power of the Italian ruling class.

This explains why twelve years after the end of the War, despite the favourable combination of circumstances of the last few years, the situation shows no sign of improvement. The government, forced by the seriousness of the situation, has established the *cassa del mezzo giorno*, which should have given impetus to the development of the South, but the gap between North and South (as is obvious from the principal statistics on income, productivity, etc.) has continued to widen, because the government has chosen to spend the money of the fund solely on public works or pre-industrial enterprises and has refrained from what could truly be called "industrialisation".

With regard to unemployment, the Minister Vannoni had prepared his scheme for the increase of incoming employment which, starting with an annual 5% increase of the national income, calculated to eradicate unemployment in ten years (by 1965) by means of a policy of well-chosen productive investments and restrictions on consumption. But while the increase in national income has been above the national average of 5%, industrial investment was directed towards an increase in mechanisation and modernisation of plant, without reducing in the slightest measure the unemployment figures, which have remained stationary at about 2 millions, in addition to the 4-5 millions under-employed in agricultural or artisanal occupations with very low productivity and income levels. Therefore, the greater part of the national income has gone towards increasing only the profits of the major industries, and the wages of their workers, emphasising the most serious of the disequilibria in the Italian situation.

Finally, regarding illiteracy, the recently published figures of the 1951 census are startling: 5,466,000 illiterates and 7,581,622 semi-illiterates (i.e., persons who can only either read or write) that is to say altogether 13,037,622 persons over six years of age who cannot read and write, equivalent to 30.82% of the population.

Salazar bound?

It seems clear, therefore, that the development of democracy in Italy, which ought to have as its main object economic and cultural progress, requires an orientation in a direction quite different from that followed up to now in the interests of the great monopolistic combines. But these are particularly strong in Italy. Precisely because there was a retarded development, Italy does not have a large class of independent entrepreneurs, nor an independent middle class. The marked tendency towards monopoly, of which we have already spoken, and the absolute domination of the market by a handful of oligopolies, operates in such a way that, apart from the workers, there are no social forces capable of waging a political struggle against the dominant trend. Moreover this great concentration of economic power prompts those exercising it to seek a similar concentration of political power, to control and direct the whole of national life. Taken in conjunction with the tendency of the Catholic Church towards integration—a tendency particularly marked in Italy—this situation permanently threatens a totalitarian evolution with a similar character and orientation to that of Salazar in Portugal.

It is noteworthy that for ten years since the establishment of the Republican constitution in 1948 successive governments have refused to introduce the necessary legislation outlined in the constitution, and to make operative the judicial institutions implied by the constitution itself. The successive governments of the post-war period, while formally a coalition of the dominant Party with two small secular parties, the Liberals (Right Wing) and the Social Democrats (Saragat's Party), has in fact been promoting conditions suitable to its becoming in the Italian tradition the sole Party of the new regime.

From the foregoing it is easy to understand the gravity of the task confronting the Italian Left. Italy cannot be entirely assimilated either to the advanced capitalist countries or to completely underdeveloped countries, and a Socialist party in Italy must always take account of the quite different needs and psychology of the different parts of Italy. This explains why the P.S.I. (Nenni's Party) has always had a character of its own, which has led it to positions different from those of other European socialist

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parties. It is the only one of the great socialist parties of Western Europe which ranged itself against the 1914-18 War; subsequently, refusing to join either the reconstituted Second International, or the Communist International, remaining isolated. Only in the Fascist period did the Italian socialists in exile re-enter the International and represent the Left wing in it, maintaining the necessity of unified action with the Communists—as indispensable for the struggle against Fascism. After the War the Socialists renewed the firm agreement made in exile, agreeing to unified action with the Communists, and, refusing to follow the anti-Communist policy of the Western Socialist parties, they were excluded once more from the Socialist International. As long as the Italian situation remains oriented mainly in its present direction, it is hard to believe that the Italian workers can bring themselves to follow precisely the political line of European Social Democracy—operating as it does in conditions of higher social and economic development, and of more stable democratic equilibrium—or of Soviet Communists, who have been able to apply their methods of violence only where there exist profound disequilibria and a revolutionary situation.

The essential task of the Italian Left today is to stop the steady drift to a Sa'azar-type government and to seek the creation of a modern democratic state. This, however, is not possible except on the basis of a powerful economic and cultural development, which the alliance of capitalism and clericalism, faithful to conservative traditions, will impede in every way. Therefore it is clear that the Christian Democrats and their supporting groups represent the one threat which currently overshadows Italian democracy. The battle for democracy is a battle to create an alternative government formed from a regrouping of radical and popular forces.

However, in Italy today these popular forces are mainly Communist. At the last election (7th June, 1953) the P.C.I. scored 6,120,809 votes (22.7%) and the P.S.I. 3,444,104 (12.7%), while the P.S.D.I. (Saragat's Party) had 1,222,957 (4.5%). It is hard to believe that the P.S.I. alone, or even in conjunction with the P.S.D.I., could form this alternative government. On the other hand, if the P.S.I. maintains its alliance with the P.C.I., participation in a democratic regroupment is made difficult for the small bourgeois democratic groups (Radicals, Republicans) whose support would be quite useful.

An Italian road to socialism?

After the 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U., the P.C.I. showed a tendency to develop its programme in a greater independence of the Soviet Union. The leader of the P.C.I., Togliatti, published in *Nuovi Arguments* an article which had widespread repercussions throughout the world, in which he urged that Communists should no longer look exclusively to the U.S.S.R. as the sole centre of the Communist world, but that they should recognize the existence of as many different centres as there were different situations. In the following Congress of the P.C.I. this theory of "poly-centralism" was not played down; there was talk of the "Italian Road to Socialism" as a democratic road. But the armed Soviet intervention in Hungary and the P.C.I. solidarity with the Kadar government casts serious doubts on the sincerity of their attachment to the democratic national path. It is necessary however to recognize that the sympathies of the Congress members were revealed quite decisively as in favour of the Polish, Chinese and Yugoslav representatives. And one cannot

deny that in internal politics the Communists have remained up to now on constitutional grounds, and have fought very strongly for democratic aims. Nevertheless, in the field of international politics, they have always continued to support the Soviet line.

The P.S.I. finds itself faced with a number of difficult questions. On the one hand, it is aware that without workers' unity it is impossible to overcome the Conservative opposition, and perhaps even to stop the drift towards "salazaration"; on the other hand, it is convinced that a socially progressive Italy can today only be achieved on a democratic basis and with a vast alliance comprising the middle classes as well as the workers and peasants, who have no faith in the democratic ideals of the Communists.

Dividing the Left?

At its Congress held in Venice (February 1957) the Socialist Party rejected every permanent agreement and every organic and permanent link with the P.C.I., while recognising the need for working together with Communists in trade organisations, in local administration and even in the political sphere.

Our invitation to the Social Democrat Party to break with the Christian Democrats and so prepare for future re-unification has been rejected by Saragat, maintaining that no union should come about unless the P.S.I. first broke with the P.C.I., not only politically, but also in the Trade Union and local administration. The P.S.I. in turn refused to discuss these conditions, observing that at present it was not a question of negotiating a unification, but only of creating conditions for joint action by the Parties with a view to eventual union, and emphasised that this joint action must be directed against the Christian Democrat effort to monopolise power, as this effort was the gravest present threat to Italian democracy.

The situation today rests at this point. On one hand, Saragat, although having left the Government believes that the P.C.I. is the greatest threat to Italian democracy and therefore stresses the need for collaboration with the Christian Democrats. The P.S.I., on the other hand, is convinced that the Christian Democrats, for the reasons indicated, cannot in present circumstances, conduct a democratic policy, and so the P.S.I. does not wish to break with the P.C.I., thus isolating six million workers who are a great force in the struggle against the Christian Democrat Party. The hostility to Communism on the part of the Italian ruling class is a constant motive behind its policy of ousting the working masses from legal political life, so as to secure for itself exclusive dominion and control over the state. The P.S.I., therefore, seeks to extend its alliance with the small parties of bourgeois Democrats, and at the same time, to appeal to those Social Democrats who though fighting in Saragat's Party, oppose his policy, hoping to overthrow his direction. It encourages the "destalinization" of the P.C.I., which had ceased after the Hungarian affair, although the P.C.I. of all Western Communist Parties remained the most open to the requirements of a struggle in Italian conditions—another effect of the teaching of Gramsci.

This situation, as I have said, is not easy. But it will be a grave mistake if Socialists and democrats of other countries in judging the P.S.I. apply to it standards valid for their own countries, overlooking completely the conditions peculiar to Italy, suspended half-way between reaction and progress, and with a capitalist class incapable of assimilating itself to a real progressive role.