

Present Problems of the Workers' Movement: Against the Concept of the "Brilliant Leader"

Gauche Communiste de France
1947

This text was published in French in *Internationalisme* 25 in August 1947, with other texts, as part of a larger article (itself part of a series) titled "Present Problems of the Workers' Movement." The International Communist Current republished this text in English in *International Review* 33, available online at <https://en.internationalism.org/ir/033/concept-of-brilliant-leader>. French original at <https://archivesautonomies.org/spip.php?article1821>.

In politics, there's nothing new in a group radically changing its way of seeing and acting once it has become a big organisation, a mass party. One could cite several examples of such metamorphoses. One could to some extent apply it to the Bolshevik party after the revolution. But what's striking about the International Communist Party of Italy is the surprising rapidity with which its main leaders have undergone such a change. And this is all the more surprising in that the Italian Party, both numerically and functionally, is in essence an enlarged fraction.

How are we to explain this change? For example: at the time that it was founded the Italian Communist Party, animated by the leadership of the Left and of Bordiga, was always an 'enfant terrible' in the Communist International. Refusing to submit *a priori* to the absolute authority of leaders – even those it held in the greatest regard – the Italian CP insisted on freely discussing and, if necessary, fighting against any political position it didn't agree with. As soon as the CI was formed, Bordiga's fraction was in opposition on many points and openly expressed its disagreements with Lenin and other leaders of the Bolshevik party, the Russian revolution, and the CI. The debates between Lenin and Bordiga at the Second Congress are well known. At this time nobody thought about questioning this right to free discussion; no one saw it as an insult to the authority of the 'leaders'. Perhaps men as feeble and servile as Cachin¹ believed in their heart of hearts that this was scandalous, but they wouldn't have dared to admit it. Moreover, discussion wasn't seen simply as a right but as a **duty**; the confrontation and study of ideas were the only way of elaborating the programmatic and political positions required for revolutionary action.

Lenin wrote: "It is the duty of communist militants to verify for themselves resolutions coming from the higher bodies of the party. Anyone in politics who believes in mere words is an incorrigible idiot." And we know what contempt Lenin had for such 'incorrigible

¹ A former socialist member of parliament, the principal private secretary of the socialist minister Sembat during the First World War. A confirmed national chauvinist, he was charged with the task of handing over the French government stocks to Mussolini to campaign for Italy to enter the war on the side of the Entente... In 1920 he became a partisan of the CI where he continued his parliamentary career and was the flabbiest partisan of Stalin up to his death.

idiots'. Lenin insisted time and again on the necessity for the political education of militants. Learning and understanding could only develop through free discussion, through the general confrontation of ideas, involving each and every militant. This wasn't simply a question of pedagogy, but a fundamental precondition for political elaboration, for the progress of the movement for the emancipation of the proletariat.

After the victory of Stalinism and the exclusion of the left from the CI, the Italian Fraction never stopped fighting against the myth of the infallible leader. Within the left opposition, in contrast to Trotsky, it insisted on making the greatest efforts towards the critical examination of the positions of the past, towards theoretical research via the widest possible discussion of new problems. The Italian Fraction dedicated itself to this work before the war. But it never claimed to have resolved all the problems and it is well known that there were divisions within it on questions of the utmost importance.

It has to be said that all these excellent traditions and practices have disappeared with the foundation of the new Party. The ICP is today the group where the least amount of theoretical and political discussion takes place. The war and the post-war period have given rise to a whole number of new problems. None of these problems are being looked at within the Italian Party. It's enough to read the texts and papers of the Party to see their extreme theoretical poverty. When one reads the proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Party, one wonders whether this conference took place in 1946 or 1926. And one of the leaders of the Party – comrade Damen if we're not mistaken – was right when he said that the Party was starting again from the positions of ... 1925. But what for him represents a strength (the positions of 1925) expresses more than anything else a terrible theoretical and political **backwardness**, the extreme weakness of the Party.

No period in the history of the workers' movement has overturned so many fundamental ideas and posed so many new problems as the relatively brief period between 1927 and 1947, not even such a momentous period as the one between 1905 and 1925. Most of the fundamental theses upon which the CI was founded have become obsolete. The positions on the national and colonial question, on tactics, on democratic slogans, on parliamentarism, on the unions, on the party and its relationship to the class: all these have had to be radically revised. What's more, answers have to be given to questions such as the state after the revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the characteristics of decadent capitalism, fascism, state capitalism, permanent imperialist war, the new forms of struggle and unitary organisation in the working class. A whole series of problems which the CI hardly began to deal with, and which appeared after the degeneration of the CI.

When in the face of the immense problems one reads the interventions at the Turin Conference, which repeat the litanies the old problems of Lenin in "An Infantile Disorder", and which were already out of date at the time he defended them; when one sees the Party returning, as though nothing has changed, to the old positions of 1924 in participating in bourgeois elections and struggling within the unions, one can see the whole political backwardness of this Party, the vast distance it still has to cover.

And yet this Party, which, we repeat, is a considerable regression in comparison to the work of the Fraction before the war, is the one which is most strongly opposed to any internal and public political discussion. It's in this Party that ideological life is the most colourless. How are we to explain this?

The explanation was given by one of the leaders of this party, in a conversation he had with us². He said to us that:

² Conversation with Vercesi.

“The Italian Party is for the most part made up of new elements, without theoretical formation – political virgins. The old militants themselves have for 20 years been isolated, cut off from any developing political thoughts. In the present situation the militants are incapable of dealing with problems of theory and ideology. Discussion can only disturb them and will do more harm than good. For the moment they need to walk on solid ground, even if it’s made up of old positions which are now out of date but which have at least been formulated and are comprehensible to them. For the moment it’s enough to group together those who have a will to act. The solution to the great problems raised by the experience between the wars demands the calm of reflection. Only a ‘great mind’ can approach them fruitfully and give them the answers they require. General discussion will only lead to confusion. Ideological work can’t be done by the mass of militants, but only by individuals. As long as these brilliant individuals haven’t arisen, we can’t hope to advance ideologically. Marx and Lenin were such individuals, such geniuses, in the past. We must await the arrival of a new Marx. We in Italy are convinced that Bordiga is such a genius. He is now working on a whole series of responses to the problems tormenting the militants of the working class. When this work appears, the militants will only have to assimilate it, and the Party to align its politics and its action with these new developments.”

This discourse, which we reproduce almost textually, contains three elements. First, a statement of fact: the low ideological level of Party members. Secondly, the danger of opening up a broad discussion in the Party because this will only disturb the members and weaken their cohesion. And thirdly, that the solution to new political problems can **only** be the work of a brilliant mind.

On the first point, the comrade is absolutely right: it’s an incontestable fact. But we think that this observation should lead us to pose the question of the value of this Party. What can such a Party contribute to the class?

We’ve seen how Marx defined what distinguished communists from the proletariat as a whole: their awareness of the general goals of the movement and of the way to reach them. If the members of the Italian Party don’t exhibit this distinction, if their ideological level doesn’t go beyond that of the proletariat as a whole, can we then really speak about a Communist Party?

Bordiga correctly indicated the essence of a Party: that it was a “body of doctrine and a will to action”. If this body of doctrine is lacking, a thousand regroupments won’t add up to a Party. In the future, the most important task of the ICP is the ideological formation of cadres, i.e. the ideological work needed for it to become a real Party.

This isn’t how our ICP leader thinks. On the contrary he considers that such work will only interfere with the members’ will to action. We can only say that this is a **monstrous** way of thinking. Do we need to recall the remarkable passages in *What Is To Be Done?*, where Lenin cites Engels on the necessity for a struggle on three fronts: economic, political and ideological?

There have always been socialists who have thought that discussion and the expression of divergences can disturb the proper activities of militants. One could perhaps call this **narrow-minded socialism**, or the socialism of ignorance.

Marx fulminated against Weitling, the recognised leader, when he wrote: “the proletariat doesn’t need ignorance.” If the struggle of ideas can trouble the activity of militants, how much more true would this be for the proletariat as a whole? And that would be the end of socialism, unless we were to say that socialism is ignorance. This is the

conception of the Church, which is also afraid of worrying the heads of the faithful with too many doctrinal questions.

Against the idea that militants can only act on the basis of certainties, even if they are founded on false positions, we insist that there are no certainties but only a continual process of going beyond what were formerly truths. Only an activity based on the most recent developments, on foundations that are constantly being enriched, is really revolutionary. In contrast, activity based on yesterday's truths that have already lost their currency is sterile, harmful and reactionary. One might try to feed the members with absolute certainties and truths, but only relative truths which contain an antithesis of doubt can give rise to a revolutionary synthesis.

If doubt and ideological controversy are likely to disturb the activity of militants, one can't see why this should only be valid today. At each stage in the struggle, the necessity arises to go beyond the old positions. At each moment acquired ideas and positions that have been taken up have to be verified and thrown into doubt. We are thus in a vicious circle: either we think and don't act, or we act without knowing whether our action is based on adequate reasoning. This is the fine conclusion our ICP leader would have to come to if he were to remain consistent. In any case, this is an idealisation of the "incorrigible idiot" against whom Lenin couldn't find enough sarcasms. This is the "perfect cretin" raised to the level of the ideal militant of the Italian ICP!

All the reasoning of our leader about the 'momentary' impossibility of theoretical-political research and controversy within the ICP is devoid of an ounce of justification.

The 'trouble' provoked by such controversies is precisely the condition for the formation of a militant, the condition for his activity being based on a conviction that is continually being verified, understood and enriched. This is the fundamental condition for revolutionary action. Outside of this there can be only obedience, cretinism and servitude.

But the most intimate thoughts of our leader can be found in the third point. The theoretical problems of revolutionary action cannot be resolved through controversies and discussions but through the brilliant mind of an individual, a leader. The solution isn't the result of collective work but of thought of an individual isolated in his study, who finds the basic elements of the solution in his own genius. Once this work has been done, and the answers have been given, all that remains is for the man of militants, for the Party as a whole, to assimilate this solution and bring their political activity into line with it. This would mean that discussion, if not harmful, would at best be a useless luxury, a sterile waste of time. And to support this whole theory we are given, among others, the example of Marx.

Our leader has a funny idea of Karl Marx. Never was a thinker less of a 'man alone in his Study' than Marx. Less than anyone is it possible to separate Marx the thinker from Marx the man of action, the militant of the movement. Marx's thought developed not in direct correspondence with the action of others, but with his own action **and** that of others in the general movement. Not one idea in his work wasn't drawn from confrontation with other ideas in the course of his activity. This is why his work always retained such freshness and vitality. All his work, even *Capital*, was an incessant controversy, where the most arduous and abstract theoretical researchers were tightly bound up with discussion and direct polemic. It's a strange way of seeing Marx's work, describing it as the product of the miraculous biological composition of his brain!

In general, the role of the genius in human history is over. What did the genius represent in the past? Simply the fact that the extremely low level of knowledge of the average man meant that there was an immense gap between this level and the knowledge held by a few elite elements. At the lower stage in the development of human knowledge,

a very relative degree of knowledge could be an individual acquisition, just as the means of production could have an individual character. What distinguishes the machine as a tool is that it changes the character of what was formerly the rudimentary product of private labour, turning it into the complicated product of collective social labour. It's the same with knowledge in general. As long as it remained on an elementary level an isolated individual could embrace it in its totality. But with the development of society and of science, the sum of knowledge could no longer be held by an individual: only humanity as a whole could do so. The gap between the genius and the average man diminishes in proportion to the growth in the sum of human knowledge. Science, like economic production, tends to be socialised. From the genius humanity has gone to the isolated scholar, and from the isolated scholar to the team of scholars. The division of labour tends to increase. To produce anything today it is necessary to rely on the co-operation of large numbers of workers. This tendency towards further division exists at the level of 'spiritual' production as well, and it's precisely through this that it advances.

The scholar's study gives way to the laboratory where teams of scholars co-operate in their researches, just as the artisan's workshop gives way to the big factories.

The role of the individual tends to diminish in human society – not as a feeling, aware individual but as an individual emerging out of a confused mass, riding above the chaos of humanity. Man as individual gives way to social man. The opposition between the individual and society will be resolved by the synthesis of a society in which all individuals will find their true personality. The myth of the genius isn't the future of humanity. It will join the myth of the hero and the demi-god in the museum of prehistory.

You can think what you like about the diminution of the role of the individual in human history. You can applaud it or regret it. But you can't deny it. In order to be able to carry on with its technically evolved production, capitalism was forced to introduce general education. The bourgeoisie had to open more and more schools. To the extent compatible with its interests, it has been obliged to allow the children of proletarians to enter higher education.

By the same token, the bourgeoisie has had to raise the general level of culture across society. But it can only do this to a certain degree before it becomes a threat to its rule; thus the bourgeoisie becomes an obstacle to the cultural development of society. This is one of the expressions of the historic contradiction of bourgeois society, which only socialism can resolve. The development of culture and of consciousness, in a process that is continually going beyond what has been acquired, is not only a result of but also a **condition for** socialism. And now we see a man who calls himself a marxist, who claims to be a leader of a Communist Party, and who tells us to wait for... a genius who will bring salvation.

To convince us of all this he recounted this anecdote: after the war he went to see Bordiga, who he hadn't seen for 20 years, asking him to comment on certain theoretical and political texts. After reading them Bordiga found their content to be erroneous and asked him what he intended to do with them. 'Publish them in the reviews of the Party', replied our leader. Bordiga's reply was that, since he didn't have the time to do the theoretical research necessary to refute the content of these articles, he was opposed to their publication. And if the Party thought differently he would cease his literary collaboration with it. Bordiga's threat was sufficient to make our leader renounce his intention of having these articles published.

This anecdote was supposed to convince us of the greatness of the master and the pupil's sense of proportion. In fact it has left us with a painful feeling. If this anecdote is true it gives us an idea of the reigning spirit in the ICP of Italy, a spirit that is truly lamentable. Thus it's not the Party, the mass of militants or the working class as a whole which

have the task of judging whether this or that political position is correct or false. The mass isn't even to be informed. The 'master' is the only judge of what can be understood and taught. So much for the sublime concern not to 'disturb' the peace and quiet of the mass. And what if the 'master' is wrong? This cannot be, because if the 'master' is wrong how could a mere mortal judge! But other 'masters' have been wrong before – Marx and Lenin included. But this presumably couldn't happen to our true master today. And if it did, only a future master could correct him. This is a typically aristocratic conception of thought. We don't deny the great value that the thought of specialists and scholars can have. But we reject the monarchist conception of thought, the idea of Divine Right. As for the 'master' himself, he is no longer a human being – he becomes a sort of phoenix, a self-moving phenomenon, the pure Idea looking for itself, contradicting itself and grasping itself, as in Hegel.

Awaiting a genius is a proclamation of one's own powerlessness; it's the crowd waiting at the foot of Mount Sinai for some kind of Moses, bringing who knows what kind of divinely inspired Bible. It's the old, eternal awaiting for the Jewish Messiah, coming to liberate his people. The old revolutionary song of the proletariat, the Internationale, says: "no saviour on high, no God, no Caesar, no Hero". Now we would have to add 'no Genius' to cover the particular standpoint of the members of the ICP.

There are many modern versions of this messianic conception: the Stalinist cult of the 'infallible leader', the Führer principle of the Nazis, the blackshirts' ideal of the Duce. They are the expression of the anguish of the decadent bourgeoisie, becoming vaguely aware of its approaching end and hoping to save itself by throwing itself at the feet of the first adventurer to come along. The concept of the genius belongs to the same family of divinities.

The proletariat has nothing to fear in looking reality in the face, because the future of the world belongs to it.