
Marxists in face of Fascism

WRITINGS BY MARXISTS ON FASCISM
FROM THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

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Introduction

The purpose of this collection is to make available a wider range of Marxist writing on fascism from the inter-war years than has previously been accessible to readers of English. Over three-quarters of the material here is translated for the first time. One consequence of bringing it together under one cover should be to lay finally to rest the idea that Marxism in this period can be simply equated with Stalinist orthodoxy. That the latter came to exercise an exclusive dominance over the Communist parties after 1928 is not in doubt; nor that its definitions of fascism as the final stage of monopoly capitalism, and of Social Democracy as fascism's left wing, contributed to the defeat of the German working class in 1933. Yet the extent of that dominance and the spectacular character of that defeat have served to obscure the range and subtlety of analyses of fascism within the Communist movement before 1928, and among Communists in opposition thereafter. Of the latter, only Trotsky's work is fully available in English, and even that is often treated as an isolated exception. On the other side of the fence, the rejection by post-1945 Social Democracy of its Marxist past has allowed a rich vein of theoretical analysis, particularly on the left of the German and Austrian parties, to remain buried. Again there are individual exceptions, such as Otto Bauer, though much of his work still remains to be translated. The first purpose of this collection, then, is to recover the variety and complexity of Marxist work available from this period.¹

What counts as 'Marxist' is naturally not uncontentious. My criterion has been inclusive rather than exclusive: those writers are included who self-consciously saw themselves as working within a Marxist tradition. That is to say, I do not use the term 'Marxist' prescriptively, to exclude all work which fails to meet some predetermined test of validity, whether of correct socialist strategy or of properly 'scientific' analysis. To adopt such a criterion not only forecloses debate on what such a strategy should be; it also distorts

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the historical record, and reinforces the illusion that the Marxist method contains some infallible inoculation against error. Perhaps this point needs no emphasis now that the idea of a single Marxist orthodoxy has long since been abandoned. Yet such an idea still has its hold on the history of Marxism, especially in the period of the Third International. As the writings here demonstrate, Marxism has always been pluralistic.

What conclusions emerge from such a collection? First, there is the necessity of a certain re-evaluation at the level of the history of ideas. To recognise the existence of a more subtle analysis of fascism before 1928, in certain sections of the Comintern, particularly in the PCI under Gramsci and Togliatti, sets both the Stalinist orthodoxy after 1928 and the criticisms of its opponents in a somewhat different light. On the one hand, the Comintern's 'third-period' line can be seen to involve a conscious rejection of a level of understanding of fascism already available. On the other hand, the theories of its critics did not emerge out of thin air, but represented a continuation and development of an earlier analysis. This continuity was most clearly embodied in those critics who were expelled from the PCI after 1928 (e.g. Tasca, Silone), but is also evident in the writings of Thalheimer and Trotsky. Some of the typical features of this analysis were then taken up by Social Democrats who moved in a revolutionary direction after 1933, and revised their views of fascism as a result of their defeat. This connection is missed by the conventional historiography which treats the history of the Comintern and of Social Democracy in separate compartments, or at least only as a history of antagonism at the institutional level. On this level one can see a Comintern orthodoxy, which viewed fascism as the final stage of capitalism on the road to collapse, challenged by a social-democratic orthodoxy, which viewed fascism as an aberration in the peaceful development of capitalism on the road to socialism. But this misses an alternative and more complex tradition which can be located within the PCI between 1924 and 1928, which was sustained after 1928 by Communists expelled from their national parties, and which was then taken up by left Social Democrats after 1934. This collection is as much concerned with this 'alternative' tradition as with the simple orthodoxies.

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Secondly is the content of that analysis. It is a common view that, in comparison with more recent Marxism, accounts of fascism from the inter-war period were crucially flawed by an 'economistic' fallacy, which deduced political structure and ideology directly from the economic system. This failing demonstrated the absence of any adequate theory of the state or of culture, such as it has been precisely the task of more recent Marxism to provide. This judgement is far too sweeping. For example, the idea that fascism, both as movement and as regime, had a certain autonomy from the direct control of capitalist interests, was clearly understood by a number of writers represented here. So too was the idea of the specificity of fascism as a form of reaction, and the explanation of its distinctive characteristics, such as its aggressive nationalism, in terms of the imbalance between different national economic and political structures within the imperialist system, rather than in terms of capitalism *per se*. Such insights were not always articulated at a high theoretical level, yet they existed none the less.² They suggest that, in its more complex versions, Marxism has more to offer towards an understanding of fascism than accounts which see it as the product of a uniquely Italian or German history, define it as the cultural malaise of the European spirit, or explain it with reference to theories of mass psychology or totalitarianism. There is not the space to argue this comparison here.³ The texts must speak for themselves. What they show is that Marxism as a mode of analysis is capable of high degrees both of obfuscation and illumination. The tradition is not only a plural, but an ambiguous one.

Thirdly is the practical question of how fascism could be prevented or successfully opposed. None of the writers represented here were concerned with the analysis of fascism simply as an exercise in abstract theory; they were concerned with the urgent practical question of how the working class could be defended against fascism, and how the latter could be defeated. Their strategies all failed, and that failure is instructive. However, a common assumption that the failures were due to an inadequate theory of fascism is over-simple, for two reasons. First, it is possible to have the 'most profound theoretical understanding, and still fail, because the circumstances themselves are simply too unfavourable. How far 'objective', and how far 'subjective' conditions are responsible is a matter of careful historical

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investigation in each case. In particular, whether the crucially debilitating split between the Comintern and the parties of the Second International should be assigned to the 'objective' or 'subjective' conditions of working-class defeat in the inter-war period is itself a matter of controversy. Secondly, practice may determine theory as well as vice versa. In this context it is significant that those who had the clearest view of fascism and the strategy for combating it, had either themselves failed in their attempts to prevent it, or been excluded from positions from which they could influence policy, or both. The 'alternative tradition' mentioned above, in other words, was associated with either failure or impotence. To say that its insights were the *product* of the latter would be going too far. Yet it is clear that the relation between theory and practice is a complex one. What we can say is that adequate theory is a *necessary* rather than a *sufficient* condition of successful practice. And to that extent mistakes of theoretical analysis are instructive.

This brings us to the question of the criterion for selection of the material included. I have tried to make the collection reasonably representative of Marxist writings from different perspectives and periods within the years 1921-39. It makes no claim, however, to being comprehensive. It is not a historical record of Marxist struggle against fascism, though due attention is paid to historical sequence and content in the organisation of the selections. I have chosen writings which seem to me intrinsically interesting and instructive, either for the questions they pose, or for the quality of their analysis, or for the exemplary character of their mistakes. The extracts are divided into five parts. The first contains analyses of Italian fascism up to 1928; the second includes more familiar material on Nazism from the Comintern and the KPD; the third is devoted to writings of Communists in opposition after 1928; the fourth includes a wide range of positions within Social Democracy; the fifth addresses what has become a crucial problem in the Marxist analysis of fascism — the relation between the fascist state and the economy. For convenience the introduction follows the same division of material. Its purpose is interpretative rather than historical, in so far as the two can be distinguished. That is to say, it is not intended to provide a detailed historical background to the texts, though readers are invited to

consult the chronological table which follows (pp. 64-81). For the rest, a certain historical knowledge is assumed.

Fascism in Italy, 1921-28

Fascism presented itself initially as a complex and puzzling phenomenon, to Marxists no less than to others. The variety of different assessments of it to be found in the writings of Gramsci alone during 1921 bears witness to this.⁴ In the articles he published in *L'Ordine Nuovo* in the course of that year, fascism appears successively as the symptom of a specifically Italian political decay and as a form of international reaction; as a criminal conspiracy and a broad social movement; as the instrument of the petty-bourgeois masses and the agent of the most reactionary elements among the major owners of land and capital; as an essentially urban phenomenon, and as a movement to subordinate the towns to the countryside. Such apparently contradictory assessments reflected the actual complexity of fascism itself, and the different phases of its development. It was only gradually that it was possible to integrate these disparate and conflicting elements into a coherent synthesis.

If one problem that had to be overcome in reaching an adequate understanding of fascism was its complexity, another was the opposite: the temptation to cut through the complexity by oversimplification. This failing was evident in the official position of the PCI under Bordiga before Mussolini's march on Rome, when fascism was understood simply as the 'terrorist instrument' or 'military wing' of capitalism. This definition saw no conflict between the fascist movement and the Italian ruling class, and no reason therefore to expect a *coup d'état*. In any case, since according to Bordiga parliament was merely a fig leaf for capitalist dictatorship, a *coup* would make no difference. It was the Socialists, who sustained the democratic illusions of the working class by their support of the parliamentary 'farce', against whom the Communist attack should be most energetically directed.⁵ The PCI thus had no strategy for resistance to fascism, and was caught completely unprepared for Mussolini's march on Rome. Even afterwards Bordiga saw no reason to modify his view that all forms of working-class suppression, whether under bourgeois democracy or dictatorship, were essentially

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the same, a view that was incorporated in official Comintern theses on fascism, most notably in the resolutions of the fifth Comintern Congress in 1924.⁶

Such a simplification undoubtedly represented one strand of Communist thinking in these early years. It did not, however, go unchallenged. Starting with a speech by Radek to the Comintern in November 1922, and developed during 1923 by Klara Zetkin and Gyula Sas,⁷ a more subtle analysis emerged which took as its starting point a critique of the earlier position. Through over-simplification, they argued, the PCI had misunderstood the distinctive character of fascism and the seriousness of its threat to the working class; such misconceptions had made their own contribution to the fascist success. The more complex analysis that emerged on the basis of this critique was developed most fully in the writings of Gramsci and Togliatti after 1924, and became the official doctrine of the PCI under their leadership.

Although not identical, these more complex accounts were in broad agreement about the problems of analysis that fascism presented. They accepted the view, put most cogently by Sas, that fascism represented the offensive of capital in a situation of economic crisis, in which the levels of exploitation necessary for capitalist reconstruction could only with great difficulty be imposed on a strongly organised working class within a democratic system. Fascism was thus part of a general capitalist reaction. However, such a characterisation was not seen as sufficient or unproblematic, but as the starting point for a series of further questions, namely: how did fascism differ from other forms of capitalist offensive; how did a movement which served the interests of the largest property owners draw mass support from strata which were ambivalent if not actually hostile to such interests; why was it in Italy, and only there, that fascism proved successful in achieving power in the immediate post-war period? Such questions were not of merely theoretical interest, but crucial to answering urgent problems of political practice: how could fascism be prevented or overcome, and what was the relation between the fight against fascism and the struggle against capitalism itself?

First, then, if fascism was to be located in the wider context of European reaction, it was not synonymous with any and every form

Fascism in Italy, 1921-8 7

of reaction, as Zetkin and Togliatti especially insisted. Terrorism was its distinctive method, but it was not to be equated with terrorism as such. In particular it was to be distinguished from the terrorism of Horthy-type regimes in Hungary and elsewhere, in two decisive respects.⁸ Fascist violence was not just counter-revolutionary - i.e. directed against the revolutionary movement - but was levelled at the working class in all its organised forms, including reformist unions and the institutions of Social Democracy. This gave the lie to the reformist theory that fascism was simply a reaction to communism, a revenge by the bourgeoisie for the revolution in Russia. Secondly, unlike the terrorism of the Horthy regime, fascist violence was not perpetrated from above, by a small caste of feudal officers, but from below, with the support of a mass movement. Hence Klara Zetkin's insistence that fascism's characteristic methods combined terrorism with demagogy, and that its victory constituted a *political and ideological* defeat for the workers' movement, not merely a military one.

The social location of this defeat was the petty bourgeoisie. Around a hard core of demobilised soldiers in the fascist movement were associated a variety of social groups: white-collar workers, small shopkeepers and small manufacturers in the towns, small landholders and more prosperous peasants and share-croppers in the countryside. Two circumstances combined to make these characteristically 'ambivalent' or 'vacillating' intermediate strata susceptible to fascism. One was the economic crisis, which threatened the long established petty bourgeoisie with proletarianisation, and made the position of newly independent producers precarious. The other was their disillusionment with socialism's failure to realise its promise of a reconstituted society, presenting itself instead as simply a threat to their existence. Whatever the precise definition of this failure - whether the collapse of the factory occupations in northern Italy in the autumn of 1920, or the 'syndicalist' policies of the PSI in the rural areas which alienated the share-croppers and small proprietors - it was agreed that the social strata which subsequently turned to fascism could have been won over, or at least neutralised, by a more intelligent and determined revolutionary movement. Fascism was thus a consequence, not a cause, of socialism's political failure. The

failure marked the point at which the middle strata (and sections of the proletariat) turned instead to a movement offering apparently simple solutions to their grievances: the idea that economic problems could be solved 'by machine guns and pistol shots'; that class conflict could be abolished by appeals to national unity and submission to authority; that the power of finance capital could give way before a romanticised conception of the small entrepreneur. As Gramsci put it, fascism had for the first time in history discovered the secret of a mass organisation for the petty bourgeoisie: an ideology of national unity and an organisation modelled on the army in the field.⁹

The identification of fascism as a mass movement of the middle strata raised at once a central problem of analysis. How could it also be the 'organic expression' of large scale property? What was the relationship between the mobilisation of the petty bourgeoisie and the large financial, industrial and landed interests that this mobilisation reputedly served? It was undeniable that the ruthless attacks on the rural workers' organisations were from the first supported by the large agrarian landholders; that the fascist groups were welcomed by the industrialists when they moved to the large urban centres; and that they operated everywhere with the connivance of the public authorities. In this sense the idea of 'agent' or 'instrument' had a certain aptness. Yet it is in the nature of agents to be dismissed when they have done their appointed work, of instruments to be discarded when they have served their function. And it was notorious that fascism refused to retire so promptly from the scene. It aspired to go beyond its terrorist activity at the local level, to launch an attack on the bourgeois state itself, and to replace the established ruling groups in power.

It was this fact that led the writers represented here to conclude that the fascist movement could not be simply the tool of the capitalists and landowners, but had a certain autonomy of its own.¹⁰

In so far as the bourgeoisie actually acquiesced in its seizure of power, this could only be, as Zetkin suggested, because the fascists had grown too powerful to be suppressed without the danger of proletarian resurgence. Once in power, however, the fascist regime was dependent for its continuance on satisfying the major industrial and financial interests, even at the expense of the mass of its own

supporters. 'The inexorable consequences of capitalist stabilisation impose themselves', Togliatti wrote, 'and fascism finds itself compelled to carry out the brutal policy of financial capital'.¹¹ A contrast had therefore to be drawn between the social origins of the fascist movement and the policies of the fascist regime; between its social base and the objective interests it came to serve.

What began as a problem requiring explanation thus became the central contradiction of fascism itself in power. While it had been engaged in the destructive and essentially localised activity of smashing the workers' movement, a community of interest could emerge between the small and large proprietors. Once it was in power, it soon became evident that capitalist advance could only take place at the expense of the middle strata as well as the workers; policies for the concentration of capital, higher consumer prices, new taxation, etc., all brought fascism into conflict with its mass base. The ideology of national unity was now exposed as a fiction, and 'class conflict was abolished for everyone except the bourgeoisie'. This conflict found its expression within the fascist movement itself, as a conflict between the representatives of finance capital and those of the petty-bourgeois masses; and between the institutions of the state and those of the party to which its members still looked for their protection and advance. Fascism in power, then, was not a 'block of granite' as Zetkin put it, but rent with contradictions.¹² That this conflict was not all on one side was suggested by Gramsci, who highlighted the way in which the terrorist methods intrinsic to fascism continued to operate as a destabilising element after the seizure of power, most conspicuously during the Matteotti crisis:

Fascism is a movement which the bourgeoisie thought should be a simple 'instrument' of reaction in its hands, but once called up and unleashed is worse than the devil, no longer allowing itself to be controlled . . . but proceeding according to its own internal logic and ending by taking no account of the interests of conserving the existing order.¹³

In an article on fascist 'contradictions' written in 1926, Togliatti identified a number of strategies employed by Mussolini in an attempt to stabilise his regime.¹⁴ Foremost among these was the suppression of

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the independence of the fascist party, and its fusion with the existing structures of bourgeois class power. Its original cadres (the 'fascists of the first hour') were replaced by members of the bourgeoisie or their representatives; staff were absorbed from other bourgeois political parties; internal party democracy was suppressed and replaced by appointment from above, though not without a struggle. These moves were accompanied by an intensification of the repression of fascism's opponents internally, and a redirection of fascist aggression outwards on to 'the path of nationalism and militarism in struggle against the whole world'. Common to both Gramsci and Togliatti was an insistence that fascist policy had important political as well as economic determinants; and that capitalism's recourse to fascism as a 'solution' to its problems only recreated contradictions on a new plane.

This is an appropriate point to consider the question of why it was only Italy that experienced a fascist regime (though not a fascist movement) in the immediate post-war period. To none of the writers represented here was fascism a uniquely Italian phenomenon, whether as parenthesis in, or necessary consequence of, a uniquely Italian history. Fascism could take root anywhere, given the right combination of circumstances; in this sense it was a 'universal' phenomenon. Yet only in Italy did fascism in fact come to power in this period. The contrast drawn between Italy and other European countries suggested different levels at which an explanation was to be found: first, an especial severity of economic crisis working on a distinctive class structure; secondly, a historic weakness in the bourgeois state.

As to the first, the post-war crisis, so it was argued, had affected Italy more profoundly than any other European country. With a poorly developed industrial base and lack of raw materials, Italy formed one of the 'weakest links' in the capitalist chain after Russia. Objectively it was among the most ripe for revolution; subjectively, however, its proletarian movement was unprepared in both consciousness and organisation to take advantage of the opportunity. Yet it was strong enough in a 'defensive' or 'passive' way to constitute an obstacle to capitalist reconstruction. To these factors was added a further crucial element: the presence of a numerically large petty

bourgeoisie, which, so Gramsci argued, because of the scanty development of industry and the regional concentration of what industry there was, constituted the only class that was territorially national. Given such a combination of circumstances, what other European countries might be considered vulnerable to fascism? Significantly Klara Zetkin singled out Germany, on the grounds that its economy had been the most completely shattered at the end of the war, and the SPD responsible for the most complete betrayal and demoralisation of the masses.¹⁵ Gramsci and Togliatti, writing after the apparently conclusive defeat of Hitler's movement in 1923, developed the concept of the capitalist periphery to characterise a group of countries with structurally weak economies and large petty-bourgeois strata, including Spain, Portugal, the Balkans, Poland and Lithuania, of which Italy served as the prototype. Such countries, they argued, were most vulnerable to the development of a strong fascist movement¹⁶.

Typical of such 'peripheral' countries was also a weakness of the bourgeois state structure, which meant that economic crisis was immediately reproduced as a crisis in the political sphere. Writing of Italy, Gramsci drew attention to the historical weakness of liberalism, due to the deep division between north and south, and the failure of the bourgeoisie to achieve an ascendancy over the rural landowners. Lacking mass support, and without any cohesion among its ruling classes, the Italian state fell into disarray in face of the economic crisis. Fascism was at once manifestation, contributory cause and beneficiary of this 'decomposition'. Once in power, it offered the prospect of replacing the discredited Giolittian tactic of perpetual compromise with an organic unity of all the bourgeois forces in a single political organism under the control of a single centre.¹⁷ In similar vein Togliatti, contrasting the Italian experience with that of Britain and France, concluded that, where the bourgeoisie was economically and politically strong enough to control the working class by purely economic means, or to inflict defeat on it through the existing political framework, fascism 'moved into the background'. Precisely because the bourgeoisie did not control fascism, it constituted a last resort to which it would only be driven when the existing state proved incapable of sustaining a united political front

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for the defence of bourgeois class interests. In such a context fascism would have the task not only of destroying working-class autonomy but also of reconstructing the bourgeois political order itself.¹⁸

Before considering the implications drawn from this analysis for political practice, it would be useful to summarise its main conclusions. In contrast to the view which treated all forms of bourgeois reaction as identical, and every violent suppression of the working class as 'fascist', the position developed by most of the writers in this section, and most fully by Gramsci and Togliatti, involved defining fascism as a distinctive form of capitalist offensive, characterised as follows:

- (1) It was a mass movement, drawing support mainly from the petty bourgeoisie, and directing violence at all autonomous institutions of the working class.
- (2) Its widespread support was a consequence, not a cause, of revolutionary defeat and of socialist failure to resolve the economic crisis.
- (3) It was used, though not always controlled, by the large property owners, who turned to fascism because they were unable to subdue the working class by means of the existing legal and political order.
- (4) Once in power, fascism proved unable to promote the interests of its petty-bourgeois followers, in face of the logic of capitalist reconstruction.
- (5) This gave rise to internal conflicts, which could only with difficulty be overcome by a reconstitution of the fascist party, and a transference of its militarism on to an external plane.
- (6) Fascism was most likely to flourish in those capitalist countries with a weak economic and political structure.

What practical conclusions could be drawn from this analysis for the anti-fascist struggle? A number of different, though interconnected, questions need to be distinguished here. How could a fascist movement be prevented from developing in the first place? How could the working class be protected from it once it had won support? How could it be overthrown once it had seized power? In the context of the writings considered here, the first of these questions was essentially retrospective. All the Communist writers were agreed that it was the failure to carry out the revolution that had provided the

fertile soil for fascism, and for this the 'betrayal' by the Socialists in Italy and the Social Democrats elsewhere had been largely responsible.¹⁹ The World War had heralded an 'era of world revolution' and created objectively revolutionary situations in a number of countries in its aftermath, particularly in Italy. What had been lacking was the subjective dimension of an organised and determined revolutionary party capable of taking advantage of this situation. It was this analysis that dictated the logic of the split between the Third and Second Internationals, and the creation of the revolutionary parties on the Bolshevik model.

The logic of this split, however, made it difficult to sustain an effective alliance with Socialists or Social Democrats once fascism had reached the level of a serious danger. According to the analysis of fascism outlined above, it was evident that fascism threatened all autonomous institutions of the working class, reformist as well as revolutionary; indeed the former constituted a particular obstacle to the levels of exploitation necessary for capitalist reconstruction. As Zetkin observed, 'fascism does not enquire whether the factory worker owes his allegiance to the white and blue of Bavaria, to the black, red and gold of the bourgeois Republic, or to the red flag with the hammer and sickle . . . it strikes him down regardless'.²⁰ Yet it did not prove easy for Communists to make a defensive alliance with parties whose 'betrayal' they saw as responsible for the development of fascism in the first place, and from whom they had only recently split. The tactics required for developing the revolutionary party — ruthless exposure of Social-Democracy's leaders in an attempt to win over the proletarian masses from their influence (the so-called united front 'from below') — were diametrically opposed to those required for a defensive alliance, which demanded genuine co-operation with that selfsame leadership (united front 'from above').²¹ To switch from one to the other was not easy, and it depended on an accurate perception of the nature and urgency of the fascist threat. That this was not impossible is exemplified by the writings of Zetkin in 1923, and Thalheimer, Trotsky, and others included in later sections of this collection. Yet it proved beyond the capacity of the PCI, which in any case only split off from the Socialists immediately prior to fascism's rise, and became more preoccupied with attacking the PSI

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than with the threat from fascism itself.

Even after the march on Rome, and subsequently 'under' the leadership of Gramsci and Togliatti, the PCI's approach to the anti-fascist struggle was conditioned by an attitude of unremitting hostility to the Socialist parties. This was predicated on the assumption that a revolutionary conjuncture had only been deferred, not removed by the fascists' seizure of power. On the one hand was the belief, common throughout the parties of the Comintern, that the period of capitalist stabilisation after 1923 was a temporary one only. On the other was the evidence that Mussolini's attempts to remedy the specific structural weaknesses of the Italian economy were intensifying the conflict between the fascist state and the mass of its original supporters. Here one can detect a close parallelism between the PCI's theory of revolution and its analysis of fascism discussed above. It was precisely the countries of the capitalist periphery that were both most vulnerable to fascism and most ripe for revolution; the numerous intermediate strata whose attitudes had determined the success of fascism would also be decisive for the prospects of its revolutionary overthrow. Having 'oscillated' to the right, they were now moving left under the impact of Mussolini's policies. In the first instance the Gramscian strategy of proletarian alliance involved the poor peasants of the south and the Islands, though he saw it in time extending to the middle peasantry and those of other regions.²² Despite the admitted problems of this strategy — such as the hold exercised over the peasants by the Church, and the problem of reconciling the requirements of agricultural modernisation with the peasants' attachment to private property — it did take seriously the importance of the 'intermediate' strata, both to fascism's success, and to the possibility of its overthrow.

It was this belief in the continuing prospects for revolution that determined the attitude of the PCI to the democratic opposition to Mussolini. The issue crystallised around the question of what sort of regime might follow his fall — a return to bourgeois democracy, or a proletarian dictatorship. In part, as Togliatti observed, this was a question which events and the balance of class forces would determine. Yet in so far as it was a matter of strategy, the policy of the PCI was to oppose those working for a restoration of bourgeois democracy. Gramsci argued the reasons most forcefully: to ally with

the bourgeois opposition was to ally with those who had 'acquiesced' in Mussolini's seizure of power; democracy was only acceptable to them now, because fascism had succeeded in rendering the working class impotent ('fascism has restored to democracy the possibility of existing'); for the reformists to accept the restoration of democracy as their goal was to acquiesce in a vicious circle which would one day require the intervention of fascism once more.²³ For these reasons the PCI continued to distance itself from the Socialist parties, and to define them as 'counter-revolutionary' (though, as Togliatti insisted, not themselves actually 'fascist').²⁴

At this point the Socialist position was the mirror-image of the Communist one, as the extract from Zibordi makes clear. In fact, Zibordi's analysis of fascism itself was not all that different from the ones already discussed. It was remarkable perhaps for having grasped earlier and set out more systematically the relation between the three component elements of the fascist movement: the hard core of ex-combatants; the mass following from the petty bourgeoisie; the material and personal support of the big bourgeoisie and landowners. Like the others, it recognised the failings of the left as decisive in driving the middle classes into the fascist camp. The crucial difference, however, lay in how these failings were characterised: For Zibordi it was not so much the failure to carry through the revolutionary project, as the fact that it was attempted at all, that was responsible; not so much a 'subjective' inadequacy, as an 'objective' immaturity of economic conditions. Zibordi represented that school of Marxism which held that a political defeat of bourgeois class power was only possible when the economic conditions for socialism had fully matured. Italy's economic backwardness, and the predominance of petty-bourgeois and peasant strata, essentially 'individualist' in outlook, indicated that the country had only reached the stage of political democracy. The Bolshevik revolutionary programme, he argued, as also the Socialists' 'maximalist' programme in those rural areas of north Italy where they held power in 1920, were attempts to 'force the pace of history' beyond what the objective development of the country would allow. Fascism represented the brutal historical reprisal for such an attempt.²⁵

This was the mirror image of The Communists' critique of the Socialists. Yet Zibordi could offer no more plausible strategy than they for