GRAMSCI AND ITALY'S PASSIVE REVOLUTION

Edited by
John A. Davis

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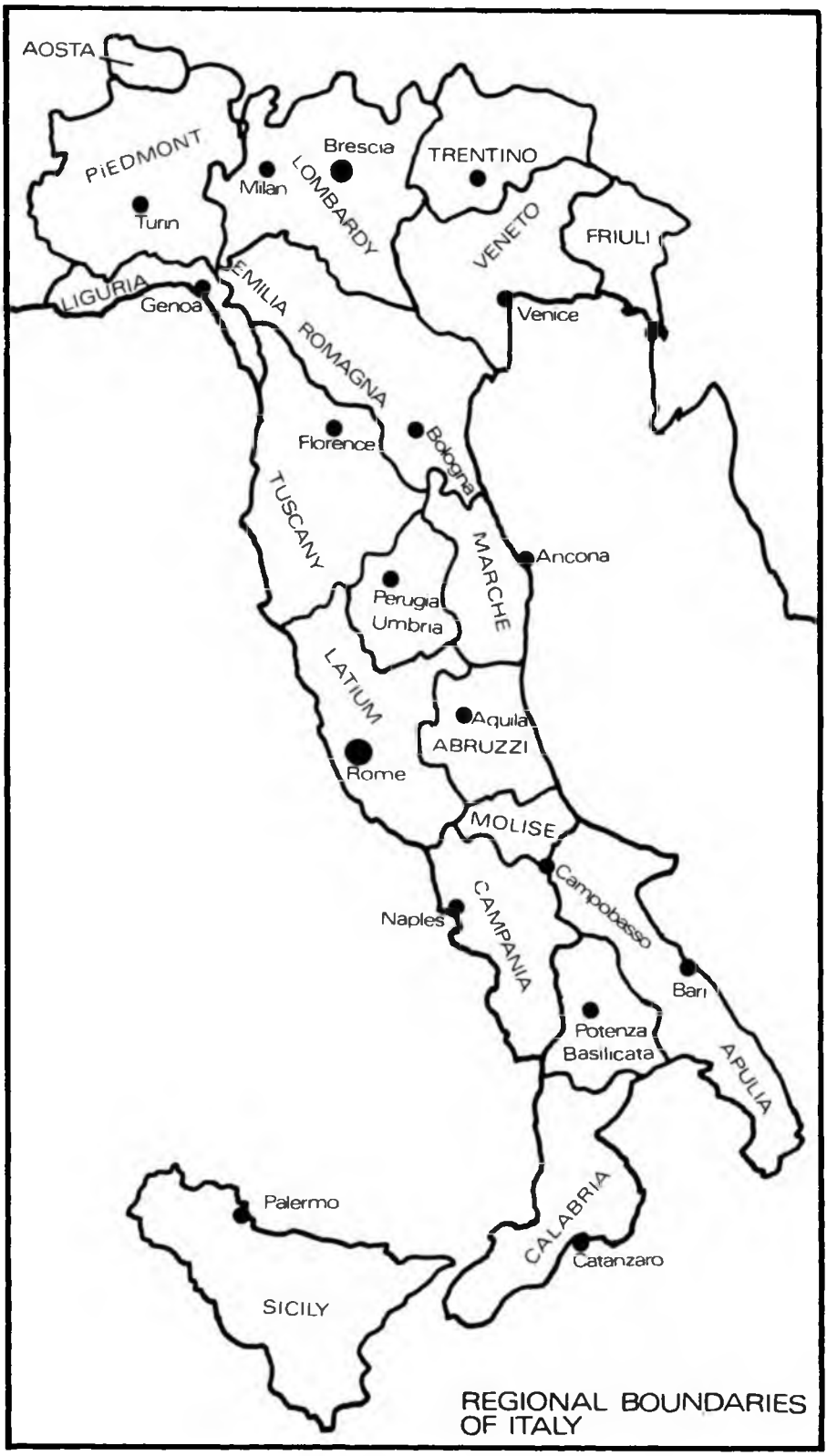
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1 INTRODUCTION: ANTONIO GRAMSCI AND ITALY'S PASSIVE REVOLUTION

John A. Davis

In the thirty years since the publication of the *Prison Notebooks* the interest and importance of Antonio Gramsci's contribution to Marxist thought and political analysis has become widely recognised. It is in particular on the basis of his analysis of the structure of the capitalist state and his insistence on the essentially political nature of power exercised through what Hegel had termed the 'institutions of civil society' that this reputation has been established. Deeply influenced both by Lenin's appeal for a more revolutionary interpretation of Marx's writings and by his own aversion to the sterile gradualism of the reformist socialism of the Second International, Gramsci sought to rehabilitate that area of social activity which had been relegated to a subservient and almost irrelevant 'superstructure', and to demonstrate the essentially political function and class orientation of culture, ideology and social institutions. It was from this that the now familiar concept of 'hegemony' emerged, together with the call for the revolutionary movement to extend the front of its struggle in order to combat the capitalist classes at the level of ideology and civil institutions, as well as in the more traditional and restricted sphere of the so-called 'state apparatus'.[1]

The concern to explore and identify the structures of the capitalist state is not only the principal characteristic of Gramsci's theoretical and political writings, but also the inspiration for his writings on Italian history. The problem of the nature and structure of the capitalist state in Western Europe is the central theme of those sections of the *Prison Notebooks* which are devoted to the century of Italian history which witnessed national unification, the formation of the liberal state and the establishment of Mussolini's fascist dictatorship. Gramsci the historian cannot be separated from, or contrasted to, Gramsci the political theorist or Gramsci the revolutionary. His historical writings were not the product of a retirement from active politics enforced by seclusion in a fascist prison. One of the principal motives for analysing Italy's immediate past was to reveal to his colleagues the inadequacy of their awareness of the fundamental structures and organisation of the state which they had unsuccessfully attempted to replace.[2] In his address to

the Lyons Congress of the Communist Party in 1926, Gramsci had already pointed uncompromisingly to the 'political, organizational, tactical and strategic weaknesses of the workers' party' as a cause of the success of the fascist movement in Italy.[3] It was from this insistence on the need for unsparing and unsentimental self-criticism and reflection that much of the originality of Gramsci's thought was to derive. And it was along this *via crucis* that Gramsci embarked on a *post mortem* not only of Italian socialism, but also of the corpse of the liberal state. Only through careful analysis of the political structures and organisation of that state could a basis be laid for constructing a more effective and realistic revolutionary strategy. This could be achieved only by looking first at the origins and evolution of that state, and then by attempting to assess the relationship between Mussolini's fascist dictatorship and the earlier liberal state.

At first sight the essentially political emphasis of Gramsci's historical writings might seem to make them an inappropriate focus for a collection of essays concerned predominantly with economic and social aspects of Italy's history in this period. One recent Italian commentator, who could not be considered hostile to Gramsci, has indeed claimed that the *Prison Notebooks* contribute nothing new to an understanding of Italy's economic development in this period, because this was not Gramsci's primary concern.[4] But it is, perhaps, precisely for this reason that so many of the questions and problems which Gramsci raised have shown the need for wider investigation of the economic and social structures around which the political systems of the liberal state were organised. It was certainly no accident that the debate on Italian industrialisation in the late nineteenth century – one of the few aspects of modern Italian history, other than fascism of course, to attract wide attention outside Italy – began with the criticisms which Rosario Romeo levelled against Gramsci's assessment of the shortcomings of national unification.[5]

It would be wrong to suggest, however, that Gramsci's analysis is of interest to the economic or social historian for purely negative reasons, or that the problems it poses are simply a matter of filling in gaps or demonstrating incongruencies. Few historical writers have been more impressed than Gramsci by the need to reveal the nature of the relations and inter-relations which united the disparate material, social and political aspects of the historical process both in, and over, time. If Gramsci had little that was new to say about the economic structure and development of the modern Italian state, this structure remained his fundamental point of reference. The alliance between the progres-

sive manufacturing and industrial bourgeoisie of the North and the traditional landowners of the South, the 'historical alliance', was the central reality of the Italian state, and the point from which his analysis of its political systems begins. And if much of the originality of Gramsci's analysis is to be found in the exploration of the ideological aspects of political relations, and in particular the relationship between social forces and forms of political representation, the material basis of those relationships is never called into doubt. Not only, then, are economic structures and relationships an integral part of Gramsci's historical analysis, but they are also the stuff on which that analysis is founded.

Gramsci was not, of course, the first to have identified the alliance between northern industry and southern landlords as the central and determining feature of the liberal state. Since the adoption of industrial and agrarian protectionism in the 1880s this had been one of the dominant themes in both socialist and free-trade liberal political writing. But Gramsci was the first to argue that the origins and consequences of this alliance constituted the fundamental feature of continuity running through Italy's political development from unification to fascism. This was the material reality which he set against Benedetto Croce's claim that the inspiration of the modern Italian state lay in the spirit and ethos of liberalism. Putting Croce through the same undignified exercise to which Marx had earlier subjected Hegel, Gramsci argued that the politics and ideology of Italian liberalism could only be understood in relation to the material and social structure within which they had taken form. Written in the same decade as the publication of Croce's *History of Italy* and *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* at times read almost as a dialogue with Croce. But from this dialogue emerged an interpretation of the continuities running through Italy's history from the Risorgimento to fascism which drew together in a single comprehensive analysis a wide range of earlier socialist and anti-Crocean ideas and writing. And whereas for Croce fascism had represented an irrational and therefore temporary aberration from the guiding tendencies in Italy's development, for Gramsci it was an explicable, although not inevitable, continuation of the economic and political structure which had been present from the birth of the unified state. It is this alternative interpretation of the fundamental features and tendencies in modern Italian history that has become one of the principal bases for historical debate and discussion in Italy since the publication of the *Prison Notebooks*.

As Perry Anderson has recently pointed out, few Marxist writers are more difficult to read accurately or systematically than Gramsci.[6]

There are many reasons for this: the appalling circumstances and restrictions under which he was writing; the peculiar economy and terseness of his style, and the rapid juxtaposition of assertion and suggestion; the sheer breadth and complexity of his imagination. At any one moment his analysis develops at a series of levels: the problem of the state in general, that in Italy in particular, the role of ideology and intellectuals in general terms, and in the Italian state in particular; the relations between city and countryside in general, and in the particular circumstances of Italy. The list of problems that are confronted is long, and the relationship between the general and the particular is something that Gramsci rarely loses sight of; in his search for the unity of the historical process, each individual piece of the historical jigsaw is carefully related to a final overall pattern.

Not only does this mean that any descriptive account of necessity loses the richness of Gramsci's own writing, but it also makes it difficult, and potentially misleading, to single out any one theme of interpretation. There is, however, one theme which recurs time and time again in his analysis of the modern Italian state, and around which his interpretation of the fundamental tendencies in this period is based. This is the 'passive revolution'. Although the term is used in a number of ways, it is in essence both a description of the nature of the liberal state and an assessment of the shortcomings of that state.

The way in which 'passive revolution' was defined by Gramsci shows clearly the inseparability of his political and historical method. The central problem was always the state, and the variety of forms which political power might take within the state. But if the state – and Gramsci was concerned primarily, of course, with the capitalist state, and in particular the Western versions of that state – could in practice take a variety of forms which would differ in important ways from one country to another, so too would the political processes which created the state. Just as there were different types of capitalist state, so there were different forms of bourgeois revolutions. In Italy the form taken by both was 'passive revolution'.

In theoretical terms Gramsci explained this concept by reference to Marx's well-known assertion in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* that 'no social formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further movement, a society does not set itself tasks for whose solutions the necessary conditions have not already been incubated'.[7] On one hand, this might seem to provide a good explanation of the type of state which had resulted from unification in Italy. The Italian bourgeoisie of the early

nineteenth century had been, in economic terms at least, relatively weak and heterogenous. It would therefore be entirely consonant with Marx's statement to find 'pre-capitalist' groups – in other words, the traditional aristocratic and landowning interests – represented strongly in the new political structure.

But such a definition also presented serious problems for Gramsci, because to define the basis of the Italian bourgeois state in such terms came close to an open invitation to the kind of political gradualism adopted by the Second International. It implied that the bourgeois revolution in Italy had been incomplete, hence introducing endless possibilities of procrastination for the revolutionary parties while they comfortably and inactively awaited the Second Coming. What Gramsci was concerned above all to stress was that such a form of revolution was still revolution. National unification had not simply provided a first step towards the capitalist state in Italy, but had created that state. It had permitted industrialisation, the establishment of bourgeois democracy, and Italy's elevation to the status of a Great Power (formally recognised in the Versailles Peace Treaty). At the same time, the circumstances in which that state had been created, and the nature of the social forces on which it was based, gave Italian capitalism both its particular, unique form and also determined limits beyond which it could not progress.

The argument becomes clearer if we look at the passage in which Gramsci contrasted the different forms taken by the state in Russia and in the West:

> In Russia the state was everything and civil society was primordial and gelatinous: in the West there was a proper relation between the state and civil society, and when the state trembled the sturdy section of civil society was at once revealed. The state was only an outer ditch, behind which was a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks.[8]

It was the presence, for historical and cultural reasons, of these 'fortresses and earthworks' in European societies that made 'passive revolution' possible. The material weaknesses of the nineteenth-century Italian bourgeoisie, for example, could be compensated by political action directed, consciously or unconsciously, to achieve domination through the institutions of civil society – through culture and literature, through professional institutions and ethos, through education. By achieving 'hegemonic' power in this fashion, even a numerically small advanced bourgeois elite could give a decisively 'capitalist' imprint to a political revolution which necessitated support from more traditional social

forces. This, in Gramsci's view, was what had occurred in Italy in the nineteenth century, and the alliance between the advanced bourgeoisie of the North and the traditional landowners of the South was both cause and effect of the 'passive revolution'.

This provides at least one reason for Gramsci's very detailed analysis of the factors which contributed to the success of the Moderate 'Party' (the term is clearly anachronistic), which after 1848 became increasingly identified with the policies of Cavour, in providing the leadership for the national revolution.[9] They were confronted by 'very powerful and united forces which looked for leadership to the Vatican and were hostile to unification'.[10] The Moderates had little economic strength and even fewer physical resources. They had, therefore, to seek allies. First they looked to Piedmont and its army to carry through their revolution, and hence the national question became predominant. Secondly they had to choose between alliance either with the more traditional social groups on the peninsula or with the people. For the Moderates, any alliance with the people was out of the question, partly as a result of the terror which French Jacobinism had implanted amongst the European bourgeoisie, and they opted for alliance with the traditional groups. The result was, in Gramsci's phrase, '"revolution" without "revolution"'.[11]

But revolution none the less, and it is here that the issue of 'hegemony' becomes relevant. Although the resources for establishing leadership on the basis of coercion were, in Gramsci's view, limited, the Moderates succeeded in compensating this by eliciting voluntary support and consensus. The ideology of Moderate liberalism, at once progressive in material terms and conservative in social terms, dominated Italian culture, and won over the professional and bureaucratic classes. Hence the Moderates became 'hegemonic', and it was this which constituted the dynamic element of the 'passive revolution'.

The process of passive revolution had other important features, which Gramsci developed in contrasting the success of the Moderates with the failure of the Radicals – that is, Mazzini, Garibaldi, Pisacane, Ferrari and their followers. At every point they were outmanoeuvred by the Moderates. The Moderate programme had a broad eclectic appeal; the Moderates learned from their mistakes; they used the national question and the external enemy, Austria, to unite a heterogenous following; they were prepared to adopt radical measures such as the expropriation of Church land. The Radicals, on the other hand, were unsure of their radicalism. They did not attempt to counter the 'spontaneous' support won by the Moderates with an alternative 'organised' political force; they had no unified programme, no understanding of the political forces

opposing them. Above all they failed to play the card of agrarian reform, and hence failed to recruit to their platform the vast potential of peasant unrest. Hence the notion of 'the failed revolution'.

The debate which developed around the 'failed revolution'[12] has perhaps served to draw attention away from what was undoubtedly Gramsci's principal concern in examining the relationship between the Moderates and the Radicals. Because, in the Moderates' ability to dominate and even absorb the Radicals, Gramsci saw one of the central features of the type of political system which would emerge from the passive revolution. Particularly important was the conclusion that the 'Action Party (i.e. the Radicals) were in fact led "indirectly" by Cavour and the King'.[13] This was a demonstration of the 'hegemonic' power of the Moderates, but it also foreshadowed a political system which was to become a fundamental feature of the liberal state – *trasformismo*. In *trasformismo* the lines of distinction between the different historical political parties and interests were gradually eroded in a single undifferentiated ruling alliance. 'One might say – Gramsci noted – that the entire state life of Italy from 1848 onwards has been characterised by trasformismo.'[14]

An even more fundamental feature of the 'passive revolution' than the absorption of the Radicals, however, was the alliance with the South. In Gramsci's view this alliance not only lay at the heart of the 'passive revolution', but its continuation after 1870 was the principal reason why 'passive revolution' remained the framework for political action within, and after, the liberal state.

The origins and development of the North-South alliance are analysed by Gramsci at two levels – one economic and the other ideological.[15] To explain the economic origins of the unification of these two very distinct sections of the peninsula, Gramsci drew heavily on Marx's discussion of the relationship between city and countryside.[16] This was a relationship, or series of relationships, which had a particular fascination for Gramsci. While on one hand the problems could be posed in purely economic terms – the ways in which the city, the nucleus of capitalist development, transmitted the germs of capitalist modes of production and social relations to the surrounding rural areas, and hence dominated the countryside – on the other, these relationships demonstrated precisely that inter-penetration of economic and cultural influences which constituted so important a feature of Gramsci's own thought.

Applying the concept to the South, Gramsci argued that the region as a whole stood in relation to the North as countryside stands to city. The South was predominantly rural and semi-feudal. The great Southern cities (Palermo and Naples were the largest cities not only on the

peninsula but also in the Mediterranean for most of the nineteenth century) were essentially 'silent', pre-capitalist cities.[17] They were centres of consumption but not of production, in which the absentee Southern landlords spent their rent-rolls. They were, then, dependent on revenues from the agrarian economy, and their inhabitants simply provided the services required by the urbanised landowners. For this reason, this predominantly agrarian economy of the South was irresistably drawn into the more advanced urban economy of the North. The South came to constitute a classical *Nebenland*, an area of colonial dependence which the Northern economy could exploit at will and from which, in particular, it could draw off capital through taxation and through the internal imbalance of trade, in order to further the development of the Northern economy.[18] The alliance between North and South embodied in national unification was not merely an unequal partnership, but a partnership which ensured the continuing, and even worsening, backwardness of the South.

Equally important, however, was the political partnership which accompanied this economic symbiosis. What made the South an essential feature of the 'passive revolution' was the fact that it provided extensive possibilities for the exercise of that type of political influence which Gramsci described as 'hegemony'. The economic structure of the South meant that the Southern bourgeoisie, other than the great landowners, was predominantly professional, bureaucratic and intellectual. It was the sons of the Southern gentry who filled the law courts, the schools, the universities and the political institutions of the liberal state, and it was they who provided the most effective evangelists of the ideology of that state. The social basis of the Southern bourgeoisie had made them particularly susceptible to the attraction of the Cavourian programme, and as a result the Southern bourgeoisie provided one of the most important bases for the continued exercise of Northern hegemonic power. It was for this reason that Gramsci singled out two of the great Southern intellectuals, Benedetto Croce and Giustino Fortunato, as the bastions of Italian capitalism.[19]

Both the theory of economic exploitation and the political contribution of the Southern bourgeoisie had been widely discussed by earlier Italian writers. Gaetano Salvemini, for one, had described the block of Southern deputies who obediently gave their votes to any government prepared to offer them in return political patronage and privilege as 'Giolitti's askaris'. But the originality of Gramsci's argument lies not only in the way in which the economic and political features of the alliance become reciprocally self-sustaining, but also in the claim that

the backwardness of the South was a necessary condition for the development of Italian capitalism. The 'Southern Problem', that open wound in Italian society, was not accidental or even, given the structure of the state, open to remedy. It could not, therefore, be argued that the South simply represented a 'feudal residue' which would wither away as the Italian economy progressed. In fact, the contrary was true. For this reason, not only was the alliance between North and South an essential feature of the 'passive revolution', but was to remain the main limitation to the subsequent development of the Italian state thereafter.

North and South, *trasformismo* and passive revolution, all then became part of a single process which determined the essential character of the liberal state. But the process did not end with national unification. For Gramsci, Italy's political development between 1870 and 1914 was dominated by the attempt to maintain and extend both the structure and the strategy of the 'passive revolution'. Crispi's attempt to speed up the rate of development and establish Italy among the Great Powers failed because he stepped outside the confines of the passive revolution. Trade war with France alienated both export-orientated industrialists and many landowners, so threatening the base of the system of political and economic alliances. But in Giolitti, Gramsci recognised the master of the strategy of 'passive revolution'. Giolitti's parliamentary alliance with the Socialists in the face of mounting opposition to the exclusive political power of the traditional ruling class constituted, for Gramsci, the high point of *trasformismo*, the incorporation of the workers' representatives, but not the workers, in the political system.[20]

Yet if the strategy of passive revolution reached its culmination in the pre-war decade, it was shortly to be thrown into serious crisis for the first time. When Mussolini and the Intransigents wrested control of the Socialist Party from the reformists, the trasformist alliance broke down. War with Libya in 1911 made reconciliation impossible, and in 1913 Giolitti 'changed his rifle to the other shoulder' and set out to woo the Catholic peasantry of Northern Italy by means of the Gentiloni Pact. But the concessions made on the way made it difficult to keep the system together. The crisis which followed the outbreak of war in Europe and the fierce debate over whether and how Italy should intervene served to polarise attitudes further, making the politics of 'passive revolution' unworkable. The introduction of universal suffrage in the South also made electoral manageering more difficult, further weakening the traditional system, and Giolitti for once was unable to find a formula to bridge the growing diversity of interests and political ambitions.

Although the war brought crucial changes to Italy's economic and

social structure, the crisis which followed the peace was, in Gramsci's view, essentially a continuation of the pre-war problem. The rapid expansion of certain sectors of heavy industry in particular and the parallel mobilisation and politicisation of large strata of the working class and the peasantry which had resulted from the war, meant that the circumstances had changed radically. But underlying the crisis and underlying the emergence of the 'fascist solution', Gramsci saw the attempts of the traditional capitalist classes to restore the structure of passive revolution.

Gramsci did not provide any comprehensive analysis of the rise of Italian fascism, and clearly in the case of his prison writings it was a difficult subject for him to approach directly.[21] However, his earlier writings and his address to the Lyons Party Congress in 1926 make it clear that he saw fascism as the consequence not of any single cause, but rather as the product of a convergence of developments and problems, not least of which was the strategy of the left in these years. But if he avoided any single explanation, and so implicitly denied that the fascist solution was in any sense predetermined or inevitable, he did insist on the continuities which linked fascism to the liberal state.

Other socialists, like Bordiga, had argued that the fascist experiment was no more than a temporary expedient adopted by the capitalist classes in response to the panic aroused by the show of proletarian strength in the post-war crisis. But it was an expedient which could not outlive that sense of panic, because it was only in a system of bourgeois democracy that Italian capitalism could continue to develop. The fascist counter-revolution was useful only in the short term, but would thereafter begin to damage the interests of the bourgeoisie. But for Gramsci such an interpretation risked perpetuating the unjustified optimism which had encouraged the left to under-estimate the strength of the capitalist state throughout the post-war crisis. Fascism was something more than a capitalist 'White Guard', and it bore a more permanent relationship to the structure of the liberal state. Only if the nature of that relationship was made clear would it be possible to construct an effective strategy of opposition.[22]

Gramsci's writings on fascism from the time of the first appearance of the blackshirt squads to the corporatist regime which became established by the early 1930s are filled with this search for continuities and links. He was amongst the first to point to the significance of the *petit bourgeois* following which the fascist movement had developed from its earliest appearance. Comparing this urban and rural *petit bourgeoisie* to Kipling's Bandar Log people[23] – mindless apes ready to follow any leader

prepared to flatter their vanities and aspirations – Gramsci drew two conclusions. First, the presence of this *petit bourgeois* following suggested that fascism was something more than an anti-socialist strike-breaking force at the service of Italian capitalism, and that it had a firm base in certain aspects of the social structure. Secondly, the means by which this following had been achieved suggested a parallel with the liberal state. In order to win the support of these groups the fascists had created a programme and an ideology which appealed directly to their aspirations. And in this Gramsci saw a successful attempt to create a new form of hegemonic power which, in the changed circumstances of post-war Italy, was able to replace the earlier forms of hegemony exercised by the traditional ruling classes within the liberal state.[24] The form, together with the circumstances, had changed, but the structure of political domination remained the same.

If fascism as a new form of hegemonic power suggested one continuity with the liberal state, another lay in the city-countryside relations which underlay the emergent fascist movement. It was the rapid expansion of agrarian fascism in the Po Valley and in Tuscany in particular, in the years between 1920 and 1922, which had transformed Mussolini's early urban fascism into a mass movement. For Gramsci, the adoption of the fascist solution by the Northern agrarians was of the utmost significance. After the factory occupations he had written: 'By striking at the peasant class, the agrarians are attempting to bring about the subjugation of the urban workers as well.'[25] In other words, agrarian fascism was not a separate phenomenon, but was closely related to the struggle in the cities to dominate the organised working classes. In fact, what this amounted to was a revival and continuation, in the new circumstances created by the war, of the traditional industrial-agrarian axis of the Italian political structure. And because the counter-offensive directed against the peasantry struck at the weakest sector of the proletarian front, it made the question of the formation of an effective worker-peasant alliance all the more immediate.

On the nature of this new city-countryside partnership Gramsci seemed less certain. Northern agriculture was certainly very different from that of the South, as was the agrarian structure. But the objectives of the new alliance seemed unchanged. The agrarians had come to the rescue of the Northern industrialists who had been abandoned by the state in their struggle with the workers. In so doing, the agrarians seemed to be attempting to restore the political influence of which they had in important ways been deprived by the war. The result was to restore and reconstruct the 'passive revolution'.

Despite the anti-capitalist rhetoric of early fascism, Gramsci had little doubt that the movement which emerged from the post-war crisis represented an attempt to reconstruct and reconsolidate bourgeois power in the new circumstances resulting from the war. This continuity was strengthened and confirmed, in Gramsci's view, by the behaviour of the regime once it had established power. In the introduction of corporatist institutions, particularly those in the economic and financial fields in the early 1930s, Gramsci saw evidence of a direct connection between the fascist experiment and the problems posed for Italy by developments in the international economy since the war. In the essay on *Americanism and Fordism* he suggested that fascism was in some senses a response to the problems created for the European economies as a whole, and that of Italy in particular, by the advent of mass production, rationalised planning and scientific management in America. The changes associated with Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor posed a terrible threat to the antiquated 'liberal' structures of the Western economies, which they could not afford to neglect. The question that Gramsci asked was whether fascism could be seen as an attempt to introduce such forms of economic organisation in Italy:

> The ideological hypothesis could be posed in the following terms: that there is a passive revolution involved in the fact that through the legislative intervention of the state and by means of the corporate organisations, far reaching modifications are being introduced into the country's economic structure in order to accentuate the 'plan of production' element; in other words, that socialisation and co-operation in the sphere of production are being increased without, however, touching (or at least not going beyond the regulation and control of) individual and group appropriation and profit.[26]

As Paul Corner points out in the last essay in this book, this is a question on which there is both little agreement and little research. But although Gramsci believed that the fascist economic system could in some senses be seen as an attempt to modernise and develop the Italian economic structure within the context of passive revolution – that is, without permitting any parallel political and social development – his own conclusion was that this intention could not be realised. The crucial difference between America and the Western European countries lay in their social structures.[27] Like Lenin, Gramsci argued that the distinctive feature of American society lay in the absence of a pre-capitalist structure. The American bourgeois revolution had been born *ex nuovo*. In

Europe, on the other hand, the capitalist revolutions had been established in the context of the struggle against pre-capitalist social classes which had never entirely disappeared. In Italy, in particular, the legacy of this pre-capitalist structure weighed heavily. The 'passive revolution' had meant that Italian society remained trapped in a framework in which capitalist and pre-capitalist groups co-existed side by side in mutual interdependence. Unlike America, Italian society contained large parasitic and non-productive groups, superfluous bureaucrats and professionals, whom Gramsci described with a characteristic flourish as 'pensioners of economic history'. The presence of such groups, he argued, made impossible the type of reorganisation and rationalisation of production which was taking place in America. Rather than reduce their numbers, in fact, the experiments embodied in the corporate institutions of the fascist state simply served to increase the opportunities for bureaucratic and non-productive employment. Fascism was not a new departure, but a continuation of the traditional structure of the passive revolution, and for that very reason was incapable of advancing the structure of Italian society beyond the limits dictated by the 'passive revolution'.

It is then 'passive revolution' which both defines and explains the continuity of Italian history from unification to fascism. At every stage there were alternatives: the Radicals might have taken up the peasant cause, Giolitti might have gone further towards effectively incorporating the working classes into the political system; in the post-war crisis other alternatives were available and might have been adopted. But in each case, Gramsci argued, to have accepted such alternatives would have implied moving outside the framework of 'passive revolution'. It would have forced the Italian capitalist classes to accept some broader degree of social and political change as the concommitant of economic development. This they were not prepared to do because it would have jeopardised the alliance between industry and agriculture, of which 'passive revolution' was the direct political expression.

It is against this interpretation that the essays which follow can be set. While they do not provide a comprehensive discussion of Gramsci's analysis, they do attempt to explore further certain of the problems and relationships identified by Gramsci. Although the range of topics with which they deal is too narrow to provide the basis for any thorough revision of Gramsci's arguments, the conclusions of each of the contributions would tend to confirm that the predominant relations in, and between, industry and agriculture, constituted one of the principal obstacles both to development and stability in the liberal state. On the

other hand, the conclusions reached are less easily reconcilable with the more general interpretative concepts which Gramsci uses, and in particular they raise a number of questions concerning the 'passive revolution' and the implications of immobility and continuity which surround it.

It is not, I think, very helpful to pose the question in terms of whether Gramsci's reading of Italian history was right or wrong, at least in part because such a question is unanswerable. The question that would appear to be more relevant and useful is to what extent the concept of 'passive revolution' adequately serves to identify the aspects of the relationship between social forces and political organisation which were particular to Italy, and hence would explain the particular development of the Italian state. Following on from this one can also ask how adequate was Gramsci's analysis of the social and, in particular, economic bases of those social forces – the agrarian and industrial classes in particular – and to what extent does more detailed study of these relationships confirm or modify his own analysis.

First, to what extent was the 'passive revolution' a specific characteristic of the bourgeois state in Italy? Certainly the alliance between industrial and agrarian sectors of the national bourgeoisie was not in itself unique. Paul Ginsborg, in the first of the essays which follow, argues that the relationship between these two sectors of the middle classes played a major role in determining the timing of the delays between political and economic change throughout Europe. Both the partnership of manufacturing and agrarian interests and also the role played by the agrarian question – in other words, the satisfactory absorption of the countryside in capitalist relations of production – were not problems unique to Italy, but rather general features of the European bourgeois revolutions. In which case the social and economic base of the political system in Italy might be compared with that of Louis Philippe's France or Bismarck's Germany, and the transition from the liberal state to fascism with Louis Napoleon's Caesarism or German National Socialism. Such comparisons are of course frequently made, but they have not, it must be said, proved particularly fruitful. Highly specific political, cultural and economic realities tend to inhibit comparison of any but the most general and superficial features of these developments. Does the concept of 'passive revolution' identify any qualitative feature, then, of this reasonably typical political system?

Gramsci uses the term 'passive revolution' in both a comparative and a particular sense. He applies it at times to Europe as a whole, for the period between 1815 and 1870, and then again for the years after the First World War. He also uses it at other times as a synonym for 'war of

position', in contrast to 'war of manoeuvre'. At the same time, it was only in Italy that 'passive revolution' became the permanent form of political organisation and strategy. There were also particular characteristics of the Italian state and society which made this form of 'passive revolution' possible. As we have described above, it was the hegemonic power of the advanced sectors of the national bourgeoisie which, in Gramsci's view, enabled them to establish and maintain control over the direction and programme of the revolution. But this resulted from two features which were peculiar to Italy – the material weakness of the bourgeoisie and the opportunities for hegemonic action provided by the peculiar social and economic situation of the South. Hegemony is used not only to designate forms of political power dependent on consensus rather than coercion, but also to provide the qualitative distinction of the 'passive revolution'. But it is precisely in the evaluation of this qualitative feature that Gramsci's argument seems least certain.

The general remarks which Gramsci makes on the importance of the formation of hegemonic power before achieving control of the state suggest that he saw certain parallels between the situation of the nineteenth-century Moderates and that of the Communist Party after the fascist victory. Like the earlier Moderates, the Communist Party lacked the resources and organisation to mount a frontal assault on the fascist state. Did Gramsci then see in the Moderate strategy of 'passive revolution' a possible model for the Communist Party to adopt? The suggestion has been vehemently denied,[28] and even if such a model is not entirely foreign to the policies of the present-day Communist Party in Italy, there would not seem to be any grounds for believing that Gramsci was recommending such a strategy. Certainly he did advocate that the revolutionary struggle should also be waged through the institutions of 'civil society', but this was something far short of advocating the adoption of 'passive revolution'.

It is not so much Gramsci's revolutionary philosophy which becomes unclear as a result of this parallel, but rather his interpretation of the national revolution. On one hand, he stressed the strength of the opposition which the nineteenth-century Liberals overcame, their willingness to adopt certain policies which were more 'radical' than those of the Radicals, and he even described the 'passive revolution' on one occasion as a 'brilliant solution' to the problems facing the Liberals.[29] On the other hand, there can be no doubt as to the negative character of his overall evaluation. Echoing Mazzini, he wrote: 'They [the Moderates] were aiming at the creation of a modern state, and they created a bastard.'[30] Such a 'failed revolution' would hardly provide a healthy

model for the Communist Party to adopt in the 1930s. But this also places a major question mark against the concept of hegemony. How effective was the much discussed hegemonic role of the Italian bourgeoisie? Did it, in particular, provide an outcome which in any way went qualitatively beyond the material interests of the dominant social forces? The answer is clearly, no. In which case the prop on which the distinctive feature of the 'passive revolution' rested collapses. If hegemony ceases to be the distinctive feature of the bourgeois political ascendancy in Italy, then we are forced back on to the industrial-agrarian alliance – and in particular the specific features and content of that alliance – in order to discover the peculiarities of the 'Italian case'.

If 'passive revolution' presents problems in terms of the specificity of the political system which resulted from unification, the continuities implied in it also raise certain questions. In the first place, the argument that passive revolution was both cause and effect involves a degree of *a posteriori* rationalisation. As Paul Ginsborg argues, in the case of the Risorgimento this results in an undue subordination of the 'moment' of revolution to the more general 'process', and causes Gramsci to underestimate the real alternatives open to the Italian Liberals in 1848 and 1860. My own essay also suggests that neither 'passive revolution' nor the industrial-agrarian alliance can be seen as causes, rather than results, of the unification of North and South. Similarly, Paul Corner's argument that it was the South that lost most heavily under fascism would also question one of the most fundamental aspects of the continuity of the 'passive revolution'.

What these problems suggest, I think, is a certain tension between the different levels of Gramsci's analysis. At one level, he was always extremely alert to specific social and economic relations, and to specific circumstances of time and place. At a more general and comparative level, however, such distinctions tend to become lost in a series of broader and more abstract categories which perhaps owe much to the Idealist tradition in Italian historiography. The search for the unity and the integral relations binding the different elements of the historical process together is not reconciled wholly satisfactorily with Gramsci's own awareness of distinctions of time and place, and of the peculiar diversities of social and economic conditions in Italy. As a result these broad comparative concepts do not really help to identify the particular features of the economic and social structure around which the Italian state evolved. As Gramsci himself argued 'the state is only conceivable as the concrete form of a specific economic world, a specific system of production',[31] and it is therefore the nature of the relations embodied in the highly

diversified texture of the Italian economic system which requires closer examination.

It is with one such set of relations, those between landlord and peasant, that Adrian Lyttleton's essay is concerned. Arguing that the failure to resolve the agrarian question constituted a fundamental weakness of Italian liberalism, he shows that relations between landlords and peasants developed in a variety of forms which differed not only between North and South, but also at a more localised level. Although in certain areas – in particular the Po Valley and Tuscany – the links between agrarian instability and fascism might seem direct, he warns against any simple equation of the two. Even in cases where agrarian conflict assumed the character of open class antagonism, the political consequences were far from uniform. Rather than determining any one political outcome, Adrian Lyttelton concludes, the failure to solve the agrarian question both undermined the liberal state and also served to obstruct any gradual process of social or political development at either local or national level.

Frank Snowden takes up a similar argument in his detailed study of one of the forms of agrarian contract discussed in Adrian Lyttelton's essay, the Tuscan *mezzadria*. Describing the gradual collapse of the traditional *mezzadria* system under the impact of commercialisation from the 1880s to the early 1920s, he shows how the contractual situation of the peasants deteriorated rapidly in the face of unbending landlord conservatism. The growing insecurity of the landlords on the one hand, and the growing but still disorganised resentment of the peasants on the other, combined to produce a peculiarly volatile situation in the province by the close of the First World War, making the region very vulnerable to the influence of the early fascist movement. This particular case lends further support to Adrian Lyttelton's more general conclusions, and shows the importance of studying both specific economic relations and also the specific regional circumstances within which they evolved.

The element of regional diversity is again stressed in the essays by Alice Kelikian and Anthony Cardoza, which examine the relations between and within industry and agriculture in two different regional contexts in the early twentieth century. Anthony Cardoza traces the growing inter-penetration between industrial and agricultural capital in the Po Delta, a region which was to play a vital part in the development of agrarian fascism. He argues that this economic inter-penetration should not be seen as an attempt to put the clock back, but marked the advance of industrial capitalism into the countryside. At the same time, the political consequences of this partnership by the time of the outbreak of the European war were far from clear. The uncertainty and insecurity

which accompanied the partnership, together with the difficulty of expressing these new economic interests within the framework of existing political parties helps to explain the particular susceptibility of the Po Valley agrarians to the blandishments of the fascists. But while Anthony Cardoza's argument confirms the importance of the relationship between industry and agriculture in this region, which Gramsci had pointed to, it also demonstrates that it was of a very different nature from the earlier North-South alliance of industry and agriculture, and was not therefore simply a continuation of the 'historical alliance'.

Similar political uncertainty and confusion resulted from the economic changes caused by the war in the province of Brescia which Alice Kelikian has studied. The war broke down the earlier equilibrium between agriculture and industry in the province, brought about qualitative changes in industrial organisation and reduced the region's economic isolation. However, these changes were far from completed by the end of the war. The Brescian workers were little better organised than they had been before, and the traditional Brescian entrepreneurs were far from reconciled to the new forms of industrial corporatism which the war had encouraged. This again serves not only to indicate the regional diversity of economic structures and relations, but also shows the complexity of the divisions and distinctions within specific economic groups.

In the final essay, Paul Corner takes up the question which Gramsci had posed on the economic significance of the fascist regime. He argues the highly unconventional case that the fascist period, far from being a phase of economic stagnation which masked a tendency to protect agriculture at the expense of industry, in fact brought about a major shift in the structure of the Italian economy. The 'Battle for Wheat' and the 'Quota 90', he argues, did not, as has generally been assumed, protect the more backward sectors of Italian industry and agriculture, but rather subordinated them to the interests of heavy industry and capitalist farming in the North. As a result these two key sectors were able to develop and consolidate despite the international economic circumstances of the 1930s, and laid the basis for the post-war 'economic miracle'.

Paul Corner's argument is highly original and will certainly be contested, but if he is right it would seem to cast doubt on the economic continuities between fascism and pre-fascism. It would also question the continuity of the 'historical alliance' of North and South in the fascist period. And this touches on what is perhaps the least tidy part of Gramsci's analysis. Because he does not define the role played by the South in the transition to fascism, the relationship between the new agrarian-industrial partnerships which had emerged in the North and the traditional 'historical

alliance' remains unclear. Those, like Sereni,[32] who have examined this relationship more fully have tended to emphasise the continuity. One of the problems, of course, lies in the essentially passive role played by the South in the transition to fascism. Adrian Lyttelton's conclusions on the continuing fragmentation and isolation of the Southern peasantry – which reflect Gramsci's own analysis – provide one explanation of this relative passivity. The absence of effective or organised peasant opposition in the South meant that the type of counter-offensive adopted by the Tuscan and Emilian landlords was simply not needed. But if, as Paul Corner argues, the Southern landlords as well as the Southern economy were losers under the fascist regime, this passivity may well reflect a shift in the political structure which deprived the Southern landowners of their former privileged political position. And the fact that, of all the traditional groups in Italy, it was the Southern landowners who emerged weakest from the Second World War, would seem to support such an argument.

The specific characteristics of the economic relations and structures on which the political system of the liberal state were based would then confirm Gramsci's arguments on the weaknesses and limitations of Italian capitalism. But they also indicate that industry and agriculture encompassed a variety of relationships which make it difficult to talk of any single agrarian or industrial interest, or any fixed relationship between the two. The arguments raised in these essays would also suggest that the fundamental continuity of the economic structure on which the political systems from Risorgimento to fascism were based is a problem which still remains very much open to debate.

Notes

(For reasons of space the bibliographical references to this introduction have been kept to a minimum. More detailed bibliographies on specific issues will be found accompanying the essays which follow. The most recent and useful general survey of Italian economic historiography for the period covered by this volume is: V. Castronovo, 'Dall'Unità a oggi – storia economica' in the new *Storia d'Italia*, vol.4 (Turin, 1974).)

1. Wherever possible reference will be made to Gramsci's writings in English in the excellent edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, edited by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (London, 1971: hereafter *PN*) and A. Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings (1921-6)*, ed. Q. Hoare (London, 1978). In addition to the Introduction to the Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, more general guides are provided by: J. Joll, *Gramsci* (London, 1977); J. Cammet, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford, 1967);