Gramsci

The first Italian Marxist

W RITING in Unità after the defeat of the British Labour Government in the general election of 1951, Togliatti remarked that "the British Communist Party has not yet succeeded in striking deep roots among the masses".

Antonio Gramsci was a fellow student of Togliatti. Like Marx, he gave up the prospect of a brilliant academic career in order to throw himself into the struggles of the working class. In 1919, when the Turin workers, organised in factory councils, were taking over some of the big factories, he started a workers' newspaper, Ordine Nuovo, which issued a revolutionary programme for the Italian working class. Two years later, with Togliatti and others, he founded the Italian Communist Party. In 1922, after the march on Rome, Ordine Nuovo was suppressed. In 1924 he founded another paper, Unità, and in the same year he was elected to Parliament. Then, at the end of 1926, he was arrested and sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. "For twenty years", the public prosecutor demanded, "we must stop that brain from working". In prison he was subjected to continuous maltreatment, which destroyed his health, and from this slow torture he died in 1937. Nevertheless, during those eleven years, he filled thirty-two notebooks, amounting to nearly 3,000 closely-written pages, with his ideas about Marxism in general and its application to the Italian revolution. These writings were published after his death, and a selection from them now appears for the first time in English.

This book is a very important one for us, because it shows how, under the leadership of Gramsci and later of Togliatti, the Italian Party succeeded in "striking deep roots among the masses".

The greatness of Gramsci's contribution to Marxism lies in his profound understanding of the unity of theory and practice. On the one hand, his work has a wide theoretical range, comprising many problems of history, philosophy, ethics, religion, literature and the arts. On the other hand, these problems are always approached from the standpoint of the concrete situation of the Italian working class at the time of writing and with the conscious purpose of throwing light on that situation and changing it. Just as Mao Tse-tung set himself the task of applying the general truths of Marxism to the Chinese revolution, so Gramsci applied those truths to the Italian revolution.

In a certain sense, he writes, "all men are philosophers": that is, they carry in their heads a body of ideas, contained in the language they speak, in their religion, and in what they call "common sense". But such a philosophy is "spontaneous" and "unconscious". It is only the first stage of knowledge, at which a man is content with passive acceptance of a world view imposed on him from outside. The second stage is the stage of "critical awareness", at which he "works out his own conception of the world consciously and critically" and so begins "to participate actively in making the history of the world", that is, becomes free. But from its nature this higher stage is only attainable through action, political action, participation in the class struggle. "Critical awareness of oneself comes through the struggle of political 'hegemonies', of opposing directions, first in the field of ethics, then of politics, culminating in a higher elaboration of one's own conception of reality." Moreover, "the awareness of being part of a determined hegemonic force (i.e. political consciousness) is the first step towards a further and progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice finally unite". Hence "the unity of theory and practice is not a given mechanical fact but a historical process of becoming". All this is very close to Mao Tse-tung: "To start from perceptual knowledge and actively develop it into rational knowledge, and then, starting from rational knowledge, actively to direct revolutionary practice so as to remould the subjective and the objective world."

If Gramsci's account of the Marxist theory of knowledge is studied in its context, it will be seen to be drawn from his political activity and his experience in seeking through practice the solution to the basic problems of the Italian working class. This appears very clearly in his article on the Southern question, that is, the problem arising from the fact of Italy being...
divided between the industrial North and the agrarian South. He writes:

“The Turin Communists posed to themselves correctly the question of the ‘hegemony of the proletariat’; in other words, of the social basis of the proletarian dictatorship of the workers’ state. The proletariat can become the leading and ruling class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which enables it to mobilise the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois state; this means, in Italy, in the actual conditions existing in Italy, to the extent that it succeeds in obtaining the consent of the large peasant masses. But the peasant question in Italy is historically determined; it is not ‘the peasant and agrarian question in general’; in Italy the peasant question has, through the determined Italian tradition, assumed two typical and peculiar forms, the Southern question and the Vatican question. To conquer the majority of the peasant masses means, therefore, for the Italian proletariat, to make these two questions its own from a social point of view, to understand the class exigencies that they represent, to incorporate these exigencies into its own revolutionary programme of transition, to place them among its aims in the struggle.”

Recognising the fundamental importance of the Leninist theory of allies, Gramsci devoted special attention to the peasantry.

The Southern question was bound up with the Vatican question, that is, the role of the Catholic Church. Here again he starts from the concrete situation:

“Every religion, even the Catholic (or rather, especially the Catholic, precisely because of its efforts to remain ‘superficially’ unitary in order not to break up into national churches and social stratifications) is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions: there is the Catholicism of the peasants, the Catholicism of the petty bourgeoisie and the town workers, the Catholicism of the women, and the Catholicism of the intellectuals.”

The Catholicism of the peasants, full of superstition though it is, is characterised by the latent anti-clericalism summed up in the popular saying: “The priest is a priest at the altar; elsewhere he is a man like any other”. (I have heard the very same saying in the west of Ireland.) This is one aspect of the “crass materialism” of popular Catholicism, which enables the Catholic Church, in contrast to most of the Protestant Churches, to maintain its hold over the masses; but of course it stands in contradiction to the scholasticism and mysticism which characterises the Catholicism of the intellectuals.

How was this alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry to be created? It could only be done with the help of the intellectuals. In 1924 he wrote:

“What a tragedy it would be, if the groups of intellectuals who come to the working class, and in whom the working class places its trust, did not feel themselves the same flesh and blood as the most humble, the most backward, the least aware of our workers and peasants! Then all our work would be useless and we should obtain no results.”

Why so? Why did the intellectuals form the organic link in the alliance? Because, in order to win over the peasantry, the proletariat must “break up the intellectual bloc which forms the flexible but very resistant armour of the agrarian bloc”.

It is largely thanks to this lead given by Gramsci in the early twenties that the little groups of comrades who followed him then have grown into the mass Party of today. Our British conditions are very different from the Italian, but the fundamental tasks are the same; and, when we have produced a new version of the British Road to Socialism, based on a concrete theoretical analysis of the economic, social and ideological structure of life in Britain today, with full consideration of the national question in Wales, Scotland and Ireland and to the regional peculiarities of different parts of England, then we too shall begin to strike deep roots among the masses.

In conclusion, let me quote a few words which contain a lesson for the editorial board of our new journal. Drawing on his experience as editor of Ordine Nuovo, Gramsci makes some remarks about editorial boards “which function as cultural circles as well as editorial boards” and he says:

“Through discussions and joint criticism (consisting of suggestions, advice, indications of method, constructive criticism directed towards mutual learning), by which each man functions as a specialist in his own subject to improve the collective competence, the average level of each individual is raised. It reaches the height of the capacity of the best-trained and assures the review not only of ever better selected and organic contributions but creates the conditions for the rise of a homogeneous group of intellectuals trained to produce regular and methodical ‘literary’ activity.”

Four years ago, when the Modern Quarterly was reconstituted as the Marxist Quarterly, the new Board announced its intention of organising from time to time discussions on questions of theoretical and cultural interest. This was a good idea, but nothing came of it. Let us take as a model for the future the experience of Ordine Nuovo.

GEORGE THOMSON
PROFESSOR V. KATZ attacked the point of view that there is no need to elaborate basic economic laws. The question as to whether one can or should speak about a basic economic law at all—especially since we have managed quite well without it until recently—is a false one, for it misses the essence of the matter. What is being discussed is not a matter of description, but the fact that we seek to find, for every social formation, one out of the totality of categories which acts as the determining one, that which embodies the essence of the formation as a whole. And this is precisely the basic economic law, as we define it.

Lenin remarked that the theory of surplus value is the cornerstone of the economic teachings of Karl Marx. What else is this but a formulation of the basic law? The view that Stalin was the first and only one to formulate the basic law is therefore incorrect. Of course, each law only explains one side of the essence. Nevertheless, in spite of this, there is one law around which the whole system regulates itself, one which combines all other categories into a single unity, namely, the basic economic law.

Professor Katz declared that in order to answer the question as to whether or not the means of production are commodities under socialism, it is first of all necessary to determine what are the features which give the character of a commodity to any product of labour. We have usually regarded as the sole criterion the exchange of goods, the passing of the product of labour from one owner to another. Although this is an essential description it is insufficient for a definition of a commodity in the economic sense of the term. The addition of a whole number of other features is required.

Professor Katz listed the following attributes which go to make up a commodity: (1) Change of ownership, (2) sale of the product to a third person, i.e. the sale of a product produced in one undertaking to another undertaking for use (this expresses the social division of labour), and (3) obligation to make a return payment (compensation, recompense) making the transaction one of equal values. The commodity in the fullest sense of the term must fulfil all these conditions. If the means of production under socialism are considered from this standpoint, then it at once becomes clear that the first feature no longer applies, for the movement is not accompanied by a change of ownership but proceeds within one and the same form of social ownership. From this, however, we must not conclude that the means of production, having lost one essential feature, are no longer commodities at all. They still retain the other attributes, they still have value and are not disposed of for nothing, but for a definite exchange value, a process which is an objective necessity under socialism. Consequently the means of production have not finally ceased to be commodities, a state of affairs which is of great importance for the unity of the whole reproduction process.

T. Mansilya was critical of the chapter in the textbook which discussed the law of absolute impoverishment. A Marxist can have no doubt that such a law exists under capitalism but one should not make the mistake of dealing with the problem in a schematic way. What is required here is detailed, comprehensive investigation. Above all one should not work on the basis of facts and figures of the last century, but deal with the most recent information. Thus one cannot simply maintain that the real wages of the workers decline consistently under capitalism. What would follow from such an approach is that wages are ultimately reduced to nothing—which entirely contradicts reality. Similarly, one cannot just flatly affirm that the French worker today consumes less bread than his predecessor of a century ago. What we have to do is to show how the forms of absolute impoverishment change under imperialism. In this connection special attention has to be given to the intensification of labour because that is the most important factor influencing the development of absolute impoverishment. And here, economic investigation must be undertaken, authentic facts and figures.