

Antonio Gramsci 1925

Sterile and Negative Criticism

Source: *L'Unità* September 30, 1925;

Translated: by [Mitchell Abidor](#);

CopyLeft: [Creative Commons](#) (Attribute & ShareAlike)

marxists.org 2008.

In [Bordiga's] long article one thing is truly noteworthy: the elegant skepticism with which he avoids taking a clear position on points which he nevertheless affirms to dissent from; there is the continual oscillation between thesis and antithesis, without for all that indicating an "original" thesis of his own.

Comrade Bordiga limits himself to upholding a cautious position on all the questions raised by the Left. He doesn't say: the International poses and resolves such and such a question in this way, but the Left will instead pose and resolve it this other way. He instead says: the way the International poses and resolves problems doesn't convince me; I fear it falls into opportunism, there are insufficient guarantees against this, etc. His position, then, is one of permanent suspicion and doubt. In this way the position of the "Left" is purely negative; they express reservations without specifying them in a concrete form, and above all without indicating in concrete form their point of view, their solutions. They end by spreading doubt and distrust, without constructing anything.

The article begins with a characteristic metaphysical hypothesis. Comrade Bordiga asks; is it possible to 100% exclude the possibility that the Communist International will fall into opportunism? But we can also

ask if we the possibility can be excluded that even Comrade Bordiga won't become opportunist, that the Pope will become an atheist, that the industrialist Ford will become a communist, etc. In the realm of metaphysical possibility you can fancy whatever you want, but a Marxist should pose the question thusly: does possibility exist that the Communist International is no longer the vanguard of the proletariat but is instead on the road to becoming the expression of the workers' aristocracy, corrupted by the bourgeoisie? It is thus that the question is posed Marxistically, and it is then easy for every comrade to resolve it.

The article is a tissue of theoretical and practical errors that the comrades will surely point out. We will limit ourselves to pointing out the most characteristic points. Comrade Bordiga says a propos of cells that the type of party organization cannot in itself ensure its political character and guarantee it against opportunist degeneration. But we affirm that organization in the form of cells ensures the proletarian character of the Communist Party better than any other and, better than any other, guarantees the party against opportunism.

And after having repeated the curious affirmation that the system of cells is appropriate for Russia, though more so before than after the conquest of power, and that this doesn't apply to countries with a bourgeois democratic regime, Comrade Bordiga concludes: "We aren't against the cells, at least as groups of members in factories, with given functions" So is the left for or against the cells? And what are these "given functions" that Comrade Bordiga avoids specifying? The Left and Comrade Bordiga don't declare themselves explicitly against Bolshevization, but are only suspicious of it because it is based on organization in cells which would be overseen by a web of functionaries chosen based on the criterion of blind obsequiousness to Leninism.

That the local leadership of the party should be made up of ideologically chosen elements is beyond any doubt, because without this the Communist Party would not be what it is. As for blind obsequiousness, this is a type of polemical method that is vulgar to no small extent and upon which it is pointless to linger.

It is also curious what Comrade Bordiga writes concerning Leninism. He writes that if Leninism is nothing but Marxism, then it's pointless to use such a term; but immediately after this he adds that the Left will use both terms indifferently. Not only does he contradict himself here, but there is also a contradiction in the assertion concerning the use of the two terms indifferently and the contemporary recognition that Lenin is the "completer, in large part, of Marxism; and his interpretation of imperialism, the formulations on the agrarian and national questions are fundamental contributions in the development of Marxism."

Concerning his disagreement with Lenin, Comrade Bordiga remains skillfully on the general, while not being specific. The phrases, "We have discussed and criticized Lenin and we are not entirely convinced by his counter-deductions," and, "Lenin's rebukes have not converted me" can have an effect on the petit-bourgeois, but Communists and revolutionary workers will only shrug their shoulders.

Comrade Bordiga, without anywhere specifying the extent of his disagreement with Lenin goes on affirming that he doesn't retain Lenin's tactical system because it doesn't contain guarantees against opportunist applications. But Comrade Bordiga would be more sincere if he were to declare that he rejects any tactical maneuvers insofar as every tactical maneuver presents the danger of opportunist deviations.

The guarantee against deviations doesn't consist in tactics themselves, but in us, in our Communist consciousness, in the entire party's vigilance

and self-criticism, in firmness of principles, in the effort to never lose sight of the revolutionary goal. We don't pretend to have exhausted in the current note the objections to Comrade Bordiga's article. It is truly a mine of errors and inconsistencies of every type.

We want only to note those concerning anti-parliamentarism and the tactics of the party towards the Aventine worker masses. The tactic adopted by the party- says Comrade Bordiga – was not anticipated at any congress. But aside from the fact that no congress anticipated either the Matteoti crime or the reaction of the masses, with their contemporaneous tilt towards Aventine illusions, what is the tactic that, according to Comrade Bordiga, should have been adopted? He restrains himself from explaining it in any form, and limits himself to saying “little is done when a lot could be done.”

The entire article is a document of true intellectual decadence. Comrade Bordiga not only fails to draw the logical consequences of his negations, he above all fails to counter-propose new directives to the criticized directives in a clear and complete form. To limit oneself, as he does, to negative criticism, to spread doubt, skepticism and distrust, without indicating anything positively constructive constitutes not only a lack of character, but also reveals little respect for or attachment to the party and the International.