

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF

"BORDIGUISM"



Lithograph from a History of the Soviets published in Paris in 1925.

Bordiga, the celebrated anonymous

In order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current we propose to analyze here, it is necessary to recall to what extent the term "bordiguism" itself is contaminated by ideology. As is often the case with this type of neologisms, especially when it comes to currents coming from Marxist thought, the term is above all the fruit of a will to do harm emanating from political enemies determined to stigmatize the ideas of an author by caricaturing his thought. As with any commodity, once the label has been attached to a given ideological product, it is no longer necessary to evaluate the quality of its content, since its name alone suffices to praise or discredit it. As with most concepts ending in the suffix "ism", this transformation is the semantic translation of the process of ideologization of a theoretical body.

This is usually accompanied by a tendency to transform this thought into a gelatinous dogma that ignores and hides the contradictions inherent to all theoretical thought in motion.¹ The term "Bordigism", derived from the name of Amadeo Bordiga², is thus used to vindicate or stigmatize a doctrine that is presented as immutable and elaborated by a single individual³, considered brilliant or mediocre. In this particular case, an added difficulty arises from the fact that several groups claiming to be part of this movement (generally known as the "International Communist Party") anonymized Bordiga's texts under the pretext of maintaining an anti-personal and "collective" view of his theoretical production. In doing so, they instituted a veiled personality cult that was all the more disconcerting. It is well known that the columns published in the P.C.I. newspapers (Battaglia Comunista from 1948 to 1952 and Il programma comunista), entitled "Sul filo del tempo", were the original and exclusive work of Bordiga. He also used this ruse of notoriety to impose a blind and implicit discipline

¹This explains why, when we use the term "Marxism" to describe our political approach, we usually add adjectives such as "revolutionary", "lively" or "internationalist" to differentiate ourselves from a doctrinaire and religious vision....

²"Notice Bordiga Amadeo, known as ALFA, known as ORSO" [online], Maitron, September 7, 2013, [accessed August 8, 2023], <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article148719>

³The main texts by Bordiga that escaped anonymization by his self-declared heirs can be found here: http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bordiga_amedeo/bordiga_amedeo.html et : <https://www.marxists.org/francais/bordiga/index.htm> See also: LALBAT, Benjamin, Les bordiguistes sans Bordiga, Contribution to a history of the heirs of the Italian Communist Left in France. From the roots of May 68 to the explosion of the PCI (1967-1982), University of Aix-Marseille, Year 2013-2014, [online] <https://lorage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Les-bordiguistes-sans-bordiga-Memoire-M2.pdf>.

on his disciples⁴, camouflaging the reality of his oscillations and changes in the analysis of the period aptly described as "unfavorable".

"As if the difficulties of the post-May '68 period were already looming on the horizon of the party, there came a moment when the old and false opposition between "theory" and "practice" reappeared, which had already been at the origin of the split of the CP Inter in 1951-52. Faced with the sometimes puerile, often petty conflicts to which this oscillation gave rise, Bordiga was implicitly called upon to formulate a clear solution to it, since this must necessarily follow from the points of principle he had previously expounded. And this was the situation of incomprehension and impotence in which he placed the little party in which he had revived, which he had led with all his knowledge and passion and which, nevertheless, showed itself incapable of finding in his teachings the answers to the questions which were tearing it apart." L. Laugier⁵

On the contrary, a number of experienced activists, such as O. Damen, B. Fortichiari, O. Perrone, V. Verdaro, B. Maffi, J. Feingold, M. Pappalardi⁶, but later also S. Voute, J. Camatte, R. Dangeville, J. Angot, Hilden and L. Laugier were able to demonstrate the non-monolithic reality of this current, also known as the "Italian communist left", even if it had many ramifications in Belgium and France as a result of emigration. It is also worth remembering that, upon his return from exile in the early 1930s, Bordiga ceased all political activity until 1944, considering that the counterrevolutionary situation was inevitably leading to a new war and that it was necessary above all to make a theoretical and political assessment of the previous period.

This was the fundamental work of the faction of émigrés grouped in Brussels around O. Perrone. Perrone, who carried out a very relevant critical work in the magazines Bilan and Prometeo. Bordiga joined the party created by Damen after the 1943 strikes, without formally affiliating with it. Despite the obvious criticisms that can be made of the PCI, what is certain is that, like some of its splits, it was a place of transmission of a political heritage and of training in a revolutionary Marxism marked above all by the uncompromising and permanent struggle against Stalinism and the capitalist character of the economic categories defended by this constituent form of the international counterrevolution of the 20th century. His frontal struggle in Moscow in 1926, at the Sixth Enlarged Executive Committee of the Communist International, saw him openly oppose Stalin and affirm that the Russian question was not only a Russian question, and that it demanded the opening of an international debate on the current involutions. This intervention made him the last of the leaders of the International to have called Stalin a traitor and to have survived long enough to be able to tell the tale. Consistent with this position, Bordiga produced numerous texts in which he analyzed the capitalist reality of the USSR while waiting in vain for the Stalinist leaders to admit the counterrevolutionary nature of their regime. The tragic isolation caused by the repression, exile and deportation brought about by the fascist regime also greatly strengthened the

⁴ Bordiga only discussed and corresponded with a handful of his collaborators, his "blacks," who were the only ones in a position to interpret and also discuss his politics (among them were Peronne, Maffi, Camatte, etc.). This implicit system is typical of the sectarian drift of a movement.

⁵ LAUGIER, Lucien, "Strength and weakness of Bordigism," article from 1983, [online], Prolétariat universel, published in August 2016, [accessed on 08/08/2023], <https://proletariatuniversel.blogspot.com/2016/08/force-et-faiblesse-du-bordiguisme-8.html>

⁶ On the trajectory of this militant of the Italian communist left who joined the theses of the German communist left (Karl Korsch) voir "Pappalardi", [online], Bibliothèque du marxisme, 2017, [consulté le 08/08/2023], <https://bibliothequedu-marxisme.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/pappalardi.pdf>

positions of this current. After the war, however, it evolved into a form of radical leftism which, despite its anti-activist claims, embarked on the construction of a formal party linked to the reinforcement of its congenital deviations, particularly Third Worldism. This led to great disillusionment, recurrent splits (in 1952, 1966, 1981, etc.) and numerous desertions. All that remain today of Bordigism are small, scattered groups, most of which have succumbed to an accelerated process of sectarian sclerosis.

Political forces of Bordigism

Before returning to the political weaknesses of this current, we will first highlight its strong points by listing the questions of principle which, in our opinion, must continue to be defended intransigently today.

Rejection of parliamentarism, electoralism and reformism.

"The constitution of a purely communist party will not be possible if we do not renounce electoral and parliamentary action." Bordiga⁷

These were the questions that crystallized the struggle and resistance of the young militants of the Italian Socialist Party against the opportunist degeneration and corruption -classical, after all- of the social democratic parties, represented in particular by the collusion with Freemasonry and the "culturalist" policy of A. Tasca. After leading the struggle against Italian participation in the colonial wars and in World War I, these militant internationalists enthusiastically welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution of October, to which they gave their unconditional support. It was in this struggle that the essential programmatic intransigence of the faction grouped around the newspaper *Il Soviet* was forged. With this in mind, Bordiga participated in the Third Congress of the CI in 1920 as a representative of the Italian communist current and contributed to the drafting of the 21st condition of affiliation. Unfortunately, it was not until 1921 -too late- that the Communist Party of Italy, led by A. Bordiga, was founded in Livorno.

Fight against democracy

From this period on, he and his comrades waged a battle against democracy, considered the most appropriate form of organization for capitalist dictatorship. In 1922, in an essential text entitled *The Democratic Principle*, he denounced the imposture and fetishization of this concept.

"The Marxist critique of the postulates of bourgeois democracy is in fact based on the definition of the characteristics of present-day society divided into classes. It shows the theoretical inconsistency and the practical trap of a system that would like to reconcile political equality with the division of society into social classes determined by the nature of the mode of production. (...) Democracy cannot be for us a principle; centralism certainly is, since the essential characteristics of the party organization must be unity of structure and movement. The term centralism is sufficient to express the continuity of the party structure in space; and to introduce the essential idea of continuity in time, that is, the continuity of the goal toward which we tend and of the direction in which we advance through successive obstacles which must be overcome, or better still, linked in a single

⁷ Camatte, Jacques, *Bordiga et la passion du communisme*, Spartacus, Paris, 1974.

formula. Given these two essential ideas of unity, we would propose to say that the Communist Party bases its organization on "organic centralism". Bordiga⁸

Critique of anti-fascism

This critique of democracy subsequently gave rise to an important critique of the Front's anti-fascism, which from the early 1930s was considered a "formula for confusion," leading to the bourgeois fascism/anti-fascism polarization that subsequently legitimized the Spanish Civil War and World War II.

"Thus, the problem does not consist in saying: fascism is a threat, let us make a common front of anti-fascists and anti-fascists, but in determining the positions around which the proletariat will rally in its struggle against capitalism. To pose the problem in this way means excluding the anti-fascist forces from the front against capitalism and even arriving at the conclusion (which may seem paradoxical) that if capitalism is definitely orientated towards fascism, the condition of success lies in the unalterability of the workers' program and of the class demands, while the condition of certain defeat lies in the dissolution of the proletariat in the anti-fascist swamp." Bilan N° 7(1934): L'antifascisme: formule de confusion.⁹

Critique of managerialism

Another characteristic aspect of the contributions of this current is its critique of managerialism and the importance given to the revolutionary and military seizure of power (destruction of the bourgeois state and dictatorship of the proletariat, as detailed in the work Force, violence and dictatorship in the class struggle). This critique arose mainly during the factory occupation movement of 1918 and through the critique of the role played by A. Gramsci and his journal "Ordine Nuovo".

"Unlike the Bordigist current, whose theoretical basis was already consolidated, Ordinovism was full of ambiguities from the beginning. Gramsci, together with Tasca, Terracini and Togliatti, had founded the group "L'Ordine Nuovo" in May 1919. The Ordovist current emerged, therefore, long after the founding of the Neapolitan group "Il Soviet", whose homonymous newspaper was published shortly before Christmas 1918. "It was this group, and not Gramsci's, which demanded the immediate exclusion of the reformists and the transformation of the PSI, which had already affiliated with the Comintern in the summer of 1919, into a truly revolutionary party." P. Bourrinet.¹⁰

In addition to this dominant influence, the Il Soviet group carried out a very interesting critique of the illusion represented by the passive occupations in the factories and the fantasies of self-management that subsequently accompanied them.

"In fact, for Gramsci, the factory councils were very much like those economic councils, institutionalized and recognized by the state, the Betriebsräte, which German social democracy, having just crushed the council movement and the Spartacist insurrection, legalized in order to better control the labor force." P. Bourrinet, p. 27.

⁸ "Parti et Classe", Programme communiste, P.C.I., Paris, 1975.

⁹ See on our web site <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsie/archives>

¹⁰ Bourrinet, Philippe, Bordiguisme et gramscisme, prendre le pouvoir ou gérer les usines ?, Éditions moto proprio, Paris, décembre 2018, [en ligne] https://data.over-blog-kiwi.com/0/55/15/36/20210209/ob_11a841_gramscisme-bordiguisme_-_bro.pdf À lire également : Riechers, Christian, Gramsci et le marxisme italien, Éditions Ni patrie ni frontières, Paris, 2021. Et Bourrinet, Philippe, Le Courant bordiguiste 1919-1999, Italie, France, Belgique, Éditions left-dis, Zoetermeer, 2000.

Struggle against activism

A constant in Bordiga's redoubled understanding of the democratic and fascist counterrevolution was his struggle against activism, voluntarism and immediatism. This struggle was made possible, among other things, by Marx's emphasis on a conception of the historical existence of the party, independent of these contingent and formal expressions. This interesting conception is demonstrated in the text *Origin and function of the party form*, published by the revue N°1 of *Invariance*¹¹ in 1968.

Back to Marx and Engels

Another fundamental point concerns the work of discovery, translation and study of Marx's unpublished works, materializing (long before some) a fundamental return to Marx-Engels. This resulted in the discovery, editing and commentary of fundamental unpublished works such as the 1844 Manuscripts, the sixth chapter of *Capital*, the *Grundrisse* and the *Military Writings*, as well as numerous thematic compilations (in French by Maspero and 10/18). This laudable effort has enabled a generation of militants to confront Marx's works without having to put up with the vulgar comments of Stalinists or academic interpretations.

Analysis of abandoned theoretical questions

This current also dealt in depth with theoretical questions too often neglected, such as the agrarian question, the non-market character of socialist society and the philosophical question in Marxist theory, in texts such as *Faux recours à l'activisme*, *Volcan de la production ou marais du marché*, *Propriété et capital*, *La classe moyenne, notre bête noire*, *L'opposition de gauche dans la IIIe Internationale*, *Espace contre Béton*, *Le marxisme des bègues*, etc. These and many other topics were dealt with by Bordiga at the general assemblies held between 1944 and 1966, detailed reports of which were published in the PCI press.

Ecology

In a prophetic and poetic way, Bordiga addressed questions concerning man and his necessary reconciliation with nature, from a perspective that today we would qualify as ecological, thus formulating an indispensable critique of science as a tool of capitalist production¹². These texts constitute a highly topical questioning of the so-called natural catastrophes as dual products of capitalist evolution and of the eminently profitable character of the reconstruction that follows them.

Rejection of the figure of the providential man and of internationalism

Finally, Bordiga regularly stressed the inanity for Marxist theory of the principle of a savior genius destined to guide the working class towards its salvation, and the need to carry out a critique of the world totality constituted by the PCM.

¹¹ Available on our website at <https://81b6bb22-93ff-445e-9132-db9118c0c19f.filesusr.com/ugd/ca292a236cfa3e72d64f199bc7b24d5c526244.pdf>

¹² Notamment dans le recueil de textes Bordiga, Amadeo, *Espèce humaine et croûte terrestre*, Payot, Paris, 1978.

"The workers will win if they understand that no one has to come. The wait for the Messiah and the cult of genius, conceivable for Pierre or Carlyle, are only, for a Marxist of 1953, a miserable cover of impotence. The revolution will resurge, terrible but anonymous." Carlylian Phantom, Invariance I series, N°5.

The political weaknesses of "Bordigianism"

Bordiga's greatest political trauma probably resides in the criticism Lenin addressed to him in his pamphlet *The Infantile Disease of Communism: Leftism*. In it, Lenin harshly opposed the abstentionism of the Italian CP, comparing it with the German Dutch left. For Bordiga, this criticism translated into an over-interpretation of a radical Leninism of which he wanted to be the best representative, in the unrealized hope of erasing his reputation as heterodox.

"We consider that Lenin's tactical method is incompletely exact, in the sense that it does not include guarantees against possibilities of application which, by being superficially faithful, lose the profound revolutionary finality which always animated all that Lenin supported and did." Le "Comité d'Entente", April–July 1925.¹³

Unfortunately, this also weighed on the impossibility for the communist left to unite to wage a common struggle against the degeneration of the CI and the victory of the Stalinist counterrevolution. This refusal to form a united opposition was also reflected in the reply given to K. Korsch, who wanted to move in the direction of the formation of a workers' community.

"I believe that one of the defects of the present International has been to be a "block of local and national oppositions". We must reflect on this point, of course without falling into exaggeration, but in order to profit from these lessons. Lenin stopped a lot of "spontaneous" work in the hope of bringing the different groups together materially, and only then to fuse them homogeneously in the heat of the Russian revolution. For the most part he failed. I realize that the work I am proposing is not easy in the absence of organizational links, opportunities for publishing, propaganda, and so on. Despite this, I think we can still hope." Bordiga.¹⁴

This attitude of waiting lasted until much later, when the fraction of the communist left in exile, under the impulse of Peronne, formed a working community with the League of Internationalist Communists of Belgium, which ended in rupture due to differences of analysis on the events in Spain. Maintaining a direct link with this "Leninist" tension, the weak points of the "Bordigist" current were mainly based on two major questions, which probably also explain why some of its heirs went over to the counterrevolutionary camp, such as the El Oumami group, the former Algerian section of the P.C.I.¹⁵

Entryism in the trade unions

The first was the reproduction of entryism in the state trade unions, considered as the "transmission belt" of the party within the working class. From the 1920s on, this classic

¹³ Camatte, Jacques, *Bordiga et la passion du communisme*, Spartacus, Paris, 1974.

¹⁴ Lettre à K. Korsch du 28 octobre 1926 available here : <https://www.sinistra.net/lib/upt/prcomi/ropa/ropanrobuf.html>

¹⁵ On this issue, see "El Oumami: From Leninism to Open Nationalism," *Le communiste*, the French-language central organ of the Internationalist Communist Group, No. 15, October 1982, Brussels, [online], <http://archivesautonomies.org/IMG/pdf/gauchecomuniste/gauchescommunistes-ap1952/gci/lecommuniste/lecommuniste15.pdf>

leftist position was already undermined by the reality of the class struggle and the appearance of "unitary" proletarian organizations within the great industrial concentrations of Germany, the United States and England. This catastrophic "tactic" was contested and questioned on several occasions within the "bordiguist" current, by the Réveil Communiste group of M. Pappalardi among others, but also within Bilan and up to the 1970s, in particular during the split of the Danish section of the PCI in 1971, which produced an exemplary analysis on this question: *La Gauche allemande et la question syndicale dans la IIIe Internationale* (The German left and the trade union question in the III Internationale).

"The revolution is a monolithic historical fact, and its movement cannot be divided according to the patterns of previous economic periods (....). There are parallels between the work of the Communards and that of the communists of the German Left: both expressed in their action the historical programmatic line of the proletariat, both gave formidable theoretical and practical weapons to the proletarians of the future revolution; just as the Commune was the "daughter" (Engels) of the A.I.T. In the same way that the Commune was the "daughter" (Engels) of the A.I.T. in the same way the German revolution was the daughter of that International Left which never had the strength to give itself a definitive unitary organization, - but whose great currents were the German Left, which in the struggle itself dared to support the programmatic direction given by the revolutionary movement itself, and the Italian Left, which had the historic task of continuing the work of the International Left, completing it and formulating it in its attacks against the victorious counterrevolution; transmitted to us its theoretical weapons ("of the critique"), which will constitute the basis of the future revolutionary movement which, in the practice of the German Left ("critique of the weapons"), finds its great historical example. The future revolution will not be a question of banal "imitation"; it will be a question of following the "thread of time". "Tiré par la gauche Communiste Internationale." Kommunistisk Program

What these comrades stress is the forced and exaggerated character of the differences between the German and Italian communist lefts, which suited both the ideological supporters of "bordiguist" Leninism and the anti-Leninist supporters of "councilism." In its practice of trade union entryism, the PCI never played any other notable role than that of recruiters like that of other lefts (Trotskyist, Maoist or anarchist). And, when the reality of the workers' struggles completely overflowed the bourgeois management structures constituted by the main trade union centrals, as during the "wildcat" movements in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, the "bordiguista" militants, totally disconnected, continued their tasks of petty trade union bureaucrats collecting dues stamps from the less militant workers. In doing so, they totally vindicated the German communist left and its historical practice of "unitary" organizing on the fringes of and against the state trade unions.

Support for national liberation struggles and political opportunism.

Another tragic compromise was to develop and corrupt much of the orientation of the "Bordiguiste" current. This was the opportunist overbidding in defense and apology for the "incandescent awakening of the peoples of color". In practice, this nationalist lyricism was reflected in the support of the "Bordiguiste" movement for the Algerian national liberation struggle and the F.N.L. in the 1950s and 1960s. This was already a departure from the principled position that the "Italian left" had previously held.

"As for the principle of nationalities, it is not difficult to demonstrate that it has never been anything other than a phrase of mass agitation and, at best, an illusion of certain petty-bourgeois intellectual layers." Bordiga: Communism and the National Question.¹⁶

This opportunist approach came most probably from the will to compensate for the lack of independent workers' struggles and the leaden cloak of the counterrevolution with the political overvaluation of independence, democratic and even religious movements, to the detriment of the firm maintenance of the Marxist critique. This undoubtedly allowed the P.C.I. (Le Prolétaire) to win over "militants" (some of whom came from Maoism) attracted by activism around the question of emigrants (strikes in the "Sonacotra" shelters), as well as by a verbal cult of exacerbated violence, which led some to "armed reformism". In the following years, these errors were compounded by a delirious apology for the Khmer Rouge and support for "radical" factions of political Islam.

"Every sincere revolutionary and anti-imperialist militant cannot but feel an elementary duty of solidarity with the Indo-Chinese revolution and, in particular, with the revolutionary terror with which the most radical component of the Indo-Chinese movement defends and continues in Kampuchea economic, political and social convulsions which, in their most extreme manifestations, recall the national-revolutionary movements which Lenin's International set out to support, encourage and lead in the backward zones." Le Prolétaire No. 225, Paris, July 24–September 3, 1976.

This prose relegated the official "Bordiguiste" movement to the status of auxiliaries of the extreme left of capital. However, some opposed it.

"The other sections of the PCI could not fail to react. The orientation defended by El Oumami no longer has much to do with the initial positioning of the Bordiguiste current and is almost identical to that of the French Maoists." Benjamin Lalbat: Les bordiguistes sans Bordiga, p.207, already cited.

Some of the old party militants were forced to break with the sacrosanct organic discipline.

"The situation was no longer acceptable to all PCI militants who did not accept its "Third Worldist" turn. Suzanne Voute, of the Marseilles group, tries to overcome the compartmentalization of the organization to get in touch with the sections refusing to defend the "bourgeois slogans" in the national liberation struggles and the "activist" turn of the organization." Benjamin Lalbat, p.204.

These repeated excesses led to the organizational crisis of 1982, which shattered this suicidal immediatism, leaving only a handful of disoriented militants, unable to draw any political conclusions from this activist and Third Worldist failure. However, the end of the course of this tragic involution does not sum up the historical importance of the current of the so-called Italian communist left. On the contrary, it incites us to analyze and objectify the theoretical and political causes of the collapse of a current which, however, demanded invariability in the defense of proletarian principles.

"The Marxist communists must, therefore, propagate among the broad working masses the hatred of the fatherland, which is a means of capitalism to sow division among the proletarians of the different countries. They must defend among the broad working masses the need for fraternization, for the international union of all the proletarians of all countries. They must fiercely

¹⁶ Read "Communism and the National Question" [online], The Internet Archive of Marxists, French section, [accessed on 08/08/2023], https://www.marxists.org/francais/bordiga/works/1924/00/bordiga_nationale.htm as well as our archives available here <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsie/archives>

combat not only all the chauvinist, fascist or social-democratic tendencies that poison even the circles of the working class, but also all the masked tendencies that try to give any basis to the national ideal. They must fight against the legend of national wars, the legend of popular anti-imperialist crusades. They must use historical experience to anchor in the depths of the proletarian masses the faith in the victory of socialism, on purely classist, purely internationalist bases."
L'Ouvrier Communiste, n°2/3, October 1929.¹⁷

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