

**ON GRAMSCI  
AND OTHER WRITINGS**

**Palmiro Togliatti**

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Leader for nearly four decades of the most influential Communist Party of Western Europe, one of the earliest advocates of 'national roads' socialism, and the Communist leader who took the most consistent, if somewhat belated, stands against the deformations of the Stalin period, Palmiro Togliatti must rate as one of the most important figures in the history of the European labour movement.

Like Gramsci he came to Marxism along the 'royal road' which passed through Hegel and avoided that fatalistic passivity and verbosity which was so characteristic of the Italian Left at the early stages of its development. Like Gramsci also he was crucially influenced by the revolutionary vigour of the Turin workers and very quickly gravitated towards the 'Communist' faction of the PSI. Although very much influenced by Bordiga, who then led the revolutionary section of the Socialist Party, Togliatti had, by 1924, broken with him to join the group around Gramsci which by then had taken over the leadership of the recently-formed PCI. Sent

to Russia as the PCI's representative, Togliatti was out of the country when the party was driven underground. It was as one of the very few leaders of major stature who had not been imprisoned by Mussolini that he took over as head of the party in 1927.

Togliatti was not to set foot on his native soil for another seventeen years. Even though the PCI never possessed more than a small handful of members during this period, they were not locust years. Certainly they had their dark side. He had to knuckle under to the Left Turn, though he had opposed it until it was no longer prudent to do so, he had to survive the paranoid atmosphere of Moscow under the purges when a foreign Communist's life could be very dangerous, and he had, like many others, to make the thousand and one compromises which allowed him to physically and politically survive.

Yet the experience of these years was crucial to the development of the concept of the 'new party' and of more advanced democratic struggle once Togliatti returned to Italy in 1944. This theme is referred to in two of the most important essays in the collection, *The Communist Policy of National Unity*, and *Tasks of the Party in the Current Situation*. They are significant because they were written at a time of marked decomposition of bourgeois hegemony and they point to many of the practical difficulties which will confront any party of the working class which proposes itself, and the social forces which it leads, as a new and credible governing force.

By 1944 the Italian bourgeoisie had fulfilled Gramsci's prediction, made at his trial in 1928, that they would drag the country to destruction. Half the country was occupied by the Nazis, the other half was held by the Allies. There were shortages everywhere as the country's income fell to a level below that of the pre-Risorgimento period. The task of a revolutionary party in this situation, Togliatti said, was not to bemoan the past or to offer the country some vague propagandistic alternative to its present woes, but to organise itself as a mass force able to govern circumstances in a way that was beneficial to the working class.

What Togliatti said, then, is especially relevant today as the European ruling classes threaten to drive us into a new desolation. First of all, he believed, a Communist Party had to possess a revolutionary science based upon a very detailed and acute knowledge of national history and the *specific* way it had conditioned the class struggle. Way in advance of any other European Communist Party, the PCI had already begun the creation of this new science. It had done it through Gramsci's early writings, through documents



such as the Lyons Theses of 1926, Togliatti's Lectures on Fascism, the writings of party theorists in *Lo Stato Operaio*, and crucially through Gramsci's Prison Writings which had been sent to Togliatti in Moscow.

From this the PCI could orient itself to the specific features rather than wander around in a Blind Man's Bluff fashion hoping to grasp something in the general darkness. From this much more fruitful approach it could propose realistically a national road to socialism, based upon the peculiarities of the social formation through which it would have to be developed. The proletariat, Togliatti believed, had no alternative but to organise itself on the national terrain of class relations whose dominating points were as yet still controlled by the bourgeoisie. The party as the collective intellectual had to intellectually dominate this terrain and organise the counter-hegemonic thrust of the proletariat around its imperatives. Through a struggle which is coordinated around these imperatives, the working class rehearses its own leading role, and comes to know 'by the process of changing it, the whole reality of national life. In this way it produces the conditions of its own political rule, and the road towards becoming an effective ruling class is opened.' (*The Present Relevance of Gramsci's Theory and Practice*, 1957.)

But since the working class's advance through the trench and fortress system of bourgeois hegemony implied a shift in class relations to which the revolutionary party was dialectically tied, the Communist Party had to change also. This idea, already put forward in *Lezioni sul Fascismo*, that political parties were a particular expression of class equilibria, led Togliatti to propose the theory

of the 'new party', one which was adapted to the new international conditions consequent upon the defeat of Fascism and to the conditions of lessened bourgeois hegemony in Italy.

This new party could no longer be an association of propagandists which was cut off from the life of the nation by a comforting knowledge of its own correctness and superiority. It had to be a mass party, inserted in every crevice of popular life, and one which, through being able to cope with the nation's difficulties, could actually displace class relations in the working class's favour. The fate of a revolutionary party, Togliatti believed, depended upon its being able to exploit the thousand and one contradictions which capitalism daily exhibited. If it did not, if it 'damned the past and dreamt of the future', it would never do more than subsist at the margins of national life. Because it could never actually change the class relations which underlay bourgeois hegemony it would always be driven to utopianism and reformism.

Largely through the struggle of the Italian people, the theoretical and political innovation of Togliatti and Gramsci and many other lesser known leaders, and the concrete responses which the party at all levels gave to the enormous national crisis of 1939-1945, the PCI avoided entering the political Hampton Court Maze which many other smaller European Communist Parties still find themselves in.

It is because this Togliatti collection has so many important and practical things to say to us that its publication is to be welcomed. While these matters are a question of individual judgement, it might have been more useful to have concentrated less on Togliatti's thoughts about Gramsci, who is now increasingly dealt with in other studies, and more on Togliatti's own contribution to the development of the PCI's strategy. There is also a certain amount of overlap and repetition and this could have been avoided had there been found space for some of Togliatti's writings in the 1930s, especially his theories of a democracy of a new type, and also, for example, his *Rapporto* to the historic Eighth Congress in 1956. It is also a slight pity that room is found for two articles, the *Yalta Memorandum* and *Nuovi Argomenti Interview*, which already exist in English. These are clearly problems which arise from going for a one volume, representative, selection of his works. However, any collection which ranges as widely as this one does and which touches on so many aspects of the PCI's development, has to be given a very warm reception.

**Gordon Robinson**