Amadeo Bordiga
The Guignol in History
Following the Thread of Time

In a quotation from Engels\textsuperscript{1} that we recently cited with regard to the Marxist assessment of the Russian revolution we emphasized the sentence: “The age of chosen peoples is gone forever”. It is hardly likely that someone will come along and want to draw their sword to defend the contrary thesis, after the infamous process that led to German Nazism; and after the fate suffered by the Jews who paid a very high price in the expurgation of that incredible racist fury: crushed first by Hitler’s Aryan hatred, then by the deals of British imperialism, today by the inexorable Soviet apparatus, and tomorrow most likely by the cosmopolitan, tolerant and self-righteous policy of the United States, which is now sinking its teeth into the slave trade.

It will be much more difficult, however, to make people see that the time of the chosen individuals, of the “men of destiny”—as Shaw called Napoleon, above all in order to make fun of him dressed in pyjamas—of the great men, of the military strategists and leaders of history, of the Supreme Guides of humanity, has also passed.

Currently, however, on all sides and universally in all belief systems, Catholic or Masonic, fascist or
democratic, liberal or socialistoid, it appears that—to a much greater extent than in the past—no one does anything but exalt and bow down in servile admiration before the name of this or that personality, consistently attributing to him the whole merit of the “cause” he represents.

Everyone agrees in attributing to this personality determinant influences over past events and those to come, and in granting him of course the personal qualities of the leaders who have already taken up their abodes in the empyrean: they even dispute ad nauseam concerning whether they should do so by acclamation or democratic vote, or maybe it should be imposed by the party, or even by a coup de main on the part of the individual in question, but they all agree that everything depends on the success of this procedure, in the allied camp as well as that of the enemy.

If this generalized opinion was correct, and we were to lack the power to negate and undermine it, we would have to confess that the Marxist doctrine would have plunged into the lowest condition of bankruptcy. But to the contrary, and as usual, we have never ceased to champion the following two positions: that of classical Marxism, which has already put the great men of history
out to pasture; and that of the weavers of the web of what is to be [the Moirai or Fates of Greek mythology], which in light of the re-evaluation of the achievements of great men that we are now undertaking, confirms the Marxist theory by other paths.

**YESTERDAY**

**Questions and Answers**

In this connection, the responses given by Frederick Engels to questions about this topic are of interest. In his letter dated January 25, 1894, the question of great men is raised in the second part of the second question. Both questions are important. They are as follows:

1. To what degree do economic conditions have a causal influence? (Note that the word is causal, not casual).
2. What role does the factor of race or the factor of the individual play in the materialist conception of Marx and Engels?

I am also interested in the question to which he responded in a letter dated September 21, 1890: How did Marx, and Engels himself, understand the fundamental principle of historical materialism?; that is, according to them, do the production and reproduction
of real life constitute in and of themselves the determinant moments, or do they only comprise the foundation for the other conditions?

The connection between these two points—the function of the great individuals in history, and the precise link between economic conditions and human activity—is explained clearly by Engels in his responses, which he modestly claims had only been more or less sketched out in private and not composed with “the precision” that he sought when he was writing for the public. Actually, Engels reaffirms the general depiction of the Marxist conception of history that was set forth in Anti-Dühring (Part I, Chapters 9-11; Part II, Chapters 2-4) and above all in the crystalline essay on Feuerbach, published in 1888, Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy. And to give a luminous example of a specific application of the method, he refers to Marx’s The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, which contains a brilliant description of an individual who could be taken as the prototype of the “guignol”, a term that we shall now proceed to explain.
The Continuity of Life

At the cost of a digression, which is also the anticipation of a Thread, whose master key has for some time been on the stairway of the quarry, we would like to express our congratulations to the unknown student who asked the question in the first letter. It is often the case that those who have not understood anything, are the ones who wave their hands in class and say they have assimilated and digested everything, with the intention of being able to vomit it all up and repeat sentences from memory. The most sincere and interested students, however, are always convinced that they need to acquire a better understanding, even when they have already approached mastery of the subject. The young and, by chance, somewhat irreverent, interrogator of Engels adopted, instead of the normal expression, “economic conditions”, the exact and equivalent expression, “production and reproduction of physical life”. As students of the next higher class, we have replaced real with physical. The adjective real does not have the same meaning in the Germanic languages as it does in the Latin languages.
We once again insist, following the masters of Marxism, that production and reproduction are the same, quoting Engels when he defines reproduction, or the sensual and life-generating sphere of life, as the “production of the producers”.

It would be useless to erect an economic science, or even a metaphysical one, on the basis of immutable laws, and even more so if it were to be a dialectical science—that is, it would be of no use to once again compose the theory of a succession of phases and cycles—if we were to examine a group, or a society of producers, devoted of course to work and economic labor aimed at satisfying their needs by preserving their existence and their productive force to the limits of their lifespans, whose members would have undergone an operation (maybe supervised by a racist head surgeon!) that rendered them incapable of reproducing and having biological successors.

Such a condition would radically transform—the followers of all economic schools will admit this—all the relations of production and distribution of this hypothetical community.

This is relevant because it reminds us just how important, in the consolidation of the structure of
economic relations, is the sector of production that prepares food (and other things) that contributes to the *preservation* of the physical life of the worker, as well as the biological *reproduction* that prepares—with a major investment of consumption and productive efforts—the future replacements of the workers themselves.

As we shall see, with Engels and Marx and against Feuerbach, man is neither all *love* nor all *war*. Be that as it may, the integral perspective of the double economic base of society applies to this aspect, too: materialism has already been victorious on the field of production, and no one denies the predominance of the criterion of the material sum of the results; and on this basis it is a simple matter to found the theory of the activity of struggles, passing from molecular disputes of the alleged “*homo oeconomicus*”, which has in its heart not a ventricle but an accountant, to the class confrontation in which is summed up, with the economy, all the other forms of human activity. But it is in the field of genetics and that of sensuality, where the most ardent parish priests seem to be celebrating mass in the absence of transcendent and mystical motives, and where the attraction between the male and female has to be translated—even if only for the purpose of raising it
above the filth of modern civilization—in terms of economic causality, and where it is necessary to found the most robust pillars of the revolutionary doctrine of socialism.

That the individual, great or small in terms of banal common sense, tends to seek economic advantage and conceives of himself in erotic terms is a problem posed in a miserable and meaningless way. We shifted the dynamic of the process to the activity of the species, and we situated the effort to preserve the lives and abilities of the active elements of society, in the same procedure of their multiplication and continuity; both cycles are much more extensive than those in which the idiotic fear of death and the stupid belief in the eternity of the individual develop. Individual death and individual eternity are the products and decisive features of societies that are infested with ruling and exploiting classes, parasites on labor and on love.

The curse of living by the sweat of one’s brow and in suffering, an ideology that defines societies with class rule, that is, societies that are based on monopolies over leisure and pleasure, will be abolished by socialism.
The correct approach to the problem that we have posed, that is, the subordination of the problem of historical personalities to the general problem of the materialist conception, appears immediately. Imagine for a moment that the future development of a society, or even that of humanity, were to decisively depend on the presence, of the appearance, or of the particular action of just one man. It would no longer be possible to argue or to prove that the essential origin of all social life resides in the characteristics of determined conditions and economic situations that are analogous for the great masses of the “rest” of the individuals, whether they are normal or “little” people.

If it was necessary for this long and difficult road, which we shall never agree to reduce to a simple automatism, of the parallel development of labor and consumption up until the final transformation of the social revolutions, with the assumption of power by another class, with the rupture of the forms that determined that parallelism of productive relations, to pass through the head (critique, consciousness, will, action) of one man, and this in the sense that it is a necessary element, of such a nature that
in his absence this transformation would not take place, then it could not be denied that at a certain moment all of history would be found “in his thought” and would depend on an action on the part of this individual. This would amount to an insuperable contradiction, since, once we have made this concession, it would be necessary to submit to the viewpoint that is opposed to ours, that is, to the viewpoint that claims that there is no causality in history, or laws, but that everything takes place by unpredictable “chance”, everything is aleatory, and thus can indeed be studied, but only after, never before the event. And if this were true, precisely, our viewpoint would necessarily be annihilated, because, how can it be denied that the birth of this colossus was a chance event, how is it possible to avoid reducing the entire field of reproduction to a false step ... on the part of a spermatozoid?

We have long fought a bitter struggle against the most rational and modern concept of the “great man”, which is so typical of the enlightened bourgeoisie, who wanted historical facts to preventively pass not through one, but through all brains: preferring general education and consciousness to the revolutionary struggle. But this incomplete and marginal conception is even more insufficient than the one that concentrates all
consciousness in the individual skull, since we do not see how it could be sustained, except by being joined in the embrace, so many times invoked by tradition, between a divine being and a human being.

We have already shattered into pieces the theory, even more stupid, of the universal popular consciousness, which is based on the one-half plus one of brains in order to pilot history, because from the Marxist point of view it is pitiful and sad; shall we then allow the theory of the single brain to survive? And why not in that case the theory of the single reproducer, the human seed, which is evidently less foolish?

We shall once again return to the main question: what comes first, nature or thought? Is the history of the human species an aspect of real nature or of an act of “parthenogenesis” on the part of thought?

The brief text by Engels on Feuerbach, or rather the text directed against an apologetic piece by Starcke (which Engels as usual defines as a general sketch, or even as an illustration of the materialist conception of history), compounded of one part of synthesis of the history of philosophy, and one part of the history of the class struggle, is magnificent for its scope and its brevity.
A brief exposition would be sufficient (today the longer sessions take days); a couple of half-days, with the appropriate commentary. We shall limit ourselves here to providing a report verifying the credentials of the delegate.

Historically, Engels reminds us, it was from the idealist Hegel, whose philosophy could have served as a basis for the German conservative right and reactionary currents, that the materialist Feuerbach traced his heritage, under the influence of the powerful standards of materialism and the French Revolution. And it was from Feuerbach, to some extent, that the later and very different conceptions of Marx and Engels were derived, after a brief period of admiration until 1840 with the publication of *The Essence of Christianity* and afterwards by a no less radical critique of the critique Feuerbach directed at Hegel. This critique was condensed in Marx’s famous theses of 1845, which had remained unknown for more than forty years, which concluded with the eleventh thesis: “up until now the philosophers have merely criticized the world; the point is to change it.”
Hegel had situated human activity on the first plane, but he was unable to provide a revolutionary development for this premise on the historical field due to his absolute idealism. The future society along with its design and model were already contained *ab aeterno* in the *absolute idea*. Once this discovery had been made and it had been elaborated in the mind of a philosopher, with its own rule of pure thought, and these results were transmitted in the system of law and the institution of the state, the integral realization of the Idea had already been executed. What is there in all of this that is unacceptable to us? Two points, which are the two dialectical aspects of this notion. We reject the need for an endpoint, for a definitive and unsurpassable *barrier*. We reject the possibility that all the properties and laws of thought should have been given in advance, before the cycle of nature and the species have even begun.

Let us quote Engels: “Just as knowledge is unable to reach a complete conclusion in a perfect, ideal condition of humanity, so is history unable to do so; a perfect society, a perfect ‘state’, are things which can only exist in imagination. On the contrary, all successive historical systems are only transitory stages in the endless course of development of human society from the lower to the higher.”
Hegel had gone beyond all the preceding philosophers by proposing the dynamic of the contradictions that compose the long road to the present. Just like his predecessors, however, and just like all possible philosophers, he encapsulates and congeals this lively beehive of contradictions in his “system”. “But if all contradictions are once and for all disposed of, we shall have arrived at so-called absolute truth — world history will be at an end. And yet it has to continue, although there is nothing left for it to do — hence, a new, insoluble contradiction.”

Here Engels makes short work of the old objection, resuscitated by Croce shortly before his death (see the refutation in the fourth issue of the second series of *Prometeo*), that avers that Marxist materialism will also bring an end to history, because it claims that the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie will be the last of the class struggles. In his inveterate anthropomorphism every idealist confuses the end of the struggles between economic classes with the end of all struggles and of all development in the world, in nature and in history; and he cannot see, within the limits, that are for him the light and for us are clouds, of an individual skull, that communism will in turn be an intense and unpredictable struggle for life on the part of
the species, which no one has yet brought to a conclusion, since the sterile and pathological solitude of the Ego does not deserve the name of life, just as the treasure of the miser is not wealth, not even personal wealth.

**Spirit and Existence**

Feuerbach arrives and eliminates the antithesis. Nature is no longer the manifestation of the Idea (reader: stretch the thread, which has not broken, and let us proceed towards the thesis that history is not the manifestation of the Guignol!); it is not true that thought lies at the origin, and nature is a derivative of thought. Materialism, among the enthusiasm of the youth, including the young Marx, is *restored to its throne*. “Nature exists independently of all philosophy. It is the foundation upon which we human beings, ourselves products of nature, have grown up. Nothing exists outside nature and man, and the higher beings our religious fantasies have created are only the fantastic reflection of our own essence.” And Engels, up until this point, also applauds, even though he is now quite old; he only pauses to ridicule the opposition that, for practical activity, Feuerbach erects to replace the categorical imperative of
Kant: love. This is not about sex, but about solidarity, the “innate” fraternity that unites men with each other. It was upon this basis that the bourgeois and Prussian “true socialism” of the epoch was founded, which was powerless to see the demands of revolutionary activity, of the struggle between classes, and of the rejection of bourgeois forms.

This is the point where Engels rewrites the epilogue of the philosophical construction that preserves the materialist basis, freeing it of the metaphysical ball and chain and dialectical impotence, which immobilized it in another way, in the same “glacial historicity” of idealism, however much it was coated in a glaze of practical will and activity.

Engels elucidated this problem by relating it to the formation of schemas of thought since the times of the primitive peoples. Here we may have to take another look in order to get a better angle on the question, although it would be especially useful to our movement to integrate and amplify (a job that the future will no doubt assume responsibility for) the conjectures in which Engels confronts his deductions with the contributions of the positive sciences.
Engels writes: "Thus the question of the relation of thinking to being, the relation of the spirit to nature ... could for the first time be put forward in its whole acuteness, could achieve its full significance, only after humanity in Europe had awakened from the long hibernation of the Christian Middle Ages. The question of the position of thinking in relation to being, a question which, by the way, had played a great part also in the scholasticism of the Middle Ages, the question: which is primary, spirit or nature — that question, in relation to the church, was sharpened into this: Did God create the world or has the world been in existence eternally?

"The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other — and among the philosophers, Hegel, for example, this creation often becomes still more intricate and impossible than in Christianity — comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism."

Once this dividing line between the two groups of philosophers has been clarified, the problem of the relation between existence and thought remains to be solved. Are they mutually alien or are they
complementary? Can human thought fully know and describe the essence of nature? There are philosophers who have contrasted and separated the two elements: object and subject. Among these philosophers is Kant, with his incomprehensible “thing in itself”. Hegel overcame the obstacle, but in an idealist way, that is, he absorbed the thing and nature into the Idea, which allowed him to examine and understand its concept. This is what Feuerbach denounced and fought against: “... the Hegelian premundane existence of the ‘absolute idea’, the ‘pre-existence of the logical categories’ before the world existed, is nothing more than the fantastic survival of the belief in the existence of an extra-mundane creator....” This is already enough for a work of critical demolition.

Engels, in a clear declaration, accuses German culture of not having been capable of going beyond this critical attitude, as well as of its inability to understand the life of human society as a movement and never-ending process, for which Hegel had only been able to provide the foundations. This anti-historical conception on the part of German philosophy condemned the Middle Ages as a kind of useless and obscure digression (today’s Marxists must arrive at a similar evaluation of the irrational attitude shown by the anti-fascist and anti-nazi
struggle and critique). German philosophy was incapable of properly situating the Middle Ages with its causes and effects, just as it was incapable of discovering the great progress attained in that period and its enormous contribution to the future.

“All the advances of natural science which had been made in the meantime served them only as new proofs against the existence of a creator of the world.... They, likewise, could conceive of a man without religion only as a monster, and used to say to us: ‘Donc, l’atheisme c’est votre religion!’ ['Well, then atheism is your religion!'].”

The Play and the Actors

Engels then proceeds to the organic presentation of the historical materialist doctrine, perhaps the best that has ever been written. Here the step is taken that Feuerbach had not dared to take: replacing “the cult of abstract man” with “the science of real men and of their historical development”.

This leads us to a consideration of Hegel, who established (rather than discovered) the dialectic, which for him was “the self-development of the concept”. In Marx the dialectic was converted into “the conscious reflex of the dialectical motion of the real world”. As in
the famous phrase, the dialectic was put back on its feet, so that it no longer stood on its head.

Marxism begins by examining social science and historical science with the same method that applies to the natural sciences. But no one is unaware of the particular characteristics of this “domain” of nature, which is that of the life of the human species. We return to the “responses” of Engels, reproducing only a few fundamental quotations: “In nature there are unconscious agents ... in the history of society, to the contrary, the actors are obviously in possession of consciousness, men who act with reflection or passion in order to achieve certain ends.... But this intention, although important for historical investigation, especially with regard to particular eras or events, has no effect on the fact that the course of history is determined by general internal laws.... Very seldom do people obtain what they want ... all the confrontations between innumerable individual wills and actions led to a state of affairs that is absolutely analogous to the one that rules in unconscious nature. The aims of actions are desired, but the results that are obtained are not the ones that were wanted, or if they seem to correspond to the desired end, they ultimately have consequences that are very different from the desired ones.... Men make their
history, regardless of the result, while each individual man pursues his own ends ... the result of these multiple wills acting in different directions, and their effect on the external world, is precisely history.... Therefore, if you want to investigate the motor forces that (consciously or unconsciously, and all-too-often unconsciously) lie behind these motives in the name of which men act in history, and which constitute the authentic supreme original forces of history, you must not focus so much on the motives of isolated men, however relevant they may be, as on the motives that impel great masses, whole peoples, and, within each people, entire classes; and not just momentarily, in rapid explosions, as in the brief flare-up of a bonfire built with straw, but in continued actions that translate into great historical changes.” [The passages quoted in this paragraph were translated from the Spanish translation—American translator’s note.]

The philosophical part is followed by the historical part up to the great modern proletarian movement. Once this point is reached philosophy comes to an end, in the domain of nature as well as that of history. “It is no longer a question anywhere of inventing interconnections from out of our brains, but of discovering them in the facts.”
Clear Oracles

Note the questions and pay attention to the responses, which will not be obscure or ambiguous like those of the ancient Oracles, but transparent and in accordance with our Marxist positions.

Engels answers the question that we previously referred to dating from 1890:

“... the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life.”

“The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas — also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events whose inner interconnection is so remote or so impossible of proof
that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible), the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary.” Now to the first question from the letter of 1894 about the causal influence of economic conditions: “What we understand by the economic conditions, which we regard as the determining basis of the history of society, are the methods by which human beings in a given society produce their means of subsistence and exchange the products among themselves (in so far as division of labour exists). Thus the entire technique of production and transport is here included…. this technique also determines the method of exchange and, further, the division of products, and with it, after the dissolution of tribal society, the division into classes also and hence the relations of lordship and servitude and with them the state, politics, law, etc.”

If, as the above letter states, technique depends to a very great extent on science, we are even more justified in saying that science depends on the conditions and exigencies of technique.... All hydrostatics (Torricelli, etc.) was generated by Italy’s need during the 16th and 17th centuries to regulate the flow of the surplus water from the mountains (see the various articles in our newspaper and journal about the precocious development of capitalist agriculture in Italy, and on the decline of the
modern technologies for hydraulic containment demonstrated by the Polesine floods).

As for the first point raised in question number 2, about the role played by race, we shall only quote this brilliant sentence (to spin into our Thread): “race is itself an economic factor.” Didn’t you hear what he said about production and reproduction? Race is a material chain of reproductive acts.

And finally, as for the second point in question number 2, which concerns the guignol, we shall allow the magnificent Frederick to speak for himself: “Men make their history themselves, but not as yet with a collective will or according to a collective plan or even in a definitely defined, given society. Their efforts clash, and for that very reason all such societies are governed by necessity, which is supplemented by and appears under the forms of accident. The necessity which here asserts itself amidst all accident is again ultimately economic necessity. This is where the so-called great men come in for treatment. That such and such a man and precisely that man arises at that particular time in that given country is of course pure accident. But cut him out and there will be a demand for a substitute, and this substitute will be found, good or bad, but in the long run
he will be found. That Napoleon, just that particular Corsican, should have been the military dictator whom the French Republic, exhausted by its own war, had rendered necessary, was an accident; but that, if a Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place, is proved by the fact that the man has always been found as soon as he became necessary: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc."

“What about Marx?”, Engels hears someone shout from the audience. For it applies to him, too. “While Marx discovered the materialist conception of history, Thierry, Mignet, Guizot, and all the English historians up to 1850 are the proof that it was being striven for, and the discovery of the same conception by Morgan proves that the time was ripe for it and that indeed it had [Engels’ emphasis] to be discovered.”

Engels, however, in a note on Feuerbach, states that his own talent was attributable to Marx, who was a genius. It would be unfortunate if, after our whole demonstration, it was not understood that there are major differences between one man and another, not just from the muscular point of view, but also with regard to the potential of the cerebral machine.
The fact is, however, that, after having liquidated the extreme case of the Shavian “man of destiny”, we must not allow ourselves to nourish any illusions about the disappearance of the “cretins of destiny”, those poor self-proclaimed candidates who want to occupy the vacuum prepared for them by history, who are so anxious about seizing their opportunity and wait in ambush on glory.

**TODAY**

**Recent Correspondence**

We would like to conclude our treatment of this theme with a letter we sent to a female working class comrade who, after a much too modest apology for her imperfect powers of expression, was capable of posing the question in a most evocative manner. We include part of our response.

“You write: ‘You speak truly when you affirm that a Marxist must remain faithful to principles and not to men ... if we say that men do not count and we have to set them aside, to what extent are we supposed to do so? For if men are in part the cause that determines the revolt, we cannot completely forget about them.’ Far
from being an inaccurate approach to the question, this is a very useful way of doing so.

“The social reality and actions that concern us as Marxists are the work of men, they have men as actors. An indisputable truth, and without the human element our construction could not function. But this element was traditionally considered in a very different way than it is treated by Marxism.

“Your simple exposition could be expressed in three ways; and then the problem can be contemplated in all its profundity, which has the merit of having brought you closer to its solution. Social reality is the work of men. Events are events carried out by men. Acts are the work of the man named Titus, of the man named Sempronius, of the man named Gaius.

“Not only are we Marxists distinguished from the ‘rest’ by the fact (since man is one part animal, and the other part is a being who thinks) that they say that man thinks first, and then as a consequence of this thought arranges his relations with material and even animal life, while we as Marxists say that physical, animal, nutritional relations, etc., lie at the basis of everything.
“The question is not precisely posed at the level of individual relations, but only in the reality of the complex social relations and phenomena engendered by these relations.

“Thus, the three formulations of the way that men intervene (forgive me for the pompous expression) in history are as follows:

“The traditional religious or authoritarian systems assert that when a Great Man, or someone who is Enlightened by the divinity, thinks and speaks, everyone else must heed his words and obey.

“The more modern bourgeois idealists assert that their ideal part, even though it is common to all civilized men, determines certain trends, according to which men are led to act. Here, too, certain individual men (thinkers, agitators, military commanders) will still have to provide the instigating force for all development.

“Finally, the Marxists assert that the common action of men, or that aspect of common action that is not accidental and individual that exists in human action, is born from material needs. Consciousness and thought come later and determine the ideology of each era.
“And then what? The same as for everyone else, it is human actions that are transformed into historical and social factors. Who makes a revolution? Men, of course.

“But according to the first formulation, the Enlightened Man, priest or king, was essential.

“For the second formulation, consciousness and the Ideal were essential, for the conquest of minds.

“For us, it is the totality of economic facts and the community of interests.

“Men are not mere puppets being jerked around by strings ... by necessity, but protagonists who create and speak for themselves. Within the community of the proletarian class there are various degrees and strata, and complex dispositions for action, and different capacities to perceive or to expound the common theory.

“But what is new about our theory is that for us a handful of particular men are not indispensable, as they were for past revolutions, not even in the form of symbols, or as strong personalities or even as names.”
The Inertia of Tradition

The fact is that, since it is precisely the traditions that are the last to disappear, men are often swayed by the hypnotic attraction of their passion for the Leader. And why not use this element, which, although we know it cannot affect the course of the class struggle in the slightest, might enhance recruitment and hasten somewhat the onset of the great confrontation?

It seems to me that the fruit of the harsh lessons of so many decades is this: it is not possible to renounce agitation among men, nor is it possible to win by means of them, and it is precisely we, the Italian communist left, who have always maintained that the collectivity of men who struggle cannot be composed of all men or even the majority of them, but that this collectivity must be a not-too-numerous party and the vanguard circles associated with its organization. The famous names that galvanize the masses, however, have caused us to lose a thousand men for every ten we gained. We therefore put an end to this tendency and to the best of our abilities we have abolished, not men of course, but the Man with that particular Name and with that certain Curriculum Vitae.... I already know the response that will quickly come to mind for the most disingenuous comrades: LENIN.
Although it is true that after 1917 we won over many militants to the revolutionary struggle because they were convinced that Lenin knew what to do and made the revolution: they came, they fought and then provided our program with more depth. And thus proletarians and whole masses of people were mobilized who might otherwise have remained inactive. I admit it. But, what happened then? Using the same name, a wave of recruitment took place that led to the total opportunist corruption of the proletarians. We have regressed so far that today the vanguard of the class is much more backward than it was prior to 1917, when very few people had ever heard the name of Lenin.

Having said that, I maintain that the theses and directives established by Lenin comprise the best summary of the collective proletarian doctrine, of the authentic class politics; but I also hold that his name, as a name, falls on the negative side of the balance sheet. It has obviously been subject to exaggeration. Lenin himself was sick and tired of the constant praise to which he was subjected. Only worthless little nobodies think they are indispensable in history. Lenin laughed like a little child at such exaggerations. He was followed, adored and understood.
Have I succeeded in providing you, by way of these brief phrases, with an idea of the problem? A time will come when a powerful class movement will wield correct theory and engage in effective action without exploiting any feelings of identification with any names. I think that day will come. Anyone who does not is nothing but a victim of their disillusionment with the new Marxist view of history, or even worse, a stooge planted among the oppressed by the enemy.

As you see I have not added the historical effect of the enthusiasm for Lenin to the positive side of the balance sheet, nor have I added the disastrous effect of thousands of renegade leaders in the negative column of the balance sheet, but only the negative effects of the name, Lenin. Nor have I yielded to the insidious lamentation: *If only Lenin had not died!* Stalin, too, was a Marxist, with all the right credentials and a man of action of the first water. The error of the Trotskyists lies in having sought the key to this immense distortion of revolutionary forces in the wisdom or the attitudes of men.
Contemporary Figures

Why did we call the theory of great men in history the theory of the guignol?

The guignol is a puppet that attracts attention, while simultaneously revealing its absolute vacuity. Elongated, staggering, leaning one way and another as its oversized and utterly stupid-looking head wobbles on its shoulders, walking unsteadily. In Naples they call it *batte-il-occhio* [shut-eye], with reference to its constant blinking and winking like a scatterbrained dolt or a vulgar, insensitive, loudmouth philistine; in Bologna, foregoing local jargon, they shout at it: *Tell us you’re a braggart!*

Contemporary political history in this year 1953 (in which everything reflects the general situation, not accidentally, in which a semi-putrescent form, capitalism, is not in danger of dying) has treated us to entire constellations of guignols. The foul miasma that is native to such epochs disseminates among the stupefied and hallucinating masses the absolute conviction that these guignols, and only they, are responsible for everything, and that everything depends on these guignols of destiny, and furthermore and above all that the changing of the guards in the *guignolesque* board of directors is
the factor (woe to us, Frederick!) that determines history.

Among the chiefs of state, in view of the complete absence of a new word that would define all of them or even provide a form of address that would be common to all of them, there is an infallible trio: Franco, Tito, Perón. These champions, these winners of the historical beauty pageant, have brought to the nec plus ultra the supreme art of abolishing from their personalities every sign of individuality, except for the dynastic noses and the eagle eyes!

As for Hitler and Mussolini, we have an encore, since the former makes us think of the formidable General Staff composed of non-guignols that surrounded him, and who were therefore elevated to the rank of criminals, who not only made history, but violated it at their pleasure! The latter gives us pain because of the ineffable stratum of sub-guignols who advised him, and who, after the changing of the guard in 1944-1945, gave way to a gang of associated guignols, who today provide us with such delights.

But it is a most beautiful trio that is displayed not in space, but in time, providing the proof that all
succession, whether by inheritance or by election, produces the same historical effect that is obtained by multiplying zero by zero, yielding the result of Delano (Roosevelt), Harry (Truman) and Ike (Eisenhower). The American forces that occupy the world will justify the definition of this period as that of the fall of the guignols.

**Pallid Diadochi**

A no less expressive constellation of the times we are living in has been provided to us by the national leaders of recent and current history, who were often violently overthrown, in the countries allied with Russia. We do not know where we would find more guignols, in the lower Balkans or on Marianne’s lap. When Alexander the Great died, the Macedonian empire that spanned two continents was fragmented into lesser states that were divided up among the different generals (Diadochi); these states, in a relatively brief period of time, disappeared without leaving a trace. Anyone who can remember their names will get a high grade in history class.

When history needs him it always finds the right man. It might be that it finds it in a head that is largely bereft of sense. But when it calls for guignols it might even occur
that the position could be occupied by a man of merit. And here we are not calling anybody an idiot.

The fact is, in Italy for example, that the career openings for great personalities include posts that had once been occupied by historical colossi. It was actually the parody of a tragedy that unfolded in its solemn development on the occasion of the sixtieth birthday of Togliatti, with a ceremony that was fully oriented towards the past, which after fully informing us concerning his *curriculum vitae* and his works, concluded with this summary definition: *a great patriot*.

A century has passed since such praise had any meaning, and hardly provides us with any hope for a greatness that is not just stupidity. History has already found its heroes, without searching too hard: Mazzini, Garibaldi, Cavour, and so many others who will not fall off their pedestals. To tell the truth, we have very little left of a fatherland, but we have plenty of patriots. The bus of revolutionary glory is already full. This is by no means intended to deny the qualities of the subject in question (Togliatti): his writings exhumed from the year 1919 (when he committed the mistake of not paying close enough attention to them) do him honor. He never ceased to be a Marxist, because he never was a Marxist. He supported
the same things yesterday that he does today: the mission of the fatherland. Very great, and, if you like, patriotic; like a very great horse and buggy in these times of the electric train and the jet airplane.

If, after having discussed Lenin, we have made no references at all to Stalin, who died recently, it is not because our scalpel, after a punitive expedition, was retired to adorn the mausoleum, although such a wide array of possibilities is presented for such work. Stalin is still the outgrowth of an anonymous iron environment of the party that was constructed under the non-accidental historical impulses of a collective, anonymous and profound movement. It is the reactions of the historical foundations, and not the chance cases of a vulgar careerism, that determine the reversal by means of which, in a Thermidorian outburst, the revolutionary group had to immolate itself, and while a name can be a symbol, even when a person has no effect at all on history, the name of Stalin remains as a symbol of that extraordinary process: the most powerful proletarian force reduced to slavery for the revolutionary construction of modern capitalism, on the ruins of a retarded and lifeless world.
The bourgeois revolution has to have a symbol and a name, even though it, too, was carried out in the final instance by anonymous forces and material relations. It is the last revolution that was unable to be anonymous, and that is why we call it romantic.

Our revolution will arise when no one bows and scrapes anymore before anyone, which is a sign of particular vileness and ignominy. And as an instrument of the power of its own class a party will exist, unified in all its doctrinal, organizational and combative features, and for its members the name or merits of this or that individual will be of little importance, and it will be able to negate the individual consciousness, will, initiative, merit or fault, because it will embrace in its unity all of these things within well-defined limits.

**Morphine and Cocaine**

Lenin took the definition from Marx, which many have accused of being trite, according to which religion is the opiate of the people. The cult of the divine being is therefore the morphine of the revolution, with which the active faculties of man are put to sleep, and it is not by chance that in the recent period of mourning (for Stalin)
prayers are being said for the deceased in all the churches of the USSR.

The cult of the Leader, the cult of personality, not a divine but a human personality, is an even worse social narcotic that we shall define as the cocaine of the proletariat. The hope for a hero who will inspire men to fight and lead them into battle is like an injection of amphetamine, for which the pharmacologists have found the perfect term: heroin. After a brief period of pathological high-energy intoxication, chronic prostration and collapse follow. There are no injections for a revolution that hesitates, in a society that has been in a torpid state of pregnancy for eighteen months, and is still overdue.

We reject the vulgar recourse to the exceptional man, and instead put our wager on the other formula, that of communism, that is, a society that has abolished the guignols.

Amadeo Bordiga  
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1. Before reading this article it is recommended that you read the text by Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, since Bordiga’s text contains numerous comments, more or less literal quotations, evaluations, critiques and arguments that are based on this work by Engels.