Lucio Colletti

A Political and Philosophical Interview

Can you give us a brief sketch of your initial intellectual origins, and entry into political life?

My intellectual origins were similar to those of virtually all Italian intellectuals of my generation. Their starting-point during the last years of fascism was the neo-idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. I wrote my doctorate in 1949 on Croce's logic, although I was already by then critical of Croceanism. Then between 1949 and 1950 my decision to join the Italian Communist Party gradually matured. I should add that this decision was in many ways a very difficult one, and that—although this will perhaps seem incredible today—study of Gramsci's writings was not a major influence on it. On the contrary, it was my reading of certain of Lenin's texts that was determinant for my adhesion to the PCI: in particular, and despite all the reservations which it may inspire and which I share towards it today, his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. At the same time, my entry into the Communist Party was precipitated by the outbreak

of the Korean War, although this was accompanied by the firm conviction that it was North Korea which had launched an attack against the South. I say this, not in order to furbish myself with an *a posteriori* political virginity, but because it is the truth. My attitudes even then were of profound aversion towards Stalinism: but at that moment the world was rent into two, and it was necessary to choose one side or the other. So, although it meant doing violence to myself, I opted for membership of the PCI—with all the deep resistances of formation and culture that a petty-bourgeois intellectual of that epoch in Italy could feel towards Stalinism. You must remember that we had lived through the experience of fascism, so that all the paraphernalia of orchestrated unanimity, rhythmical applause and charismatic leadership of the international workers' movement, were spontaneously repugnant to anyone of my background. Nevertheless, in spite of this, because of the Korean conflict and the scission of the world into two blocs, I opted for entry into the PCI. The left-wing of the PSI did not provide any meaningful alternative, because at that time it was essentially a subordinate form of Communist militancy, organically linked to the policies of the PCI. It is important to emphasize the relative lateness of my entry into the Party—I was about 25 or 26—and my lack of the more traditional illusions about it. For the death of Stalin in 1953 had a diametrically opposite effect on me to that which it had on most Communist or pro-Communist intellectuals. They felt it as a disaster, the disappearance of a kind of divinity, while for me it was an emancipation. This also explains my attitude towards the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956, and in particular towards Khruschev's Secret Speech. While most of my contemporaries reacted to the crisis of Stalinism as a personal catastrophe, the collapse of their own convictions and certitudes, I experienced Khruschev's denunciation of Stalin as an authentic liberation. It seemed to me that at last Communism could become what I had always believed it should become—an historical movement whose acceptance involved no sacrifice of one's own reason.

What was your personal experience, as a young militant and philosopher, within the PCI *from 1950 to 1956?*

My membership of the Party was an extremely important and positive experience for me. I can say that if I were to relive my life again, I would repeat the experience of both my entry and my exit. I regret neither the decision to join nor the decision to leave the Party. Both were critical for my development. The first importance of militancy in the PCI lay essentially in this: the Party was the site in which a man like myself, of completely intellectual background, made real contact for the first time with people from other social groups, whom I would otherwise never have encountered except in trams or buses. Secondly, political activity in the Party allowed me to overcome certain forms of intellectualism and thereby also to understand somewhat better the problems of the relationship between theory and practice in a political movement. My own role was that of a simple rank-and-file militant. From 1955 onwards, however, I became involved in the internal struggles over cultural policy in the PCI. At that time, the official orientation of the Party was centred on an interpretation of Marxism as an 'absolute historicism', a formula which had a very precise mean-

ing—it signified a way of treating Marxism as if it were a continuation and development of the historicism of Benedetto Croce himself. It was in this light that the Party also sought to present the work of Gramsci. Togliatti's version of Gramsci's thought was, of course, not an accurate one. But the fact is that Gramsci's writings were utilized to present Marxism as the fulfilment and conclusion of the tradition of Italian Hegelian idealism, in particular that of Croce. The objective of the internal struggles in which I became engaged was by contrast to give priority to the knowledge and study of the work of Marx himself. It was in this context that my relationship to Galvano Della Volpe, who at that time was effectively ostracized within the PCI, became very important for me.[1] One outcome of the theoretical struggle between these two tendencies was the entry of Della Volpe, Pietranera and myself into the editorial committee of *Società*, which was then the main cultural journal of the Party, in 1957–8.

To what extent was the change in the composition of the editorial committee of Società at that time a consequence of the Twentieth Party Congress in the USSR *and of the Hungarian Revolt?*

It was a consequence of Hungary, for a very simple reason. After the rising in Budapest, the majority of Italian Communist professors abandoned the Party, which was left virtually without university luminaries. One of the few professors who remained in the Party was Della Volpe. The new situation induced Mario Alicata—who was then in overall charge of the Party's cultural policy, and who, it must be said, was a highly intelligent man—to change his attitude towards Della Volpe, who had hitherto been intellectually proscribed within the Party. The result was that Della Volpe was finally accepted on to the editorial board of *Società*, and with him a good part of the Della Volpean tendency, including Giulio Pietranera (who died today) and myself. This lasted until 1962. In that year, the Party then decided to dissolve *Società*, for reasons which were not only ideological but political. The suppression of the journal was basically motivated by the fact that after the composition of the editorial committee had changed, the review became steadily radicalized, if only on an ideological level: Marxist and Leninist articles were becoming predominant, and this theoretical turn to the left disquieted the Party leadership for a very good reason. The PCI had for many years previously ceased to recruit young people. But from 1959–60 onwards, it started to register gains amongst youth once more—especially after the popular demonstrations which overthrew the Tambroni government in 1960. There now started to emerge a new levy of young Communist intellectuals—some of whom occupy comparatively important positions in the PCI today, while others have left it—influenced by Della Volpean positions. Alarmed by the leftward shift of these younger intellectuals, who soon dominated the Youth Federation of the Party, the PCI leadership decided to suppress *Società* as the source of their theoretical inspiration.

Yet within the editorial committee of Società there were other currents—

[1] For an introduction to the work of Della Volpe, see NLR 59, January–February 1970, pp. 97–100.

represented for example by Spinella or Luporini, who joined the journal at more or less the same time as Della Volpe and yourself. Wasn't there a plurality of contending influences on Società, consequently?

No, there were no real debates as such in the pages of the review. Spinella was in principle the chief editor; but after the entry of Della Volpe onto the editorial board, some of its members—while remaining formally on the masthead—simply ceased to collaborate with the journal. So in practice there was no public confrontation of views in *Società*. Moreover, you must remember that the journal was a publication produced by the Party, which meant that the preparation of its issues was tightly controlled from above, in particular by Alicata. In practice, most of the contributions came from the so-called Della Volpean group, but more for reasons of inertia and boycott by its antagonists on the journal. Thus, without a true political debate, *Società* eventually came to reflect—within its own ideological-cultural limits—a new commitment to themes proper to Marxism and Leninism.

Surely towards the end of this period there were some quite important debates on political questions in the review: for instance, the polemic between yourself and Valentino Gerratana on the nature of the representative State?

It would be misleading to call this episode a debate within the review. It occurred within the Party. For some years back, I had been attacking the notion of the 'constitutional State' (*Stato di diritto*), to some extent also in the journals of the Left of the PSI like *Mondo Nuovo*. The theme of my polemics was that it was strange for the PSI to call for the advent of a 'constitutional State', since in my view this already substantially existed in Italy—it was none other than the liberal-bourgeois State. I failed to understand how the status quo could become a future objective of the Party. To organize a reply to such criticisms, the Party convoked a conference on the 'concept of the constitutional State', at which Gerratana delivered a report rebutting positions expressed in an article of mine. The two texts were published in *Società*, but the debate did not derive from within the journal.[2]

You left the Party two years after the closure of Società, in 1964. What were the reasons for your departure? Was it mainly inspired by a persistent Stalinism, or by a growing reformism, of the PCI*?*

My decision to leave was the result of the overall evolution of the Party. In one sense, the process of renovation for which I had hoped after the Twentieth Party Congress had failed to occur—but in another sense it had occurred, in a patently rightward direction. I slowly came to realize in the period from 1956 to 1964 that both the Soviet regime itself, and the Western Communist Parties, were incapable of accomplishing the profound transformation necessary for a return to revolutionary Marxism and Leninism. It had become structurally impossible for either the CPSU or the Western Parties to undergo a real democratiza-

[2] See L. Colletti, 'Stato di Diritto e Sovranità Popolare', *Società*, November–December 1960; and V. Gerratana, 'Democrazia e Stato di Diritto', *Società*, November–December 1961—the last issue of the journal. For Gerratana's work, see his important essay 'Marx and Darwin', NLR 82, November–December 1973.

tion—in other words, not in the sense of a liberal or bourgeois democracy, but in the sense of revolutionary socialist democracy, of workers' councils. This conviction gradually matured within me during the experience of these years. I found myself ever more marginalized within the Party, where I was permitted to pay my dues, but little else. Thus when I finally came to the conclusion that there was no chance even of a slow transformation of either the Soviet regime or the Western Communist parties towards a renewed socialist democracy, membership of the PCI lost any meaning for me, and I left the Party silently. There was no dramatic scandal or rupture in my departure. I left in 1964, the year of Khruschev's fall. There should be no misunderstanding about my attitude towards this. I was naturally aware of all the criticisms to be made of Khruschev, whom I never idealized. Nevertheless, Khruschev did represent a crucial point of no-return in post-war history. For his Secret Speech was a formal denunciation of the sacred character with which all Communist leadership had surrounded itself for four decades. This desacralization of Communist bureaucratic leadership remains an achievement that cannot be cancelled. Thus Khruschev's importance for me was that he did symbolize an attempt—however inadequate and debatable—to unleash a process of transformation of Soviet society, by a radical and violent indictment of Stalin. If this process had succeeded, it would have transformed the Western Parties too. In the event, as we know, it failed.

So far as Italian Communism is concerned, the PCI does possess certain traits that are distinct from those of other parties of classical Stalinist formation, and which are in some ways more rightist and revisionist. However, in essence—in its mechanisms of policy-making, its selection of leadership, the whole way in which the political will of the organization is formed—the PCI has remained a fundamentally Stalinist Party. The expulsion of the *Manifesto* group in 1970 shows how limited the real margins for political debate and struggle in fact are within the Party. Naturally, this does not mean that there is no political conflict within the Italian Communist Party. There is: but it is masked and hidden from the base of the Party, which remains ignorant even of the terms of the stealthy struggles at the summit. The rank-and-file consequently remains confined to a perpetually subaltern and atomized condition. The ordinary Communist militant is converted from a vanguard to a rearguard element, whose function is simply to execute political directives determined over his head. My rejection of this type of party can be summed up in a single formula. The real mechanisms of power in contemporary Communist parties are these: it is not the Congress that nominates the Central Committee, but the Central Committee that nominates the Congress, it is not the Central Committee that nominates the Executive Committee, but the Executive Committee that nominates the Central Committee, it is not the Executive Committee that nominates the Political Bureau, but the Political Bureau that nominates the Executive Committee.

The major early influence on your philosophical work was Galvano Della Volpe, with his concern for the nature of scientific laws, his notion of the role of specific-determinate abstractions in cognition, and his stress on philological precision in the study of Marx. What is your assessment of Della Volpe today?

The essential lesson I learnt from contact with the writings of Della Volpe was the need for an absolutely serious relationship to the work of Marx—based on direct knowledge and real study of his original texts. This may sound paradoxical, but it is important to remember that the penetration of Marxism in Italy in the first post-war decade, from 1945 to 1955, was intellectually and theoretically very superficial and exiguous. Let me explain. The official Marxism of that epoch, as it remains today, was Soviet-style dialectical materialism. Now, Togliatti was cultivated and intelligent enough to be aware that this Stalinist compendium was too blatantly crude and dogmatic to have much attraction for the Italian intellectuals whose adhesion to the PCI he was anxious to obtain. Consequently, there were few orthodox dialectical materialists in Italy: compatriot charity forbids me to mention names. What Togliatti sought to substitute for Soviet orthodoxy in his cultural policy was an interpretation of Marxism as the national heir to the Italian historicism of Vico and Croce—in other words, a version of Marxism that did not demand any real break of these intellectuals from their former positions. Most of them were Crocean by formation. The Party simply asked them to take one small step more, to adopt a historicism that integrated the basic elements of Croce's philosophy, repudiating only the most patently idealist propositions of Croceanism. The result was that up to 1955–6 Marx's work itself, above all *Capital*, had a minimal diffusion in the cultural ambience of the Italian Left. It was in these conditions that Della Volpe came to symbolize a commitment to study Marxism rigorously, where it is actually to be found, namely in Marx's writings themselves. For Della Volpe, Marx's early *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* was a central starting-point. But this naturally represented only the beginning of a direct knowledge of the work of Marx, which necessarily had as its conclusion an intense study and analysis of *Capital* itself.

Would it be true to say that in the period after 1958, Della Volpeanism as a theoretical current within the PCI*—by its emphasis on the paradigmatic importance of* Capital, *and the necessity of determinate abstractions for the formulation of scientific laws—implied a covert political opposition to the very moderate goals officially pursued by the* PCI, *the 'democratic' objectives which were justified by the Party on the grounds of the relative backwardness of Italian society? Some of your 'historicist' adversaries at the time argued that the real meaning of Della Volpeanism was a denial of the hybrid and retarded character of the Italian social formation, which dictated democratic rather than socialist demands, for a fixation with the general laws of pure capitalist development as such, to justify inappropriately 'advanced' objectives for the working-class in Italy. How valid was the interpretation?*

It is certainly true that the diffusion of Della Volpean positions—a phenomenon whose dimensions should not be exaggerated, incidentally—was combated in the Party, with the accusation that they were pregnant with political sectarianism and ultra-leftism. For it was evident that while the historicist tradition tended to give priority to the peculiarities of Italian society, playing down the fact that despite all its particularities it was still a capitalist society, the systematic study of Marx that was central to Della Volpeanism gave priority precisely to the concept of the capitalist socio-economic formation and the laws of

motion of capitalism as such. In the latter perspective, Italy was analysed essentially as a capitalist country. Naturally, there was no question of denying that Italian capitalism had idiosyncratic characteristics of its own, but merely of affirming that despite these peculiarities, the predominant characteristic of Italian society was that it was capitalist. The opposing theoretical trends of the time thus could well lead to divergent political conclusions.

If this was so, how is the subsequent political role of some of the leading members of the Della Volpean school to be explained? Della Volpe himself was always unquestioningly loyal to the official line of the Party, even exalting the Stalin Constitution of 1936 in the USSR *as a model of radical democracy. Pietranera went on to theorize and justify 'market socialism' in Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe generally. What explains the apparent combination of methodological rigour and political weakness or complaisance?*

Firstly, Della Volpe himself was an intellectual of the old style, who always worked on the assumption that there should be a division of labour between theory and politics. Politics could be left to professional politicians. Secondly, it is important to stress that the Della Volpean school proper was a very circumscribed phenomenon; it involved a few collaborators, among whom, as events were rapidly to show, there was no basic identity of political views at all. Della Volpeanism was a phenomenon limited in both space and time, of very short duration, after which the members of this so-called 'school' went their separate ways. Most of them have remained in the PCI to this day.

Turning to your own later philosophical writings, you have expressed an increasingly marked respect and admiration for Kant in them—a preference unusual among contemporary Marxists. Your basic claim for Kant is that he asserted with the greatest force the primacy and irreducibility of reality to conceptual thought, and the absolute division between what he called 'real oppositions' and 'logical oppositions'. You argue from these theses that Kant was much closer to materialism than Hegel, whose basic philosophical goal you interpret as the absorption of the real by the conceptual, and therewith the annihilation of the finite and of matter itself. Your revaluation of Kant is thus complemented by your devaluation of Hegel, whom you criticize implacably as an essentially Christian and religious philosopher—contrary to later Marxist misconceptions of his thought. The obvious question that arises here is why you accord such a privilege to Kant? After all, if the criterion of proximity to materialism is acknowledgment of the irreducibility of reality to thought, most of the French philosophers of the Enlightenment, La Mettrie or Holbach for example, or even earlier Locke in England, were much more unambiguously 'materialist' than Kant. At the same time, you denounce the religious implications of Hegel—but Kant also was a profoundly religious philosopher (not to speak of Rousseau, whom you admire in another context), yet you appear to pass over his religiosity in polite silence. How do you justify your exceptional esteem for Kant?

The criticisms you have just made have been levelled at me many times in Italy. The first point to establish is the difference between the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the Kant of the *Critique of Practical Reason* . . . .

Isn't that the same sort of distinction that is commonly made between Hegel at Jena, and Hegel after Jena—which you reject?

No, because the difference between knowledge and morality is a central one for Kant himself. He explicitly theorizes the difference between the ethical sphere and the cognitive-scientific sphere. I cannot say whether Kant is important for Marxism. But there is no doubt whatever of his importance for any epistemology of science. You have remarked that La Mettrie, Holbach or Helvetius were materialists, while Kant fundamentally was not. That is perfectly true. But from a strictly epistemological point of view, there is only one great modern thinker who can be of assistance to us in constructing a materialist theory of knowledge —Immanuel Kant. Of course, I am perfectly aware that Kant was a pious Christian. But whereas in Hegel's philosophy there is no separation between the domain of ethics and politics and the domain of logic, because the two are integrally united in a single system, in Kant there is a radical distinction between the domain of knowledge and the domain of morality, which Kant himself emphasised. Thus we can leave Kantian morality aside here. What is important to see is that the *Critique of Pure Reason* is an attempt by Kant to arrive at a philosophical comprehension and justification of Newton's physics: the work is essentially an inquiry into the conditions that render possible true knowledge—which for Kant was represented by Newtonian science. Naturally, there are many shades and contradictions in Kant's epistemological work, with which I am perfectly familiar: I have used only certain aspects of it. But there is one basic point that must always be remembered, nevertheless. While Hegel died at Berlin delivering a course of lectures on the proofs of the existence of God, and reaffirming the validity of the ontological argument (which a century later was still being upheld by Croce), Kant—despite all his contradictions—from his text of 1763 on the *Beweisgrund*[3] to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, never ceased to criticize the ontological argument. His rejection of it was founded on the qualitative (or as Kant says, 'transcendental') gulf between the conditions of being and the conditions of thought—*ratio essendi* and *ratio cognoscendi*. It is this position that provides a fundamental starting-point for any materialist gnoseology, and defence of science against metaphysics. The problem of an overall interpretation of Kant is a very complex one, which we cannot resolve in an interview. I have singled out and stressed one particular aspect of his work—the Kant who was the critic of Leibniz, and the scourge of the ontological proof. In this respect, although Kant was not a materialist, his contribution to the theory of knowledge cannot be compared to that of La Mettrie or Helvetius.

Thus my interest in Kant has nothing in common with that of the German revisionists of the Second International, Eduard Bernstein or Conrad Schmidt, who were attracted to Kant's ethics. I have tried, on the contrary, to revalue Kant's contribution to epistemology, as against the legacy of Hegel. In fact, my own interpretation of Kant is precisely that of Hegel himself—except that whereas Hegel rejected Kant's

[3] Colletti's reference is to Kant's work *The Only Possible Ground for a Proof of the Existence of God*.

position, I have defended it. For Hegel, Kant was essentially an empiricist. In his Introduction to the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel classifies Kant together with Hume as examples of the 'second relation of thought to objectivity'. There is no need to remind you of the stature of David Hume in the history of the philosophy of science. One could say, indeed, that there are two main traditions in Western philosophy in this respect: one that descends from Spinoza and Hegel, and the other from Hume and Kant. These two lines of development are profoundly divergent. For any theory that takes science as the sole form of real knowledge—that is falsifiable, as Popper would say—there can be no question that the tradition of Hume-Kant must be given priority and preference over that of Spinoza-Hegel.

Finally, I believe that my attempt to separate the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason* from the Kant of the *Critique of Practical Reason* has a real basis in history. For bourgeois thought and civilization succeeded in founding the sciences of nature; whereas bourgeois culture has been incapable of generating scientific knowledge of society and morality. Of course, the natural sciences have been conditioned by the bourgeois historical context in which they have developed—a process which raises many intricate problems of its own. But unless we are to accept dialectical materialism and its fantasies of a 'proletarian' biology or physics, we must nevertheless acknowledge the validity of the sciences of nature produced by bourgeois civilization since the Renaissance. But bourgeois discourses in the social sciences command no such validity: we obviously reject them. It is this discrepancy between the two fields that is objectively reflected in the division within Kant's philosophy between his epistemology and his ethics, his critique of pure and of practical reason.

But is there such a complete separation between the two? Marxists have traditionally seen the Kantian notion of the thing-in-itself—Ding-an-sich—*as the sign of a religious infiltration directly into his epistemological theory, surely?*

There is a religious overtone to the notion of the thing-in-itself, but this is its most superficial dimension. In reality, the concept has a meaning in Kant's work that Marxists have never wanted to see, but which Cassirer—with whose general interpretation of Kant, based on careful textual studies, I am in considerable sympathy—has rightly emphasized. When Kant declares that the thing-in-itself is unknowable, one (if not the only) sense of his argument is that the thing-in-itself is not a true object of cognition at all, but a fictitious object, that is nothing more than a substantification or hypostasization of logical functions, transformed into real essences. In other words, the thing-in-itself is unknowable because it represents the false knowledge of the old metaphysics. This is not the only meaning of the concept in Kant's work, but it is one of its principal senses, and it is precisely this that has never been noticed by the utterly absurd reading of Kant that has prevailed among Marxists, who have always reduced the notion of the thing-in-itself to a mere agnosticism. But when Kant states that it is an object that cannot be known, he means that it is the false 'absolute' object of the old rationalist metaphysics of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz; and when Hegel announces that the thing-in-itself can be

known, what he is in fact doing is to restore the old pre-kantian metaphysics.

Your work often appears to define materialism essentially as acknowledgment of the real existence of the external world, independent of the knowing subject. But has materialism not traditionally meant something more than this, both for Marxism and for classical philosophy as well—a specific conception of the subject of knowledge itself? In Italy, for example, you have been reproached by Sebastiano Timpanaro with ignoring the 'physicality' of the knowing subject and its concepts: he has accused you, in effect, of reducing materialism to realism by your silence on the latter score.[4] *Would you accept this criticism?*

No, in my view Timpanaro's argument is completely mistaken. For a number of reasons. First of all, my own concern has been above all with materialism just in *gnoseology*. Now, on the one hand, it is not true that a gnoseological materialism can be reduced merely to acknowledgment of the reality and independence of the external world. This is, of course, a fundamental thesis, but it in turn provides the basis for the construction of an experimental logic, and the explanation of scientific knowledge. Scientific experiments signify that ideas are only hypotheses. Such hypotheses must be checked, verified or falsified, by confronting them with data of observation, which are different in nature from any logical notion. If this diversity of the material contents of knowledge is denied, hypotheses become hypostases or ideal essences, and sensible and empirical data become purely negative residues once again, as in Leibniz or Hegel. On the other hand, Timpanaro's writings reveal a type of naturalism that remains somewhat ingenuous, with its single-minded insistence on the sheer physicality of man as the main basis for a philosophical materialism. Of course, once one acknowledges the existence of the natural world, there can be no disagreement that man too is a natural entity. Man as a physico-natural being is an animal. But this particular natural species is distinguished from all others by its creation of social relationships. To use Aristotle's formula: man is a *zoon politikon*, a political animal. Men live in society and have a history, and it is this level of their existence that is essential for historical materialism. The specificity of man as a natural being is to refer to nature in so far as he refers to other men, and to refer to other men in so far as he refers to nature. This dual relationship is precisely what is grasped in Marx's concept of 'social relations of production'. For Marx, there can be no production—that is, relationships of men to nature—outside or apart from social relationships, that is relationships to other men; and there can be no relationships between men that are not a function of relationships of men to nature, in production. The peculiarity of the 'nature' in man is to find its expression in 'society'. Otherwise, any discourse on man could equally be applied to ants or bees. The distinguishing characteristic of man as a natural-physical species is its generation of social relations of production, rather than honeycombs or cobwebs. It is in the nature of man to be a social-historical subject.

[4] Timpanaro's criticisms of Colletti have been developed in an essay entitled 'Engels, Materialismo, "Libero Arbitrio"', included in his volume *Sul Materialismo*, Pisa 1970 (English translation, NLB forthcoming). For Timpanaro's general philosophical positions, see his essay 'Considerations on Materialism', NLR 85, May–June 1974.

Within historical materialism it was, of course, Engels who classically insisted most on the physical structure of man, and on the relationships between man and nature, in his later writings. You have tended to counterpose Marx against Engels in an extremely radical way in your work. For example, you attribute the entire responsibility for the notion of 'dialectical materialism' to Engels. Elsewhere, you suggest that it was Engels who introduced the first deleterious elements of political fatalism into Marxism, in the Second International. By contrast, you absolve Marx of any errors in either of these directions. Indeed, in one passage you have gone so far as to speak of 'the gulf between the rigour and complexity which characterize every page of Marx, and the popular vulgarization and at times dilettantism of the works of Engels'.[5] *Would you really maintain such a formulation today? Marx, after all, not only read and approved, but collaborated on the* Anti-Dühring; *and in his introductions to* Capital, *there are surely statements implying a fatalism and mechanism at least as equivocal as anything in the later Engels? Above all, does not any over-dramatic polarization of this type between Marx and Engels contain the grave danger not merely of at times unjustly criticizing Engels, but also of creating by contrast a kind of sacred zone about Marx, who conversely becomes above criticism?*

I absolutely agree with your last comment about the creation of a sacred zone about Marx. You musn't forget that the passage you quote was written 17 years ago. My view of the relationship between Marx and Engels is now much less rigid and more nuanced, in the sense that I have become aware that in Marx too there are critical areas of uncertainty and confusion about the dialectic. I am currently preparing a study that will deal with this question. Thus I fully accept your objection: it is shameful to confer a sacred aura on any thinker, including Marx. I now utterly reject such an attitude, although I admit that I may have encouraged it in the past. This is a self-criticism. Having said this, however, I continue to maintain that the traditional image of the theoretical twins who presided over the birth of the labour movement, is infantile and absurd. The facts, after all, speak for themselves. Everyone knows that Marx spent a large part of his life studying in the British Museum, while Engels was working in a cotton-business in Manchester. Twin souls are miracles that do not exist in the real world; no two minds think exactly alike. The intellectual differences between Marx and Engels are evident, and have been discussed by many authors besides myself: Alfred Schmidt, George Lichtheim, or Sidney Hook when he was still a Marxist, among others. Then, too, there is no historical malice in recalling the letters which Marx wrote against Engels in his life-time, and which were destroyed by his family after his death. So far as the dialectics of nature are concerned, while I concede certain exaggerations in my writings, I would still insist that in the end all Marx's work is essentially an analysis of modern capitalist society. His basic writings are the *Theories of Surplus-Value*, the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*: all the rest is secondary. While in the case of Engels, one of his major writings is indubitably the *Dialectics of Nature*—a work 90 per cent of

[5] This passage occurs in the long Introduction which Colletti wrote to an edition of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* in 1958. The Introduction was then reprinted a decade later as the first part of the Italian volume *Il Marxismo e Hegel*, Bari 1969. The English edition of *Marxism and Hegel* (NLB 1973) is a translation of the second part of the Italian volume, which was written as a book of its own by Colletti in 1969. The passage above is to be found in *Il Marxismo e Hegel*, p. 97.

which is hopelessly compromised by an ingenuous and romantic *Naturphilosophie*, contaminated by crudely positivist and evolutionist themes.

But what about the supposed political contrast between the two men—an allegedly proto-reformist Engels set off against an unswervingly radical Marx? Engels, after all, never committed such involuntary blunders as Marx's prediction that the mere introduction of universal suffrage—bourgeois democracy—would ensure the advent of socialism in England, a far more parliamentarist statement than anything to be found in Engels?

I concede this point. I would merely say that in the space of this interview I cannot develop all my present critical reflections on the question.

You have accorded an exceptional importance to Rousseau, as the central precursor of Marxism in the field of political theory. You have argued, in particular, that it was Rousseau who first developed a fundamental critique of the capitalist representative State, of the separation of the citizen from the bourgeois, and a counter-theory of popular sovereignty, direct democracy and revocable mandates—all themes directly inherited by Marx and Lenin. You sum up your emphasis on these ideas in a formulation which recurs in your writings, and appears to be a very shocking one: 'So far as "political" theory in the strict sense is concerned, Marx and Lenin have added nothing to Rousseau—except for the analysis (which is of course rather important) of the "economic bases" of the withering away of the State'.[6] *It is the reduction of Marxist political theory solely to a critique of the bourgeois representative State and a model of direct popular democracy beyond it, that appears very strange or outré in this judgment. For it seems to ignore entirely the strategic side of Marxist political thought, above all as developed by Lenin: his theory of the construction of the party, of the alliance between proletariat and peasantry, of the self-determination of nations, of the rules of insurrection, and so on—in other words, the whole theory of how to make the socialist revolution itself. Moreover, even confining political theory in the 'strict sense' to analysis of the capitalist State, this century has seen important types of bourgeois State never dreamt of by Rousseau—above all the fascist States, which were classically analysed by Trotsky. How can you exclude all this from Marxist political theory?*

Let me reply in this way. Firstly, the formulation you have quoted obviously refers only to political philosophy proper, in the sense of the most general questions of principle in the theory of Marx and Lenin, which are derived from Rousseau—those you have mentioned: critique of the representative State and of the separation of civil society from political society, non-identification of government and sovereignty, rejection of parliamentary representation, notion of revocable delegates of the people, and so on. In this connexion, we must realize that Marx's own discourse on the State never developed very far. His basic texts on the question are the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* of 1843 and the *Jewish Question* of 1844; then much later the pages on the Paris Commune in the *Civil War in France* of 1871. These writings all reiterate themes to be found in Rousseau. Naturally, my statement has no validity in the field of revolutionary strategy—party-building, class

[6] *From Rousseau to Lenin*, NLB 1972, p. 185.

alliances or fascism. It was more limited in scope. At the same time, however, I should make it clear that it contained an element of deliberate provocation. It was intended to draw attention to a particular fact—the *weakness* and sparse development of political theory in Marxism. In other words, you can also read it as a way of saying that Marxism lacks a true political theory. All the elements of Lenin's work to which you have pointed—his writings on the party, the peasantry, the national question and so on—are of great importance: but they are always tied so closely to particular historical events, that we can never extrapolate them to a level of generalization where they are simply transferable to an historical environment profoundly different from that in which Lenin thought and acted. Thus the real meaning of my statement was a polemical one. The development of political theory has been extraordinarily weak in Marxism. There are doubtless many reasons for this debility. But a crucial one is certainly the fact that both Marx and Lenin envisaged the transition to socialism and the realization of communism on a world scale as an extremely swift and proximate process. The result was that the sphere of political structures remained little examined or explored. One could formulate this paradoxically by saying that the political movement inspired by Marxism has been virtually innocent of political theory. The absurdity and danger of this situation are manifest, now that it has become clear that the so-called phase of transition to socialism is actually an extremely protracted, secular process whose length was never foreseen by Marx or Lenin, during which Communist leaderships today exercise power in the name of Marxism, in the absence of any real theory of this power—let alone any control by the masses over whom they rule.

What is your judgment of Althusser and his pupils? The Della Volpean school in Italy was the first radically anti-Hegelian current in Western Marxism since the First World War. It developed a whole complex of themes whose aim was to demonstrate Marx's rupture with Hegel by the constitution of a new science of society, which was then compromised by the reintroduction of Hegelian motifs into historical materialism after Marx. A decade or so later, many ideas very close to these were developed by Althusser in France, where they have gained a wide intellectual influence. How do you view Althusser's work today?

It is not easy to reply to this question. I knew Althusser personally, and for some years corresponded with him. Then I would fail to reply to him, or he to me, and gradually the letters between us ceased. When we first met in Italy, Althusser showed me some of the articles he later collected in *For Marx*. My initial impression on reading them was that there was a considerable convergence of positions between ourselves and Althusser. My main reservation about this convergence was that Althusser did not appear to have mastered the canons of philosophical tradition adequately. Della Volpe's discourse on Hegel was always based on a very close knowledge and analytical examination of his texts, not to speak of those of Kant, Aristotle or Plato. This dimension was much less visible in Althusser. On the contrary, it was substituted by the intromission of simplifications of a political type. For example, in these essays there would be a series of references to Mao, which appeared to be an intrusion of another sort of discourse into the philosophical text itself. Politically, it should be added, none of the Della

Volpeans had any weakness towards Maoism. At any rate, with these reservations, the articles which later made up *For Marx* otherwise seemed to show a pronounced convergence with the classical theses of the Della Volpean current in Italian Marxism. Then Althusser sent me *Reading Capital*. I started to read it, and found—I say this without any irony—that I could not understand the presuppositions and purpose of the work. What perhaps struck me most was something that Hobsbawm later remarked, in an otherwise very laudatory review of Althusser in the *Times Literary Supplement*: that *Reading Capital* did not actually help anyone to read *Capital*. I had the impression of a lengthy theoretical construction erected, so to speak, behind the back of *Capital*. I did not find it particularly interesting as such, and did not pursue it any further.

Subsequently, the essays in *Lenin and Philosophy* appeared, including 'Lenin Before Hegel', and it became increasingly obvious that Althusser was intent on salvaging 'dialectical materialism', at least in name. Now, so far as I am concerned, dialectical materialism is a scholastic metaphysic whose survival merely indicates the deep inadequacy hitherto of the attempts by the working-class movement to come to terms with the great problems of modern science. It is an evening-class philosophical pastiche. Although Althusser interpreted it somewhat idiosyncratically, I could never understand why he still clung to the notion of dialectical materialism. More recently, however, I think I have grasped the real function it fulfils in Althusser's work, and which situates the latter more readily within the prior history of Marxism. There is a passage in a polemic of Godelier with Lucien Sève which is very revealing in this connexion. Godelier cites a letter from Engels to Lafargue of 1884[7] which anticipates a thesis that was later developed by Hilferding in his preface to *Finance Capital*. This is the idea that there is a fundamental difference between Marxism and socialism, and that you can accept the one while rejecting the other: for Marxism is value-free science, without any ideological orientation or political finalism. In Althusser, the same theme takes the form of his recent discovery that Marx did, after all, directly inherit a central notion from Hegel—the idea of a 'process without a subject'. Philologically, of course, this claim is absurd: it could only be made by someone who had read Hegel a very long time ago, retaining the dimmest memory of him. For the Hegelian process emphatically does have a subject. The subject is not human, it is the Logos. Reason is the subject of history in Hegel, as his famous expression *Der List der Vernunft*—'the cunning of reason'—makes clear. But apart from questions of scholarship, what does it mean to say that for Marx history is a process without a subject ? It means that history is not the site of any human emancipation. But for the real Marx, of course, the revolution was precisely this—a process of collective self-amancipation.

In his latest work, the *Reply to John Lewis*, Althusser once again restates at length his thesis of the process without a subject. But for the first time, he is also forced to admit that the theme of alienation is present in

[7] See the polemic, published in Italian, between Maurice Godelier and Lucien Sève, entitled *Marxismo e Strutturalismo*, Turin 1970, pp 126–127.

Capital. In fact, the truth is that the themes of alienation and fetishism are present not only in *Capital*, but in the whole of the later Marx—not only in the *Grundrisse*, but in the *Theories of Surplus Value* as well, for hundreds of pages on end. The *Grundrisse* and *Theories of Surplus Value* merely declare in a more explicit terminology what the language of *Capital* states more obliquely, because Marx was resorting to a greater extent to the scientistic vocabulary of English political economy itself. But the problems of alienated labour and commodity fetishism are central to the whole architecture of Marx's later work. Althusser's admission, however reluctant, of their presence in *Capital*, in fact undermines his whole previous formulation of the 'break' between the young and the old Marx; it also disqualifies the notion of history as a process without a subject. But it is this component of Marxism that Althusser essentially rejects. I think that this is what explains his organic sympathy with Stalinism. In his *Reply to John Lewis*, of course, Althusser tries to establish a certain distance from Stalin. But the level of this brochure makes one throw up one's arms, as we say in Rome, with its mixture of virulence and banality. Nothing is more striking than the poverty of the categories with which Althusser tries to explain Stalinism, simply reducing it to an 'economism' that is an epiphenomenon of the Second International— as it were a mere ideological deviation and a long familiar one at that! Naturally, Stalinism was an infinitely more complex phenomenon these exiguous categories suggest. Althusser is certainly a highly intelligent person, and I have a great human sympathy for him. But it is impossible to escape the impression that his thought has become increasingly impoverished and arid with the passage of time.

In your Introduction to Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks, *written in 1958, you end by saying that the young Lenin of 1894 had not read Hegel when he wrote* Who are the Friends of the People?, *but nevertheless managed to understand him better than the older Lenin of the* Notebooks, *who did study him in 1916, but misunderstood him. Then, in a cryptic conclusion, you add that this paradox indicates 'two divergent "vocations" which still today contend within the soul of Marxism itself. To explain how and why these two "vocations" became historically conjoined and superimposed would be a formidable task: but it must nevertheless be confronted'.*[8] *What did you mean by this?*

You must remember that I was young and enthusiastic when I wrote those lines. I was given to exaggeration. It is true that Lenin did not know Hegel at first-hand when he wrote *Who are the Friends of the People?*. But this text is marked by the positivist culture of the time: the esoteric meanings I sought to attribute to it I would firmly repudiate today. The occasionally positivist overtones of my 1958 *Introduction* are, I think, corrected and overcome in my 1969 study on *Marxism and Hegel*. However, through these successive divagations and oscillations, I was groping towards a real and serious problem, which has now preoccupied me directly for a number of years. There are two possible lines of development in Marx's own discourse, expressed respectively in the title and subtitle of *Capital*. The first is that which Marx himself advances in his preface to the first edition, and post-script to the second

[8] *Il Marxismo e Hegel*, pp. 169–70.

edition, in which he presents himself simply as a scientist. Marx, according to his own account here, is performing in the field of the historical and social sciences a task that had already been performed in the natural sciences. This too was Lenin's interpretation of Marx in *Who are the Friends of the People?*, and my own *Introduction* of 1958 went in the same direction. The title of *Capital* itself spells this direction out. It promises that political economy, which started with the works of Smith and Ricardo but remained incomplete and contradictory in them, will now become a true science in the full sense of the term. The sub-title of the book, however, suggests another direction: a '*critique* of political economy'. This notion found little echo in the Second or Third Internationals. Lenin would certainly have rejected the idea that Marxism was a critique of political economy: for him it was a critique of *bourgeois* political economy only, which finally transformed political economy itself into a real science. But the sub-title of *Capital* indicates something more than this—it suggests that political economy as such is bourgeois and must be criticized *tout court*. This second dimension of Marx's work is precisely that which culminates in his theory of alienation and fetishism. The great problem for us is to know whether and how these two divergent directions of Marx's work can be held together in a single system. Can a purely scientific theory contain within itself a discourse on alienation? The problem has not yet been resolved.

The original Della Volpean school interpreted Marx's work as something like a strict analogue of that of Galileo. There are obvious difficulties, however, in transferring the experimental procedures of the natural sciences into the social sciences. History is notoriously not a laboratory in which phenomena can be artificially isolated and repeated, as they can in physics. Lenin would often say: 'This moment is unique: it can pass, and the chance it represents may never return . . . '—just the opposite of repeatability. There is a striking passage in your Introduction to his Philosophical Notebooks, *however, in which you say: 'Logic and sociology are constituted simultaneously, in the same relationship of unity-distinction as obtains between the consciousness they represent and social being: thus logic falls within the science of history, but the science of history falls in its turn within history. That is, sociology informs the techniques of politics, and becomes a struggle for the transformation of the world. Practice is functional to the production of theory; but theory is in turn a function of practice. Science is verified in and as society, but associated life in its turn is an experiment under way in the laboratory of the world. History is thus a science of* historia rerum gestarum, *practice-theory; but it is also a science as* res gestae *themselves, theory-practice; or in the words of a great maxim of Engels, "history is experiment and industry". We can thereby understand the deep nexus between the "prophet" or politician, and the scientist, in the structure of the work of Marx himself.'*[9] *Do you still find this solution satisfactory?*

You have selected the best page of that text—the one in which I strove most to square the circle! I no longer agree with it, because what then seemed to rne a solution I now realize is still an unanswered problem. I am currently in a phase of radical rethinking of many of these questions —whose outcome I cannot yet wholly foresee. I will probably publish a short work soon on the theory of capitalist contradictions in Marx. In

[9] *Il Marxismo e Hegel*, pp. 126–7.

this, I will take a still further distance from Della Volpe's work, and try to show through a study of Kant's *Attempt to Introduce the Notion of Negative Quantities into Philosophy* in 1763, that Marx's concept of a capitalist contradiction is not the same as Kant's notion of a 'real opposition'. I am confident of this point, but it remains a limited one, of whose implications I am still uncertain. However, in reply to your question, my answer would be that the sense of my argument in this forthcoming study is that Marx cannot simply be equated with Galileo; he would only be so, if capitalist contradictions were real oppositions in Kant's meaning of the term.

One of your most central themes in Marxism and Hegel *is that contradictions exist between propositions, but not between things. Confusion between the two is for you the hallmark of dialectical materialism, which defines it as a pseudo-science. Yet in the last essay of your* From Rousseau to Lenin, *written a year later, you repeatedly speak of capitalist reality itself as 'upside-down', a system that 'stands on its head'.*[10] *Isn't this simply a metaphorical way of re-introducing the notion of a 'contradiction between things'—by a literary image rather than a conceptual axiom? How can the idea of an 'upside-down reality' be reconciled with the principle of non-contradiction, which you insist is central to any science?*

That is the very problem on which I am working: you are absolutely correct to point out the difficulty. For I stand firmly by the fundamental thesis that materialism presupposes non-contradiction—that reality is non-contradictory. In this respect, I agree with Adjukiewicz and Linke, and I fully reiterate my critique of dialectical materialism. At the same time, re-reading Marx, I have become aware that for him capitalist contradictions undeniably are dialectical contradictions. Della Volpe tried to save the day by interpreting the opposition between capital and wage-labour as a real opposition—*Realrepugnanz*—in Kant's sense: that is, an opposition without contradiction, *ohne Widerspruch*. If the relationship between capital and labour were a real opposition of the Kantian type, it would be non-dialectical and the basic principle of materialism would be safe. But the problem is actually much more complex. I continue to believe that materialism excludes the notion of a contradictory reality: yet there is no doubt that for Marx the capital/wage-labour relationship is a dialectical contradiction. Capitalism is a contradictory reality for Marx, not because being a reality it must therefore be contradictory—as dialectical materialism would have it, but because it is a capsized, inverted, upside-down reality. I am perfectly conscious that the notion of an upside-down reality appears to jar with the precepts of any science. Marx was convinced of the validity of this notion. I do not say that he was necessarily right. I cannot yet state whether the idea of an inverted reality is compatible with a social science.

But I would like to comment on the problem of the relationship between the social and natural sciences, which you raised earlier. I no longer uphold the optimistic position of my *Introduction* of 1958, which was too facile in its assumption of a basic homogeneity between the sciences of nature and the sciences of society. On the other hand, I can

[10] See *From Rousseau to Lenin*, pp. 232–5.

see that of the two broad positions that are generally adopted on this problem, both raise acute difficulties. The first position is that which I took up in my *Introduction*, and which derived from Della Volpe: it effectively identified the social and natural sciences—Marx was 'the Galileo of the moral world' for us then. Today, this formula strikes me as highly debatable: apart from anything else, it presupposed that the capital-labour relationship in Marx was a non-contradictory opposition, which is not the case. On the other hand, there is a second position which insists on the heterogeneity of the social and natural sciences. The danger of this alternative is that the social sciences then tend to become a qualitatively distinct form of knowledge from the natural sciences, and to occupy the same relationship towards them, as philosophy used to occupy towards science as such. It is no accident that this was the solution of the German historicists—Dilthey, Windelband and Rickert. It was then inherited by Croce, Bergson, Lukács and the Frankfurt School. The invariable conclusion of this tradition is that true knowledge is social science, which because it cannot be assimilated to natural science, is not science at all but philosophy. Thus either there is a single form of knowledge, which is science (the position I would still like to defend)—but then it should be possible to construct the social sciences on bases analogous to the natural sciences; or the social sciences really are different from the natural sciences, and there are two sorts of knowledge—but since two forms of knowledge are not possible, the natural sciences become a pseudo-knowledge. The latter is the ideologically dominant alternative. Continental European philosophy in this century has been virtually united in its attack on the natural sciences—from Husserl to Heidegger, Croce to Gentile, Bergson to Sartre. Against the dangers of this spiritualist idealism, I personally would prefer to incur the opposite risks of neo-positivism. But I am divided on the issue, and have no ready solution to the problem.

Turning to Capital *itself, as an exemplar of scientific method, you once wrote that 'the conclusive verification of* Capital, *which we can call external, has been provided by the ulterior development of history itself: a verification to which Lenin referred when he wrote that "it is the criterion of practice—that is, the evolution of* all *the capitalist countries in the last decades—that demonstrates the objective truth of* all *the economic and social theory of Marx in general". Let it be noted—*all *the theory: which means that it is not just this or that part, but the entire work of Marx, that constitutes an ensemble of verified hypotheses, and thus of laws to be continuously controlled and adjusted in the light of real historical experience.'*[11] *What is your attitude to these claims today?*

Youthful errors, pure and simple.

In a recent text, you seem to accept that there is a theory of 'collapse' in Capital, *although your analysis is a prudent one which suggests the presence of counter-elements in Marx's work. You identify the main strand of 'collapse' theory as the postulate of the falling rate of profit in* Capital.[12] *Do you regard this as a*

[11] *Il Marxismo e Hegel*, p. 160.
[12] See Colletti's Introduction to L. Colletti and C. Napoleoni, *Il Futuro del Capitalismo*: *Crollo o Sviluppo?*, Bari 1970, pp. C-CV ff.

scientific law that has been 'conclusively verified by the ulterior development of history itself'?

Absolutely not. Indeed I believe there is something much graver to be said about the predictions contained in *Capital*. Not only has the falling rate of profit not been empirically verified, but the central test of *Capital* itself has not yet come to pass: a socialist revolution in the advanced West. The result is that Marxism is in crisis today, and it can only surmount this crisis by acknowledging it. But precisely this acknowledgment is consciously avoided by virtually every Marxist, great or small. This is perfectly comprehensible in the case of the numerous apolitical and apologetic intellectuals in the Western Communist Parties, whose function is merely to furbish a Marxist gloss for the absolutely unMarxist political practice of these parties. What is much more serious is the example set by intellectuals of truly major stature, who systematically hide the crisis of Marxism in their work, and thereby contribute to prolonging its paralysis as a social science. Let me cite two instances, to make myself clear. Baran and Sweezy, in their introduction to *Monopoly Capital*, inform their readers in a brief note that they are not going to utilize the concept of surplus-value, but that of surplus, nor that of wage-labour, but that of dependent labour. What does this actually mean? It means that Baran and Sweezy decided that they were unable to use the theory of value and of surplus value, in their analysis of post-war US capitalism. They had every right to do so; they may even have been correct to do so—we need not enter into that question here. But what is significant is their way of doing so. They effectively blow up the keystone of Marx's construction: without the theory of value and surplus-value, *Capital* crumbles. But they merely mention their elimination of it in a note, and then proceed nonchalantly as if nothing had happened—as if, once this minor correction were made, Marx's work remained safer and sounder then ever.

Let us take another case, of a great intellectual and scholar for whom I have the highest respect, Maurice Dobb. Presenting an Italian edition of *Capital* a century later, Dobb has written a preface in which he gives out that everything in it is in order, except for a very small blemish, a tiny flaw in the original. This little error, says Dobb, is the way in which Marx operates the transformation of values into prices in Volume III of *Capital*: fortunately, however, the mistake has been rectified by Sraffa, and all is now well again. Dobb may well be right not to content himself with Marx's solution of the transformation problem, just as it is possible that Sweezy has good grounds for rejecting the theory of value. For the moment, we can suspend judgment on these issues. But where they are certainly wrong, is in believing or pretending to believe that the central pillars on which Marx's theoretical edifice rests can be removed, and the whole construction still remain standing. This type of behaviour is not merely one of illusion. By refusing to admit that what it rejects in Marx's work is not secondary but essential, it occludes and thereby aggravates the crisis of Marxism as a whole. Intellectual evasion of this sort merely deepens the stagnation of socialist thought evident everywhere in the West today. The same is true of the young Marxist economists in Italy who have adopted most of Sraffa's ideas. I do not say that Sraffa is wrong; I am willing to admit as a hypothesis

that he may be right. But what is absolutely absurd is to accept Sraffa, whose work implies the demolition of the entire foundations of Marx's analysis, and at the same time pretend that this is the best way of shoring up Marx.

Pivotal questions for contemporary Marxism do not, of course, concern only its economic theory. They are also political. In two recent texts, you have made a distinction between the notion of a 'parliamentary road' and a 'peaceful road' to socialism. Thus in the penultimate essay of From Rousseau to Lenin *to argue that* State and Revolution *was not directed by Lenin merely against reformism as such, and is not centred on any assertion of the necessity for physical violence to smash the bourgeois State—but is rather concerned with a much profounder theme, namely the need to substitute one historical type of power for another: the parliamentary representative State by direct proletarian democracy, in workers' councils, that are already no longer in full sense a State at all.*[13] *In a more recent article on Chile, you have repeated that violence is essentially secondary for a socialist revolution—something which may or may not occur, but never defines it as such.*[14] *You cite Lenin's article of September 1917 in which he said that a peaceful accession to socialism was possible in Russia, in both of these essays, to support your argument. But surely this use of a passage from Lenin is very superficial? By September 1917, there had already occurred a colossal historical violence in the First World War, which had cost millions of Russian lives and essentially broken the whole Army as a repressive apparatus of the Tsarist State. Moreover, the February Revolution had overthrown Tsarism itself by violent riots: a popular explosion that was in no sense a peaceful process. It was only in this context, after the liquefaction of the Tsarist military machine and the nation-wide establishment of Soviets, that Lenin said that for a brief moment a transition to socialism without further violence was possible, if the Provisional Government transferred its power to the Soviets. In practice, of course, the October Revolution proved necessary all the same—an organized insurrection for the seizure of power. The whole of Lenin's work is surely saturated with insistence on the necessity and inevitability of social violence to break the army and police apparatus of the ruling class. In general, you seem to pass too casually over this fundamental theme of Lenin's revolutionary theory. Has the need which you have obviously felt to resist the whole tradition of Stalinist nihilism towards proletarian democracy, and its massive utilization of police violence against the working class itself, not perhaps led you involuntarily to minimize the proletarian violence inherent in any mass revolutionary rising against capital?*

You may be right in saying that I have tended to underestimate this dimension of any revolution. But what was my basic aim in writing my essay on *State and Revolution*? You have indicated it yourself. It was to confront and attack a conception that Stalinism had entrenched in the workers' movement, that simply identified revolution with violence. For this tradition, it was only violence that was the real hallmark of a revolution: everything else—the transformation of the nature of power, the establishment of socialist democracy—was of no importance. The difference between Communists and Social-Democrats was simply

[13] *From Rousseau to Lenin*, pp. 219–27.
[14] Colletti's article on the lessons of Chile was published in *L'Espresso*, 23 September 1973.

that the former were for a violent revolution, while the latter were against a revolution because they were pacifists. If Communists created a bureaucratic political dictatorship after the revolution anywhere, or even a personal tyranny like that of Stalin, it was of minor significance: the regime was still socialism. It was against this long tradition that I sought to demonstrate that revolution and violence are by no means interchangeable concepts, and that at the limit there could even be a non-violent revolution. This is not just an isolated phrase in Lenin; there is a whole chapter of *State and Revolution* entitled 'the peaceful development of the revolution'.

The only important passages where Lenin affirms the possibility of a peaceful revolution as such are those in which he envisages a phase of history in which the ruling class has already been expropriated by violent revolutions in the major industrialized countries of the world, and the capitalists of the remaining smaller countries capitulate without serious resistance to their working classes, because the global balance of forces is so hopelessly against them. This is not a very relevant scenario yet.

I don't think we disagree on the substance of the issue. The really important question is the political nature of the power that emerges after any revolution, whatever the coercive force of the struggles that precede it. My main preoccupation has been to combat the heritage of Stalinist contempt for socialist democracy.

This concern remains very understandable. Still, the Communist Parties of the West themselves have now long since ceased to speak of violence in any form, let alone exalt it: on the contrary, they speak only of peaceful progress towards an 'advanced democracy', within the constitutional framework of the existing bourgeois State today. At most, they will say that if the bourgeoisie does not respect the constitutional rules of the game after the election of a government of the Left and attacks it illegally, then the working class has a right to defend itself physically. Whereas in Engels, Lenin or Trotsky, proletarian insurrection is envisaged essentially as an aggressive *weapon of revolutionary strategy, in which the essential rule is to take and keep the initiative—Danton's watchword of 'audacity'. You do seem to play down this central heritage of Marxist thought. Surely polemical confrontation with the Italian Communist Party today cannot avoid it?*

It is true that, as you say, the Western Communist Parties no longer mention violence today. But unfortunately small groups have arisen on the far Left in the same period, which reproduce Stalinist fixations on violence, and whose influence, especially on youth, cannot be ignored; it is often greater on the younger generation of Marxists than that of the Communist Parties themselves. You have cited my article on Chile. In it, I wrote that there can be no socialism without the freedom to strike, freedom of the press, and free elections. These were widely regarded here as outrageously parliamentarist statements. Why? Because in the deformed Stalinist mentality of most of these groups, freedom of the press or the right to strike are simply equated with parliament: since a socialist revolution will abolish parliament, it must also suppress all free elections, newspapers and strikes. In other words, install a police regime, not a proletarian democracy. Against this

disastrous confusion, it is necessary to remind socialists again and again that civic liberties—of election, expression and right to withold labour—are not the same thing as parliament, and that the mere exercise of violence is not the same thing as the revolutionary transformation of social relationships, and does not guarantee it.

True. But this was not the problem in Chile. No-one on the Left there was threatening to suppress the right to strike. The central problem, on the contrary, was just the opposite: trusting confidence in the neutrality of the repressive apparatus of bourgeois State. It was that which led to disaster in Chile. Moreover, it was not just the groups on the far Left who spoke of the Chilean situation. The Communist Parties were also vocal in their commentaries. Wasn't it necessary to say something about them too?

You are right. What happened was that I had to write a very short article quickly, in a very brief space of time. I now realize that I exposed my flank towards the Communists. I admit this.

But isn't it possible that there are theoretical—not just conjunctural—reasons for your underestimation of the importance of the coercive apparatus of the capitalist State? For all your interest in the bourgeois State has been essentially concentrated on what the whole Marxist tradition since Marx has largely neglected (Lenin included)—that is, the reality of parliamentary democracy, as an objective historical structure of bourgeois society, and not as a mere subjective trick or illusion created by the ruling-class. The political and ideological efficacy of the bourgeois-democratic State in containing and controlling the working class in the West has been enormous, especially in the absence of any proletarian democracy in the East. Nevertheless, the duty to take the whole system of parliamentary-representative State with the utmost seriousness, and to analyse it in its own right as the foreground of bourgeois political power in the West, should not lead one ever to forget the background of the permanent military and police apparatuses arrayed behind it. In any real social crisis, in which class directly confronts class, the bourgeoisie always fall back on its coercive rather than its representative machinery. The Chilean tragedy is there to prove the consequences of forgetting it.

I accept the justice of these criticisms. You are right to make them.

In this connexion, it is the particular merit of Gramsci to have started to try to think through some of the specific strategic problems posed by the social and political structures of the advanced capitalist countries, with their combination of representative and repressive institutions. You have never referred much to Gramsci in your major writings. Presumably in your Della Volpean phase you regarded him as a dangerously idealist influence in Italian culture, viewing him essentially in a philosophical context, rather than as a political thinker. Is this still your attitude?

No, I have changed my opinion of Gramsci completely. Your assessment of my earlier attitudes is accurate. It was difficult for us in our situation as a minority with an extremely weak position inside the PCI, to be able to separate Gramsci from the way in which the Party leadership presented Gramsci. This is completely true. However, since then, I have reflected on Gramsci a great deal, and I now understand his im-

portance much better. We should be quite clear about this, keeping a sense of proportion and avoiding any fashionable cult. I continue to believe that it is folly to present Gramsci as an equal or superior to Marx or Lenin as a thinker. His work does not contain a golden theoretical key that could unlock the solution to our present difficulties. But at the same time there is an abyss between Gramsci and a thinker like Lukács, or even Korsch—let alone Althusser. Lukács was a professor, Gramsci was a revolutionary. I have not yet written on Gramsci, in part because I am waiting for the critical edition of his *Prison Notebooks* to appear;[15] I think it is important to have fully accurate texts before one when writing on an author. In this case, I doubt whether there will be any major surprises in the definitive edition. However, the way in which the *Prison Notebooks* have been published hitherto in Italy has been completely aberrant. For example, the first volume was entitled 'Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce', as if Gramsci intended to construct a philosophy. Actually the *Prison Notebooks* are really concerned with a 'sociological' study of Italian society. This was precisely the whole difference between Gramsci and Togliatti. For Gramsci, cognitive analysis was essential to political action. For Togliatti, culture was separated and juxtaposed to politics. Togliatti exhibited a traditional culture of a rhetorical type, and conducted a politics without any organic relationship to it. Gramsci genuinely fused and synthesized the two. His research on Italian society was a real preparation for transforming it. This was the measure of his seriousness as a politician.

In fact, I believe that we can appreciate Gramsci's stature better today than it was possible to do 20 years ago, because Marxism is now in a crisis which imposes on us a profound self-examination and self-criticism—and Gramsci's position in the *Prison Notebooks* is precisely that of a politician and theorist reflecting on an historical defeat and the reasons for it. Hobsbawm has put this very well in a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*. Gramsci sought to understand the reasons for this defeat. He believed that the 'generals' of the proletariat had not known the real nature of the whole social terrain on which they were operating, and that the precondition for any renewed offensive by the working-class was to explore this terrain fully beforehand. In other words, he undertook an analysis of the peculiar characteristics of Italian society in his time. The great fascination and force of his work in this respect lies for me, paradoxically, in his very limitations. What were Gramsci's limitations? Basically, that he had an extremely partial and defective knowledge of Marx's work, and a relatively partial one even of Lenin's writings. The result was that he did not attempt any economic analysis of Italian or European capitalism. But this weakness actually produced a strength. Just because Gramsci had not really mastered Marxist economic theory, he could develop a novel exploration of Italian history that unfolded quite outside the conventional schematism of infrastructure and superstructure—a couplet of concepts that is very rare in Marx himself, and has nearly always led to retrograde simplifications. Gramsci was thus liberated to give a quite new

[15] The critical edition of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* will finally appear in Italy later this year, published by Einaudi. Its general editor will be Gerratana.

importance to the political and moral components of Italian history and society. We have become so accustomed as Marxists to looking at reality through certain spectacles, that it is very important that someone should now and again take these spectacles off: probably he will see the world somewhat confusedly, but he will also probably perceive things that those who wear spectacles never notice at all. The very deficiency of Gramsci's economic formation allowed him to be a more original and important Marxist than he might otherwise have been, if he had possessed a more orthodox training. Of course, his research remained incomplete and fragmentary. But Gramsci's achievement and example are nevertheless absolutely remarkable, for all these limitations.

You have singled out Gramsci from his contemporaries in Western Europe after the First World War, as on a level apart. How would you summarize your judgment of Trotsky?

My attitude to Trotsky is such that I am generally considered as a 'Trotskyist' in Italy, although I have never actually been one. If you go into the University here in Rome, you will see signs painted by students—Maoists and neo-Stalinists—which demand: 'Hang Colletti'. Anti-Trotskyism is an epidemic among Italian youth: and so I am commonly considered a Trotskyist. What is the fundamental truth expressed by Trotsky—the central idea for whose acceptance I am quite willing to be called a Trotskyist? You could condense it very laconically by saying that in any genuinely Marxist perspective, the United States of America should be the maturest society in the world for a socialist transformation, and that Trotsky is the theorist who most courageously and unremittingly reminds us of that. In other words, Trotsky always insisted that the determinant force in any real socialist revolution would be the industrial working class, and that no peasantry could perform this function for it, let alone a mere communist party leadership. The clearest and most unequivocal development of this fundamental thesis is to be found in the work of Trotsky. Without it, Marxism becomes purely honorific—once deprived of this element, anyone can call themselves a Marxist. At the same time, so far as the Soviet Union is concerned, I consider Trotsky's analyses of the USSR in *The Revolution Betrayed* to be exemplary, as a model of seriousness and balance. It is often forgotten how extraordinarily measured and careful *The Revolution Betrayed* is in its evaluation of Russia under Stalin. Nearly 40 years have passed since Trotsky wrote the book in 1936, and the situation in the USSR has deteriorated since then, in the sense that the bureaucratic caste in power has become stabilized and consolidated. But I continue to believe that Trotsky's fundamental judgment that the Soviet State was not a capitalist regime remains valid to this day. Naturally, this does not mean that socialism exists in the USSR—a species of society that has still not been properly catalogued by zoologists. But I am in basic agreement with Trotsky's position that Russia is not a capitalist country. Where I diverge from his analysis is on the question of whether the USSR can be described as a degenerated workers' State: this is a concept that has always left me perplexed. Beyond this doubt, however, I cannot propose any more precise definition. But what above all I respect in Trotsky's position is the sober caution of his dissection of Stalinism. This caution remains especially salutary today, against the

facile chorus of those on the Left who have suddenly discovered 'capitalism' or 'fascism' in the USSR.

How do you now view your personal development as a philosopher to date: and what do you see as the central problems for the general future of Marxism?

We have discussed the Della Volpean school in Italy, in which I received my early formation. What I would finally like to emphasize is something much deeper than any of the criticisms I have made of it hitherto. The phenomenon of Della Volpeanism—like that of Althusserianism today—was always linked to problems of *interpretation* of Marxism: it was born and remained confined within a purely theoretical space. The type of contact which it established with Marxism was always marked by a basic dissociation and division of theory from political activity.This separation has characterized Marxism throughout the world ever since the early 20s. Set against this background, the Della Volpean school in Italy is necessarily reduced to very modest dimensions: we should not have any illusions about this, or exaggerate the political differences between the Della Volpeans and the historicists at the time. The real, fundamental fact was the separation between theoretical Marxism and the actual working class movement. If you look at works like Kautsky's *Agrarian Question*, Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital*, or Lenin's *Development of Capitalism in Russia*—three of the great works of the period which immediately succeeded that of Marx and Engels—you immediately register that their theoretical analysis contains at the same time the elements of a political strategy. They are works which both have a true cognitive value, and an operative strategic purpose. Such works, whatever their limits, maintained the essential of Marxism. For Marxism is not a phenomenon comparable to existentialism, phenomenology or neo-positivism. Once it becomes so, it is finished. But after the October Revolution, from the early 20s onwards, what happened? In the West, where the revolution failed and the proletariat was defeated, Marxism lived on merely as an academic current in the universities, producing works of purely theoretical scope or cultural reflection. The career of Lukács is the clearest demonstration of this process. *History and Class Consciousness*, for all its defects, set out to be a book of political theory, geared to an actual practice. After it, Lukács came to write works of a totally different nature. *The Young Hegel* or *The Destruction of Reason* are typical products of a university professor. Culturally, they may have a very positive value: but they no longer have any connexion with the life of the workers' movement. They represent attempts to achieve a cognitive advance on the plane of theory, that at the same time are completely devoid of any strategic or political implications. This was the fate of the West. Meanwhile, what happened in the East? There revolutions did occur, but in countries whose level of capitalist development was so backward that there was no chance of them building a socialist society. In these lands, the classical categories of Marxism had no objective system of correspondences in reality. There was revolutionary political practice, which sometimes generated very important and creative mass experiences, but these occurred in an historical theatre which was alien to the central categories of Marx's own theory. This practice thus never succeeded in achieving translation into a theoretical advance within Marxism itself:

the most obvious case is the work of Mao. Thus, simplifying greatly, we can say that in the West, Marxism has become a purely cultural and academic phenomenon; while in the East, revolutionary processes developed in an ambience too retarded to permit a realization of socialism, and hence inevitably found expression in non-Marxist ideas and traditions.

This separation between West and East has plunged Marxism into a long crisis. Unfortunately, acknowledgment of this crisis is systematically obstructed and repressed among Marxists themselves, even the best of them, as we have seen in the cases of Sweezy and Dobb. My own view, by contrast, is that the sole chance for Marxism to survive and surmount its ordeal is to pit itself against these very problems. Naturally what any individual, even with a few colleagues, can do towards this by himself is very little. But this at any rate is the direction in which I am now trying to work: and it is in this perspective that I must express the most profound dissatisfaction with what I have done hitherto. I feel immensely distant from the things that I have written, because in the best of cases they seem to me no more than an appeal to principles against facts. But from a Marxist point of view, history can never be wrong—in other words, mere *a priori* axioms can never be opposed to the evidence of its actual development. The real task is to study why history took a different course from that foreseen by *Capital*. It is probable that any honest study of this will have to question certain of the central tenets of Marx's own thought itself. Thus I now completely renounce the dogmatic triumphalism with which I once endorsed every line in Marx—the tone of the passages of my *Introduction* of 1958, which you have quoted. Let me put this even more strongly. If Marxists continue to remain arrested in epistemology and gnoseology, Marxism has effectively perished. The only way in which Marxism can be revived is if no more books like *Marxism and Hegel* are published, and instead books Hilferding's *Finance Capital* and Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital*—or even Lenin's *Imperialism*, which was a popular brochure—are once again written. In short, either Marxism has the capacity—I certainly do not—to produce at that level, or it will survive merely as the foible of a few university professors. But in that case, it will be well and truly dead, and the professors might as well invent a new name for their clerisy.

Interviewer: PA