

Foreword to Five unpublished texts on Knowledge and Consciousness by Amadeo Bordiga

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With this double issue we make available to our readers five unpublished texts by Bordiga on the theory of knowledge. This is a project from at least two decades ago, which should have had its conclusion in a book. Things turned out differently, so we publish the texts in our journal proposing to return to the subject with specific works in future issues.

Between the first and the last of the texts we publish runs a third of a century, but all were written with unified intent. As such, we have collected them, accompanying them with an introductory essay and numerous notes. They take up three vital questions raised since the 1920s in the Communist Party of Italy, especially with Gramsci, to which they respond:

1. that the theory of revolution is not about "detailed theses" (tactics, unions, organization, etc.) but about the complete transition from capitalism to communism; it is based on a program that anticipates a new conception of the world and its knowledge;
2. that the return of idealism, scientific decadence, philosophical indeterminacy, etc., are products of social conservation; this society's way of knowing is not heritable, it must be overcome;
3. that therefore the theory of revolution allows us to critique of today's philosophy and science, but only with the transition to another society will the complete development of new knowledge be possible.

On the level of epistemology Gramsci was part of that variously defined current-neokantism, pragmatism, vitalism, neo-positivism, existentialism, etc. - which Lenin, anticipating later invariants, criticized in empiriocriticism. Today the current survives as a new form of vitalism, denying the possibility of treating social data with the same criteria with which one treats phenomena of nature. With the return to such old dichotomies, the very possibility of knowing, of approaching objective reality, of predicting events, in short, of making unified science between society and nature, which would be separate worlds, is thus denied.

The “Epistemological Notes”

Several typewritten copies of these old notes by Bordiga circulated in sections of the International Communist Party. The manuscripts are generally dated to 1928 because of a reference to the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Antidühring (1878) in the text. However, a double reference to the “*general communist conception of the world*”, which we find in the part mentioning the anniversary, is directly reminiscent of the controversy between Bordiga and Gramsci in the margins of the Lyon Congress held in January 1926. Therefore, it is almost certain that the date of the “notes” is to be brought forward to the end of '26 or the beginning of '27, that is, to the brief period in which they started, together, the “party school” for the interneees of Ustica. By 1928, Bordiga had already been ousted from the PCd'I and could not have drafted what was the obvious outline for a party meeting. Being watched on sight by the fascist police, without the support of the party's underground network, it was also impossible to meet with comrades from the Left. For these reasons it is almost certain that these are notes from Ustica and used at the “party school.” The approach to the theory of knowledge was not a way to settle an occasional discussion between two party leaders, but one of the cornerstones on which nothing less than the future of the revolution was being played out and which in Lyon had only found an opportunity to become explicit. Bordiga himself recounts:

“I declared that one is not within one's rights to declare oneself a Marxist, or even a historical materialist, merely because one accepts as party baggage detailed theses, referring either to trade union action, or to parliamentary tactics, or to questions of race, religion, or culture; but one is under the same political banner only when one believes in the same conception of the Universe, of History, and of Man's task in it. I am sure I remember well that Antony answered me by agreeing with me on the fundamental conclusion I had thus enunciated, and indeed admitted that he had then discerned for the first time that important truth.”

At the Lyon Congress, Bordiga spoke for seven hours, ranging over the specific features of a world communist party and certainly expanding on the brief reference to the Marxist worldview already included at the beginning of the Theses that the Left contrasted with those of the centrists, written by Gramsci. Unfortunately, the account was lost. The party school came soon after and it is interesting to note the subjects taught there, among which we find a history of philosophy. They are mentioned more than once in the letters Bordiga wrote from Ustica to Gramsci, who was transferred to prison in Milan awaiting trial:

“Everything is going excellently here including classes. We will have Lauriti take a history class. We have doubled German... The books of yours left here I have divided into two groups, one of which we will send to you, while the other is for the school... Tomorrow we start the physics course with elementary experiments... As for books we are keeping Economics which we are studying

together with the history of philosophy... The confined have increased to about 300 and still increasing. So large numbers of the schoolchildren. For practical reasons the school had to continue according to the primitive start-up: only now we give short vacations, then we will have sessions to classify the school mass, and then it will resume with a completely new plan and increased teaching staff... The school is doing well, even as attendance but it demands a lot of care and work as you can well believe."

We have three different photocopies of the Notes in our archives, and no doubt more circulated, as typewritten carbon-paper copying was the most common method in the 1950s-60s:

1. the oldest one was made in Ivrea in 1969 from an earlier carbon-paper copy; it is untitled and begins with the dot track (Socialism in the History of Thought, etc.); the comments and excerpts from the Antidürring are placed at the end;
2. another is from Milan; it was made in 1973; also untitled, it is identical to the previous one but typed on a different typewriter;
3. a third one comes from Rome; it is dated "August 1989" and is titled "Philosophical Notes"; the sequence of the texts is reversed from the previous copies: at the beginning, with the subtitle "First Notebook," are the excerpts from the Antidürring and the comments; at the end, with the subtitle "Second Notebook," is the dotted outline; the original quotations are replaced with the equivalent ones taken from the Antidürring of Editori Riuniti (1984 edition).

As the two oldest documents in our archive attest, the original was thus untitled, so "Philosophical Notes" is undoubtedly a later and also somewhat improper heading, given Bordiga's aversion to modern philosophizing and given the prominence in the text of issues on the theory of knowledge rather than philosophy.

The structure of the two notebooks gives us an indication of the logical sequence of their contents: first comes the general outline, which practically traces the index of the Antidürring and contains some additions; next comes the direct collection of material, with quotations and glosses; finally comes the Foreword, with a hint of the possibility of reversing the order of the chapters, which Engels is forced to take from Dürring, and Chapter One. The latter texts are certainly post-confinement, perhaps referable to an attempt to rewrite Engels' book from the epistemological premises, with reference to the new scientific discoveries and the necessary "reversal of the pyramid" (which Bordiga also mentions in the Bologna meeting). The title of these two fragments, "Foreword" and "Chapter One" is in itself unmistakable, and what is more, the

text, although in half-finished form, is very accurate, a clear sign that it was not just meant to serve as an outline to a meeting.

The tripartite structure of the "Notes," i.e. (1) the general thematic outline, (2) the documentation extracted from the Antidühring on the basis of the same outline, and (3) the beginning of the drafting of an extended text divided into chapters, is a sequence that gives indications of the working method used by Bordiga, but not only that: the first two parts can also be traced back to a unified whole, i.e., it is possible to bring them together simply by bringing the series of quotations from Engels and the related comments under the general thematic outline, merging the whole into one text. In this way it becomes clear which parts are carried out and which are not; which parts are taken from Engels and which are added by Bordiga. The operation is facilitated by the fact that the thematic outline and the documentation collection have many titles in common, so we have certainly proceeded to combine the first two fragments into a single text. It is followed by the third fragment, which gives an idea of how a rewritten Antidühring could be set up without being forced to follow the nonsense of a Dühring and taking into account the new achievements of science and epistemology.

The Three Meetings on the Theory of Knowledge

It is well known that Bordiga did not want to circulate tapes of recordings and indeed, as a rule, did not even want to see tape recorders running while he was speaking. The reason was very simple: the amount of work he was doing was such that it did not leave him time to prepare "finished" reports for each topic, so he wanted to be free to "say any nonsense" and then resume the topics in writing, more thoughtfully. Thus, recordings were made only when they served as reminders, as when, in earlier years, comrades took stenographic notes. After all, it is a method we continue to use as well: we record the meetings to keep a record of them, then delete everything when the topic is refined and passes into a written semi or the journal.

The Florence, Casale Monferrato, and Bologna meetings on knowledge were given to us in 1974 by an old militant of the International Communist Party, from the Winterthur section, during a general meeting. These were recordings made on several small-format reels, by means of rather primitive amateur equipment, reproduced from copy to copy not by direct cable but from speaker to microphone; the recording speed was even varied so that the speaker's voice from one tape to the next went from ragged bass to falsetto. The presence of a large number of overlaps and gaps showed that the source reels must have been of a different format than the target reels and that care had not been taken to join the parts of the speech correctly. Finally, because the recordings, starting with the original ones, had been made with poor microphones, there was an overwhelming background of ambient echo on the

tapes. In short, in the ones that reached us, as they were, one almost missed the speaker's words. So we decided to intervene technically to try to improve the audibility of the recordings. Having obtained access to an acoustics laboratory with the necessary equipment, we made a copy of the reels and succeeded, within the limits of the analogue instruments of the time, in "restoring" the voice to passably intelligible levels. The originals were returned and the new recordings were transferred to cassette.

Some parts are therefore fragmentary, which explains the need for the many reconstructions, always faithful to the context, that the reader will find in the transcript. But these are also meetings in which Bordiga spoke off the cuff, without delving into the topics touched upon, without even finishing sentences, in the heat of the speech, for the reasons mentioned above. Therefore there are repetitions and gaps, minute details and incredibly condensed arguments that required both an intervention on the text and a large number of notes. Bordiga would certainly have erased such tapes as soon as he had a written record of them, even a coarse one. But the reason for their preservation is clear, and Bordiga himself exposes it at the opening of the Bologna meeting: their final, oft-announced transcription remained a draft, and this resulted in a few "working" copies circulating among the comrades, as an exception to custom. Custom that was still strong after Bordiga's death, so much so that in 1975 the then party center, having learned that reels were circulating, requisitioned those from Winterthur, proposing to make a publication from them that was never realized. When the old party dissolved, some young comrades, with commendable work, squeezed out of the restored magnetic track all that it could give. Even so, as anyone who has tried to transcribe non-"official" speech knows, the result needed to be taken up for the written form. This, in our case, entailed some not-insignificant problems.

First, that of the actual gaps, that is, the parts that were missing altogether or incomprehensible, needed to be addressed. It soon became apparent that, leaving things as they were, the sequence of the discourse would be too fragmentary and the reader's understanding would be impaired. We therefore decided to "fill in the blanks" with original material, even if not in the specific text. In the footnotes we always pointed out both inserts taken from other texts by Bordiga and suitable for bridging, as well as reconstructions based on the author's language and especially the meaning of the context.

Secondly, a decision had to be made as to whether to keep intervention in the text in general to a minimum, presenting its framework without intervention (as archaeologists do today with ancient artifacts) or whether it would be more useful to perform a minimum of "proofreading" in keeping with the general content. That is, on the one hand, to achieve a simple "cleaning up" of the spoken language by arranging the punctuation, leaving the usual square brackets with suspension dots to indicate unintelligible words or sentences left in

the middle, etc.; on the other hand, to put ourselves decisively in the author's shoes and try to make at least those minimal interventions that he could have made himself.

We decided to proceed with both requirements in mind: we prepared an initial minimal arrangement of the text by carefully replaying the tapes in headphones, highlighting on the written text the unclear parts, redundancies, interruptions and parts of speech that Bordiga, an exuberant Neapolitan orator, emphasized with his voice, effects obviously impossible to report on paper; at a later stage we resumed the complete text by reconstructing, wherever possible, the missing parts, in short, doing editing work on the speech so as to obtain a version that could be called philological.

The method is the one used in all cases where gaps need to be filled by resorting exclusively to original material. There is, of course, a difference between objects and speech: a broken vase can certainly be reconstructed, provided, however, that all the pieces are found; where they are missing, the gap must be left or, if it is to be filled with non-original material, declared to be false. A speech is not a vessel; it possesses its own dynamics, redundancies, tones, hints, etc. Above all, it is not camped in the middle of nowhere, being a continuation of other speeches that the author has already made throughout his existence, working, communicating with others. And therefore it is possible to end it without distorting it, leaving it true.

We have been working with material by Bordiga and the "Italian" Communist Left in general for decades. We do it not for pleasure or archaeopolitical passion but as militants trying to continue their work. So it is a common work, done with the same methods: we have the context, we have the historical series, we have the mastery of their language, we have the same goal. In short, to put it in information theory terms, we have enough "global" redundancy to fill any "local" lack of data. Technically, the procedure is the same as that used, for example, to derive a razor-sharp image from a shot taken with an amateur video camera or other low-resolution medium: each individual image may not have enough information to reconstruct in the desired details a face, a writing, any detail, but the sequence of many images gives us the missing information to reconstruct, with absolutely original material, what one does not have. On the other hand, the reader will find that, apart from our "restoration," there is far more information in Bordiga's texts as a whole than appears from the mere sum of the paragraphs.