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Bonapartism and Fascism

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The vast practical importance of a correct theoretical orientation is most strikingly manifestos in a period of acute social conflict of rapid political shifts, of abrupt changes in the situation. In such periods, political conceptions and generalizations are rapidly used up and require either a complete replacement (which is easier) or their concretization, precision or partial rectification (which is harder). It is in just such periods that all sorts of transitional, intermediate situations and combinations arise, as a matter of necessity, which upset the customary patterns and doubly require a sustained theoretical attention. In a word, if in the pacific and “organic” period (before the war) one could still live on the revenue from a few readymade abstractions, in our time each new event forcefully brings home the most important law of the dialectic: The truth is always concrete.

The Stalinist theory of fascism indubitably represents one of the most tragic examples of the injurious practical consequences that can follow from the substitution of the dialectical analysis of reality, in its every concrete phase, in all its transitional stages, that is, in its gradual changes as well as in its revolutionary (or counter-revolutionary) leaps, by abstract categories formulated upon the basis of a partial and insufficient historical experience (or a narrow and insufficient view of the whole). The Stalinists adopted the idea that in the contemporary period, finance capital cannot accommodate itself to parliamentary democracy and is obliged to resort to fascism. From this idea, absolutely correct within certain limits, they draw in a purely deductive, formally logical manner the same conclusions for all the countries and for all stages of development. To them, Primo de Rivera, Mussolini, Chiang Kai-shek, Masaryk, Brüning, Dollfuss, Pilsudski, the Serbian King Alexander, Severing, MacDonald, etc., were the representatives of fascism. In doing this, they forgot: (a) that in the past, too, capitalism never accommodated itself to “pure” democracy, now supplementing it with a regime of open repression, now substituting one for it; (b) that “pure” finance capitalism nowhere exists; (c) that even while occupying a dominant position, finance capital does not act within a void and is obliged to reckon with the other strata of the bourgeoisie and with the resistance of the oppressed classes; (d) that, finally, between parliamentary democracy and the fascist regime a series of transitional forms, one after another, inevitably interposes itself, now “peaceably,” now by civil war. And each one of these transitional forms, if we want to go forward and not be flung to the rear, demands a correct theoretical appraisal and a corresponding policy of the proletariat.

On the basis of the German experience, the Bolshevik-Leninists recorded for the first time the transitional governmental form (even though it could and should already have been established on the basis of Italy) which we called Bonapartism (the Brüning, Papen, Schleicher governments). In a more precise and more developed form, we subsequently observed the Bonapartist regime in Austria. The determinism of this transitional form has become patent, naturally not in the fatalistic but in the dialectical sense, that is, for the countries and periods where fascism, with growing success, without encountering a victorious resistance of the proletariat, attacked the positions of parliamentary democracy in order thereupon to strangle the proletariat.

During the period of Brüning-Schleicher, Manuilsky-Kuusinen proclaimed: "Fascism is already here"; the theory of the intermediate, Bonapartist stage they declared to be an attempt to paint over and mask fascism in order to make easier for the Social Democracy the policy of the "lesser evil." At that time the Social Democrats were called social fascists, and the "left" Social Democrats of the Zyromsky-Marceau Pivert-Just type passed – after the "Trotskyists" – for the most dangerous social fascists. All this has changed now. With regard to present-day France, the Stalinists do not dare to repeat: "Fascism is already here;" on the contrary, they have accepted the policy of the united front, which they rejected yesterday, in order to prevent the victory of fascism in France. They have found themselves compelled to distinguish the Doumergue regime from the fascist regime. But they have arrived at this distinction as empiricists and not as Marxists. They do not even attempt to give a scientific Definition of the Doumergue regime. He who operates in the domain of theory with abstract categories is condemned to capitulate blindly to facts. And yet it is precisely in France that the passage from parliamentarism to Bonapartism (or more exactly, the first stage of this passage) has taken on a particularly striking and demonstrative character. It suffices to recall that the Doumergue government appeared on the scene between the rehearsal of the civil war by the fascists (February 6) and the general strike of the proletariat (February 12). As soon as the irreconcilable camps had taken up their fighting positions at the poles of capitalist society, it wasn't long before it became clear that the adding machine of parliamentarism lost all importance. It is true that the Doumergue government like the Brüning-Schleicher governments in their day, appears at first glance to govern with the assent of parliament. But it is a parliament which has abdicated, a parliament which knows that in case of resistance the government would dispense with it. Thanks to the relative equilibrium between the camp of counterrevolution which attacks and the camp of the revolution which defends itself, thanks to their temporary mutual neutralization, the axis of power has been raised above the classes and above their parliamentary representation. It was necessary to seek the head of the government outside of parliament and "outside the parties." The head of the government has called two generals to his aid. This trinity has supported itself on its right and its left by symmetrically arranged parliamentary hostages. The government does not appear as an executive organ of the parliamentary majority, but as a judge-arbiter between two camps in struggle.

A government which raises itself above the nation is not, however, suspended in air. The true axis of the present government passes through the police, the bureaucracy, the military clique. It is a military-police dictatorship with which we are confronted, barely concealed with the decorations of parliamentarism. But a government of the saber as the judge arbiter of the nation – that's just what Bonapartism is.

The saber by itself has no independent program. It is the instrument of "order." It is summoned to safeguard what exists. Raising itself politically above the classes,

Bonapartism, like its predecessor Caesarism, for that matter, represents in the social sense, always and at all epochs, the government of the strongest and firmest part of the exploiters; consequently, present-day Bonapartism can be nothing else than the government of finance capital which directs, inspires, and corrupts the summits of the bureaucracy, the police, the officers' caste, and the press.

The "constitutional reform" about which so much has been said in the course of recent months, has as its sole task the adaptation of the state institutions to the exigencies and conveniences of the Bonapartist government. Finance capital is seeking legal paths that would give it the possibility of each time imposing upon the nation the most suitable judge-arbiter with the forced assent of the quasi-parliament. It is evident that the Doumergue government is not the ideal of a "strong government" More suitable candidates for a Bonaparte exist in reserve. New experiences and combinations are possible in this domain if the future course of the class struggle is to leave them enough time.

In prognosticating, we are obliged to repeat what the Bolshevik-Leninists said at one time about Germany: the political chances of present French Bonapartism are not great; its stability is determined by the temporary and at bottom unsteady equilibrium between the camps of the proletariat and fascism. The relation of forces of these two camps must change rapidly, in part under the influence of the economic conjuncture, principally in dependence upon the quality of the proletarian vanguard's policy. The collision between these two camps is inevitable. The time scale of the process will be calculated in months and not in years. A stable regime could be established only after the collision, depending upon the results.

Fascism in power, like Bonapartism, can only be the government of finance capital. In this social sense, it is indistinguishable not only from Bonapartism but even from parliamentary democracy. Each time, the Stalinists made this discovery all over again, forgetting that social questions resolve themselves in the domain of the political. The strength of finance capital does not reside in its ability to establish a government of any kind and at any time, according to its wish; it does not possess this faculty. Its strength resides in the fact that every non-proletarian government is forced to serve finance capital; or better yet, that finance capital possesses the possibility of substituting for each one of its systems of domination that decays, another system corresponding better to the changed conditions. However, the passage from one system to another signifies the political crisis which, with the concurrence of the activity of the revolutionary proletariat may be transformed into a social danger to the bourgeoisie. The passage of parliamentary democracy to Bonapartism itself was accompanied in France by an effervescence of civil war. The perspective of the passage from Bonapartism to fascism is pregnant with infinitely more formidable disturbances and consequently also revolutionary possibilities.

Up to yesterday, the Stalinists considered that our "main mistake" was to see in fascism the petty bourgeoisie and not finance capital. In this case too they put abstract categories in place of the dialectics of the classes. Fascism is a specific means of mobilizing and organizing the petty bourgeoisie in the social interests of finance capital. During the democratic regime capital inevitably attempted to inoculate the workers with confidence in the reformist and pacifist petty bourgeoisie. The passage to fascism, on the contrary, is inconceivable without the preceding permeation of the petty bourgeoisie with hatred of the proletariat. The domination of one and the same superclass, finance capital, rests in these two systems upon directly opposite relations of oppressed classes.

The political mobilization of the petty bourgeoisie against the proletariat, however, is inconceivable without that social demagoguery which means playing with fire for the big bourgeoisie. The danger to “order” of the unleashed petty-bourgeois reaction, has just been confirmed by the recent events in Germany. That is why, while supporting and actively financing reactionary banditry, in the form of one of its wings, the French bourgeoisie seeks not to push matters to the point of the political victory of fascism, aiming only at the establishment of a “strong” power which, in the last analysis, is to discipline the two extreme camps.

What has been said sufficiently demonstrates how important it is to distinguish the Bonapartist form of power from the fascist form. Yet it would be unpardonable to fall into the opposite extreme, that is, to convert Bonapartism and fascism into two logically incompatible categories. Just as Bonapartism begins by combining the parliamentary regime with fascism, so triumphant fascism finds itself forced not only to enter into a bloc with the Bonapartists, but what is more, to draw closer internally to the Bonapartist system. The prolonged domination of finance capital by means of reactionary social demagoguery and petty-bourgeois terror is impossible. Having arrived in power, the fascist chiefs are forced to muzzle the masses who follow them by means of the state apparatus. By the same token, they lose the support of broad masses of the petty bourgeoisie. A small part of it is assimilated by the bureaucratic apparatus. Another sinks into indifference. A third, under various banners, passes into opposition. But while losing its social mass base, by resting upon the bureaucratic apparatus and oscillating between the classes, fascism is regenerated into Bonapartism. Here, too, the gradual evolution is cut into by violent and sanguinary episodes. Differing from pre-fascist or preventive Bonapartism (Giolitti, Brüning-Schleicher, Doumergue, etc.) which reflects the extremely unstable and short-lived equilibrium between the belligerent camps, Bonapartism of fascist origin (Mussolini, Hitler, etc.), which grew out of the destruction, the disillusionment and the demoralization of the two camps of the masses, distinguishes itself by its much greater stability.

The question “fascism or Bonapartism?” has engendered certain differences on the subject of the Pilsudski regime among our Polish comrades. The very possibility of such differences testifies best to the fact that we are dealing not with inflexible logical categories but with living social formations which represent extremely pronounced peculiarities in different countries and at different stages.

Pilsudski came to power at the end of an insurrection based upon a mass movement of the petty bourgeoisie and aimed directly at the domination of the traditional bourgeois parties in the name of the “strong state”; this is a fascist trait characteristic of the movement and of the regime. But the specific political weight, that is, the mass of Polish fascism was much weaker than that of Italian fascism in its time and still more than that of German fascism; to a much greater degree, Pilsudski had to make use of the methods of military conspiracy and to put the question of the workers’ organizations in a much more circumspect manner. It suffices to recall that Pilsudski’s *coup d’état* took place with the sympathy and the support of the Polish party of the Stalinists. The growing hostility of the Ukrainian and Jewish petty bourgeoisie towards the Pilsudski regime made it, in turn, more difficult for him to launch a general attack upon the working class.

As a result of such a situation, the oscillation between the classes and the national parts of the classes occupied and still occupies with Pilsudski a much greater place, and mass terror a much smaller place, than in the corresponding periods with Mussolini or Hitler;

there is the Bonapartist element in the Pilsudski regime. Nevertheless, it would be patently false to compare Pilsudski to Giolitti or to Schleicher and to look forward to his being relieved by a new Polish Mussolini or Hitler. It is methodologically false to form an image of some “ideal” fascism and to oppose it to this real fascist regime which has grown up, with all its peculiarities and contradictions, upon the terrain of the relationship of classes and nationalities in the Polish state. Will Pilsudski be able to lead the action of destruction of the proletarian organizations to the very end? – and the logic of the situation drives him inevitably on this path – that does not depend upon the formal definition of “fascism as such,” but upon the true relationship of forces, the dynamics of the political processes taking place in the masses, the strategy of the proletarian vanguard, finally, the course of events in Western Europe and above all in France.

History may successfully inscribe the fact that Polish fascism was overthrown and reduced to dust before it succeeded in finding for itself a “totalitarian” form of expression.

We said above that Bonapartism of fascist origin is incomparably more stable than the preventive Bonapartist experiments to which the big bourgeoisie resorts in the hope of avoiding fascist bloodletting. Nevertheless, it is still more important – from the theoretical and practical point of view – to emphasize that the very fact of the regeneration of fascism into Bonapartism signifies the beginning of its end. How long a time the withering away of fascism will last, and at what moment its malady will turn into agony, depends upon many internal and external causes. But the fact that the counterrevolutionary activity of the petty bourgeoisie is quenched, that it is disillusioned, that it is disintegrating, and that its attack upon the proletariat is weakening, opens up new revolutionary possibilities. All history shows that it is impossible to keep the proletariat enchained with the aid merely of the police apparatus. It is true that the experience of Italy shows that the psychological heritage of the enormous catastrophe experienced maintains itself among the working class much longer than the relationship between the forces which engendered the catastrophe. But the psychological inertia of the defeat is but a precarious prop. It can crumble at a single blow under the impact of a powerful convulsion. Such a convulsion – for Italy, Germany, Austria, and other countries – could be the success of the struggle of the French proletariat.

The revolutionary key to the situation in Europe and in the entire world is now above all in France!

[*The Rise of Fascism in Germany Index*](#)

