ELEMENTS OF POLITICS

It really must be stressed that it is precisely the first elements, the most elementary things, which are the first to be forgotten. However, if they are repeated innumerable times, they become the pillars of politics and of any collective action whatsoever.

The first element is that there really do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led. The entire science and art of politics are based on this primordial, and (given certain general conditions) irreducible fact. The origins of this fact are a problem apart, which will have to be studied separately (at least one could and should study how to minimise the fact and eliminate it, by altering certain conditions which can be identified as operating in this sense), but the fact remains that there do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led. Given this fact, it will have to be considered how one can lead most effectively (given certain ends); hence how the leaders may best be prepared (and it is more precisely in this that the first stage of the art and science of politics consists); and how, on the other hand, one can know the lines of least resistance, or the most rational lines along which to proceed if one wishes to secure the obedience of the led or ruled. In the formation of leaders, one premise is fundamental: is it the intention that there should always be rulers and ruled, or is the objective to create the conditions in which this division is no longer necessary? In other words, is the initial premise the perpetual division of the human race, or the belief that this division is only an historical fact, corresponding to certain conditions? Yet it must be clearly understood that the division between rulers and ruled—though in the last analysis it has its origin in a division between social groups—is in fact, things being as they are, also to be found within the group itself, even where it is a socially homogeneous one. In a certain sense it may be said that this division is created by the division of labour, is merely a technical fact, and

agrarian interests, and that the interests of urban capitalism were not asserted before classical economics. The Physicocrats represent the break with mercantilism and with the guild system, and are a stage on the way to classical economics. But it seems to me that precisely for that reason they represent a far more complex future society than the one against which they are fighting, and even than the one which immediately derives from their affirmations. Their language is too much linked to their time, and expresses the immediate contrast between city and countryside, but it permits an expansion of capitalism into agriculture to be foreseen. The formula of "laissez-faire, laissez-passer", that is to say of free industry and free enterprise, is certainly not linked to agrarian interests.

I.e. under the conditions of class society. For Gramsci's "first element" here, see Hegel: *Philosophy of History*, Dover 1956, p. 44: "The primary consideration is, then, the distinction between the governing and the governed..."

88 Luigi Cadorna (1850-1928) was commander-in-chief of the Italian armed forces until the defeat at Caporetto in 1917, for which he was held responsible. The war was widely unpopular by 1917, and the Italian soldiers' disillusionment was certainly an important factor in the defeat. Cadorna was taken by Gramsci as the symbol of the authoritarian leader who makes no attempt to win the "consent" of those he is leading.
The principle once posed that there are leaders and led, rulers and ruled, it is true that parties have up till now been the most effective way of developing leaders and leadership. (Parties may present themselves under the most diverse names, even calling themselves the anti-party or the “negation of the parties”; in reality, even the so-called “individualists” are party men, only they would like to be “party chiefs” by the grace of God or the idiocy of those who follow them.)

Development of the general concept contained in the expression “State spirit”.

This expression has a quite precise, historically determinate meaning. But the problem is raised: does there exist something similar to what is called “State spirit” in every serious movement, that is to say in every movement which is not the arbitrary expression of more or less justified individualisms? Meanwhile “State spirit” presupposes “continuity”, either with the past, or with tradition, or with the future; that is, it presupposes that every act is a moment in a complex process, which has already begun and which will continue. The responsibility for this process, of being actors in this process, of being in solidarity with forces which are materially “unknown” but which nevertheless feel themselves to be active and operational—and of which account is taken, as if they were physically “material” and present—is precisely in certain cases called “State spirit”. It is obvious that such awareness of “duration” must be concrete and not abstract, that is to say in a certain sense must not go beyond certain limits. Let us say that the narrowest limits are a generation back and a generation to come. This represents no short period, since generations cannot be calculated simply as thirty years each—the last thirty and the next thirty respectively. They have to be calculated organically, which

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at least as far as the past is concerned is easy to understand: we feel ourselves linked to men who are now extremely old, and who represent for us the past which still lives among us, which we need to know and to settle our accounts with, which is one of the elements of the present and one of the premises of the future. We also feel ourselves linked to our children, to the generations which are being born and growing up, and for which we are responsible. (The call of tradition, which has a tendentious value, is something different; it implies a choice and a determinate goal—that is to say, it is the basis for an ideology.) However, if it can be said that a “State spirit” in this sense is to be found in everybody, it is necessary from time to time to combat distortions of it or deviations from it.

“The act for the act’s sake”, struggle for the sake of struggle, etc., and especially mean, petty individualism, which is anyway merely an arbitrary satisfying of passing whims, etc. (In reality, the question is still that of Italian “apoliticism”, which takes on these various picturesque and bizarre forms.) Individualism is merely brutish apoliticism; sectarianism is apoliticism, and if one looks into it carefully is a form of personal following [clientel], lacking the party spirit which is the fundamental component of “State spirit”. The demonstration that party spirit is the basic component of “State spirit” is one of the most critically important assertions to uphold. Individualism on the other hand is a brutish element, “admired by foreigners”, like the behaviour of the inmates of a zoological garden. [1933]

THE POLITICAL PARTY

It has already been said that the protagonist of the new Prince could not in the modern epoch be an individual hero, but only the political party. That is to say, at different times, and in the various internal relations of the various nations, that determinant party which has the aim of founding a new type of State (and which was rationally and historically created for that end).

It should be noted that in those regimes which call themselves totalitarian, the traditional function of the institution of the Crown is in fact taken over by the particular party in question,
which indeed is totalitarian precisely in that it fulfills this function. Although every party is the expression of a social group, and of one social group only, nevertheless in certain conditions certain parties represent a single social group precisely in so far as they exercise a balancing and arbitrating function between the interests of their group and those of other groups, and succeed in securing the development of the group which they represent with the consent and assistance of the allied groups—if not out and out with that of groups which are definitely hostile. The constitutional formula of the king, or president of the republic, who “reigns but does not govern” is the juridical expression of this function of arbitration, the concern of the constitutional parties not to “unmask” the Crown or the president. The formulae stating that it is not the head of State who is responsible for the actions of the government, but his ministers, are the casuistry behind which lies the general principle of safeguarding certain conceptions—the unity of the State; the consent of the governed to State action—whatever the current personnel of the government, and whichever party may be in power.

With the totalitarian party, these formulae lose their meaning; hence the institutions which functioned within the context of such formulae become less important. But the function itself is incorporated in the party, which will exalt the abstract concept of the “State”, and seek by various means to give the impression that it is working actively and effectively as an “impartial force”. [1933-34: 1st version 1930-32.]

Is political action (in the strict sense) necessary, for one to be able to speak of a “political party”? It is observable that in the modern world, in many countries, the organic and fundamental parties have been compelled by the exigencies of the struggle or for other reasons to split into fractions—each one of which calls itself a “party” and even an independent party. Hence the intellectual General Staff of the organic party often does not belong to any of these fractions, but operates as if it were a directive force standing on its own, above the parties, and sometimes is even believed to be such by the public. This function can be studied with greater precision if one starts from the point of view that a newspaper too (or group of newspapers), a review (or group of reviews), is a “party” or “fraction of a party” or “a function of a particular party”. Think of the role of The Times in England; or that which

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34 For Gramsci’s use of the term “organic”, see e.g. “The Formation of the Intellectuals” on pp. 5-14 above.
providing leadership of a cultural and general ideological nature for a great movement of interrelated parties (which in reality are fractions of one and the same organic party). And secondly, in the more recent period, there is a type of party constituted this time not by an elite but by masses—who as such have no other political function than a generic loyalty, of a military kind, to a visible or invisible political centre. (Often the visible centre is the mechanism of command of forces which are unwilling to show themselves in the open, but only operate indirectly, through proxies and a "proxy ideology")99 The mass following is simply for "manoeuvre", and is kept happy by means of moralising sermons, emotional stimuli, and messianic myths of an awaited golden age, in which all present contradictions and miseries will be automatically resolved and made well. [1933]

To write the history of a political party, it is necessary in reality to confront a whole series of problems of a much less simple kind than Robert Michels,40 for example, believes—though he is considered an expert on the subject. In what will the history of a party consist? Will it be a simple narrative of the internal life of a political organisation? How it comes into existence, the first groups which constitute it, the ideological controversies through which its programme and its conception of the world and of life are formed? In such a case, one would merely have a history of certain intellectual groups, or even sometimes the political biography of a single personality. The study will therefore have to have a vaster and more comprehensive framework.

The history will have to be written of a particular mass of men who have followed the founders of the party, sustained them with their trust, loyalty and discipline, or criticised them "realistically" by dispersing or remaining passive before certain initiatives. But will this mass be made up solely of members of the party? Will it be sufficient to follow the congresses, the votes, etc., that is to say the whole nexus of activities and modes of existence through which the mass following of a party manifests its will? Clearly it will be necessary to take some account of the social group of which the party in question is the expression and the most advanced element. The history of a party, in other words, can only be the history of a particular social group. But this group is not isolated; it has friends, kindred groups, opponents, enemies. The history of any given party can only emerge from the complex portrayal of the totality of society and State (often with international ramifications too). Hence it may be said that to write the history of a party means nothing less than to write the general history of a country from a monographic viewpoint, in order to highlight a particular aspect of it. A party will have had greater or less significance and weight precisely to the extent to which its particular activity has been more or less decisive in determining a country's history.

We may thus see that from the way in which the history of a party is written there emerges the author's conception of what a party is and should be. The sectarian will become excited over petty internal matters, which will have an esoteric significance for him, and fill him with mystical enthusiasm. The historian, though giving everything its due importance in the overall picture, will emphasise above all the real effectiveness of the party, its determining force, positive and negative, in having contributed to bringing certain events about and in having prevented other events from taking place. [1933-4: 1st version 1932.]

The problem of knowing when a party was actually formed, i.e. undertook a precise and permanent task, gives rise to many arguments and often too, unfortunately, to a kind of conceit which is no less absurd and dangerous than the "conceit of nations"41 of which Vico speaks. It is true that one may say that a party is never complete and fully-formed, in the sense that every development creates new tasks and functions, and in the sense that for certain

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99 This second type of party must refer to fascismo. The first type of "party" is probably a reference to the role of Croce; see MS. p. 172: "The party as general ideology, superior to the various more immediate groupings. In reality the liberal party in Italy after 1876 was characterised by the way in which it presented itself to the country as a number of national and regional fractions and groups 'in open order'. All of the following were fractions of political liberalism: the liberal catholicism of the Popular Party; nationalism (Croce was a contributor to *Politico*, the journal of A. Rocco and F. Coppola); the monarchist unions; the Republican Party; a great part of socialism; the democratic radicals; the conservatives; Sommio and Salandra; Giolitti, Orlando, Nitti and Co. Croce was the theorist of what all these groups, grouplets, camarillas and mafias had in common; the head of a central propaganda office which benefited all these groups and which they all made use of; the national leader of the cultural movements which arose to renovate the old political forms." See too "The History of Europe seen as 'Passive Revolution'" on pp. 118-20 above.

40 See note 79 on p. 430.

41 "On the conceit of nations, there is a golden saying of Diodorus Siculus. Every nation, according to him, whether Greek or barbarian, has had the same conceit that it before all other nations invented the comforts of human life and that its remembered history goes back to the very beginning of the world." The New Science of Giambattista Vico, Cornell, 1968, p. 61. When Gramsci speaks of "party conceit" he may also have in mind a phrase of Zinoviev's at the Fourth World Congress, directed in particular against the PCI. Zinoviev referred to the danger of "kom-pl siaostio" = communist boastfulness or conceit.
parties the paradox is true that they are complete and fully-formed only when they no longer exist—i.e. when their existence has become historically redundant. Thus, since every party is only the nomenclature for a class, it is obvious that the party which proposes to put an end to class divisions will only achieve complete self-fulfilment when it ceases to exist because classes, and therefore their expressions, no longer exist. But here I wish to refer to a particular moment of this process of development, the moment succeeding that in which something may either exist or not exist—in the sense that the necessity for it to exist has not yet become “imperative”, but depends to a great extent on the existence of individuals of exceptional will-power and of exceptional will.

When does a party become historically necessary? When the conditions for its “triumph”, for its inevitable progress to State power, are at least in the process of formation, and allow their future evolution—all things going normally—to be foreseen. But when can one say, given such conditions, that a party cannot be destroyed by normal means? To give an answer, it is necessary to develop the following line of reasoning: for a party to exist, three fundamental elements (three groups of elements) have to converge:

1. A mass element, composed of ordinary, average men, whose participation takes the form of discipline and loyalty, rather than any creative spirit or organisational ability. Without these the party would not exist, it is true, but it is also true that neither could it exist with these alone. They are a force in so far as there is somebody to centralise, organise and discipline them. In the absence of this cohesive force, they would scatter into an impotent diaspora and vanish into nothing. Admittedly any of these elements might become a cohesive force, but I am speaking of them precisely at the moment when they are not nor in any condition to become it—or if they are, it is only in a limited sphere, politically ineffectual and of no consequence.

2. The principal cohesive element, which centralises nationally and renders effective and powerful a complex of forces which left to themselves would count for little or nothing. This element is endowed with great cohesive, centralising and disciplinary powers; also—and indeed this is perhaps the basis for the others—with the power of innovation (innovation, be it understood, in a certain direction, according to certain lines of force, certain perspectives, even certain premises). It is also true that neither could this element form the party alone; however, it could do so more than could the first element considered. One speaks of generals without an army,

but in reality it is easier to form an army than to form generals. So much is this true that an already existing army is destroyed if it loses its generals, while the existence of a united group of generals who agree among themselves and have common aims soon creates an army even where none exists.

3. An intermediate element, which articulates the first element with the second and maintains contact between them, not only physically but also morally and intellectually. In reality, for every party there exist “fixed proportions” between these three elements, and the greatest effectiveness is achieved when these “fixed proportions” are realised.

In view of these considerations, it is possible to say when it is that a party cannot be destroyed by normal means. The second element must necessarily be in existence (if it is not, discussion is meaningless); its appearance is related to the existence of objective material conditions, even if still in a fragmented and unstable state. The moment when it becomes impossible to destroy a party by normal means is reached when the two other elements cannot help being formed—that is, the first element, which in its turn necessarily forms the third as its continuation and its means of expressing itself.

For that to happen, the iron conviction has to have been formed that a particular solution of the vital problems is necessary. Without this conviction the second element will not be formed. This element can the more easily be destroyed in that it is numerically weak, but it is essential that if it is destroyed it should leave as its heritage a ferment from which it may be recreated. And where could this ferment better be formed and subsist than in the first and third elements, which, obviously, are the nearest in character to the second? The activity of the second element towards creating this ferment is therefore fundamental. The criteria by which the second element should be judged are to be sought: 1. in what it actually does; 2. in what provision it makes for the eventuality of its own destruction. It is difficult to say which of these two facts is the more important. Since defeat in the struggle must always be envisaged, the preparation of one's own successors is as important as what one does for victory.

With regard to party conceit, this may be said to be worse than the national conceit of which Vico speaks. Why? Because a nation cannot help existing; and in the fact that it exists it is always possible—maybe with a little goodwill and an invocation of the

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42 See “The Theorem of Fixed Proportions” on pp. 190-2.
puts forward this hypothesis in advance, when no concrete fact
(that is to say, none which appears as such to the evidence of
common sense—rather than as a result of some esoteric "scientific"
analysis) yet exists to support it. It thus appears as a moralistic
accusation of duplicity and bad faith, or (in the case of the move-
ment’s followers), of naïveté and stupidity. Thus the political
struggle is reduced to a series of personal affairs between on
the one hand those with the genie in the lamp who know everything
and on the other those who are fooled by their own leaders but are
so incurably thick that they refuse to believe it. Moreover, until
such movements have gained power, it is always possible to think
that they are going to fail—and some indeed have failed (Boulangism
itself, which failed as such and then was definitively crushed with
the rise of the Dreyfusard movement; the movement of Georges
Valois; that of General Gajda).48 Research must therefore be
directed towards identifying their strengths and weaknesses. The
"economic" hypothesis asserts the existence of an immediate
element of strength—i.e. the availability of a certain direct or
indirect financial backing (a large newspaper supporting the move-
ment is also a form of indirect financial backing)—and is satisfied
with that. But it is not enough. In this case too, an analysis of the
balance of forces—at all levels—can only culminate in the sphere
of hegemony and ethico-political relations. [1933-34; 1st version
1930-32.]

One point which should be added as an example of the so-called
intransigence theories is the rigid aversion on principle to what are
termed compromises49—and the derivative of this, which can be
termed "fear of dangers". It is clear that this aversion on principle

48 Georges Valois was a French fascist thinker, who early in this century
formed the "Cercle Proutien", of which Sorel was a member. After the World War
he organized a movement aimed at "national revolution", based on ex-servicemen
and inspired by Mussolini; it was equally hostile to "bolshievism" and "peterc-
ocracy". In the 'thirties he espoused a form of "convergence" theory, seeing both
the USA and the USSR as evolving towards a highly technological, syndical
form of society.

General Rudolf Gajda, commander of the Czech Legion under Kolcheck
during the Civil War in Russia, discharged from the Czech army for plotting
a military putsch in the 'twenties, formed a fascist League for Electoral Reform
which won three seats in the 1929 elections in Czechoslovakia. When the Nazis
entered the country, he hoped to become their puppet ruler, but they no doubt
mistrusted his nationalist past since his hopes were frustrated.

49 In his comments on "intransigents" (see note 58 on p. 161) Gramsci often
appears to mean that, to be referring also—or even especially—to the positions of
Amadeo Bordiga (see General Introduction), Bordiga was among those com-
munists criticised in Lenin's Left-wing Communism—an infantile disorder, whose
eighth chapter was entitled, ironically, "No compromises".

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to compromise is closely linked to economism. For the conception
upon which the aversion is based can only be the iron conviction
that there exist objective laws of historical development similar in
kind to natural laws, together with a belief in a predetermined
teleology like that of a religion: since favourable conditions are
inevitably going to appear, and since these, in a rather mysterious
way, will bring about palimpsestic events, it is evident that any
deliberate initiative tending to predispose and plan these conditions
is not only useless but even harmful. Side by side with these fatalistic
beliefs however, there exists the tendency "thereafter" to rely
blindly and indiscriminately on the regulatory properties of armed
conflict. Yet this too is not entirely without its logic and its con-
sistency, since it goes with a belief that the intervention of will is
useful for destruction but not for reconstruction (already under way
in the very moment of destruction). Destruction is conceived of
mechanically, not as destruction/reconstruction. In such modes of
thinking, no account is taken of the "time" factor, nor in the last
analysis even of "economics". For there is no understanding of the
fact that mass ideological factors always lag behind mass economic
phenomena, and that therefore, at certain moments, the automatic
thrust due to the economic factor is slowed down, obstructed or
even momentarily broken by traditional ideological elements—
hence that there must be a conscious, planned struggle to ensure
that the exigencies of the economic position of the masses, which
may conflict with the traditional leadership’s policies, are under-
stood. An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to
liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional
policies—i.e. to change the political direction of certain forces
which have to be absorbed if a new, homogeneous politico-economic
historical bloc, without internal contradictions, is to be successfully
formed. And, since two "similar" forces can only be welded into
a new organism either through a series of compromises or by force
of arms, either by binding them to each other as allies or by forcibly
subordinating one to the other, the question is whether one has the
necessary force, and whether it is "productive" to use it. If the
union of two forces is necessary in order to defeat a third, a recourse
to arms and coercion (even supposing that these are available) can
be nothing more than a methodological hypothesis; the only concrete
possibility is compromise. Force can be employed against enemies,
but not against a part of one’s own side which one wishes rapidly
to assimilate, and whose "good will" and enthusiasm one needs.
[1933-34; 1st version 1932.]