

# *Gramsci Dictionary / Dizionario gramsciano*

## *Jacobinism*

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Jacobinism is a historical-interpretative concept of prime importance for the Gramsci of the *Prison Notebooks*. There, it is a positive concept, whereas the young Gramsci had been severely critical of it, considering it a wholly bourgeois mode of political action. In an article of his of 18 July 1917, *The Russian Maximalists*, he peremptorily asserted that «in Russia there are no Jacobins».<sup>1</sup> After this initial aversion he would change idea. The turning point was his reading of the French historian Albert Mathiez's *Le Bolchévisme et le Jacobinisme*, of which Gramsci commissioned a translation and which he published in instalments in «L'Ordine Nuovo» in 1921. This seems the moment when the Jacobin phenomenon undergoes his thorough historical rethink, together with its more favourable ideological re-reading. Mathiez's article is entirely based on the analogy between the Jacobin republic and the Bolshevik revolution. It is evident that Gramsci here undergoes the influence of Mathiez's interpretation, in which Jacobinism and Bolshevism constitute one and the same “myth”. Thus in the *Notebooks*, Jacobinism – transformed by Gramsci into a fundamental historical-interpretative category – has a depth that goes well beyond that of a concrete historical phenomenon, even though he warns against a de-historicized reading, divorcing the phenomenon from time and place and reducing it to “formulas”, in which solely «a ghost», «hollow and useless words» would attain.<sup>2</sup>

Gramsci notes how the term “Jacobin” ended up by taking on two meanings: that of a given party in the French Revolution, which had its given programme and employed its party and governmental action with a method «characterised by extreme energy»; and another, successive, one for which the name “Jacobin” was used for a «politician who was energetic, resolute and fanatical, because [he was] fanatically convinced of the thaumaturgical virtues of his ideas, whatever they

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<sup>1</sup> *CF*, p. 266; *SPW 1*, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Q 1*, § 48; *QC*, p. 61; *PN 1*, p. 158).

might be».<sup>3</sup> Attempting to establish what the nature and role of the Action Party was in the Italian Risorgimento in continuous juxtaposition with the – victorious and hegemonic – action of the moderate party, of Cavourian persuasion, Gramsci observed that the Action Party lacked the ability to exert a «spontaneous attraction». To achieve this, it ought to have been able to stamp «the movement of the Risorgimento with a more markedly popular and democratic character».<sup>4</sup> Gramsci asserted that the Action Party «lacked even a concrete programme of government»; further, it «confused the cultural unity which existed in the peninsula [...] with the political and territorial unity of the great popular masses, who were foreign to that cultural tradition».<sup>5</sup> Gramsci's severe judgments on the Mazzinian party and its extreme lack of political action are well known. He maintained that one could make a comparison between the Jacobins and the Action Party. The Jacobins «strove with determination to ensure a bond between town and country, and they succeeded triumphantly». In French political literature «the necessity of binding the town (Paris) to the countryside had always been vividly felt and expressed»; in the history of the peninsula the Action Party always had this tradition to which it could go back and attach itself, given that «the history of the mediaeval Communes is rich in relevant experiences». It was indeed exactly «the most classic master of the art of politics for the Italian ruling classes, Machiavelli, [who] had also posed the problem – naturally in the terms and with the preoccupations of his time».<sup>6</sup>

Asking himself the reason for the failed attempts to awaken in Italy a «national-popular collective will», Gramsci found it in the establishment of an «economic-corporative» form of society, that is to say the «the worst of all forms of feudal society, the least progressive and the most stagnant. An effective *Jacobin* force was always missing, and could not be constituted». Such a force was precisely that which «in other nations awakened and organised the national-popular collective will, and founded the modern States». The formation of a national-popular collective will in Gramsci's view is impossible if the great masses of the peasantry do not *simultaneously* irrupt into political life.

<sup>3</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, p. 2017; *SPN*, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, p. 2013; *SPN*, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, p. 2014; *SPN*, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, pp. 2014-15; *SPN*, pp. 63-64.

This is what Machiavelli meant through the reform of the militia, and what the Jacobins did in the French Revolution. And this is the basis of why Gramsci sees a «precocious Jacobinism» in Machiavelli, «the (more or less fertile) germ of his conception of national revolution».<sup>7</sup> Machiavellianism and Jacobinism are united in their capacity to pose in a radical form the problem of the peasant revolution and by the fact that both are the expression of a collective will aiming at the foundation of a new type of State. This positive assumption of Jacobinism leads Gramsci to gloss over the question of the use of terror, if not even to legitimize it: «The Third Estate would have fallen into these successive “pitfalls” without the energetic action of the Jacobins, who opposed every “intermediate” halt in the revolutionary process, and sent to the guillotine not only the elements of the old society which was hard a-dying, but also the revolutionaries of yesterday – today become reactionaries».<sup>8</sup>

Carrying on his analysis of the activity of the Action Party in the light of Jacobinism (or, rather, the lack of Jacobinism), Gramsci observes that the «Jacobins won their function of “leading” [*dirigente*] party by a struggle to the death»;<sup>9</sup> in reality they «imposed» themselves on the French bourgeoisie, leading it to a much more advanced position than the originally strongest bourgeois nuclei would have “spontaneously” wished to occupy. This feature, characteristic of Jacobinism (but before that, of Cromwell and the roundheads), consists in forcing the situation by creating «irreversible *faits accomplis*, and in a group of extremely energetic and determined men driving the bourgeois forward with kicks in the backside». Gramsci also denies that the Jacobins were «abstract dreamers»: they were instead «realists of the Machiavellian stamp», persuaded of the «absolute truth» of the formulas on equality, fraternity, liberty, such that the «great popular masses whom the Jacobins stirred up and drew into the struggle» were also convinced of this truth. Their language, their ideology, their methods of action «reflected perfectly the exigencies of the epoch».<sup>10</sup> Gramsci then establishes a precise relation between French Jacobinism and physiocratic culture: one would be «inexplicable» without the

<sup>7</sup> Q 13, § 1: *QC*, pp. 1559-60; *SPN*, pp. 131-32.

<sup>8</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, p. 2028; *SPN*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *QC*, pp. 2027-28; *SPN*, p. 78.

other, «with its demonstration of the economic and social importance of the peasant proprietor» even if it does not seem right to claim that the physiocrats «merely represented agrarian interests», given that they represented «a far more complex future society than the one against which they [were] fighting, and even than the one which immediately derives from their affirmations». <sup>11</sup> Moreover, to whomever from a moderate historicist viewpoint argues that the Jacobins were «irrational», Gramsci counters that «neither Napoleon nor the Restoration destroyed the Jacobins' *faits accomplis*». <sup>12</sup>

One must, however, have an appropriate view of the Jacobins and their politics, a vision that includes the absolute importance of their agrarian policy, without which «Paris would have had the Vendée at its very doors». <sup>13</sup> The Girondins unsuccessfully «tried to exploit federalism in order to crush Jacobin Paris» whereas the Jacobins held to the formula of the «single and indivisible republic» and the policy of «bureaucratic-military centralisation», which they «could not renounce without committing suicide». The agrarian policy proved stronger than the aspirations towards local autonomy; rural France «accepted the hegemony of Paris», in other words it understood that, in order to destroy once and for all the old regime, it had to form «a bloc with the most advanced elements of the Third Estate, and not with the Girondin moderates». If it is true that the Jacobins «“forced” the hand», that always «occurred in the direction of real historical development»; theirs was a fundamental work, to which only their class affiliation posed an unsurmountable barrier: by making the bourgeoisie into a national leading and hegemonic class they «created the compact modern French nation». <sup>14</sup>

Concluding the comparison between the Jacobins and the Mazzinian party, Gramsci asserts that «in the Action Party there was nothing to be found which resembled this Jacobin approach, this inflexible will to become the “leading” [*dirigente*] party». The severity of this

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<sup>11</sup> Q 13, § 13: *QC*, pp. 1575-76; *SPN*, pp. 144-45, inclusive of the double-asterisked footnote there.

<sup>12</sup> Q 10 II, § 41.xiv: *QC*, p. 1326; *FSPN*, p. 375. (The paragraph where this occurs in the Notebooks, and also the wording “moderate historicist”, indicates that Gramsci’s main target here is Benedetto Croce – trans. note).

<sup>13</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, p. 2029; *SPN*, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

judgment is attenuated by the consideration that, naturally, «one has to allow for the differences», since in Italy one was dealing with the «existing international order, and against a foreign power», namely Austria, which occupied one part of the peninsula and controlled the rest. But Gramsci doubled his criticism of the Action Party, observing that the Jacobins «were able to utilise the external threat as a spur to greater energy internally: they well understood that in order to defeat the external foe they had to crush [its] allies internally, and they did not hesitate to carry out the September massacres». <sup>15</sup> In Italy the connection that existed between Austria and a part of the Italian bourgeoisie and nobility was not denounced by the Action Party, or at least not denounced with the necessary forcefulness. <sup>16</sup> Lessening a little the harshness of his considerations Gramsci states that the reasons for absence of a Jacobin party in Italy were «to be sought in the economic field, that is to say in the relative weakness of the Italian bourgeoisie and in the different historical climate in Europe after 1815». <sup>17</sup>

As regards the presence in Italy of «Jacobins», or their supporters, Gramsci notes that «usually they are usually very badly treated in popular books and articles» and one knows «very little is known about them» of them. <sup>18</sup> We are however dealing with very few people: Pisacane, who was one of these few, a man who felt the absence in the Risorgimento of «a “Jacobin” ferment», but was not himself a Jacobin «such as was necessary for Italy»; <sup>19</sup> Crispi, was a «Jacobin» only in the sense of a resolute politician – he was of a «Jacobin temperament», but did not have a programme that could bear comparison with that of the Jacobins and not even «their fierce intransigence». Crispi's weakness, Gramsci goes on to say, was closely linked to the Northern industrial group; he left «himself open to blackmail», and systematically sacrificed the South, «that is to say, the peasant» and, different from the Jacobins, did not dare to postpone the corporative interests of the ruling group, putting the interests of the «future class» first; he

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<sup>15</sup> [At the beginning of September 1792, the Jacobins executed 1200 royalist prisoners, held responsible for the defeats of the revolutionary armies up to the Battle of Valmy: cf. note 50 on p. 81 of *SPN* – trans note.]

<sup>16</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, p. 2030; *SPN*, p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, p. 2032; *SPN*, p. 82.

<sup>18</sup> Q 2, § 106: *QC*, p. 106; *PN* 2, p. 338.

<sup>19</sup> Q 15, § 76: *QC*, p. 1834.

was, then, a «precautionary Thermidorian».<sup>20</sup> His «most noble Jacobin “obsession” was the «politico-territorial unity of the country».<sup>21</sup> The sole person who not only felt the lack of an Italian Jacobinism, but who showed himself to be a «a genuine Jacobin at least in theory and in the situation in Italy» was Gioberti, who – as Gramsci notes – after 1848 in his volume *Rinnovamento* showed an understanding of the harsh historical necessities that drove the French Jacobins to deploy their «wild energy»: in Gioberti one would further find, even if only «vaguely», «the concept of the Jacobin “popular-national”, namely the alliance between the bourgeois-intellectuals (*ingegno*) and the people».<sup>22</sup>

In his reflection on the Jacobin phenomenon, Gramsci also deals with the causes for its decline. He argues that the Jacobins with their refusal to recognize the workers’ right to coalitions,<sup>23</sup> «broke the Paris urban bloc». Thus their «assault forces, assembled in the Commune, dispersed in disappointment, and Thermidor gained the upper hand».<sup>24</sup> The centrality of the notion of Jacobinism emerges clearly from the assertion that the «Modern Prince must have a part devoted to Jacobinism» and this revival of the notion must come about «in the integral sense which this notion has had historically, and must have conceptually».<sup>25</sup> Gramsci stigmatizes therefore as much the «fear of Jacobinism»,<sup>26</sup> typical for example of Croce, as the «adversion» to it present in Sorel, which takes on the forms of an «ethical repugnance»,<sup>27</sup> an attitude which, in Gramsci’s view stems from Proudhon, who in one of his writings had characterized the Jacobins as the “Jesuits of the revolution”.<sup>28</sup> Gramsci defines this “anti-Jacobinism” of Sorel’s as «mean, sectarian and anti-historical».<sup>29</sup>

In analysing the causes of the defeat of the Jacobins, Gramsci observes that the incursion of religious beliefs contributed towards opening up cracks in the unity of the pro-Jacobin front in the coun-

<sup>20</sup> Q 6, § 89: *QC*, p. 765-66; *PN* 3, pp. 76-77.

<sup>21</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, p. 2017; *SPN*, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Q 17, § 9: *QC*, pp. 1914-15; *SCW*, p. 248.

<sup>23</sup> (Through the «Le Chapelier law» of June 1791 that banned craft guilds and trade unions – trans. note.)

<sup>24</sup> Q 19, § 24: *QC*, p. 2030; *SPN*, p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> Q 13, § 1: *QC*, p. 1559; *SPN*, p. 130.

<sup>26</sup> Q 13, § 1: *QC*, p. 1560; *SPN*, p. 132.

<sup>27</sup> Q 13, § 1: *QC*, p. 1559; *SPN*, p.130.

<sup>28</sup> Q 5, § 80: *QC*, p. 611; *PN* 2, p. 335.

<sup>29</sup> Q 11, § 66: *QC*, p. 1498.

tryside. An analogous weakness would in the Action Party lead to Mazzini's «vain strivings» for a religious reform. The example of the French Revolution demonstrated that the Jacobins, who had succeeded in crushing all the parties to their right on the question of agrarian reform «were damaged by Robespierre's attempts to instigate a religious reform – although such a reform had, in the real historical process, an immediate significance and concreteness».<sup>30</sup> The institution of the cult of the Supreme Being was an attempt to «unify in a dictatorial manner the constitutive elements of the State organically» in a «desperate search» to «tighten their grip» on the whole of the people's, and of national, life, but it appears as the first root of the modern lay State, independent of the Church, that finds within itself «all the elements of its historical personality».<sup>31</sup>

As with many Gramscian concepts, that of Jacobinism turns out to be a metaphor, an image (not of the decisive politician but of the popular-national collective will). It links up with the idea of the «prince» given that Gramsci claims that the Jacobins were the «“categorical embodiment” of Machiavelli's prince»<sup>32</sup> who, in his turn, «represents plastically and “anthropomorphically”» the symbol of the “collective will”».<sup>33</sup> One must emphasize this theoretical-political material value that the concept of Jacobinism takes on in Gramsci's evolving framework. As a final word, Gramsci draws attention to its class “limit” and to its degenerative aspects, which are a prelude to the «French Byzantinism», which consists of a particular characteristic of the French cultural tradition. After the revolution this degenerated rapidly into a «new cultural Byzantinism», revealing the intention to give a «perfect and stable form to the innovations that it brought about». The elements of this degeneration, moreover, were already present «during the evolution of the great revolutionary drama», in the Jacobins themselves, «who impersonated it with greater energy and completion».<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Q 19, § 26: *QC*, p. 2046; *SPN*, p. 102.

<sup>31</sup> Q 6, § 87: *QC*, p. 763; *PN 2*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>32</sup> Q 13, § 1: *QC*, p. 1559; *SPN*, p. 130.

<sup>33</sup> Q 13, § 1: *QC*, p. 1555; *SPN*, p. 125.

<sup>34</sup> Q 10 II, § 19: *QC*, pp. 1256-57.