

Gramsci 1925

Speech to the Italian parliament

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SPEAKER: The honourable Gramsci may speak.

GRAMSCI: The proposed law against secret societies has been presented to the House as a proposed law against freemasonry; this is the first real act of fascism to assert what the Fascist Party calls its revolution. We, as a communist party, want to seek out not only the reason for the presentation of this bill against organizations in general, but also the meaning of why the Fascist Party has presented this law as directed primarily against freemasonry.

We are among the few who have taken fascism seriously, even when fascism seemed nothing more than a blood-stained farce, when fascism was discussed in the common terms of "war psychosis," when all parties sought to soothe the working population presenting fascism as a superficial phenomenon, of very short duration.

In November 1920 we predicted that fascism would take power – a thing then inconceivable to the Fascists themselves – if the working class did not take up arms in time to block its blood-stained advance.

Fascism, then, today declares itself to have practically "conquered the State." What does this expression, now become a cliché, mean? And what meaning, in this sense, has the struggle against freemasonry?

Since we think this phase of the "Fascist conquest" to be one of the most important undergone by the Italian state, and as we represent the interests of the majority of the Italian people, the workers and peasants, we believe that an analysis of the question, even if rushed, is necessary.

What is freemasonry? You have spoken at length on the spiritual significance, the ideological currents which it represents, etc; but all of these are forms of expression which you use only to convince yourselves.

Freemasonry, given the manner in which Italy was united, given the initial weakness of the Italian capitalist bourgeoisie, freemasonry was the the only real and effective party which the bourgeois class had for a long time. It must not be forgotten that little less than twenty years after the entry of the Piedmontese into Rome, parliament was dissolved and the electoral body of about three million was reduced to 800 thousand.

This was an open confession by the bourgeois of being a very weak minority of the population, if after twenty years of unity it was forced to adopt the most extreme dictatorial measures to maintain power, to

crush its class enemies, which were the enemies of the unitary state.

Who were these enemies? They were mainly the Vatican, the Jesuits, and the Honourable Martire must be reminded how, as well as the Jesuits who wear the habit, there exist lay Jesuits, who have no special symbol which indicates their religious order.

In the early years after the foundation of the kingdom the Jesuits stated in a series of articles published in *Civiltà cattolica* the political programme of the Vatican and of the classes which were represented by the Vatican, that is the old semifederal classes, Bourbon by tendency in the South, or Austrian by tendency in Lombardy-Veneto, numerous social forces which the capitalist bourgeoisie has never managed to contain, even though in the period of the Risorgimento it represented progress, and a revolutionary beginning. The Jesuits of *Civiltà cattolica*, and thus the Vatican, made the first point of their political programme the sabotage of the unitary state, through parliamentary abstention, the obstruction of the liberal state in all of its activities which could corrupt and destroy the old order; the second point, the creation of a rural reserve army to place against the advance of the proletariat, as since '71 the Jesuits foresaw that on the field of liberal democracy the proletarian movement would be born, which would develop into a revolutionary movement.

The Honourable Martire has today declared that the spiritual unity of the Italian nation, at the expense of freemasonry, has finally been achieved.

Since freemasonry in Italy has represented the ideology and the real organisation of the capitalist bourgeois class, whoever is against freemasonry is against liberalism, is against the political tradition of the Italian bourgeoisie. The rural classes which were represented in the past by the Vatican, are today mainly represented by fascism; it is logical that fascism has replaced the Vatican and the Jesuits in the historical task, by which the most backward classes of the population bring under their control the class which has been progressive in the development of civilization; this is the significance of the achievement of the spiritual unity of the Italian nation, which would have been a phenomenon of advancement fifty years ago; and today it is instead the largest phenomenon of regression ...

The industrial bourgeoisie has not been capable of slowing down the workers' movement, it has not been capable of controlling the workers' movement, or the revolutionary rural movement. Thus the first instinctive and spontaneous watchword of fascism, after the occupation of the factories was this: "The rural will control the urban bourgeoisie, who do not know how to be strong against the workers."

If I have not deluded myself, then, Honourable Mussolini, was that not your thesis, and between rural fascism and urban fascism you said you preferred urban fascism ...

[INTERRUPTIONS]:

MUSSOLINI: I must interrupt you to remind you of an article of mine in praise of rural fascism in 1921-22.

GRAMSCI: But that is not a purely Italian phenomenon, however much in Italy, with its weaker capitalism, it had the greatest development; it is a European and world phenomenon, of great importance in understanding the general postwar crisis in the domain of practical activity and in the domain of ideas and culture.

The election of Hindenburg in Germany, the victory of the conservatives in England, with the liquidation of the respective liberal democratic parties, are the equivalent of the Italian fascist movement; the old social forces, though not completely absorbed by it, have taken control of the organisation of the states, bringing into their reactionary activity all of the depth of ferocity and ruthless decision which has always been theirs; but in substance we have a phenomenon of historical regression which is not and will not be without implications for the development of the proletarian revolution. Examined on this ground, will the present law against the associations will be enforced or is it instead destined to be futile? Will it correspond to reality, will it be a means to stabilize the capitalist regime or will it only be a new instrument given to the police to arrest Tom, Dick and Harry? ... The problem then is this: has the situation of capitalism in Italy been strengthened or weakened since the war, by fascism? What were the weaknesses of the Italian capitalist bourgeoisie before the war, weaknesses which brought about the creation of this masonic political system which existed in Italy, which had its greatest development in Giolittismo? The greatest weaknesses in Italian national life were in the first place the lack of raw materials, that is the impossibility of the bourgeoisie creating in Italy industry which would have deep roots in the country

and which could develop progressively, absorbing the surplus workforce. Secondly, the lack of colonies tied to the mother country, thus the impossibility for the bourgeoisie of creating a labour aristocracy which could be permanently allied to the bourgeoisie itself. Thirdly, the Southern question, that is the question of the peasants, closely tied to the problem of emigration, which is the proof of the inability of the Italian bourgeoisie to maintain ...[Interruptions].

MUSSOLINI: Germans have also emigrated by the million.

GRAMSCI: The significance of mass emigration of workers is this: the capitalist system, which is the dominant system, is not capable of giving food, housing and clothing to the population, to a not insignificant part of this population which is forced to emigrate ...

ROSSONI: So the nation must expand in the interests of the proletariat.

GRAMSCI: We have our own conception of imperialism and colonialism, according to which these are above all an export of finance capital. Until now Italian "imperialism" has consisted only of this: the Italian emigrant worker works for the profit of the capitalists of other countries, that is until now Italy has only been a means of expansion for non-Italian finance capital. You rinse your mouths with declarations of a claimed demographic superiority of Italy over other countries; you always say, for example, that Italy is demographically superior to France. This is a question which only statistics can finally resolve, and I sometimes deal with statistics; now a statistic

published after the war, and never denied, and which can not be denied, states that pre-war Italy from the demographic point of view, was already in the same situation as France after the war; this is determined by the fact that emigration removes from the national territory such a mass of the male, economically active, population, that the demographic relations become catastrophic. In the national territory there remain the old, women, children, invalids, that is the inactive part of the population, which weighs on the population to a greater degree than in any other country, even France.

And this is the fundamental weakness of the Italian capitalist system, for which Italian capitalism is destined to disappear even more rapidly as the world capitalist system no longer manages to absorb Italian emigration, to exploit Italian labour, which our capitalism is incapable of organizing.

The bourgeois parties, freemasonry, how have they tried to resolve these problems?

In Italian history we know about the last two political plans of the bourgeoisie to resolve the question of the governance of the Italian people. We have had the Giolitti programme, the collaboration of Italian socialism with Giolittismo, that is the attempt to establish an alliance of the industrial bourgeoisie with a certain northern labour aristocracy to oppress, to subject to this bourgeois-proletarian grouping the mass of the Italian peasantry, especially in the Mezzogiorno. The programme did not succeed. In southern Italy a bourgeois-proletarian coalition was established through parliamentary collaboration and the politics of public works; in southern Italy the leading class is corrupted and dominates the masses

with goons...[Interruptions of Deputy Greco] You fascists have been the major authors of the failure of this political programme, as you have impoverished equally the labour aristocracy and the poor peasantry of all of Italy.

We have had a programme which we might call that of *Corriere della sera*, a newspaper which represents no mean force in national politics: 800,000 readers are also a party.

VOICES: Fewer ...

MUSSOLINI: Half! And the readers of newspapers don't count. They have never made a revolution. The readers of newspapers are regularly wrong!

GRAMSCI: The *Corriere della sera* does not want to make a revolution.

FARINACCI: Nor does *l'Unità*

GRAMSCI: The *Corriere della sera* has systematically supported all of the politicians of the Mezzogiorno, from Salandra to Orlando, to Nitti, to Amendola; in the face of the Giolitti solution, oppressive not only of classes, but even of whole territories, such as the Mezzogiorno and the islands, and thus just as dangerous as the current fascism for the same material unity of the Italian state, the *Corriere della sera* has always supported an alliance between the industrialists of the North and a certain vague mainly Southern rural democracy on the ground of free trade. One solution and the other tended essentially to give the Italian state a larger base than it had originally, and tended to develop the "conquests" of the Risorgimento.

What do fascists propose against these solutions? They propose a law supposedly against freemasonry; they claim to want to so conquer the State. In reality fascism struggles against the only effectively organized force which the bourgeoisie have in Italy, to supplant it in occupying the posts which the state gives its civil servants. The fascist "revolution" is only the replacement of one administrative personnel by another.

MUSSOLINI: Of one class by another, as happened in Russia, as normally happens in all revolutions, as we will methodically do! [Applause].

GRAMSCI: It is only revolution that which is based on a new class. Fascism is not based on any class that was not already in power ...

MUSSOLINI: But if a large part of the capitalists are against, but if I list for you the major capitalists who vote against us, who are in the opposition: the Mottas, the Contis ...

FARINACCI: And they subsidize subversive newspapers! [Comments].

MUSSOLINI: The directors are not Fascist, and you know it!

GRAMSCI: The reality then is that the law against freemasonry is not principally against freemasonry; in the end fascism will easily come to a compromise with freemasonry.

MUSSOLINI: The fascists have burnt the masonic lodges before making the law! So there is no need for an accomodation.

GRAMSCI: Fascism uses against freemasonry, in a more intense form, the same tactic as it used against all the non-fascist bourgeois parties: first it created a fascist cell in those parties; then it tried to extract from other parties the forces most useful to it, not managing to take them over as it intended ...

FARINACCI: And you call us fools?

GRAMSCI: You would not be fools only if you knew how to solve the problems of the Italian situation ...

MUSSOLINI: We will solve them. We have already solved many of them.

GRAMSCI: Fascism has not managed to completely absorb all the parties into its organization. With freemasonry it has employed the political tactic of *noyautage*, then the terrorist system of burning lodges, and finally it employs legislative action, through which certain persons of the company boards and the high bureaucracy will end up giving in to the masters so as not to lose their jobs, but the fascist government will have to come to a compromise with freemasonry. What do you do when your enemy is strong? First, you break his legs, then you make a compromise from a condition of obvious superiority.

MUSSOLINI: First you break his ribs, then you imprison him, as you have done in Russia! You have taken your prisoners and you hold them, and you need to! [Noises]

GRAMSCI: Taking prisoners means exactly making compromises: thus we say that in reality the law is especially made against workers' organizations. We ask why for many months without the Communist

Party being declared illegal, the carabinieri have arrested our comrades every time they find them in a meeting of at least three ...

MUSSOLINI: We are doing what you do in Russia.

GRAMSCI: In Russia there are laws which are obeyed: you have your own laws ...

MUSSOLINI: You have big round-ups? You do well to! [Laughter].

GRAMSCI: In reality the police apparatus of the state already considers the Communist Party a secret organization.

MUSSOLINI: That is not true!

GRAMSCI: In so far as anyone, accused of no specific offence, found in a meeting of three persons, is jailed, just because they are communist.

MUSSOLINI: But they are soon released. How many are in jail? We pick them up just to find out who they are!

GRAMSCI: It is a form of systematic persecution which precedes and will justify the application of the new law. Fascism is adopting the same systems as the government of Giolotti. You are doing as the Giolotti goons did in the Mezzogiorno when they arrested opposition voters ...to find out who they were.

A VOICE: There was only one case of it. You do not know the South.

GRAMSCI: I am from the South!

MUSSOLINI: With respect to electoral violence I remind you of an article by Bordiga which fully justifies it!

GRECO PAOLO: You, Honourable Gramsci, have not read this article.

GRAMSCI: Not fascist violence, ours. We are sure of representing the majority of the population, of representing the most essential interests of the majority of the Italian people; proletarian violence is thus progressive and cannot be systematic. Your violence is systematic and systematically arbitrary because you represent a minority destined to disappear. We must say to the working population what your government is, how your government conducts itself, to organize against you, to make it ready to defeat you. It is most probable that we too will find ourselves forced to use the same systems as you, but as a transition, occasionally. [Noises, interruptions]. Certainly: use the same systems as you, with the difference that you represent the minority of the population, while we represent the majority. [Interruptions, noises].

FARINACCI: But then, why do you not make the revolution? You are destined for the same end as Bombacci! They will throw you out of the party!

GRAMSCI: The Italian bourgeoisie when they made the unification were a minority of the population, but since they represented the interests of the majority even if it did not follow them, were able to maintain themselves in power. You have won by arms, but you have no programme, you represent nothing new or progressive. You have only taught the revolutionary vanguard that only arms, in the final analysis,

determine the success of programmes and non-programmes ... [Interruptions, comments].

SPEAKER: Do not interrupt!

GRAMSCI: This law will not manage to slow down the movement which you yourselves are preparing in the country. Since freemasonry will enter the fascist party *en masse* and will form a tendency within it, it is clear that with this law you hope to impede the development of large worker and peasant organizations. That is the real value, the real meaning of the law.

Some fascists still hazily remember the teachings of their old masters, from when they were revolutionary and socialist, and believe that a class cannot permanently remain so and develop itself up to the conquest of power without it having a party and an organization of the best and most conscious part of itself. There is something true in this sinister reactionary perversion of Marxist teachings. It is certainly very difficult for a class to reach the solution of its problems and to reach those ends which are built into its existence and into the general strength of society, without a vanguard constituting itself and carrying this class to the attainment of these ends.

But it is not said that this statement is always true, such dogmatism is foreign to reactionary purposes! This is a law which serves for Italy, which must be applied in Italy, where the bourgeoisie has not managed in any way and will never manage to resolve in the first place the question of the Italian peasantry, to resolve the question of Southern Italy. Not for nothing is this law presented at the same time as some

projects concerning the reclamation of the Mezzogiorno.

A VOICE: Talk about freemasonry.

GRAMSCI: You want me to talk about freemasonry. But in the title of the law there is not even a hint of freemasonry, it speaks only of organizations in general. In Italy capitalism has been able to develop insofar as the state has pressed on the peasant populations, especially in the South. Today you feel the urgency of this problem, so you promise a billion for Sardinia, you promise public works and hundreds of millions for the whole Mezzogiorno; but to do serious concrete work you should start by restoring to Sardinia the 100-150 million in taxes that you extort from the Sardinian population every year! You should restore to the Mezzogiorno the hundreds of millions in taxes which every year you extort from the Southern population.

MUSSOLINI: You don't impose taxes in Russia! ...

A VOICE: They steal in Russia, they don't pay taxes!

GRAMSCI: That is not the question, honourable colleague, who should at least know the parliamentary reports on these questions which exist in the library. It does not deal with the normal bourgeois mechanism of taxation: it deals with the fact that every year the state extorts from the Southern regions sums in taxes which it does not restore in any way, neither through services of any kind ...

MUSSOLINI: It is not true.

GRAMSCI: ...sums which the state extorts from the Southern peasant populations to give a base to the capitalism of northern Italy. [Interruptions, comments]. On this field of the contradictions of the Italian capitalist system there will necessarily form, notwithstanding the difficulty of building large organizations, the union of workers and peasants against the common enemy.

You fascists, you fascist government, notwithstanding your demagogic speeches, have not overcome this contradiction which was already fundamental; you have instead made it more strongly felt by the popular classes and the masses. You have worked in this situation, for the necessities of this situation. You have added new dust to that already accumulated by the development of the capitalist society and you believe you have suppressed with a law the most lethal effects of your own activity. [Interruptions]. This is the most important question in the discussion of this law!

You can "conquer the state," you can change the laws, you can seek to stop organizations existing in the form in which they have existed up to now; you cannot prevail against the objective conditions under which you are constrained to move. You will do no more than force the proletariat to find a direction different from that up to now most commonly followed in the field of mass organization. We want to say this to the proletariat and to the Italian peasant masses from this platform: that the Italian revolutionary forces will not allow themselves to be broken, that your sinister dream will not succeed. [Interruptions]. It is very difficult to apply to a population of 40 million inhabitants the systems of government of Cankof. In

Bulgaria there are a few million inhabitants and in any case, despite the aid from outside, the government cannot manage to defeat the coalition of the Communist Party and the peasant revolutionary forces, and in Italy there are 40 million inhabitants.

MUSSOLINI: The Communist Party has fewer members than has the Italian Fascist Party!

GRAMSCI: But it represents the working the class.

MUSSOLINI: It does not represent it!

FARINACCI: It betrays it, it does not represent it.

GRAMSCI: Yours is a consent obtained with the stick.

FARINACCI: You are talking about Miglioli.

GRAMSCI: Exactly. The Miglioli phenomenon has great importance in exactly the sense of what I said earlier: that even the Catholic peasant masses are turning to the revolutionary struggle. Nor would the fascist newspapers have protested against Miglioli if the Miglioli phenomenon had not had great importance in showing the new orientation of the revolutionary forms as a function of your pressures on the working classes.

In conclusion: freemasonry tips the scales in favour of the reactionary anti-proletarian measures! It is not freemasonry which matters! Freemasonry will become a wing of fascism. The law is intended for the workers and peasants, who will understand so very well from the use that will be made of it. To these masses we want to say that you will not succeed in suffocating the

organisational forms of their class life, because against you stands the whole development of Italian society.

[Interruptions].

SPEAKER: But do not interrupt! Let him speak. You, however, Honourable Gramsci, have not spoken of the law!

ROSSONI: The law is not against organizations!

GRAMSCI: Honourable Rossoni, it is itself a section of the law against the organizations. The workers and peasants must know that you will not succeed in stopping the revolutionary movement strengthening and radicalizing itself. [Interruptions, noises]. Because I am only stating today the situation of our country ... [Interruptions].

SPEAKER: Honourable Gramsci, you have repeated this idea three or four times. Please! We are not jurors, who need to be told the same thing many times!

GRAMSCI: It must be repeated, however, you must hear it until you are sick of it. The revolutionary movement will defeat fascism. [Comments].