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Review

# From the Resistance to the new movements

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**Livio Maitan, a regular contributor to 'International Viewpoint', has just published *La strada percorsa - Dalla Resistenza ai nuovi movimenti: lettura critica e scelte alternative* ('The Road Taken - From the Resistance to the New Movements: A Critical Reading and Alternative Options'), with a preface by Fausto Bertinotti.**

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/32liviobook.jpg>]

This autobiography by a long-time leader of the Fourth International and its Italian section is primarily an historical analysis of a century of political and social struggles in Italy and Europe. An English translation of this work is not yet available but in the meantime we offer our readers a taster with the following reproduction of some excerpts from the preface by Bertinotti and from the conclusion by the author.

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## **A splendid ride in opposition to historical determinisms**

**Fausto Bertinotti**

A splendid ride through sixty years of the history of the workers' movement in Italy and Europe, seen from the inside, travelled by way of direct participation in the movements, read from the standpoint of a tendency within the workers movement, that of the Fourth International: that is the initial emotion derived from this volume by Livio Maitan. As the author himself explains in his concluding chapter: "My autobiographical balance sheet cannot be separated from the balance sheet of the political and cultural, national and international current which I joined in 1947 and in which I have been an active participant ever since. And this current, in turn, while it arose in opposition to the predominant currents, cannot be regarded in isolation from the record of the workers' movement as a whole. The events, the major divisions of History, the great upsurges of the workers movement and the tragic defeats are evoked together with the individual and collective choices made by the author, his memories, his scrupulous reconstruction of the debates in the parties (PCI, post-Resistance PS, PSI, Democrazia Proletaria and then PRC), in the other political and trade-union organizations of the workers movement, within the movements that have traversed the 20th century, to the emergence in the new millennium of the 'movement of movements', that is, the stormy emergence in the world arena of the movement in opposition to neoliberal globalization. The history of sixty years is therefore written and analyzed by one of its direct protagonists: it is a life that has been lived."

... Livio Maitan, and with him many men and women who were activists in the workers movement and adhered to philosophical currents and critical cultures on the communist left, have lived through some very bitter moments, misunderstandings and periods of true ostracism. It is one of the many paradoxes of History that many of those who handed down a priori verdicts in the name of an acritical orthodoxy, who excommunicated those expressing theoretical and political differences, denouncing them as enemies of the proletariat, landed in the course of events on distant banks and now proclaim the end of History, often with the same brutality of yesteryear, explaining that capitalism is the only possible social horizon and that it is neither desirable nor permissible to go beyond. ...

"I remain convinced", says Livio Maitan, "that the choices made by the hegemonic forces in the workers movement were not ineluctable and that different choices, with different results, were fully possible. I reaffirm that the strategic projects advanced over the years by the various parties and leaders - the policy of national union projected for an indeterminate period, including after the end of the war and the fall of fascism, the centre-left in the perspective of Nenni and the Socialist Party, and the historic compromise (envisaged by the PCI) - were unrealistic, since they were

based on an unfounded interpretation of the possible dynamics, as experience has by and large demonstrated. And that's not to mention the schemes, largely undefined, first of Occhetto and then of Veltroni-D'Alema."

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/33bertinotti.jpg>]

This is a significant and important aspect of the approach suggested to us by Livio Maitan in his book. History is also written with 'ifs' and 'buts' and it is not true that there is an historical determinism that predefines the actual options. Other options were indeed possible, with different consequences on the development of the societies that emerged from the great revolutions of the 20th century, and on the fate of the major political and trade-union forces of the western workers movement of the last century.

... To conclude, I can do no better than to quote Livio Maitan, while a young anti-fascist student, describing his critical method: "to start from a scrupulous philological analysis of the most significant documents, to grasp incongruities and internal contradictions in the conceptions submitted to critical thinking. Needless to say, this approach is not sufficient in itself, but it does provide the necessary point of departure."

This message, which applies to many of us, applies even more to this new generation that is a protagonist in the new movement representing the great novelty of the new century, and constituting a point of reference in which to situate a new phase in the movement for social emancipation.

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# The regressive phenomena in the workers' movement

**Livio Maitan**

The reasons why the workers' movement has experienced a series of historic defeats - from the acceptance of the imperialist logic of the First World War by almost all the social-democratic or socialist parties to the advent of fascism and Nazism in the countries in which the dominant system had undergone the most serious crisis; from the regression in the society that arose from the October Revolution to the collapse of the bureaucratized transitional societies; from the increasingly organic evolution of the Social Democracy within the socio-economic logic and institutional mechanisms of the system; and from the insertion within the hegemonic political and military bloc to the gradual social-democratization of the Communist parties themselves - have been analyzed in an extensive literature the origins of which go back to the Soviet Union in the latter half of the 1920s. Personally, I have striven with others to publicize this literature and in particular the works of Leon Trotsky, to stimulate thinking on the analytical and theoretical terrain, to engage in critical political and cultural battles in Italy and in other countries. Without returning, even in summary fashion, to the successive analyses and generalizations in an ongoing effort to update them, we will limit ourselves here to a synthetic recitation of some considerations.

First, there is no denying that the workers' movement is suffering from an unprecedented crisis of identity. Paradoxically, it could be said, in reference to Italy, that it appears to have gone back to the period prior to the founding convention of the Socialist Party in 1892, when the workers' movement had not yet asserted its own political independence. An almost symbolic synthesis of this regression was the self-liquidation in the early 1990s of the party that had managed to sink the deepest roots throughout the country's history, with its transformation into first the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) and then the Left Democrats (DS), that is, into a formation that renounced the essential founding components of the party from which it had originated, amidst recantations bordering on the grotesque. An analogous trajectory, albeit less impudently and with organizational effects that up to now are less destructive, has been followed by the largest trade unions. However, neither observation points to an acceptance of the two mystifications that the establishment has tried to impose, and keeps trying to impose, not without success, on

the political level and even more so, perhaps, on the cultural level.

The first mystification comprises a devastating judgment on the action historically developed by the workers movement in its different components. "Communism", by its very nature, it is said, was demonic and (as Reagan put it) its major achievement was to build an "Evil Empire" within the ample geographic radius of the Soviet Union, which exploded at the end of 1991. A much more indulgent attitude is and has been taken toward the Social Democracy, and with reason: but it too is criticized for the unforgivable crime of "statism", of which it has not yet been fully cured. As for those who had opposed Stalinist "communism", so to speak, from the left, they continue to be associated with it, condemned out of hand: their theories, it is said, opened the road to Stalinism, and if they had been in charge, they would have done what Stalin did, if not worse. As for us, we continue to share the assessment according to which, in every country in which, at various times, it had a real impact, the workers' movement managed to achieve some lasting social conquests, to assert some fundamental democratic rights, to create its own (albeit only partially independent) structures, to the benefit of broad layers of the masses, and to establish its own cultural points of reference. If, by some paradoxical theory, the workers' movement had not existed, even in its most timidly reformist version, the societies of the last century would undoubtedly have been different, with an even less human dimension. Likewise, it cannot be argued seriously that without the October Revolution Russia's fate would have been superior, or that it would have been preferable for the Chinese people to remain under the domination of the Kuomintang and the old ruling classes.

The second mystification is more insidious for it is supposedly based on a socio-economic premise of an analytical nature. The world economy, it is said, has undergone a radical transformation with a no less radical change in the organization of labour and, even more decisively, an overall restructuring of social classes, layers and groups. Marxism is therefore obsolete in its analytical foundations themselves and the very notion of the workers' movement is now meaningless or in any event destined to be emptied of its content. The refutation of these now predominant mystifications must first be placed on this terrain, it is true.

We, on the other hand, share the view of economists and sociologists in many countries and different continents who consider the aforementioned conclusions to be devoid of any objective foundation, for the very simple reason that the world economy remains more than ever determined by those social groups that in some form or other control the means of production, be they traditional or of recent origin, and that those who must supply their labour power in order to live, that is the subordinate workers, constitute the vast majority of the labour force, not only world wide but also in the countries that are most advanced economically, in which, according to the apologists of the 'new economy', such interpretative categories are obsolescent and of no use. Confirmation of the operational nature of such categories as 'capital', 'profit', 'concentration and centralization of capital', 'salaried or subordinate labour', 'productivity of labour' and 'cyclical nature of the economy' can be found quite simply in the use with which such terms are commonly used by the central bankers, economic experts and contributors to the major specialized publications, notwithstanding, of course, differing if not diametrically opposed value judgments.

This clarification does not imply the least underestimation of the agonizing processes that have in fact occurred within the economic structures and social fabric, and the need for constantly updated analyses of the dynamics of contemporary societies. Contradictory contexts and vicious circles can still be shattered, especially by redefining political perspectives and cultural approaches. This is the precondition to initiating this process of reconstruction and refoundation which, in our opinion, has not yet taken off in Italy or other countries. ...

Before concluding, let us return to an interpretative hypothesis that we advanced about a decade ago, and which we are now inclined to emphasize with greater force on the basis of new experiences. The point of departure is a fundamental contradiction: the working class, particularly in the countries of Western Europe, had achieved a decisive socio-economic specific weight, but had not concretized this specific weight through organizational instruments and institutions that enabled it to express and fully realize its potentialities and to play the leading hegemonic role for which the material premises existed. Some high levels of workers' democracy were achieved: to

cite only a few examples in the last half-century, during the May 1968 explosion in France, the high tide of struggle between 1969 and 1972 in Italy, and in the crucial phase of the revolution in Portugal. But in the final analysis these were but brief interludes, followed by a return to routine practices of bureaucratic normalization and delegation to crystallized bodies of functionaries, manipulative intellectuals and supposedly charismatic leaders. In the case of the Italian workers movement, we noted that some decisive strategic options, from Togliatti's 'gradual democracy' to Enrico Berlinguer's 'historic compromise', were not the end result of collective thinking based on experiences occurring and maturing within the deepest layers of the society, but flowed, in the first case, from an international strategy established by the hegemonic group in the Soviet Union, and in the second case from the thinking of an extremely limited leading nucleus, if not one individual. We won't dwell on the methods in force in the major trade unions; we have supplied some eloquent examples in the course of our presentation.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/35rome150203.jpg>]

Rome: two and a half million march on 15 February

To explain the regressive phenomena in the workers movement and its organizations, the suggestion was made during the First World War, and subsequently, that the key lay in the existence of a 'labour aristocracy', that is, the formation of layers who enjoyed relatively privileged conditions in comparison to their class as a whole, and possibly greater emphasis was placed on the alleged advantages that the working class in the imperialist countries had likewise derived, albeit to a limited degree, from the exploitation of the peoples in the colonies. This interpretation gained greater currency in the 1950s and 1960s, when the workers in the industrialized countries had managed to achieve an appreciable improvement in their conditions while in vast underdeveloped regions the old colonialism had been replaced by equally substantial forms of neocolonial exploitation. One may question whether such interpretative keys were adequate for the analysis of phenomena in other epochs. Whatever the case, they can be of little or no assistance to us in understanding the processes of the last half-century.

In this regard, it must be emphasized that, even before the rise of fascism, the composition of the organized workers' movement had been characterized by the active presence of elements originating from petty-bourgeois layers. While rejecting workerist approaches, we cannot overlook the fact that such elements, which often have a confused cultural background, have been in the forefront of the theoretical and political development and day-to-day practice of the major political and trade-union organizations. The negative effects of this situation were reinforced insofar as institutional spaces opened up and were occupied to an increasing degree by such elements, who also had an increasing impact on the party structures as well. Thus the interests and requirements of the proletariat and other non-capitalist social layers were expressed at best through mediations while direct and autonomous representation was only by way of exception. In the final analysis, therefore, the antagonistic socio-political potential was diluted, diverted and even stifled.

In Italy, as in other countries of Western Europe, a system of parliamentary democracy has functioned in various forms for more than a half-century. Unavoidably, this has resulted in the formation and consolidation of what is referred to as 'the political class', which by our criteria it is more correct to define as a layer and not a class. If we add to this the central and local institutions, in their various expressions, the multiple administrations and entities and the statized sectors of the economy, which for decades have been very substantial in their scope, this is a relatively wide layer that represents, as a tendency, a community of interests and analogous ideological and cultural reflexes, and accepts and complies with a set of unwritten rules. The elective albeit relative affinities of this layer are fully apparent, for example, in the way in which its representatives, especially elected officeholders, address each other in conferences and debates. While belonging to differing classes, generations and genders, they will with few exceptions use the familiar form and treat each other as an integral part of a common entity, a distinct layer to be precise. And with the rarest exceptions, they seem to consider as legitimate the privileges they enjoy, over and above their very high rewards and compensation.

Analogous selection criteria are applied in the parties and other formations: co-optation practices co-exist with safeguards that guarantee the continuity of membership in this layer notwithstanding possible functional and

hierarchical displacements. In our opinion, it is hard to challenge the view that this formation and gradual expansion of a political layer has affected the entire workers' movement from top to bottom, in both its political and trade-union expressions. In some respects, it would be more relevant to speak of a caste rather than a layer, in view of the increased tendency to crystallize not only the presence within the context of the layer but also the levels achieved within the hierarchy, if need be through an accumulation of functions. Finally, even where the numbers and specific weight of the working class, and more generally subordinate workers, have increased, this has not affected the composition of the institutional representations and leadership bodies of the parties. On the contrary, the dynamic has been in the opposite direction, through a drastic reduction in men and women from the working class and other non-capitalist layers. Our conviction, it bears repeating, is that there will be no refoundation or reconstruction of the workers' movement without some critical thinking about the past, without a definition of new projects and new strategies, without a new international dimension taking shape. But none of this will happen - or, if it does begin to happen, it will inevitably come to nothing - if there is not at the same time a rejection of the conceptions and practices that have become very widely entrenched within the parties, unions and mass movements, both within and without their institutional frameworks. Independently of the initial projects and intentions, these conceptions and practices have represented, for a whole century, a decisive obstacle to the genuine expression and affirmation of interests and requirements of the majoritarian social layers, which have an interest in a qualitative, revolutionary transformation of society, in the affirmation of movements and dynamics of self-emancipation, in opposition to 'verticalist', paternalist or bonapartist practices. Synthetically, the condition sine qua non is the rejection of this substitutionism which has had such destructive consequences on the workers' movement throughout its history, both in capitalist societies and in those societies in which processes of transformation toward socialism have been initiated amidst gigantic difficulties.