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Globalisation

On Fausto Bertinotti's book

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The index of the book that Fausto Bertinotti has just published with his collaborator Alfonso Gianni is revealing of the ambition of the author: Liberty - equality - work - value- need - communism.

The book contains a series of general and punctual reflexions on the theoretical questions and accumulated experiences of the workers' movement in the 20th century, analyses of capitalism at a time of globalisation and sketches of social and political perspectives for the workers' movement today. In other words, the basic inspiration of the book is the reaffirmation of a necessary continuity with the conquests and struggles of more than a century of history and a lucid assessment of the imperative necessity of a profound renewal, indeed quite simply a new beginning.

All those who, like us, continue to identify themselves with revolutionary Marxism, can only share such an approach. What is more, we are fundamentally in agreement on a series of methodological conceptions and essential ideas, which, particularly in the course of the last decade, have been rejected or grossly distorted not only by the apologists of capitalism but also, on an unprecedented scale, in the ranks of the social-democratic parties, formations emerging from the old Communist Parties and the trade unions under their influence. Let us try in this commentary to underline what are in our view the most important points.

Essential convergences

First it is significant that Bertinotti, who had already reaffirmed the relevance of Marxism and Marx's idea of revolution in debates some years ago, recalls, with pertinent quotations, texts like "The Jewish Question", the 1844 "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" and the "German ideology", taking up the themes of alienation, liberation and the very basics of a new society, communist society. For our part, we appreciate in particular a quotation from the "German Ideology" which implies by itself the rejection of the idea of socialism in one country. Bertinotti also stresses that this same text, not to mention the "Grundrisse", advances a perspective on the dynamic of capitalism which helps us understand capitalism at a time of globalisation (pp. 170-171).

Moreover, numerous pages are devoted to a reaffirmation of the Marxian theory of value, with references to the classic critique by Piero Sraffa and to the remarkable contributions of the Italian Marxist economist Claudio Napoleoni, who Bertinotti and Gianni consider as their principal point of reference, correctly in many aspects. [\[1\]](#)

Conclusion : the new forms of exploitation suggests a reaffirmation of the labour theory of value which allows an understanding of how the contemporary capitalist extracts surplus-value from new labour, whatever its legal definition (pp. 125-138).

In the second place, one can only agree with Bertinotti, whatever the differences of formulation or accentuation, when he recalls the opposition in the workers' movement since its birth between a reformist project and a revolutionary project and notes that both have suffered a defeat. We are agreed also on the breadth of the defeat, in a number of ways unprecedented, that the workers' movement has suffered in the 1980s and 1990s. It is correct to stress, moreover, that the social democratic parties have deduced from this the necessity of diluting to the extreme, indeed erasing completely, their nature as organisations of the workers' movement and accepting henceforth the framework of capitalist society as inescapable and globalisation either as progress or as a sort of natural evolution. [\[2\]](#) On the

other hand, Bertinotti also criticises, correctly, those who, despite everything, maintain a kind of "campist" conception, inspired by the Stalinist and post-Stalinist schema of confrontation between the capitalist and "socialist" countries which are more or less capable of constituting anti-imperialist bastions. [3]

Thirdly, Bertinotti's book expresses an unambiguous judgement on the defeat of "actually existing socialism" and indicates in this defeat one of the causes of the current profound political and cultural regression of the workers' movement. But his analysis is distinguished not only from that of the social democracy, but also from the analyses developed by the formations originating from the former Communist parties and by those intellectuals who try to kick over the traces of their past. He does not limit himself to denouncing the absence of democracy, the different forms of oppression and so on, but he explains that the "main critique" should focus on the "lack of socialism". The expression might appear a little summary, but it touches on the essentials.

Finally, it goes without saying that we are fundamentally in agreement with a series of analyses on capitalism in an era of globalization, the effects of the diffusion of information technology and the new means of communication, the processes of differentiation, fragmentation and recomposition of the working class, more generally of wage-earners, and the progressive withering of the national state. With greater reason, we are agreed on the main point: wage-earners, far from being in the process of disappearing, as some claim, are on a world scale more numerous than ever and, like all those who sell their labour power, whether under the most traditional or the most "modern" form, are still the irreplaceable subjects of the revolutionary transformation towards a socialist society.

Some critical remarks and questions

In the current phase of the workers' movement on the international scale one should not be astonished if different points of view exist, including between those who share conceptions and approaches on the essential problems. On top of that, even when there is agreement the problems can be approached from different angles, with different formulae or terminologies, indeed with another conceptual apparatus. One cannot then demand an impossible uniformity impossible in the debates we are involved in. That is why we have put the accent above all on the points of convergence. That does not stop us in any way from advancing now some critical remarks and raising some problems with a goal of ulterior clarification.

First, the book which, remember, tries to grasp the dynamic of capitalist economy both in the past and today, neglects an essential feature of this economy, namely its cyclical nature. It is true that at one point "the question of crisis" as "an element linked to capitalist society and its mode of production" is raised (p. 134). However, this is only a rapid allusion and, more generally, this book confirms an approach characteristic of the PRC and its entourage which consists in underestimating this key question. From whence notably a propensity to present some traits and tendencies of current capitalism as indefinite features, whereas a new cycle - which nobody can rule out - could throw into question macro-economic choices, technological options and forms of organisation of labour imposed today by the dominant classes and their governments.

Such an underestimation has repercussions also for the analysis of the events of the last two decades, most particularly in Europe. Correctly, Bertinotti stresses the multiplicity of factors which have determined the current regression of the workers' movement. However, if I am not mistaken, there is not the least allusion to the event which has constituted a major cleavage, the recession of 1974-75. In the final analysis, it is this long term change in the economic cycle which is at the origin of the new economic and social choices which have marked the 1980s and 1990s and the political orientations which flowed from them. Do we need to recall here all the consequences of the crisis of the 1929-32 period, without which it would be impossible to explain in an exhaustive manner either Hitler's coming to power or, ultimately, the outbreak of the Second World War? In the same way, there was undoubtedly a multiplicity of factors at the origin of the social and political options in capitalist Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, but

would these options have been possible without the long wave of expansion lasting nearly a quarter of a century?

What's more, only a comprehension of the persistent cyclical character of the capitalist economy allows us to anticipate and grasp tendencies which ripen and potential, ultimately inevitable, fractures in this framework that is presented in an apologetic fashion as the end of History.

It is not at all a question of advancing catastrophist approaches, rather not ignoring what the main leaders of the economic powers are themselves asking, sometimes with anguish; how long can the current phase continue and how can a major crisis with global repercussions be avoided?

Second question. In a passage of the book that we reproduce, Bertinotti alludes to some "gaps" in the political thought of Marx which "paved the way to errors which happened subsequently". [4] Indeed, as the author himself stresses, Marx was perfectly right not to commit himself to a detailed prefiguration of a future socialist state, something which would have represented a regression towards utopian socialism. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that in Marx, and in some ways still more so in Engels, there is an analysis of the nature of the state which remains fundamentally valid up to today. There is also in the work of both theorists some very pertinent and not at all obsolete analyses on the more specific forms of bourgeois political domination (for example, in relation to Bonapartism). What is more, if it is above all Engels who insists on the concept of the withering away of the state in the perspective of a communist society, some fundamental ideas in the area of a revolutionary democracy and equality are strongly enunciated in Marx's essay on the Paris Commune. It is significant, moreover, that Lenin took up these ideas in "The State and Revolution", a few months before October 1917.

To come finally to the analyses sketched of the post-revolutionary societies, the process of bureaucratisation was not fundamentally the consequence of errors or theoretical deficiencies, but the product of historically given economic, social and political conditions. Bertinotti confirms several times in his book his radical critique of Stalinism and cites, among others, a famous passage from the "Critique of the Gotha Programme" on the problematic of the transition. Certainly, nobody would expect a book to deal with every subject in 200 pages. Nonetheless, he does not stress the incontestable fact that, beyond its political and cultural dimensions, Stalinism represented a social phenomena.

It was precisely the crystallisation of a privileged new social layer that pushed to the extreme the political drifts and ideological mystifications and allowed a despotic regime, installed from the late 1920s, to maintain itself for long decades. [5] On this subject, it seems that Bertinotti, who mentions "the gigantic contribution of the great revolutionaries" including Trotsky (p. 31), has nonetheless insufficiently studied the work of the latter, as well as other theorists like, for example, Preobrajenski and Rakovsky, who from the 1920s had developed a clairvoyant analysis of the key problems of economic accumulation and the political structures of a society of transition. [6]

Yet the author defends a methodological approach which is absolutely correct when, in opposition to those who reject any idea of a "counterfactual history", he affirms that in the history of the workers' movement other projects and choices would have been possible. [7] Completely agreed: that is why, if one goes back to the tragedy of the Russian revolution, it is an obligation (including a moral one) to reassert the value of the contribution of men and women who not only have developed critiques on the theoretical level but also fought politically, even at the price of their freedom and their lives, so that radically different and opposite choices could be made rather than those which finally prevailed with devastating long term consequences that nobody would deny today.

A strategic problem which remains open

The three final pages of the book (207-209) pose the crucial problem that we call, in our own terminology, that of the

transitional programme. A critique is sketched of the conceptions of national roads to socialism. The most important passage refers to a well-known passage from Gramsci that the author still considers as an essential strategic reference. [8] Without denying the value of Gramsci's insights, we continue to think that two clarifications are needed. [9] The first is of the historic order: the characterisation of pre-revolutionary Russia is excessively simplified, even if the distinction between Russia and the societies of western Europe undoubtedly has a basis.

The second is that we should not forget that Gramsci's thinking on the conquest of positions refers to phases of struggle where the workers' movement accumulates forces and structures itself socially and politically. In this sense it does not approach the problematic of the revolutionary rupture. The falsification operated by Togliatti and the other leaders of the PCI in the 1950s consisted in presenting the approach of Gramsci as a reformist gradualist approach whereas this latter in no way authorised the idea that he had renounced a revolutionary perspective.

Today, we can precisely draw an extremely negative balance sheet: the positions of the workers' movement have been to a very large extent dismantled or deserted. With more reason we should be conscious that without the reconstruction of new positions any revolutionary perspective would only be a pious wish. Yet the problem of transitional objectives - that is objectives capable of stimulating an anti-capitalist dynamic starting from the positions conquered and the level of consciousness reached at the mass level - is far from being resolved.

For our part, we share Bertinotti's judgement: the crucial contradiction currently resides precisely in the fact that it is more than ever necessary to put the perspective of the overthrow of capitalism on the agenda whereas the relationship of forces and the regression of anti-capitalist consciousness constitutes a major obstacle in this sense. We draw even more strongly the conclusion that the Party of Communist Refoundation should make some profound changes in its strategic approaches and its manner of building itself, emerging from the impasse it has entered: it is a *sine qua non* to enable it to contribute effectively to the renewal of the workers' movement, the reconquest of the lost positions and the conquest of new ones.

October 5, 2000

Post-script

The Italian daily *Corriere della sera* (of October 20) has published an interview with Fausto Bertinotti on his book, under the headline: "Bertinotti rediscovers Marx: yes, I believe in the world revolution". That the world revolution appears in a headline of the most important Italian daily is, all in all, agreeable. We would like, nonetheless, to make a telegraphic commentary on the following passage: "The revolution is not a revolt and should not be conceived as a conquest of state power. And it cannot be accomplished in a single country. We need to go back to the idea of the revolution as a global and long term process."

Agreed: the revolution is not the conquest of existing "state power". It involves a rupture of the given political-institutional framework and the construction *ex novo* of revolutionary democratic institutions.

Agreed also on the fact that the revolution would not inaugurate the construction of a society qualitatively different from capitalist society, that is a socialist society, within a national space (let Stalin revolve in his grave!). Agreed, finally on the necessity of envisaging long term processes. Nonetheless, a question mark: if the construction of mass instruments for a revolutionary struggle (and the construction or reconstruction of pillboxes) is necessarily a process and the building of the new society is also a process, how is it necessary to conceive the transition from one to the other? Here is posed the unavoidable problem of the revolutionary break, whatever form it might take. This is a crucial point on which it is to be hoped that Bertinotti's book stimulates thought...

[1] For our part, we share Napoleoni's view that "in Sraffa's analysis there is no longer anything remaining of Marx's theory of value nor anything that flows as a consequence from this theory" (*Il valore*, ed. Isedi, 1976, p. 175). Ernest Mandel is of the same view (see "Late Capitalism", London, 1976, pp. 12 and 290).

[2] In a public debate with Bertinotti, the secretary of the DS (Left Democrats), Veltroni, claimed that Nelson Mandela had told him that there is no more point in opposing globalization than there is in opposing meteorological phenomena. The comparison is completely lame: globalization is the result of a dynamic and an undertaking by social and political forces and has absolutely nothing fatal about it. If one wanted to be punctilious, one could add that, as any good ecologist knows, meteorological phenomena themselves are no longer completely independent of the behaviour of human societies.

[3] See p. 177. A similar point of view is still defended today by some members of the PRC and was expressed in a discussion on the world political situation which took place on the party leadership last June. On China the authors express critical judgements (p. 46).

[4] See p. 31. In a fairly recent article Bertinotti has spoken of an "absence", including in Marx, of a theory of the state (*Liberazione*, September 3, 2000).

[5] Nobody could claim that the bureaucratisation of the USSR was the product of the anti-Marxist thesis of "socialism in one country". It is the opposite that happened: this thesis was adopted to justify the emergent process of bureaucratisation.

[6] We also regret that, whereas in the book he rightly refers to contemporary theorists like Sweezy and Marcuse, there is not the least allusion to the contributions of Ernest Mandel whose analysis of neocapitalism or late capitalism, that is the capitalism of the post Second World War period, should be neglected by nobody.

[7] See p. 176. Further on, as an example of a possible "counterfactual history", he refers to the Prague Spring which could have had a completely different outcome (p. 178).

[8] "In the East the state was everything etc." (*Prison Notebooks*).

[9] On this subject see our essay *Il marxismo rivoluzionario di Antonio Gramsci*, Nuove Edizioni Internazionali, 1987.