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Theory and strategy

Cooperatives, community, communism

- Features -



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Salvatore Cannavó's book, *Rivoluzione e libertà. La tradizione nascosta dell'associazionismo operaio*, (Revolution and liberty. The hidden tradition of cooperative movements) which has just been published in Rome by Alegre, is not available online. Furthermore, it has not yet been translated into French or English. With the kind permission of the author and the publisher, we have translated Enzo Traverso's preface here.

The great merit of this essay by Salvatore Cannavó – a fascinating analysis of two centuries of political experience and intellectual history – lies in rediscovering the richness and relevance of a long-forgotten tradition: the workers' cooperative and mutual aid movement.

Through a sort of ideological inertia, we had grown accustomed to viewing it as archaic, of interest solely from a historical perspective, and we now realise just how closely it aligns with our needs, our sensibilities and our world.

Following the 20th century – the era of Fordism, mass production, mass culture and mass parties; the era of armed revolutions and socialism understood as a centralised, planned behemoth – the 19th-century debates on co-operation and the associative movement are taking on a surprising new relevance.

As Reinhart Koselleck taught us, linguistic codifications of social realities, concepts change meaning over the course of history [\[1\]](#). Until 1789, the term 'revolution' was an astronomical concept denoting a cyclical process of returning to the starting point: the rotation of the planets around the sun. After the French Revolution, however, it came to denote a social and political rupture capable of propelling human beings towards the future. The concept of communism, too, has a history, which some scholars trace back to antiquity. For a liberal anti-communist such as Karl Popper, its precursor was Plato, the philosopher behind a totalitarian system subsequently developed by Hegel and Marx [\[2\]](#).

The labour movement, for its part, regarded Spartacus, the leader of the slave revolt in ancient Rome, as its forefather. These contradictory lineages underpin the entire debate surrounding the ideas of equality, cooperation, community and communism. The term was already in use in the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, the utopias of More and Campanella marked a turning point. Subsequently, the idea of liberty and equality resurfaced during the English Revolution — theorised by the 'Diggers' movement — and finally took on new forms in the nineteenth century, first with utopian socialism, then with Marx.

This reminder is not without its value following the end of 20th-century communism, for the resurgence of community-based movements cannot be understood unless it is situated within this 'long-term' history of emancipatory movements, of which modern communism — contrary to what was once thought — is not the epilogue, but a stage.

Certainly it is not a stage in a linear progression, but a specific moment in a journey punctuated by attempts, experiments, victories and defeats.

An idea in search of itself

Modern communism emerged between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, thanks to the thought and actions of

Gracchus Babeuf. In the 19th century, it was an idea in search of its true identity, feeling its way forward and giving rise to a constellation of highly diverse movements and doctrines. A community organised around the principle of equality to be achieved through the redistribution of wealth, according to Babeuf himself;

Other examples include:

- Robert Owen's 'harmonious' cooperation based on the emancipatory and moral virtues of industry, according to Saint-Simon's theories;
- the phalansteries [a group of people living together in a community and holding property in common] of Charles Fourier, who conceived of work as a game and envisaged a reduction in the working day to four hours;
- and finally the resolutely authoritarian model of an egalitarian yet disciplined and hierarchical society, where everything is centrally planned and regulated, as imagined by Étienne Cabet in his *Voyage en Icarie* (1840).

Babeuf had coined the strange term 'communist'; by the time of the July Revolution of 1830, his followers were already describing themselves as communists. Their communism was no longer that of the revolutionaries of the late 18th century, but it was still a far cry from that of Marx. As Alain Maillard has highlighted, on the one hand, it drew its language from a democratic tradition dating back to the Greek and Roman republics of antiquity; on the other hand, it anticipated the social movements of modern capitalism. It was both romantic, in its nostalgia for a distant past characterised by social harmony and political freedom (sometimes identified with ancient Greece, sometimes with Jacobin republicanism), and revolutionary, in its declaration of war against nascent, oppressive and inhuman industrial capitalism [3]. The protagonists of this 'workers' republicanism', which was already beginning to take on a communist hue, were, for the most part, Parisian workers and artisans, belonging to the countless trade guilds of the first half of the nineteenth century: printers, engravers, blacksmiths, bakers, shoemakers, hat-makers, hairdressers...

Some were 'professional revolutionaries' before the term existed, such as Armand Barbès and Auguste Blanqui, whom the police listed in their archives as individuals 'without a profession' or as 'litterati' with no fixed abode. Among them were also wine merchants who found it easier to pass off the meetings organised in their shops and cellars as professional gatherings or wine tastings. Their organisational practices were strictly conspiratorial, and their social interactions mirrored the characteristics of the secret societies described by Georg Simmel.

These communist workers and artisans sought to educate themselves. They read and wrote, and were not content merely to listen to the speeches of an elite that claimed to enlighten and guide them. They wrote, printed and distributed their own newspapers—ephemeral publications

: *L'Égalitaire*, *Le Travail*, *La fraternité* de 1841 — which defied censorship. Their ideas on cooperation were not abstract, but sprang from their experience of manual labour, which was at times highly specialised. Such was the context of the debates on cooperative movements during the 1848 revolution.

And it was from this culture that the Paris Commune emerged; it was not communist (only some of its leading figures were), but 'communalist'. It did not seek to abolish property, but to subject it to the public interest. It sought to experiment with a new form of self-government through direct democracy, founded on the principle of social and political equality [4].

As early as 1848, Tocqueville criticised this idea of cooperation during the parliamentary debate on the National Workshops, denouncing its anti-capitalist logic: abolishing property amounts to placing the economy in the hands of

the state, thereby denying freedom of enterprise, and this, he concluded, was communism [5].

Using similar arguments, Émile Durkheim would later define communism as a social regression based on 'mechanical solidarity' as opposed to the 'organic solidarity' of modern market societies [6]. In 1848 and during the Commune, the liberals—defenders of property and enemies of socialist statism—vehemently called for an authoritarian state to suppress the workers' insurrection. They welcomed with relief the massacres of June 1848 and the 'bloody week' of May 1871. They saw communism as a new tyranny, yet extolled the most violent forms of absolutist and bourgeois despotism.

The utopia of the 'community of property', Maillard emphasises, defies categorisation. It brought together two contradictory tendencies: a universalist and cosmopolitan egalitarianism that sought to liberate human beings from all relations of dependence, and a statist fetishism that saw political power as the driving force behind all social transformation. It is here that the internationalism of Louise Michel and the 'national narcissism' of Barbès have their roots, the social democracy of the Commune and Cabet's statist communism, as well as the positivist idea of progress that would permeate European social democracies. It became the subject of radical, sarcastically laden criticism from numerous socialists, from Blanqui to Walter Benjamin. [7]

Beyond utopian socialism

Within this vast intellectual landscape, Salvatore Cannavò focuses in particular on the concept of 'social freedom' developed by Pierre Leroux, a French utopian socialist of Saint-Simonian inspiration who took part in the 1848 revolution.

Doing justice to the intellectual creativity and richness of collective experience that emerged in France between 1830 and 1848, he draws on a wealth of little-known source material—adding to the pioneering work of Jacques Rancière in *La nuit des prolétaires* (1981) [8], to reinterpret both Marxist revolutionary theory and the most recent debates surrounding the concepts of the public sphere and the 'commons'.

Following the defeat of the Paris Commune, French utopian thought experienced a decline that seemed inevitable. Regarded as the prelude to modern socialism, it was relegated to the status of an embryonic and still immature stage in the history of the labour movement. The causes of this eclipse, Cannavò suggests, are essentially twofold: on the one hand, the severe criticism levelled by Marx and Engels at utopian socialism. On the other hand, the tendency of the socialist parties that emerged at the end of the 19th century to confine the social life of the proletariat to the framework of trade unions and an economic sphere regarded, ultimately, as 'pre-political'.

Cannavò revisits this intellectual debate and reinterprets Marx's texts by demonstrating the extent to which they owe a debt – beyond the critique levelled at Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux – to the experience of workers' cooperative associations, characterised by cooperation, solidarity, mutual aid, grassroots democracy and collective deliberation.

Between February and June 1848, this experience took shape in France with the creation of the National Guard, the Ateliers nationaux and the Luxembourg Commission (named after the palace that housed it, now the seat of the Senate). This was a genuine assembly of workers' delegates that foreshadowed the councils of the 20th-century revolutions. According to Cannavò, this is the historical matrix of the 'cooperative/mutual aid canon' from which the concepts of 'workers' autonomy' and 'class-for-itself' derive—concepts that have fuelled the theoretical debates of Marxism and social history, from Mario Tronti and Toni Negri to Edward P. Thompson.

Marx himself had perceived in the Luxembourg Commission (which he significantly described as a 'socialist synagogue') the very heart of the working classes' self-emancipation. The foundation of a collective experience that was both social and political, and which would find its first fulfilment in the Paris Commune. In other words, Cannavò emphasises, Marx's socialism was not born against, but beyond utopian socialism, whose essential ideas and experiences he had assimilated, and to which he owed a greater debt than he was prepared to admit in his writings. If we consider that utopian socialism was a body of experiences and not merely a corpus of doctrines, this thesis appears entirely convincing.

For Marx and Engels, the idea of communism is not fixed; it is a theoretical horizon that enables them to develop a vision of history and a critique of capitalism. In *The German Ideology* (1845), communism is not an ideal state to be created, but 'the real movement which abolishes the present state of affairs'. [9]. The idea of cooperation runs through all of Marx's economic and political writings as a prerequisite for communism. In the first volume of *Capital* (1867), he envisages, as the antithesis of the social atomisation symbolised by Robinson Crusoe, 'an association of free men (ein Verein freier Menschen) working with collective means of production and consciously expending their many individual labour-powers as a single social labour-power' [10]. In Book 3, he defines cooperative factories as the first attempt to abolish the 'antagonism between capital and labour' and as a possible lever for initiating the transition from capitalism to socialism, from a mode of production based on the pursuit of profit to a socialised mode of production. [11]

In the *Grundrisse* (1857–1858), the manuscripts preceding *Capital*, communism becomes the liberation from time made possible by associated labour [12]. Marx sees the development of the productive forces as the prerequisite for social and human emancipation, that is to say, the reduction of necessary labour time and the fulfilment of faculties freed from material dependence: from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs. In a text such as *The Civil War in France* (1871), however, the emphasis is placed on the political aspect. The Paris Commune is hailed as a novel form of direct democracy based on the self-government of the producers. Its 'true secret', writes Marx, lies in the fact that it was 'essentially a government of the working class [...], the political form at last found which made it possible to realise the economic emancipation of labour'. The Commune sought to transform the means of production—land and capital—from 'means of enslavement and exploitation of labour into mere instruments of free and associated labour'. [13] In short, the idea of communism is fragmented in Marx's writings into various elements that were never fused into a single model, but it is always based on the idea of a non-hierarchical community of freely associated producers.

Contemporaneously with Marx or following him, Marxists also discovered 'primitive communism', that is to say, the cooperative forms of social organisation that emerged in various civilisations prior to capitalism and Western colonisation. Engels formulates this concept in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), drawing on the anthropological work of Lewis Henry Morgan. Rosa Luxemburg devotes many fascinating pages to it in her *Introduction to Political Economy* (1925), in which she explores the social formations of pre-colonial India, Africa and North America. José-Carlos Mariátegui revisits the subject in his *Seven Essays on the Interpretation of Peruvian Reality* (1928), in which he concludes that, in Latin America, modern socialism can never take hold without being rooted in the tradition of 'Inca communism'. [14]

This conception of 'primitive communism' was overshadowed by the Russian Revolution of 1917, from which sprang a new idea of cooperation likened to a gigantic modern machine—highly industrialised and technologically complex—whose producers were the 'heroes', according to the myth of the New Man, but increasingly less its architects. Cooperation and mutual aid was crushed by a centralist and planned conception of communism which undoubtedly possessed marked utopian features, but at the same time stripped itself of its cooperative dimension.

In their essay *The ABC of Communism* (1919), Nikolai Bukharin and Yevgeny Preobrazhensky envisaged the Soviet future as a form of total automation [15]. In *Literature and Revolution* (1924), Leon Trotsky proposed a quasi-eugenic vision of communism as the triumph of a superior human type (a fusion of Goethe, Tolstoy and Marx) and the total

domination of nature by technology. [16]. In an essay entitled 'Americanism and Fordism' (1934), Antonio Gramsci, in turn, theorised the emergence of a new human species forged by social selection and adaptation—as beings shaped by production—to live in a world conceived as a gigantic global factory [17]. Stalinism pushed these trends to their extreme. Stakhanov, a skilled worker and technician proud of his abilities and highly productive, was presented as a new social and anthropological model—a paradigm of the socialist 'New Man'. But he had lost all autonomy in the organisation and management of labour. He was a docile and disciplined executor of directives coming from outside. Cooperation had been completely subsumed by bureaucratic and centralised planning. [18]

Cooperatives, social freedom, self-management

Having explored its origins and traced its development, Cannavò presents this 'cooperative canon' as an alternative to, or a possible transcendence of, the concepts of freedom and the public sphere developed respectively by Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. As is well known, Arendt theorised revolution as a *constitutio libertatis* as opposed to social emancipation, two antagonistic models embodied, in her view, by the American Revolution and the French Revolution, which led, one to republicanism and the other to the Reign of Terror. [19] For Arendt, freedom is the realm of the *vita activa*, superior to and fundamentally detached from the lower spheres of physical existence (*homo laborans*) and material existence (*homo faber*). [20]

For his part, Habermas theorises the public sphere as the arena of civil society, halfway between the economy and institutions, where it is possible to exercise critical reason through debate and the circulation of ideas. Although he does not entirely ignore the market-driven reification brought about by capitalism, Habermas's communicative action does not call into question the class basis of modern societies and therefore accepts the essentially bourgeois character of the public sphere. [21]

In the 21st century, however, Cannavò suggests, the 'cooperative canon' makes it possible to overcome the contradictions of Arendtian freedom and Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit* through the rediscovery of social freedom. This concept effectively links the recognition of social actors (according to Axel Honneth's thesis) and their diversity (Nancy Fraser's feminism) with the defence of the 'commons', understood as co-activity and self-management (as opposed to co-ownership and co-management in liberal and social-democratic models). This is the only way to conceive of politics as a pluralism of the 'infra' not based on inequality, conceived not merely as 'with one another', but rather as 'for one another'.

Following the collapse of official Soviet style 'socialism', the end of the Cold War and the realisation of the failure of the 20th-century revolutions, the idea of communism first fell into obscurity — in the 1990s, it was simply synonymous with totalitarianism, as asserted in *The Black Book of Communism* (1997). It then experienced a renaissance in new, uncertain forms, both creative and fragile. On a theoretical level, its re-emergence took place through a semantic innovation: the 'common' (common, commonwealth, commun, común), which is inevitably reminiscent of Babeuf's 'community of property'. At the same time, as Cannavò points out, there are the uncertainties of Marx and Engels in their use of the concept of *Gemeinwesen* (that which is held in common, but also the public sphere). They sometimes proposed it as a synonym for *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gemeinde* (community both in the sense of an association and in the purely administrative sense of a municipality).

The concept of the commons is innovative, rich and necessary: it enables us to define capitalism's predatory appropriation of the planet and the commodification of nature (water, land, the atmosphere) and of life, and to develop a critique of neoliberalism as a way of life and an individualistic, competitive anthropological model.

The word 'commons' encompasses several meanings at once. It is an analytical category: contemporary capitalism as biopolitical production and immaterial labour, that is to say, as a stage in the history of capitalism. From this perspective, the 'commons' corresponds to cognitive capitalism, which succeeds mercantilism and industrial capitalism, according to an interpretation developed notably by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri. It is also a material substance: the common goods to be protected or liberated from the shackles of modern neoliberal enclosures (an idea at the heart of Elinor Ostrom's work). Finally, it is a form of political subjectivity: common action, a transformative collective practice on which there is now a vast body of literature (ranging from the works of Hardt and Negri to those of Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval). [22] Salvatore Cannavò's 'co-operative canon' brings these currents together into a comprehensive conception. Just as Leroux's 'social freedom' was a contemporary of social Darwinism, today the 'commons' and the new cooperative movements constitute a radical alternative to a world reshaped according to the prescriptions of Friedrich von Hayek and his disciples, right through to the most obscene forms of techno-feudalism.

It must be noted, however, that the term 'commons' does not carry the same weight as its predecessor: as a social system, communism was the antithesis of capitalism and the dialectical overcoming of its contradictions. As a political movement, it was an army fighting against capitalism. This model, particularly due to its political dimension, has now run its course, but it unleashed immense energies throughout the 20th century. The commons stand in opposition to global capitalism in the neoliberal era, but they are also distinct from historical communism. On the one hand, devising a new emancipatory project centred on the idea of the 'commons' means rejecting the experience of the authoritarian and statist communism of the 20th century. On the other hand, a simple rejection of this legacy proves to be as short-sighted as it is ineffective. Bolshevism claimed the legacy of nineteenth-century socialism, from 1848 to the Paris Commune.

Contemporary alternative movements seem to want to salvage nothing from the communist tradition. To be fruitful, Cannavò suggests, the rediscovery of the 'co-operative canon' should not be a return to the utopian socialism of the nineteenth century, but a lever for negating and transcending the state-centred socialism of the twentieth century: the key to a dialectical transcendence, rather than mere negation.

Let us return to the definition of communism proposed by Marx in *The German Ideology*: the real movement that abolishes the present state of affairs. All the uprisings of the last twenty years fall into this category: Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter in the United States, the Arab Spring, the 15M movement in Spain, the occupation of Gezi Park in Istanbul, Nuit debout and the Yellow Vests in France, the global #MeToo feminist movement, and many others besides. These movements did not seek to embody the memory of communism or that of past revolutions. They saw themselves as closer to the Paris Commune than to October 1917. They rediscovered the Haitian Revolution and the Black Jacobins, but were unaware of the Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions.

They were not interested in the strategic debates of the past: reform or revolution, mass party or cadre party, war of movement or war of position, united front, insurrection, etc.. They wanted to experiment with new ways of life, organised themselves on a horizontal basis; practised forms of direct democracy, albeit short-lived. They were interested in the commons and ecology rather than elections and institutional issues. They displayed anarchist traits, not in doctrinal terms (in the sense of a return to Bakunin), but in their practices: anti-statism, a rejection of delegation, and direct action. The global movement against the genocide in Gaza has often been compared to that of the 1960s and 1970s against the Vietnam War. At that time, protesting against napalm bombings and massacres meant supporting a war of national liberation that led to a socialist revolution. Today, whilst there is a rejection of genocide, no revolution is on the horizon.

I have previously written that this void in collective memory, this break with classical communism, constitutes both the strength and the fragility of these movements. [23] Their strength lies in the fact that they are creative and defend—whilst attempting to put it into practice—a radical form of democracy. They are not weighed down by the apparatus—both material and ideological—of classical communism and show great enthusiasm in devising new

projects. But they are weak because they do not belong to any tradition; they lack the strength of movements that lived under the illusion of embodying the future, of marching in the direction of history, yet which also organised millions of men and women eager to change the world.

In the 21st century, teleology has switched sides: it is no longer socialist or communist, but neoliberal. Capitalism defines itself as the natural and definitive form of organisation for the planet (this is how Francis Fukuyama interpreted the collapse of real socialism). The new movements are fighting against this idea without harbouring any illusions. Changing the world and breaking the capitalist stranglehold is a subversive act that does not follow a natural trend, but rather involves overturning a structural trend towards the domination of nature and social inequality. They see themselves as an emergency brake before disaster strikes, rather than as the driving force of history. Seen from this angle, they seem closer to Walter Benjamin than to Marx or Lenin. But unlike Benjamin, for whom revolution was an irruption of the past into the present in order to fulfil its unfulfilled promises, these new movements do not see themselves as repositories of memory for past revolutions. They are without history. They want to project themselves into the future, but do not know what to make of the past.

Rediscovering the associative paradigm of utopian socialism and bringing it into dialogue with contemporary theories of the commons and public space is an essential aspect of this long and laborious process of constructing the past and inventing the future. Through the richness of the sources explored, the clarity of the exposition, the interdisciplinary nature of a methodology combining social history, intellectual history and political theory, as well as the originality of a creative and unconventional reading of a vast body of classical and contemporary texts, this book by Salvatore Cannavò is brilliant and admirable. It meets a vital need of the present and will fuel our discussions for a long time to come.

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