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Globalisation

# Reflections on globalisation

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**Secretary of Italy's Party of Communist Refoundation, Fausto Bertinotti** [[1](#)] has just published a new book called *Le idee che non muoiono* ("Ideas that do not die"). Believing that the problems approached in this book are of interest to activists in the workers' movement and left intellectuals in other countries, we publish here some extracts

We have to pose ourselves the question of why and how a movement born for the freedom of all was able to end up in reality in forms of oppression. The historic movement of Communism has to give a response, in spite all the difficulties that this involves.

It would be easier, indeed more acceptable intellectually, to develop a critique of the outcome of an openly oppressive ideology. However we must approach the contrary case: that of an ideology and of a culture of liberation, which represents the highest point reached by the idea of liberty in the history of human thought. We should then suppose that in the course of events the forces which identify themselves with this ideology, in most of their experiences, have contradicted radically the project from which they originated (...)

The ideas of Marx have experienced an at least three-dimensional development. The first dimension is that of ideal communism, that is the development of the overall doctrine, of the ideology, of the culture which flowed from the Marxian approach; the second is represented by the post-revolutionary state experiences which followed the 1917 revolution in Russia (...); the third is that of the history of the workers' movement as a whole and, inside this latter, the history of the movements, the class struggle and its political expressions such as they developed in western Europe. These elements as a whole configure the history of a century of the workers' movement. In this global balance sheet, instead of starting from the errors and the bankruptcy of the countries of the East, the reasons and motor causes of this bankruptcy, which poses, moreover, gigantic questions, it is opportune and necessary to reflect first on the thought of Marx.

I share the opinion of Marxist researchers who, in the course of the last decades, have argued that Marx represented the highest point of political thought, which resides precisely in the concept of revolution.

Nonetheless, judged on the basis of historic experience, it should be said that his thought also contains elements in need of development and gaps, which, certainly, does not explain the tragic events which have marked the history of the workers' movement, but should not be minimized to the extent that these "gaps" paved the way to errors which happened subsequently.

## Marx and his heirs

But first it is necessary to reflect on the heritage and the heirs. So far as ideal communism is concerned I continue to believe that Marx's thought on freedom has not been surpassed, even if there have been some great Communist thinkers in the past century, for example Gramsci, who, at a determined historic moment, marked a new evolution of Marxism, without forgetting the gigantic contribution of the great revolutionaries who combined action and thought in the first decade of the 20th century, from Kautsky to Rosa Luxembour, from Trotsky to Lenin, not to speak of great contemporaries like Sweezy and Marcuse. It is above all in the course of the last decades that there has been an obscuring of the most radical kernel of Marx's thought. This obscuring is not only determined by a great historic event, that is the defeat of the last great movement which has raised the question of revolution: I refer to the worker

and student revolt of the late 1960s, whose defeat indisputably closed a door to the evolution of Marxist thought. But even before this defeat - and still more after - the theme of freedom was advanced in terms similar enough to those that had been used before Marx, that is by a juxtaposition of freedom and equality and an attempt at composition between these two terms which, in the Communist movement itself, seems closer to democratic thought than the original thought of Marx.

After the advent of Fordism-Taylorism Marxist thought experienced a scientist turn, which led to its conceiving the development of the productive forces and technique, fundamentally, as a necessary basis for the pursuit of a process of social emancipation and of liberty. (pp. 29-32)

(...) Despite the obscuring of the project that Marx conceived as the basis of human liberty and despite the limits of his thought and the errors which occurred throughout a whole historic experience... Marx is confirmed as having discovered a fundamental law of history, that is that capitalism is a negator of liberty and that the liberty which can be produced in its framework is the result of a historic process which had links with communism, the struggles and the attempts to realize it. ( p. 42)

(...) I remain convinced that our principal critique of the experience of the countries of actually existing socialism concerns their lack of socialism (...). Nonetheless, this lack of socialism does not entirely explain the shortage of democracy and the existence of forms of oppression against persons.

But all this cannot be really explained without the spirit, the idea of liberation in Marx, who indicates as the polar star the human perspective of a free activity for all.

Yet, while affirming this, we should be absolutely conscious that more than ever we need a theory of legality. (...)

There is then a supplementary, specific element which should be approached in the process of transformation of capitalist society, whose center remains the transcendence of private property and the socialization of work, in other words, liberation from work. This aspect should not be neglected: we need a theory of the state, of legality and of democracy. In this respect the liberal and democratic thinkers were right, while being wrong for the essential. (p. 45)

(...) In the preceding phase of the development of capitalist society there was a confrontation between reformist projects and revolutionary projects. Both have suffered a defeat. So far as the reformist project is concerned, I refer as much to the reformism of the workers' movement as to bourgeois reformism (in relation to this latter our critique is still more practical and pertinent). But today we should have a still more radical attitude. We are not witnessing an attenuation of inequality but its accentuation. Yet this process develops without being contested by the center-left governments. (p. 65)

## Class consciousness and crises of Marxism

(...) As we know, there have always been two critical interpretations, one which attributes to Marx a completely progressive reading of capitalism, the other which only grasps the negative side which the full development of the class struggle alone can reverse. This paradox helps us even today to reflect on the complexity as much of capitalism as of the class struggle, but undoubtedly also on the social and human condition under capitalism.

To a certain extent this can be grasped if one reflects on the fate of the working class itself. It has been the basis of

capitalist accumulation through its labour power and at the same time it is the subject of transformation in its condition of class and acquired class consciousness. We should nonetheless understand that it amounts to a simplification inasmuch as it is in this historic process itself that we can resolve a question which, if not, would have no solution. If a total capitalist alienation existed, it would be impossible to conceive at the same time the possibility of freeing oneself from this alienation.

We should then take up a formula used by Claudio Napoleoni, [2] that is to admit that there is a residue, something which in some measure escapes capitalist alienation while being connected to this latter. (pp. 88-89)

(...) Without the critique of wage labour there is no possibility of materializing a radical contestation of the system capitalist, nor of founding a new revolutionary subject, nor of grasping these two big questions.

I believe still that the different crises of Marxism have had a link with the evolution of class consciousness. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century, contrary to predictions, the growth of class consciousness did not have a linear and uninterrupted progression. This has had some important effects on theoretical certainties in the evolution of Marxist thought.

While not sliding towards a determinist approach, it is indisputable that the different crises of Marxism are in relation to the fundamental changes in capitalist society. Thus, class consciousness can be related to a serious defeat or an effect of displacement provoked by capitalism's ability to change its own structures. That can happen as much through a direct hegemonic process as through an obstruction of antagonistic projects. This effect of displacement has resulted from several elements: notably the setback represented by the defeat of the movement of students and workers at the end of the 1960s, the collapse of the eastern regimes and the development of the capitalist revolution today known as "globalisation".

These three elements have determined a change of scenario which has implications for the question of work. The thesis of the end of work has been completely disproved. It is necessary, nonetheless, to ask the question of why it has been raised. My response is that precisely the appearance of this thesis demonstrates that it is the question of work that is at stake here. In other words, to give value to the idea of the end of conflict in a global model of society it is necessary to try to make work itself disappear from the social scene.

Nonetheless, work has not disappeared: it has been profoundly revolutionized. We can henceforth bring together numerous elements of enquiry and analysis on the new condition of work, a real overall picture as much on the world as on the regional level. We can also observe the modifications which have taken place in both the organization of work and its social composition. However, we do not yet possess a unitary key of interpretation. (pp. 93-94)

## Current stage of capitalism

(...) At the current stage of the development of capitalism, it is necessary to grasp another aspect of the reorganization of work, which determines, downwards, a change of social composition, stimulated by the effort to buy labour power at the lowest price. We should add here the revolution in information technology and communication.

This component of the revolution of capitalism directly concerns the organization of work. In fact, it modifies not only the relationship of the productive process, of space and time, but also the relationship of finance and productive capital, in the sense that financialisation is a process originating to a decisive extent from the possibility of moving capital across frontiers in real time.

That implies a significant push towards a deterritorialisation of production. Thus, the relationship of material and immaterial factors of production changes radically and the distinction between manual and intellectual labour is also undergoing an upheaval.

It is enough to consider the typographer and the journalist to understand the depth of the changes in space, in time, in the relationship between material and immaterial bases in the process of production.

But this structural modification of work and of production, of their relationship with society, is part of a more general change in the relationship between production and culture. It seems to me that this is happening in two directions. The first is that analyzed by Ignacio Ramonet, which stresses the progressive construction of an organic and functional viewpoint to this revolution of capital and the technologies subjected to capital. The second tries to destroy the spaces of autonomy which, while they are integrated into the capitalist division of labour and strongly marked by the rise of the subaltern classes, had characterized the preceding cycle. Significant spaces were conquered in the cultural, scientific and artistic process, sometimes inside even the institutional frameworks, like schools, influencing, through the conflict of classes, the organization of work at an overall level.

It is precisely all this which is now being radically thrown into question. A diffuse intellectuality is being formed, with a new place in the social division of labour and of knowledge. It is no longer about intellectuals who operate a mediation between production and society, organize the consensus and, at the same time, produce. This classic role of the intellectuals is henceforth in crisis whereas at the same time there is the emergence of diffuse intellectuals, intimately linked to the new process of production which breaks down all the barriers between production of material goods, services and culture. Hence an increasingly totalizing dimension inside of which the internal specifications are quite simply technical or in any case deprived of any kind of autonomy. (...) The system demands a total renunciation of thought as such and the acceptance of a separation of the capacity of innovation of the system and of social progress. (pp. 107-9)

(...) [On the subject of the feminization of work] it should not be forgotten that at the same time there is a constant marginalisation of women on the labour market. The process of privatization of social rights determines an ulterior deterioration of the life of women, as much directly as by the mediation of the family. It is not by chance that in the course of this process the family is hypervalorised as basic economic unit, as place of compensation, once more to the detriment of the woman. One can then speak of a feminization of work on the condition of not forgetting that it amounts to a poor feminization, which consists in externalizing numerous functions accomplished before by the organized welfare state and which today are assigned to the system of subcontracting and a distorted use of the "third sector", subject to the demands of replacement of the public sector by the private in the process of growing privatization.

On the other hand, it is through a completely different conception of social rights, of universal social rights, resting on a higher quality of guaranteed payments, that one can introduce the theme of payment as recognition of social benefit. I believe that this approach can concretize itself in the proposition of a social wage to the unemployed and to long term economically inactive, that the PRC's deputies put forward in a parliamentary draft bill in February of this year, which proposes an assured monetary income from the state to all those who are in such a condition twelve months after registering as unemployed, and guaranteed free services by local administrations. (pp. 114-115)

## Different choices were possible

(...) It is not only through historic interest that it is necessary to make a balance sheet of the workers' and Communist movement of the 20th century. Posed at the same time is the problem not only of restoring credibility to the

perspective of going beyond capitalist society and then advancing the reasons for which capitalism should not be conceived as a society without alternative, a sort of new end of history, but also to explain why the setback for the experiences of construction of socialist societies in the course of the 20th century does not in itself imply the defeat of any hypothesis of the transcendence of capitalist society.

In my view, it is not enough to have an approach which is experimental, that is to explain that it is necessary to try and try again. In order to refound a trajectory, it is necessary to guarantee that the new attempts do not cover the roads already traveled. I think that, in relation to the past, we should propose a counterfactual history...

Starting from the hypothesis that, in the history of the construction of the self-proclaimed socialist societies, a different choice could have led to a very different outcome. (pp. 175-76)

## Withering away of the national state

(...) The process of globalisation sweeps away the powers and competences of national states and throws up its own sites of government. These latter are distant and completely independent of the bodies of representative democracy, even under its most diluted forms (...). We witness, in fact, a process of profound and in some aspects irreversible crisis of the nation-state, which has less and less weight both in internal and in foreign policy. But the disappearance of states does not follow from this crisis. What follows rather is a profound modification of their role and a liquidation of the process of enlargement of democracy which developed in their framework as a result of the struggles of the workers' movement, at least so far as Europe is concerned. They have less weight, but some states still count for a lot and since the end of the war the number of states, far from reducing, has grown. The policy of the big powers, as we have seen during the events in the Balkans, in fact tends towards the multiplication of states whose territorial dimension is reduced to the least expression and which are sometimes defined on an ethnic basis, but these states have increasingly less power and authority. At the same time, although financial capital has an international dimension, its centre still has a predominant localization, above all in the US, whose military superpower status and the forms of social organization which support it constitute the heart, the model and the motor of a new imperial system basing its power not on consensus, but on the integration of narrow social groups and the exclusion of very large sectors of peoples and populations from economic, civil, cultural and democratic life. The crisis of the nation-state goes hand in hand with the creation of a new imperial system, which has at its centre the United States and at its periphery a myriad of states subjected to this latter or being fought by these latter. (pp. 192-193)

## Outline of an alternative programme

(...) A contemporary political programme should outline both an alternative way of governing society to that provided by neoliberal policies and an alternative of emancipation of significant regions of the world in contrast to the social model based on globalisation. Is it possible to define this programme without reopening the great question of capitalism and its transcendence?

From this point of view, it seems to me that the problem of Europe is posed precisely, a Europe where it is possible to construct an alternative society, founded on the critique of war as the foundation of a new imperial world order, and an alternative to neoliberal policies. This passage - which could and should involve the construction of political forces for an alternative in a dimension which is not Euro-centric, but is capable of conceiving Europe as a necessary critical mass to advance on the road of an alternative - should be nourished anew by the critique of exploitation and alienation and by the formation of elements of community capable of realizing partial objectives, under non-utopian but concrete forms.

(...) I wish to take up here the Gramscian intuition of the "blockhouses" to be liberated in the "class war" against capitalist society. In my opinion, this concept of "blockhouses" recalls to us even today the necessity of occupying spaces and times with contents which are capable of escaping, albeit not completely, the logic of exploitation and alienation and to a certain extent referring to a future whose realization implies that the proletariat can only exist on the level of universal history. This dialectic, to use the phrase, of the community and of the world sketches two polarities in the framework of which it is possible to reconstruct a new idea of the class struggle, a new idea of the liberation of men and women, an idea of life which advances the theme of Communism made historically necessary by the counter-revolution of capitalism of which we have spoken.

The most critical element of such a perspective - in a context of disproportion between its objective maturity and the dramatic immaturity of the organized subjectivity of the social movement, the workers' movement, of the forces antagonistic to the new capitalism - resides in the gap which exists, in the framework of the current capitalist modernization, between exploited and exploiters in the widespread perception and culture at a mass level.

The causal relationship between social malaise, on the one hand, and the powers of the bosses and the bourgeois classes, on the other - which were in the 19th century a determinant factor of the growth in proletarian organizations, of the transmission of class consciousness in the communities - is today dissipated following a historic defeat, numerous retreats and changes and a break, a tearing, of the social tissue, of class composition.

That is why this causal relationship, which before was to a certain extent the result of a historic process and a social process, must today be entirely rebuilt. In my view, it will not be rebuilt pedagogically or from the top, but through a new social, political and cultural experience. (pp. 206-208)

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[1] Fausto Bertinotti, born into a working class family in 1940, is known primarily for his trade union work at Novare in Turin and in the national secretariat of the CGIL. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s he was the main leader of the left trade union current Essere sindacato. After having been a member of the Italian Socialist Party, he joined the PSIUP (a split from the PSI in 1964), and was then a member of the PCI. Since 1994 he has been a secretary of the Party of Communist Refoundation, founded in 1991 following a break from the PCI, now the PDS (Party of the democratic left, then DS - Left Democrats). He is a PRC deputy in the Italian Parliament and the European Parliament. He has published, among other works, *Tutti i colori del rosso* ("All the colours of red"), 1995, and, in collaboration with Alfonso Gianni, *Pensare il '68* ("Thinking 1968"), 1998 et *Le idee che non muoiono* ("Ideas which do not die"), ed. Ponte alle Grazie, 2000, extracts from which we publish here. The choice of extracts, the headline and the subheadings are ours.

[2] Claudio Napoleoni, *Il valore*, ed. Isedi, 1976.