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Mutual aid and self-management: a multiple implantation project

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A contribution to the discussion by Communia, Italy.

The workers movement of the 20th century has exhausted its cycle. This does not mean that the working class has dissolved or that there is no longer any trade union or labour movement. What no longer exists is the synergistic whole that had forced capitalism, in Europe and in the world, to change in order to survive.. A labour movement built mainly around the "German model", the institutional and state-based strength of the Party and the complementary but limited role of economic demands, centred on the specific interests of the Union.

The early workers' movement, rooted in mutual aid and associative solidarity, was forced early on to pay the price for capitalist development, impetuous industrialization and the choices of its leading groups, and embarked on the road of building strong electoral parties.

The end of the labour movement has been accelerated and centrifuged by the end of "real socialism". The fate of the "short century" has reverberated like a nuclear mushroom over the destinies of the international labour movement, exalting the elements of the crisis and hiding its last vital functions until they were buried.

The end of the workers' movement also has another consequence: the necessity for the opposition that lived inside the movement to change its outlook and practices. Precisely those who opposed the dominant thought of the majority labour movement have the greatest responsibility to find a different way, armed with the teachings of Walter Benjamin, which urge us to save the vanquished "from the oblivion of history" .

The lost subject

In the last decades in Europe the structure of the lower classes has changed: because of the defeats that have weakened and dismembered the working class, greatly reducing its capacity to be a point of reference for the weaker and more fluid layers of the population; by the relocation of parts of the productive process and the expansion of the tertiary (service) sector; by the more massive presence of women and immigrants; by the proletarianization of a part of the social mass which formerly belonged to the petty bourgeoisie; by the marketizaion of activities and human aspects that were previously exterior to the market, etc.

From the mid-1990s, under the attack of neoliberalism, European societies were in fermentg and produced struggles, movements, different and divergent organizational forms whose variety of practices, demands and languages reflected first, the articulation of a more diversified society, and then the centrifugal dynamics brought about by the crisis of the "subjective factor".

The processes of subjectivization therefore may not be linear and superimposable. There may be sudden accelerations and delays that are difficult to fill from one sector or another, or a subjectivity that has its own specificities. What is happening in the feminist movement offers some tracks for study, although the situation is generally characterized by a fundamental fragility in the construction of possible and practicable alternatives.

The most advanced political experiences also offer interesting grounds to develop and concretely represent a need for transformation, for alternative. But overall there does not seem to be a reversal of the tendency to reduce the

hope of change and to develop an alternative grammar of the social order. The socialist awakening in the United States, made manifest by the experience of Bernie Sanders, does not produce, at least to the naked eye, a capacity to challenge the roots of the current hegemony of Trump; Jeremy Corbyn represented a shake-up for the labour movement semi-destroyed by Blair's Third Way, while remaining in the camp of reformist recipes whose consistency must be put to the test. The most interesting experience, Podemos in the Spanish state, lives contradictions that could explode. In Catalonia, Podemos has lost the possibility of a qualitative leap forward because it failed to grasp the depth of the self-determination processes and get in tune with them. Efforts in Italy oscillate between weak operations of political reunification, as in the case of Liberi e Uguali, and improvised and confused operations which, starting from slogans borrowed from self-management and mutualism, seem more like a life-raft for old political subjects (see Potere al Popolo).

What appears to be missing everywhere is a strong social connection based on robust experiences of one-off but lasting counterpositional struggles, of alternative societal embryos. "Bastions" that resist the clashes and cultivate alliances, spaces of self-activity that do not end on Saturday in the street, political and cultural discourse that really raises the question of the quality of an economic and social alternative.

The direction we have adopted is that the present phase resembles the dawn of the labour movement in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the movement experimented with ideas and practices. Today we can also experiment with new organizations, instruments of direct work organization, employee and cooperativist. Using self-management as an instrument to practice the objective, one able to build political subjectivity and to propose a new democracy in which the state really begins to decline. And organisms that finally break the old dichotomy between spontaneity and organization, between political consciousness codified only in party forms to "import" into the experiences of struggle. The two moments can coexist in a phase where the social practice can no longer be separated from theoretical and cultural elaboration.

Before everything started

It is Marx who points to two of the successive positive factors to the defeat of 1848: the law on the ten-hour work day and the cooperative movement. Marx is aware of the limitations and difficulties and in fact writes that "experience has proved that cooperative work, the practice of which can be excellent, is not in a position to stop the geometric progress of the monopoly, to emancipate and not even to lighten the burden of their misery, if it is limited in a narrow circle of partial efforts of isolated workmen". But Marx's contempt is mainly directed at the use of co-operative work by "self-proclaimed philanthropists of the middle class" from whom the "nauseating compliments" of cooperative work originate.

After the recognition of the cooperative movement "as one of the transforming forces of the present society", Marx emphasizes how, in order to encourage cooperative work, "general social changes, transformations of the general conditions of society, are only possible with the commitment of the organized forces of society, i.e. government power wrested from the hands of capitalists and landowners and placed in the hands of the producers" are indispensable. These are the same problems that characterize the fraternal societies, also straddling the labour movement and "philanthropy", between workers' emancipation organizations and the structures that the rapidly industrializing bourgeoisie used to appease the nascent workers' movement. But this contradiction was not eliminated. Throughout the ascendancy phase, the characteristic of "fraternity" and supportive assistance was manifested in the societies ranging from providing aid and economic support to sick members, education and training for children, insertion into the world of work, up to the creation of workers' credit societies. Societies were also social occasions, meeting places and relationships "outside the harrowing life of the factory or the fields". So places for discussion or confrontation on common problems, opportunities for social ties that were woven for the first time and which, as we will see, will make possible a first very important passage, that of solidarity to the "resistance".

The Italian and Belgian workers' parties

Two experiences in particular help us to better understand. In Italy, the Workers' Party was born in Milan in 1882 and represented an active and widespread political and social movement. Despite its name it was not a workerist political organization, and wasn't even Italian in the sense of a presence throughout the territory. It represented a new phase of trade unionism. More than a party, it was a "federation of societies of resistance", an evolution of the basic forms of solidarity and trade unions that had a political connotation. It was an association of associations which "binds not individuals but workers' societies of mutual aid, improvement, cooperation, education and training in a federative manner" which, through this party, in the strike, experienced the dimension of "resistance".

The experience of the Belgian Workers Party (POB), intimately linked to mutualist experience, is even more advanced. The most important is that of cooperatives for the production and sale of bread. For example, in 1905 the House of the People of Brussels produced ten million kg of bread a year while Ghent produced one hundred thousand a week. In the 1880s, these two cooperatives sent thirty tons of bread to support the miners of the Borinage,

The statutes of this party state that the purpose of the POB is to "reunite the working and socialist forces of the country to improve, through the Mutual Agreement, the fate of the working class. For this reason the party will organize itself on the political as well as the economic field" And so "professional unions, mutual aid societies, cooperative societies, circles of study and propaganda can join the Party" in addition to individual workers "of both sexes" of a certain territory. As the party principles repeat: "against capitalism workers must fight with all the means at their disposal" and therefore "with political action and with the development of free associations".

Thus is born a method of intervention defined as "multi-faceted syndicalism" in which the workers' and mutual aid societies' movement intersect, helping each other. For these pioneering socialists who have seen the experience of the First International, it is quite natural to combine mutuality, which meets basic needs, and resistance or struggle to wrest conquests and rights.

The binomial mutualism-resistance

In the nineteenth-century experience, the "mutualism-resistance" pairing is based on a dual concept of solidarity: "for" in the case of mutualism; "against" in the case of resistance struggles or for rights. But the couple "mutualism-resistance" is replaced by the couple "party / union" which theorizes and operates a rigid partitioning between the political element and the social-economic element. On the one hand, politics is understood as electoral participation to give the state social and socialist content, on the other hand the strike and trade union struggle to improve living conditions. This separation would mark the entire history of the labour movement of the 20th century, with a few exceptions, most often in anarchist and libertarian movements.

Thus at the end of the 19th century integration into the state created the conditions for the end of the constitutive autonomy of the workers' movement, its existence outside and against the bourgeois state, its structural otherness. In its work "to improve living conditions, alleviate suffering and then to determine a more advanced degree of class independence," mutualism laid the foundation for "a society in society" which, while it did not succeed in overthrowing the existing order, guaranteed the congenial otherness of the concrete working reality. The highest and symbolic example of this otherness is the Paris Commune.

Reconnect the political and social

The opportunities for politicization in the globalized world of the 20th century are infinitely greater than those of a hundred years ago. It is therefore even more difficult today to think of rigid divisions, even more if history shows us that this separation has never - or only relatively - existed.

Each revolutionary passage and each mass action that did not have a decisive military dimension showed a plurality of instruments, functions, and options, in which, in essence, the difference was represented by the degree of mass consciousness, by the forms of self-organization. And so by instances where the political and the social have been superimposed until they are indistinct. For Marx the social is always political, the revolutionary subject is not separated from the class and the idea of political consciousness imported from the outside does not exist.

Self-made consciousness

To act by oneself is the necessary precondition for the formation of a process of subjectivization. The mechanism of formation of a political consciousness - which is the distinctive element of Marx's "class for itself" - does not begin only at the very important moment of criticism of the existing, the mechanisms of exploitation, rhythms and working times, forms of domination and hierarchy of capitalist societies. It does not come only from the negation of the given reality, although negation is an important form of the process of human identity. The process of subjectivization needs association, the coordination of ideas and common practices, solidarity. "When communist workers get together, their primary purpose is doctrine, propaganda, and so on. But with that, they take ownership together of a new need, the need of society and what seems to be a means has become a goal." The centrality of associationism as a place of thought and common life allows us to get out of the trap of the consciousness brought to the workers "from the outside" by an enlightened avant-garde of intellectuals.

Lenin's famous "consciousness from the outside" produced more damage than solutions, even if it was oversimplified by a party busy seeking to make itself the state. Consciousness is certainly an element that is "outside" the fatigue of working or existential life, of permanent anxiety for survival. When we are hungry we cannot think. But where to think? And what instrument to build to be able to do so?

Consciousness can develop in actions of resistance, in this "negative solidarity" which is so constitutive of trade-union action, of conflict. But it is enriched by a propositional element and a utopian dimension if it acts motivated by positive solidarity, that which finds its fulfilment in free association. In this negative-positive dialectic, resistance-mutualism are the spaces for an accumulation of consciousness: mutualism-resistance-thought. Without thought, culture, political intelligence, mutualism and resistance fall back on the existing and curl up like faded flowers. This consciousness is not the separate prerogative of an enlightened party, but can also be formed within worker associationism. Or from a party but one which produces experiences of solidarityself-activity, experiences of self-management, of mutualism, of cooperative work. A new type of subject, with multiple implantation. The "working-class" societies of the 21st century will build their own study centres, libraries... because only in this way can the mutualist experience and a project of multiple implantation contribute to the formation of a new Subject, a consciousness adequate to the challenges for social transformation. The social dimension and the political dimension therefore go together in instruments that think as they do and do as they think.

Do it yourself, be part of it

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Starting from the 19th century does not mean cancelling out the past and pretending that the film produced by the labour movement can be rewound again and again. But it helps to learn the full lessons and to really grasp the moments where we lost the opportunity. Not only the essential political moments where the bureaucracies, the states or the various bosses prevailed (Germany 1918-19, URRS after 1927, Spain in 1937, Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, Italy between 1968 and 1977) but also moments in which we have embarked on irreversible paths that have led the subaltern classes, after a hundred years, to a stalemate; deprived of the material force to oppose what exists, but especially lacking ideas that could trace an alternative path. At bottom, the great tragedy of the third millennium is this: to have seen the progressive crisis of all hope of emancipation of humanity and to be forced to live a daily life without solutions. The moment when we lost the fertile connection between negative solidarity and positive solidarity, between mutualism and resistance, between associations based on doing for oneself, on self help, but endowed with political thought, this moment can be recovered for the future. And it is with this connection and in this capacity to weave a new thread that conflictual mutualism can find its reason for being.