

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT



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*Pre-Prison Writings*

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## Socialism and Co-operation

The officious economist of Italian Nationalism, Professor Alfredo Rocco, is convinced of having utterly destroyed the collectivist programme of socialism with the following formidable objection. The national wealth of Italy fluctuates between 80 and 100 billion lire. Now, wage-earners are in such a massive majority over capitalists that, if the profits of production were to be shared out collectively, among everyone, the increase in personal well-being for the humble worker would be minimal, and certainly not of an order to justify the crisis which would be provoked by the passage from one system to the other.

The objection is a puerile one, because the aim of socialism is not simply to solve the problem of the distribution of finished products. On the contrary, the moral justification for our struggle, and for the revolution this struggle will bring about, comes from the conviction, acquired by the proletariat through its critique of the existing means of production, that collectivism will serve to accelerate the rhythm of production itself, by eliminating all those artificial factors which limit productivity.

Among these factors, and by no means the last or the least important, is the *fortuitous* nature of the distribution of wealth among individuals. It is almost always capitalists who become industrialists, whether or not they possess the intelligence and technical competence needed for the social task they are called on to perform. True,

the bourgeois system itself has already managed to go some way towards combating this immorality of fortune. Banks and building societies tend to accumulate the capital of the more inert members of society, and put it into the hands of bolder and more active elements. In a more modern development, public companies, which, broadly speaking, are nothing other than industrial co-operatives, formed with the aim of exploiting capital more profitably and using it more effectively, represent the furthest that the bourgeois system can go towards eliminating the capitalist monad, towards separating the *technical* element in production from the provision of *capital*. Public companies are, for this reason, a social experiment of the greatest interest for socialism, because they serve to demonstrate ever more clearly the truth that the capitalist is by no means necessary; that the spirit of initiative, the vital motive force of the economy, is not deadened by the fact that the managers and the technical staff of a firm are mere salaried workers, without a personal interest in the profits, down to the last farthing.

If even these forms of capitalist co-operation can provide confirmation of the claims of socialist propaganda, then how much more can be had from consumers' co-operatives like the Alleanza Torinese, which have acquired a distinct class profile and are closely tied to the development of the proletariat.

Consumption is a relatively neutral field of social activity. It is on the basis of production, rather than consumption, that the populace divides into two classes. Consumption can become an arena for the struggle only for political, rather than economic reasons, in that the State, as the administrative and executive committee of the capitalist bourgeoisie, uses protectionism and customs barriers to match consumption to domestic production. But everyone is a consumer; and the entire populace, excepting those few people who look to retail for their profits, may find itself united in protest against harsh measures and price rises, even though each group will differ in the methods of its protest, and the different political ends that its protest is intended to serve. For this reason – since, in consumption, class boundaries are to some extent blurred – it certainly cannot be claimed that the co-operative movement is socialist in essence, and it would be naive and extremely damaging to suggest that this movement is all there is to the socialist programme.

But, even leaving aside the enormous advantages that the co-operative movement brings to *all* consumers (the advantages described so well by 'o.p.' in a previous issue),<sup>1</sup> co-operatives on the Alleanza model are impressive, large-scale laboratories for refining and purifying the socialist sense of social responsibility. The enthusiastic words which Georges Sorel used to use, in the old days, to praise the reconstructive work of the trade unions could be applied, with still more justification, to co-operatives like this today. Because co-operatives like this are an attempt to make socialist economic ideals a reality. Sadly, they suffer from the inevitable disadvantage of being grafted onto a heterogeneous trunk, to which they must adapt, to some extent, in order to survive and develop, and by which they, then, inevitably, find themselves conditioned. But, nevertheless, they are still bursting with a life of their own, which can barely be contained, and they can still cause irreparable breaches in the system.

Besides, capitalism itself is not, in its historical essence, a bourgeois phenomenon. Rather, it is a bourgeois superstructure: the concrete form taken by economic development at some time after the new class's rise to political power, resulting from its struggle to establish its roots ever more firmly in the world. And just as it was the economic nuclei which had emerged before 1789 – already potentially capitalistic, but suffocated by the remains of feudalism – which made the first breaches in the feudal system; so, equally, the economic nuclei created and nurtured by the proletariat for its own class ends, within the very heart of bourgeois society, may become a powerful lever for breaking that society apart.

From this point of view, even consumers' co-operatives can, if we want them to, take on a revolutionary role. Even in their present form, they are a kind of link, welding the present and the future. Developed, reinforced and multiplied, they will become so many weapons pointed directly against the bourgeois system. Just as the current war differs from previous wars because it entirely absorbs all the nation's activity, so, equally, the proletariat revolution differs from the bourgeois revolution because of the immediate and extraordinarily far-reaching repercussions it will have on international activity.

<sup>1</sup> Ottavio Pastore, 'Il valore socialista della cooperazione', in *L'Alleanza Cooperativa*, n. no. 112, 2 June 1916. Pastore was a leading member of the Turin Co-operative Alliance.

So, the more consumer organizations of this kind that the proletariat can succeed in creating, the more easily it will be able to get over the terrible crisis which will result when it achieves its emancipation.

*L'Alleanza Cooperativa*, 30 October 1916