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# ***Industrial democracy between neocapitalism and postfordism. The political and intellectual trajectory of Bruno Trentin (1926-2007)***

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## **Executive Summary**

Nel corso della sua lunga carriera politica, Bruno Trentin (1926-2007) non ha mai smesso di interrogarsi sul rapporto tra lavoro e democrazia. Figlio di un autorevole giurista liberale esule nel sud della Francia per il suo impegno antifascista, Trentin si forma in un ambiente cosmopolita e ideologicamente eclettico: dall'anarchismo al federalismo liberale, dal marxismo al personalismo cristiano. Dopo aver partecipato da giovanissimo alla Resistenza e alla Liberazione, conclude gli studi fra Padova e Harvard. Entra giovanissimo nel sindacato, la CGIL e leggerà ad esso la sua esistenza civile e politica. Prima come ricercatore, poi come dirigente dei metalmeccanici negli anni 60 e 70 e poi come segretario generale della confederazione fra la fine degli anni 80 e l'inizio degli anni 90, vivendo in prima persona la parabola del sindacato. La sua militanza sindacale si intreccia con una ricca riflessione intellettuale, incentrata al problema irrisolto, nella cultura della sinistra e del movimento operaio, dell'emancipazione del lavoro. Trentin denuncia il dominio dell'«ideologia produttivista» dello *scientific management* sull'intera sinistra sociale e politica. Nel quadro di questa ideologia, l'azione sindacale si riduceva all'organizzazione del conflitto distributivo, mentre la lotta politica si giocava al di fuori della sfera economica, attraverso la conquista dello Stato. Contrariamente a questa visione, gli anni 60-70 sono stati all'origine di una nuova cultura politica autogestionaria, il «Sindacato dei consigli» nata dalle lotte operaie nei luoghi di lavoro e nelle quali Trentin intravede l'incontro tra le tradizioni marxista, cristiana e libertaria del movimento operaio, che miravano a rendere i lavoratori e i loro sindacati soggetti politici a pieno titolo, acquisendo un reale potere decisionale sull'organizzazione del lavoro, sulla gestione delle imprese e sugli investimenti. Il declino del fordismo offre l'opportunità di un nuovo «contratto» in cui il lavoro possa ottenere il suo riconoscimento politico e la sua autonomia all'interno del luogo di lavoro e non dall'esterno. È a questa storia, di cui è stato un attore di primo piano, che Trentin attinge per difendere l'attualità di un progetto di liberazione dal lavoro subordinato. Allo stesso tempo la lettura dei processi storici di trasformazione del capitalismo e dell'esperienza del movimento operaio non è esente da forzature, contraddizioni e aporie. Trentin propone una concezione del sindacalismo che, sebbene incarnata nei Consigli di fabbrica e al sindacato unitario

italiano degli anni 70, risulta a volte astratta e incapace di prendere in considerazione il ruolo degli interlocutori del sindacato, in particolare i datori di lavoro, i partiti e la sfera democratico-rappresentativa. Eppure, questi sono fattori che spiegano almeno in parte le difficoltà del Sindacato dei consigli a consolidarsi e a saldare la sfera produttiva e la sfera politica. In questo articolo si inseriscono le riflessioni di Trentin nella lunga storia della sua carriera di intellettuale e dirigente politico-sindacale, così come nelle controversie e nelle *impasse* che hanno caratterizzato la sua vita e l'intera storia del movimento operaio italiano ed europeo nel corso del Novecento.

#### **Parole chiave**

Democrazia organizzativa; Storia del sindacato e del lavoro; Relazioni industriali; Neocapitalismo; Postfordismo; Sinistra italiana ed europea.

#### **Abstract**

During his long political trajectory Bruno Trentin (1926-2007) never ceased to question the relationship between work and democracy. The Italian intellectual and trade union leader denounced the domination of the «productivist ideology» of scientific management over the entire social and political Left. According to this ideology, trade union action was reduced to the animation of distributive conflict, while the political struggle was played out outside the economic sphere, through the conquest of the state. Contrary to this vision, the 1960s were the source of a new self-management political culture, born of the encounter between the Marxist, Christian and libertarian traditions of the labour movement, which aimed to make workers and their unions «political subjects» in their own right by gaining real decision-making power over the organisation of work, the management of companies and investments. The decline of Fordism offers an opportunity for a new "contract" in which work can achieve its political recognition and autonomy within the workplace and not from outside. It is from this history, in which he was a prominent actor, that Trentin draws to defend the actuality of a project of liberation from subordinate «work». In this article I reinscribe Trentin's reflections in the long history of his career as an intellectual, trade unionist and political activist, as well as in the controversies and the *impasses* that have shaped his life and the history whole Italian and European labour movement during the twentieth century.

#### **Keywords**

Organisational democracy; Unions and labour history; Industrial relations; Neocapitalism; Postfordism; Italian and European Left.

## **1. Introduction**

Within the secular debate on contemporary democracy one question has remained open, and therefore is periodically raised: that of the relationship between work, citizenship, and democracy (for recent discussions see, Sacconi, Denozza and Stabilini, 2019; Allal and Yon, 2020; Ferreras, Battilana and Méda, 2020; Pennacchi 2021).

Spanning from World War Two to the beginning of the Third Millennium, the trajectory of Trentin is particularly relevant in this regard for two reasons at least. First, because of the entanglement of political practice – the militancy in the Antifascist Resistance and the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the leadership of the Italian largest union, and the involvement in the European institutions – and theoretical reflection – a broad education, fed by exchanges with some of the most important intellectual figures of the Century, and a vast collection of writings, conferences, and books. Trentin’s conception of workplace and economic democracy is never abstract but embedded in the historical experience of the labour movement. Second, because of the broad reach of Trentin’s intellectual reflections, ranging from Soviet Marxists to American Institutionalists. Enriched, but also constrained between these intellectual lineages, Trentin’s thought strived for a synthesis between the two poles around which, according to Trentin, did turn the political plot of work in Western Twentieth century: the quest for a social contract between freedom and equality at work.

In Trentin’s thought, democracy at work revolves around two main concepts: the notion of *Sindacato dei consigli* (Councils Union) and, after the crisis of Fordism, that of *Sindacato dei diritti* (Union of Rights). Councils were a body of collective representation through which workers exerted collectively their individual rights to freedom and equality. They are the basic unit of the union. In front of them, stood the employers and the state as independent actors, each bringing irreducibly distinct interests. With the crisis of the labour movement, Trentin developed the conception of Union of Rights, trying to save the legacy of the Councils Union, by adapting to the new context of Postfordism.

## **2. A singular trajectory in the Century of the Masses: a biographical sketch of Bruno Trentin<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> For further biographical references see, Casellato, 2009; Ariemma, 2014.

Born in Pavie, in the department of Gers (South-West of France), in 1926, Bruno Trentin grew up in Auch and then in Toulouse (his mother tongue was French) where his father Silvio, a respected figure of Italian liberalism, spent his exile as an anti-fascist. Silvio Trentin (1885-1944) was an important Italian jurist at the University of Venice. He was forced to leave the country in 1926 because of his opposition to the Fascist regime. During his childhood, Bruno Trentin witnessed his father's activism and his encounters with some of the major figures of French and Italian anti-fascism (from Georges Canguilhem to Vladimir Jankélévitch, from Carlo Sforza to Pietro Nenni) against the backdrop of the historical events of the Spanish Civil War and the vicissitudes of the Popular Front.

At the age of sixteen, Trentin joined the Resistance, within the ranks of the Party of Action (*Partito d'Azione*, PdA), a political organisation of liberal socialist inspiration, in which some of the most important figures of the Italian Left were active. After the Liberation, he continued his political activity in the PdA and, in 1949, obtained his law degree at the University of Padua. In the same year, he left for the United States to complete his law studies at Harvard. Back in Italy, he was soon called by the trade union leader and resistance fighter Vittorio Foa (1910-2008) to the study office of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*, CGIL). In 1950, after the dissolution of the PdA, Trentin joined the Communist Party, for which he was a MP between 1963 and 1966 and of which he remained a member throughout his life, but always with an autonomous cultural stance.

A member with Foa of the CGIL's *Ufficio Studi* – one of the most dynamic areas of intellectual and political development of the Left during the earlier post-war period – Trentin soon became one of the closest collaborators of the secretary Giuseppe Di Vittorio (1892-1957), and he sided with him against the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. In 1955, Trentin went to Turin, sent by the *Ufficio Studi* to investigate the organisation of work and the life condition of the working class in the industrial city *par excellence*, where FIAT had its headquarters and factories<sup>2</sup>. Trentin was in charge of the investigation about the recent defeat of the CGIL in the internal

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<sup>2</sup> The union was not the only one to launch field investigations into the evolution of work in industry. This need was also felt in certain circles of the intellectual Left. In particular, in 1957 the magazine *Nuovi Argomenti*, directed by Alberto Moravia (1907-1990) and Giovanni Carocci (1932-2018), launched a study on FIAT, coordinated by Carocci himself in collaboration with young sociologists, including Giovanni Mottura (1937-2022) and Aris Accornero (1931-2018) (Carocci, 1958).

elections in the FIAT factories (March 1955) and of rebuilding a trade union nucleus inside the workplaces of the industrial capital of Italy.

In 1962, Trentin was elected general secretary of Italian Metalworkers Union, the FIOM (*Federazione impiegati e operai metallurgici*), as part of a global process of renewal of its leadership, following the union defeats of the 1950s. The metalworkers' federation, the most important within the CGIL, was a central organisation in the history of the Italian labour movement. Trentin's term of office was to last for fifteen extraordinary years for the labour movement, a time when the country was undergoing radical economic, cultural, and political change. The labour and student movements played a central role in these transformations. During these years, Trentin and the FIOM, pressured on the right by the more conservative layers of the union and challenged on the Left by the social movements and extra-parliamentary groups that emerged with the "Hot Autumn" of 1969<sup>3</sup>, sought to maintain their strategic autonomy by funnelling the conflict into the new union's representative bodies, namely the new *Consigli di Fabbrica* (CdF, Factory Councils). During the 1970s, Trentin was one of the main architects of the CGIL's trade union unity with the CISL (a centrist union close to the Christian Democracy) and the UIL (of Socialist, Liberal and Republican inspiration): in 1973 the unitary federation of metal workers (FLM) was officially constituted.

While at the front line of the political and trade union struggle, Trentin did not neglect theoretical reflection. At the end of his term as secretary, he published *Da sfruttati a produttori* (1977a)<sup>4</sup> and later *Il sindacato dei consigli* (1980). In 1988, Trentin's trade union career reached its zenith when he was elected General Secretary of the CGIL. This was a time of crisis for the union, which was suffering from the employers' offensive, the restrictions of the economic crisis and the general impoverishment of political life. In this context, Trentin sought a way out of this impasse through programmatic renewal under the formula of the *Sindacato dei diritti* (Union of Rights). However, his proposals were never seriously put on the agenda. The year 1992 opened the conclusive crisis of the "First" Italian Republic. The anti-corruption judicial investigations

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<sup>3</sup> The "Hot Autumn" was the name given to the wave of strikes that hit industrial Italy in 1969 and represented the most intense phase of workers' insurgence in that country in the '68s.

<sup>4</sup> Its French translation was published by *Éditions ouvrières* in 1984 under the title *D'exploités à producteurs*, with a preface by the CGT union leader Jean-Louis Moynet. For an analysis of this work, see, Fana, 2016.

definitively buried the party system, the monetary and public finance crisis imposed a state of emergency that concentrated power in the hands of the President of the Republic and the Bank of Italy, while the reforms of the budget law and the labour market changed the material constitution of the country. In this context of objective difficulty, the CGIL signed the agreements of July 1992 and July 1993, which definitively dismantled the *scala mobile* (the price-wage indexation mechanism; Locke 1994) and inaugurated a new era of industrial relations in Italy (Baccaro and Howell, 2017). Criticised by the political Left and the trade union base, Trentin accepted to sign the 1992 agreement and immediately resigned as a sign of dissent. His resignation was refused by the CGIL's steering bodies, and his term continued until 1994. During the following years, Trentin's political and intellectual engagement continued with the publication of new works – among them *La città del lavoro (1997)*, the summa of its social and political thought. In 1999, Trentin was elected Member of the European Parliament in the lists of the DS (*Democratici di sinistra*, descended from the PCI), in recognition of his constant commitment to the European integration process. He devoted the last years of his life to social research and theoretical reflection. He died in Rome in 2007.

### **3. 1960s-1980s: From Neocapitalism to the Councils Union**

Already in 1957, Trentin was one of the leading figures of the PCI and the CGIL. At that time, the Italian Left and the labour movement were in dire straits. For the working-class movement the first half of the 1950s have come to be known as *gli anni duri* (“the tough years”) (see, Accornero, 1959; 1973; Pugno and Garavini, 1974): the employers launched a prolonged attack on the trade union power that had grown out of the Resistance and Liberation period, while unemployment and enduring poverty afflicted the working classes. At the same time, Italian capitalism was undergoing a process of radical restructuring and growth. The global post-war recovery, the opening of the economy to international trade, the massive investments in infrastructure, steel, chemical and mechanical industries by public (ENI, IRI) and private companies (FIAT, Olivetti, Montecatini), the Marshall Plan credits, and the comparative advantage of low labour costs (favoured by internal migrations from rural South to industrialised North) pushed growth rates to a level never previously attained (Ginsborg, 1990).

In those years, the PCI's strategy was summarised by the formula of "the Italian road to socialism", and was theorised by Palmiro Togliatti (1893-1964), the general secretary of the party (Togliatti, 1974; see also, Togliatti, 2006). This long-term program envisaged for Italy a slow transition to socialism, through the completion of a "progressive democracy", in which the working class fulfilled the role of guide of economic and social development by building an alliance not only with the peasants but, above all – because the Italian society was in the throes of "modernisation" – with the middle classes (the so-called *ceti medi*). According to this reading, the Italian bourgeoisie was not up to this historical task of modernisation, and it was up to the working class and its collective intellectual, the Communist Party, to build a "historical bloc" to achieve it, a system of alliances between social classes, sociologically distinct but bordering on each other, aiming at the development of the "productive forces" and of Italian democracy. The task of the working class was to become the people and to fulfil its historical mission. In this conception, work as an activity and as the source of class consciousness lost its centrality. The working class was not to emancipate itself as such in the workplace, but to encourage the process of Taylorist rationalisation to prepare the ground for socialism.

The political strategy of the Left was discussed in 1962 during a famous Convention on the «Tendencies of Italian Capitalism». At the conference, the PCI's orthodoxy was represented by Giorgio Amendola (1907-1980) and Emilio Sereni (1907-1977) (Amendola, 1962; Sereni, 1962). Trentin – together with Vittorio Foa and Lucio Magri (1932-2011)<sup>5</sup> – had been distancing himself from this "ideology of transition" for the previous years, and, during the conference, he proposed a different reading of Italian development against the background of the international scenario (Trentin, 1956; Foa, 1957; Magri, 1962b; see also Foa's and Magri's contribution to the conference: Foa, 1962; Magri, 1962a). In Trentin's speech resonated his Marxist culture, as well as the American debate – from Commons to Pollock, from Galbraith to Drucker (Trentin, 1962). According to Trentin, Italian capitalism was not as backward as the PCI orthodoxy maintained; on the contrary, "Neocapitalism" (the modernization of the productive system proceeding from the United States) was a reality in Italy too. Hence, the need to pay greater attention to the problems of work organisation, to the research on automation and to the experiences of the New Deal and of the French planning. In companies, the workers were

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<sup>5</sup> For further discussions see, Strinati, 1992; Cella, 2012; Settis, 2016.



increasingly exploited while being incorporated into a managerial governance by the spread of the «human relations» paradigm, imported from the United States as a modern and advanced management tool for social relations, and which in this period exerted a strong influence on the CISL of Giulio Pastore (1902-1969). In this sense, Neocapitalism was not a simple ideological «mask» (Trentin, 1962: 120), but a paradigm that coordinated the centralisation of the management of the economic cycle and the intertwining of politics and capital, a mechanism in which the working class was in a first instance subordinated to the plan (i.e., considered as an adjustment variable) and in a second instance atomised by human relations.

Trentin's analysis of Neocapitalism put under question the political management of the economic cycle and the meaning of «planning». It was not enough to invoke planning to expand the space for political action by the working class: the management of the plan which emerged in the 1950s was a management “from above”, in which, once again, capital and the state (at the time embodied *sine die* by Christian Democracy) were sovereign in the economy and administered the economic cycle. Within this framework, the space of the union and the working class was determined a priori by this arrangement, in a planning where the unions and the working class were a mere parameter of adjustment, objectified and integrated in a subaltern way. In this scenario, the margins of manoeuvre for the union were reduced to wage bargaining, to pure economic exchange from above within a predetermined political framework, called «concerted economy» (*economia concertata*, a term forged within the French planning experience) (Trentin, 1962: 131–132, 451). Capitalist planning extended control from the sphere of production to that of consumption, subordinating the latter to the former and the former to the logic of accumulation under a technocratic agenda. The priority, for the union and the Party, was to take Neocapitalism seriously, understanding it as cultural force and a hegemonic project in the workplace and in the wider field of society. The task was twofold: on the one hand engage with change in the new organisation of work in the workplaces, on the other hand propose an alternative planning for the Italian economy: not from above, but through the involvement of the masses in «new instruments of popular control», even beyond the representative ones already established (but eroded) by the new alliance between monopoly capital and the state technostucture (Trentin, 1962: 140)<sup>6</sup>. The crucial divergence between Trentin and Amendola was about the actors of the new planning: for

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<sup>6</sup> Just three years later, Trentin would also stress the emergence of new centres of decision within «supra-national institutions» (Trentin, 1965, pp. 183–184)

Amendola the question was already that of the inclusion of the Communists in a decision making which remained centralised, while for Trentin, a democratic planning had to be built from conflict in the workplaces.

Conflict did not take too long to emerge. Between the 1960s and 1970s, Italy was hit by one of the strongest cycles of class conflict in the Western world (Crouch and Pizzorno, 1978; Bordogna and Provasi, 1989: 279-282). The Hot Autumn introduced a variety of innovations in collective bargaining: campaigns for the unification of blue- and white-collar job classification scheme (*inquadramento unico*), the abolition of territorial differences in wage levels (the so-called *gabbie salariali*), equal wage increases for all workers regardless of skill levels, improvement in health and safety conditions, and reductions in the speed and duration of work were all promoted in these years.

The Hot Autumn radically changed the unions' structure at the firm level. The old *Commissioni Interne* (that performed primarily dispute-resolution tasks; Baglioni, 1969) and the *Sezioni Sindacali* (often sheer appendixes of the territorial unions), were replaced by new representation bodies known as *Consigli di Fabbrica* (CdF, Factory Councils). CdF members were «elected by secret vote, without competition among lists (and, at least formally, with more limited intervention from external unions) and within small constituencies whose boundaries followed the geography of the plant's organisations of work» (Regalia, 1988: 357; see also, Regalia, 1978; 1984, 1988; Mershon, 1988; 1989). Factory councils were at the same time recognised by the union confederations as their own workplace structures. The national industry federations also experienced an increase in their power, as a result of their capacity to increasingly absorb and generalise the most innovative practices introduced by the Factory Councils (Santi, 1993; see also, Romagnoli and Treu, 1981: 165-97): «In the late 1960s and early 1970s the unions appeared to many to be the representative bodies most able to interpret, collect, and recompose new social demands that did not seem to receive adequate attention in traditional political arenas» (Regalia, 1988:345). Unions were the protagonist of the construction of Italian welfare state, of increasing spaces of democracy in the workplace, in public services and civil society.

This period coincided also with a sharp increase of labour costs (+59,5% between 1970 and 1974, compared to +15,1% between 1966 and 1970; Baccaro, 1999: 29). Real wage continued growing notwithstanding declining productivity growth and a higher import bill (Baccaro 1999: 29), while profits dropped sharply (Barca and Magnani 1989: 27-39). Although

these patterns were common to most of Western economies (Armstrong 1991), in Italy they were particularly acute.

From his position at the head of the FIOM, Trentin was a protagonist of this movement, but also a critical analyst. For Trentin, the Italian labour movement had very advanced experiences of conflict and negotiation that challenged the ideology of transition of the PCI's orthodoxy and did not spare the «bureaucratic structure of the union» (Trentin, 1980: 14; see also, Trentin, 2019: 12-14). Beyond the ritual branch negotiations, workers' struggles imposed their presence on the employers within the factories, raised the question of working rhythms, contested the systems and the principles of time and motion study, claimed health and safety at work and opened a debate on the right to vocational training. The logic of these experiments was to nuance, if not counter, the effects of Taylorism and above all to put the daily experience of work at the centre of the political debate in the name of the «defence of the workers' physical and nervous integrity and professional autonomy» (Trentin, 1965: 177); the struggle politicised the *sancta sanctorum* of Fordist capitalism – the point of production – and raised the question of «'collective knowledge' as a matter of power» (Trentin, 1977c: 212). Factory Councils represented the antithesis of the strategies that the official labour movement had developed in the face of the rise of Taylorism and Fordism. Indeed, it was also the traditional mechanism of union representation, as well as the «canonical division of tasks» between the union and the party in the class struggle (Trentin, 1965: 190), that was questioned by workers' claim for a «participated government of union conquests» (Trentin, 1980: 17). Union's autonomy was considered by Trentin to be «irreplaceable» in communist planning, which required trade union action to be «not mechanically homogeneous with that of the planning bodies, but of participation and of contestation together» (Trentin, 1965: 198).

On the other hand, Trentin was also critical with some crucial aspects of the Hot Autumn, especially on the question of wage increases and its relationship to the ongoing process of capitalist restructuring. Trentin's argument, which was to recur throughout the years, was that the union should beware of the objective of equal wage increases for all workers, because of the corporative nature of this demand. In the face of capitalist reorganisation, the workers had to go beyond merely economic demands by assuming an active role in such a process. They had to participate in the determination of the new working conditions by relying on the figure of the factory delegates. This position put Trentin in collision with the Workerist wings of the labour

movement (see, *Lotta Continua*, 1977)<sup>7</sup>. For Workerists, radical wage demands, especially “equal for all” pay increases, were a form of immediate political insubordination and a lever to overthrow the capitalist command at work (see, Wright, 2002: 119-125); Trentin, instead, refused this strategy, as he saw a risk of reducing the experience of work to the economic exchange between money and subordination. The core of capitalist domination was in the subordination of the worker in the productive process, but this subordination could not be undermined through “economistic” shortcomings. Instead, he plead for a union based on representative bodies of all workers, able to invest all the dimensions of life at work (and not only wage questions). Furthermore, Trentin’s argued that equal-for-all wage increase were dismissive of the specific professional capacities of individual workers. The goal of the union was not only the fight for better remunerations, but for the recognition of workers’ knowledge. Trentin started developing here the idea that freedom is based on work (and which would emerge in more explicit terms with the notion of *Sindacato dei diritti*). In this view, work could not be reduced to a simple factor of production; by the same token, exploitation, no matter if fairly remunerated, could not be a driver of integration in the political community. These elements constitute the originality of Trentin's thought, with respect to the official culture of the labour movement, to the Liberal tradition, and with regard to the *Operaismo*. Trentin’s defense of the Councils Union led him to engage in a double confrontation: on the one hand with the Workerist stream; on the other hand, with sectors of the PCI who theorized the subordination of the union to the party:

There is therefore a ‘Left-wing’ reading of the phenomenon of the councils which, precisely because it is dogmatically stuck in an entirely ideological notion of the union, would argue that the councils actually expressed a spontaneous and political opposition to an irreducibly corporatist union. But what is interesting to note, at this point, is the convergence that emerged on this scheme of the councils' spontaneism, between the defenders of the primacy of the party or the ‘leading’ movement, and the advocates of a moderate and essentially corporatist trade unionism, who looked with some

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<sup>7</sup> For an introduction to Italian Operaismo see, Wright, 2002; Allavena and Gallo Lassere, 2017; Roggero, 2023.

concern at these drives towards union renewal, towards grassroots democracy and towards the acceleration of the unification process [of the trade unions, NdA] (Trentin, 1980: 26–27).

Against these positions, Trentin defended the Councils and the originality of the Italian union experience. They demonstrated the CGIL's ability to override narrowly sectional interests in favour of a comprehensive strategy for the political economy of the country. This ability to think in wider terms was to become something of a hallmark of the Italian trade unions and was to separate them sharply from most of their European sister organisations.

However, factory councils entered an irreversible crisis in the 1980s. On the one hand, already in the late 1970s, the thesis had been emerging that union demands and industrial conflict were undermining Italian economy (Cattabini, 2012). Confederal union leaders began developing a new strategy of bargaining centralisation and income policy (see, for example Lama, 1976: 83-149). On the other hand, the wave of industrial restructuring which started in the 1980s, weakened the stronghold of Factory Councils, which appeared as an isolated avant-garde rather than the universal representative of the Italian working class (Regalia, 1984, Mershon, 1988; Golden, 1988).

#### **4. 1990s-2000s: From the impasses of labour movement to the Union of Rights**

The unravelling of the Fordist compromise brought about a deep crisis of the international labour movement. By the beginning of the 1990s the Italian labour movement «radically changed its bargaining behaviour and firmly embraced the cause of cooperation with management and government forces» (Baccaro 1999: 9).

Trentin led the CGIL through the beginning of this conjuncture. This experience led Trentin to revisit the whole trajectory of the Italian and international labour movement and to adapt its reflections to the new reality of Postfordism. The starting point of Trentin's analysis is the decline of Fordism i.e., the economic, social system, and above all productive system, based on economies of scale, large factories, mass production and a socio-political compromise between capital and labour (Aglietta, 1976). For

Trentin, Fordism was based on a particular mode of organisation, Taylorism: a «scientific» organisation of work that is fragmented, mechanised, and planned from above. For what concerned labour relations and the condition of the worker, the Fordist system rested, according to Trentin, on a basic assumption: that the worker exchanged economic security (through a higher wage, an open-ended contract, and various other social benefits) for his subordination in the productive process, and thus renounced his political citizenship in the workplace. However, Trentin stressed, Taylorism was not at all a paradigm imposed unilaterally by the capitalist class. The fascination with Taylorism was a global phenomenon that did not spare the labour movement and Marxist thinkers. Hence, Trentin talked about «hegemony of scientific management», pointing at an affinity between the communist theorisation of the political party (especially those of Lenin and Gramsci) and the Taylorist paradigm. These new social technologies were rooted in the “ideology of progress” that inspired the first two decades of the Twentieth century (see, Cohen, 2013: 57–65). Taylorism, as a model of productive rationalisation, was also adopted in the Soviet Union. It was seen as an objective force and even the idea in which progress was embodied. Underlying this belief was what Simone Weil, in her account of the working-class condition, calls the «religion of productive forces» (Weil, 1988: 36). Trentin reproached the Left for sacrificing the autonomy and freedom of the person in the productive process and for acting in the name of an arid realism or an abstract idea of the working class.

This subordination of the Left, whether communist or social-democratic, to productive rationality shaped its strategy of social transformation. According to this vision, the suffering and alienation generated by subordinate labour was to be alleviated by monetary compensation pending the conquest of state power, from which the foundations of property would finally be transformed. On the contrary, as already mentioned, Trentin emphasised the importance of political struggles at the point of production (see, in particular Trentin, 1997; 2004).

On the other hand, Trentin carefully distinguished his conception of the Councils Union from the German *Mitbestimmung* model or other forms of co-determination, which he saw as a downward compromise in the exchange between wages and social peace. At the same time, Trentin was critical of the original “Councilist” experiments, such as those advocated by the Gramscian *Ordine Nuovo*. He did not consider the idea of workers' self-management of the large Fordist company to be realistic at all, nor did he question the role of management, but at the same time he rejected any kind of «co-management» complicity. Trentin remained convinced of an

irreducible dualism between factory and society, and he was not concerned with removing the conflict between capitalists and workers, not even in a communist society, especially because of its immanent conception of revolution: communism was a progressive advancement going through civil society and only later in the state-political sphere. In his view, the permanent struggle for control on the work process, if regulated, allowed for progress and improvement of the production process, working conditions and for a broader transformation of society. This extract clearly sets out Trentin's view of unionism and economic democracy:

Thus, a hypothesis of industrial democracy within the conflict emerges, which indicates the possibility of an outline of a new relationship between the union, the parties, and the state. [...] The only right that we have and that we want to keep is the right to be informed in advance and to be able to contrast this information with our own proposals. It is the balance of power that then decides. Once the company has informed the union in advance and in good time, after a certain period, it is free, in theory, to act. The trade union is also free to act, and to exert through direct pressure, *its own* direct pressure, so that the company's action is changed. The company can obviously assess whether it is in its interest to continue the negotiation to prevent action and to consider the counter-objectives that the union proposes. It seems to me that in this extremely elementary mechanism, from a certain point of view of confrontation and information, there is a substantial difference with the co-determination model. Firstly, the safeguarding of conflictual autonomy is essential, and consequently the right to action without arbitration. Secondly, the guarantee of effective worker participation in the union, of real democracy without delegation to a designated elite in participation and management in the company. Thirdly, the union and the factory council preserve their character as interlocutors acting according to a global and not only corporate strategy. It is no longer only the workers of the company, but a whole series of other social forces that the work councils try to represent. To give an image, it is the unemployed of the South, and not only the interests of the Fiat workers, who constitute a reference point for the confrontation with Fiat (Trentin, 1977b: 59–60; author's translation).

The task Trentin assigned to the councils was thus to represent labour as a permanent interlocutor of management, distinct and autonomous from it. As the last sentence illustrates, the “conflictual autonomy” that Trentin defended went hand in hand with the idea that the union does not only represent the labour within the closed system of the company, but a kind of general interest of labour at the scale of Italian society. Trentin evoked a “city of work” where it is not so much the socialisation within the enterprise that is on the agenda but rather the change in the relationship between the governors and the governed.

Trentin's socialism was thus established in civil society and not in the state. In this respect, he distanced himself from two founding figures of the Left, such as Lenin and Gramsci. For Trentin, their conceptions of the political party as a guide for the working class echoed the theories of scientific management. Rather than understanding the irrationality and injustice of the factory's operation as the source of general social disorder, it was the inadequacy of the political and social order to the unquestioned rationality of the Taylorist organisation of subordinate labour that was questioned. But at the time Trentin was writing, the collapse of real socialism invites us, according to the author, to think of a model of socialism beyond the state and the hegemonic claims of the political sphere on civil society.

Against this statist (and to some extent opportunist) temptation – according to which access to government is almost an objective in itself – Trentin presented an alternative perspective on labour emancipation, democracy and socialism, spanning from guild socialism to liberal socialism, from Karl Korsch to Rosa Luxemburg. Trentin assigned to the trade union a role of representation independent from the party, and he claimed for the intervention of the trade union in political and social life by means of a renewed structure. Unions' territorial and trans-sectoral articulation, in and through the factory and society, would allow the achievement of a real industrial citizenship.

With the formula of the Union of Rights Trentin tried to widen the scope of inclusion of union representation (to atypical and autonomous workers, as well as to broader societal issues such as ecology, gender equality etc.). Trentin understood the imperative for the union to understand the new social issues that came with the crisis of Fordism, although he never trusted the misleading optimism of post-Fordist ideologists, as showed for instance by its *lectio doctoralis* given at the University of Venice (2002). In this speech, he refused the prophecies about the end of work and other mainstream narratives – he said: «Fordism is dead, not Taylorism» (*Ibidem*), meaning that the class compromise of post-war capitalism might have



waned, but the capitalist organisation of work remained based on workers' subordination and deskilling. At the same time, in Trentin's vision, the relationship between work and knowledge – which was already present in his earlier reflections on factory councils – became all the more important for the Union of Rights: the worker is the bearer of a knowledge and of the right to master this knowledge, both individually and collectively. Individually, through mechanisms of exchange «between a wage linked to a flexible occupation [...] and the worker's acquisition of an employability [...] supported by an investment of the employer, of the worker, and of the society» (Trentin, 2002). Collectively, through mechanisms of «control on the object of work (the product, the organisation of work, working time, training time, time available for private life)» (*Ibidem*). It is evident that Trentin's Union of Rights must not be grasped as a theoretical break in Trentin's thought. The post-Fordist transition did not invalidate the teaching of the Councils Union. In this regard, the Union of Rights stands as the evolution of the Councils Union in the post-Fordist era. Thus, Trentin's response to the crisis of the Left, first in *La città del lavoro* and then in *La libertà viene prima*, became that of integrating Marxism with the liberal tradition and Christian humanism. In this respect, Trentin was part of a general movement of transformation of the theories and ideological references of the post-communist and social-democratic Left which, at the time, seemed to be a necessary movement of renewal.

## **5. Trentin's industrial democracy in contemporary capitalism**

Trentin's thought is rooted in the historical experience of the Italian labour movement, and it reflects its vivacity as well as its aporias. Trentin played a major role in the labour movement, but he often maintained an ambiguous position and his choices were rarely equal to his theoretical reflections. This contradiction reached its paroxysm in 1993, when Trentin signed a pathbreaking agreement with the Italian government and the employers which he had strongly opposed. Furthermore, in Trentin's reflection, the role of the counterparts of the labour movements is seldom at the centre of the stage. In Italy, employers were forced to make concessions, but never accepted the legitimacy of working class revendication, always opposing a fierce resistance to the attempts of the workers to question employers' monopoly of power in the organisation of work (Magnani, 1997; Bologna, 2019). In Trentin's analysis the labour movement is studied as an isolated subject, without considering the constraints and resistances

encountered by the organised working class in its political affirmation. Another question that Trentin failed to answer was the place of the Communist Party in his theory of a Councils Unionism, in which unions appeared as the only legitimate actor to determine the design of social reforms. This form of “pan-syndicalism” was to be the reason for a constantly tense relationship between Trentin and the leaders of the PCI, especially those on the PCI’s right hand.

Trentin argues that the unions *were* the Factory Councils, and that the PCI (as well as the Workerist Left) never accepted this reality. However, what Trentin does not admit is that Italian trade unions were not able to fully recognise and promote the struggles of the 60s and the 70s. These struggles were in fact the product of a movement which went beyond the official union organisations (Loreto, 2006). In part, the union’s ambiguous attitude towards the movement was the result of a cleavage in the union movement itself. The Councils Union included those sectors of the labour movement that had been most active during the Hot Autumn (the metalworkers federations, the CdFs of some of Italy’s largest plants in the North-West). These sections were a numerical minority, although they were able to leverage on their power and legitimacy to mobilise the base and to shape the strategic choices of the entire labour movement. On the other hand, the rest of the labour movement, which rotated around the confederations, had a conception of the union as a partner of government and management in the process of economic change (Golden, 1988; Mershon 1988; 1989). This ambiguity on the part of the union, was combined with the PCI’s mistrust for spontaneous mobilisations. The result was that these forms of workplace democracy were not transmitted to any specific organisation, but rather diffused into a working-class culture which, after the worker unrest of the 1960s-70s, started to decline, as reminded by Trentin himself reflecting about the case of the so-called *150 ore* (Trentin 2002; see also, Causarano, 2015). Ironically, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, some forms of enterprise-level bargaining were taken over by the unions’ counterparts, the state and employers, within an original “micro-corporatism” framework (Regalia, 1995; Regini, 2000; Causarano, 2015). At the same time, while the neo-corporatist systems in Northern Europe were undergoing a profound restructuring, they were being revived in Italy to cope with the double financial and political crisis of the “First” Republic (Schmitter, 1974; Rusconi, 1984; Baccaro, 1999).

The end of the PCI and the crisis of the parties as institutions of political representation in the 1990s could have been an opportunity for the union to realise this hypothesis of industrial democracy. However, the historical movement that brought about the crisis of the PCI was rather broader in

scope, and the crisis of “intermediary bodies” brought about by Postfordism affected the union no less than the PCI. In this context, Trentin’s departure from the Union was dramatic, as testified by its personal journal posthumously published (Trentin, 2017). After being forced by the urgent circumstances to sign the agreements of 1992-1993, he resigned with deep regrets and resentments. These agreements were a watershed in the history of the unions: the CGIL embraced that neo-corporatist stance that he harshly criticised (Trentin, 1997: chap. 8), while the Left parties supported the Neo-Liberal restructuring of industrial relations (Baccaro and Howell, 2017). The labour market reforms pursued since the 1990s deregulated industrial relations to the advantage of employers; the expansion of non-salaried forms of activity, from voluntary work to self-employment, entailed a normalisation of precariousness and an even greater subordination of labour to capital, while concealing it behind an illusory appearance of autonomy. Ironically, many of these reforms were designed by centre-left governments either in agreement or with the feeble opposition of the unions (Tassinari, 2019). Trentin warned, in vain, the post-communist Left about the demise of work in post-Fordist societies. The processes of work restructuring was far from realising the promises of workers empowerment fed by the new *lean* management: on the contrary the technological innovation in the workplace, if not contained by a union and political strategy, could transmit an authoritarian and bureaucratic turn in labour relations (Trentin, 1997: chap. 2), as recent studies on algorithmic management and digitalisation tend to confirm (Massimo, 2020; Moro and Rinaldini, 2020; Tirabeni and Miele, 2020; Cirillo *et al.*, 2021; Wood, 2021). This has been accompanied by a parallel decline in political participation and the legitimacy of representative institutions in the political sphere.

Against this background, Trentin not only noticed the deterioration of working conditions and the crisis of the status of labour in Western democracies, but he also remarked the unbalance between democracy and capitalism, in the workplace as well as in the political realm. He understood that the union was caught between two dominant and contradictory discourses: one that proclaimed the end of work as a central locus of social; the other that exalted post-Fordist’s ability to overcome the capital-labour contradiction. It was in this difficult context that Trentin theorised the Union of Rights, trying to adapt the union’s vocation to the new context of Postfordism. However, while the Councils Union was embedded in the ascending slope of what was called *la parabola del sindacato* (Accornero 1993), the Union of Rights had to navigate against the stream. Trentin’s

analysis was correct, but not in phase with a political and economic debate which was enthusiastic about the promises of post-Fordist narratives.

Finally, there were key changes that Trentin missed: its scepticism against purely economic claims, dismissed as *salarialisti* (see, for instance Trentin, 2004, p. 59), led him to underestimate the wage question in Italy, whose roots are precisely in the 1992-1993 agreements (Tronti, 2007, 2010; Fana and Fana, 2019), and other (only apparently) «economistic» revendications, such as the basic income. Even more narrow appear its dismissal of the question of working time, and his hard critique of the 35 hours reform of 1998 in France (Trentin, 2004: 60), on the ground of its supposedly «egalitarian» nature (*Ibidem*: 137). Furthermore, as stressed by other commentators (Durand, 2013), Trentin failed to assess the expansion of financial circuits and their hold on the political and productive spheres; other commentators remarked the fading away of class conflict from the notion of Union of Rights (Cella 2008), thus making the union vulnerable in the face of the new processes of capitalist centralisation and intensification of exploitation that lied behind the rhetoric of a post-work society. Finally, with the benefit of hindsight, it is evident how Trentin's vision of the European integration suffered from a normative bias, which prevailed on a more critical view that yet, in some circumstances, had already emerged in his reflections (see *infra*, note 6)<sup>8</sup>.

Despite these limits, Trentin's call for political freedom and the questioning of the relationship between rulers and ruled in the place of production remains all the more relevant today. The theorisation of a democratic planning of the economy is also crucial in light of the problems of the ecologic transition faced by our society. Recent reflections on economic democracy call for the workers' (and other stakeholders') participation in the management of the economy (Sacconi, Denozza and Stabilini, 2019; Ferreras, Battilana and Méda, 2020). Trentin's theorisation of unionism presented here, offers an opportunity to think these issues starting from a concrete historical experience. In this sense, Trentin's analysis of Neocapitalism too deserves to be revamped and revitalised: the

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<sup>8</sup> In this paper, I did not focus on the important role played by Trentin in the post-war history of the European and International labour movement. Important elements in this respect, included an interview to Trentin, are included in a study of the relationship between the French unions and the international labour movement, especially the close but difficult liaison with the Italian one (Pernot, 2001; on the trade union movement and European integration in the years of Trentin's leadership in the FIOM and the CGIL, see Del Biondo, 2007; Andry, 2022).

attention to the concentration of economic power resonates with the contemporary centralisation of economic transactions in monopoly platforms; the critical analysis of the ideological aspects of a capitalism, that cyclically presents itself as moderniser and progressive, while managing to co-opt large sectors of the working class; the connection between the sphere of production and the realm of consumption, that capital tries to control simultaneously (see especially, Trentin, 1962: 443–446).

These two aspects of Trentin's analysis – on the one hand, a concrete theorisation of economic democracy, and, on the other hand, a sophisticated critique of capitalism – constitute precious and concrete reflections about organisational and economic democracy nowadays.

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