

## Reconciling Labor and Citizenship

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**Bruno Trentin's last book, which has just come out in French, fifteen years after it was published in Italy and five years after his death, explores the failure of the European left to respond to the jobs crisis of the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Will the modern-day left succeed in forging a new nexus between citizens' rights and workers' rights?**

Reviewed: Bruno Trentin, *La Cité du travail. Le fordisme et la gauche*, foreword by Jacques Delors, introduction by Alain Supiot. French translation from the Italian by Jérôme Nicolas. Paris, Ed. Fayard, collection "Poids et mesures du monde", 2012, 444 p., €25

Bruno Trentin's book, which has now come out in French translation fifteen years after its publication in Italy – and five years after the author's death – covers a surprisingly large amount of ground. Informed readers know that the author was very actively involved in a number of causes over the course of his life: the son of an anti-Fascist jurist who had fled to France, Trentin joined the Resistance during his teens, first in France and then in Italy, before his long-lasting postwar involvement in Italy's main trade union, the Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL for short). He held increasingly important posts there over the years, advancing from secretary of the metalworkers federation in 1962 to secretary general of the whole confederation from 1988 – 1994. He was a member of the Italian Communist Party and took part in its various developments over the years culminating in its transformation into a democratic left-wing party.

But there is nothing memorial about this book, which shows the other side of the author. An intellectual who completed his doctorate in law at Harvard, Bruno Trentin went on to publish about a dozen books about work and workers, about trade unionism and social conflict. The work under review, *La Cité du travail*, remains within this field of study, though turning it inside out to probe a fatal weakness in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century left-wing thought: namely its failure to look ahead and forge a future-proof nexus between labor and citizenship. To this end, it draws on an ample command of political economics, sociology and history to get to the bottom of that abiding weakness, which current events have only made all the more glaring.

Trentin is preoccupied with the persistent inability of the left, in Italy and more widely in Europe, to respond to the jobs crisis that plagued the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His diagnosis of the crisis focusses on the ever-increasing insecurity in which workers are placed, pointing up the increasing prevalence of temporary, short-term, part-time, seasonal and casual employment, as well as various legal forms of outsourcing, compounded by a reinforced subordination of work. He looks at how companies tend to augment constraints and pressure on workers, even as changes in the workplace resulting from the development of the knowledge economy demand more on-the-job intelligence and should facilitate the development of new room for maneuver. Digital resources are a good illustration of the tightening of these constraints, even though this sector holds plenty of new potential for cooperation and coordination. Faced with this deterioration of working conditions, the political, union-based and association-based left would not venture beyond its traditional options. Part of its forces took up extremist demands couched in discourse about taking over power, while other currents sought to provide social support to workers subjected to these upheavals. The trade unions often dug in their heels, adopting a defensive stance that was out of step with modernized management methods. The political left proved unable to propose an alternative to the free-market offensives launched since the Thatcher era in Europe. Having lost its critical and reforming power, it became an “indistinct” political force, quite cut off from civil society and its mutations over time, losing its legitimacy little by little. Step by step, measure after measure, the welfare states gradually crumbled and, with them, the underlying social compromise, weakening the bonds of solidarity between workers themselves.

## **Forsaking labor**

Before proposing any remedies, Bruno Trentin devotes the bulk of his book to elucidating the reasons why the left has been so ineffectual on the issue of work and workers, the very issue that is supposed to be its *raison d'être*. He extracts the Taylorist and Fordist presuppositions more or less consciously buried in left-wing traditions. The core of the book lies in demonstrating that with regard to work the dominant thought on the left was throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century subservient to the rationalizing ideologies epitomized by Ford and Taylor, and it is this intellectual allegiance that is the source of its disconnect with the workers.

The first part of his demonstration concerns the period from the 1960s to the '80s. After two decades of massive growth and widespread rationalization following World War II, the Taylorist and Fordist prescriptions for the organization of production were challenged in various ways according to the country concerned, through struggles that took alternative approaches. “A new conception of the left took shape amid the throes of social conflict [...], the outlines of a vision of society based on labor and its potential transformations [...], sweeping changes in workplace relations and the organization of civil society through new legislation governing civil and social rights” (p. 81). These movements, which were burgeoning in Italy, were as much about the recomposition of subdivided labor as about cooperative modes of organization and democratic decisionmaking in the workplace. They pointed up the ways in which left-wing political visions had endorsed rationalist reasoning, along with its concomitant strictures and

alienation, and legitimized managerial authority in the workplace. They showed how, outside of companies, these political visions had deferred all their efforts to achieve immediate or long-term redistributive compensation, progressive extension of the welfare state, and the promise of an authentic socialist government.

But this inventiveness came apart in the early 1980s. In most cases, the currents striving to bring about these changes stopped taking an interest in the transformation of labor. In Italy, some confined their struggles to the strictly political domain, and then, even more narrowly, to social action by the state. They gradually slipped into effectively fuelling neocorporatist schemata in which the state co-opted collective bargaining by centralizing it, selecting the partners it deemed legitimate and the social demands it deemed worth discussing. Abetted by mounting unemployment, this selection increasingly narrowed the scope of bargaining between labor and management to the detriment of labor itself. What Trentin calls the “featureless politics” of the parliamentary left developed in parallel, which dissolved any prospects of social transformation amidst the government’s opportunistic priorities. Above and beyond certain specific developments peculiar to Italian history, the book shows how these several political choices contributed to removing labor from the left’s visions and debates. The chronology is roughly similar in France and most Western European countries.

## **Back to basics**

Working backwards in time, Trentin’s demonstration goes back to the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which the left went decisively astray in defining its labor policy. Even before 1914, Taylor’s methods and American assembly lines gave rise to the first controversies. During the same period, labor movement organizations redefined their own labor policy. Rehearsing the difficulties Marx had encountered in examining this subject, above and beyond his analyses of alienation, Trentin recounts the late 19<sup>th</sup> century crisis of Marxism and the emphasis in the debates that marked the socialist movement on the question of political power, on its attainment and its subsequent action. In the political programs of the era, the transformation of labor was postponed to a distant “afterwards.” This essay recounts the manner in which Leninism reinforced this elimination by adopting Taylorism and legitimizing it for the construction of socialism.

But Trentin goes on to examine various left-wing currents at the time that strived to change either labor relations or the organization of labor in various European countries ranging from Central Europe to England. The chapters on Gramsci’s thought, well above and beyond his somewhat mythical image amongst the French left, are particularly rich. This thought, at least at the time of the labor strikes following World War I and the workers’ councils movement, traces a close link between political issues and visions of industrial democracy, mainly focusing on corporate management. But over the course of his years in prison from 1926 to 1934, Gramsci seems to have gradually come to envisage the future of labor itself along Taylorist lines, which, amazingly enough, he considered conducive to rationality and social order. In espousing received ideas about the acceptability of repetitive work, Gramsci turned his back on the problems of

alienation and the critical currents of labor analysis.

Bruno Trentin points to other currents which, freed from the obsession with taking over political power, set their sights on labor reform. He presents the British movement of guild socialism, which was active in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in redefining labor unionism with shop stewards that was centered on the workshop, rather than breaking down along trade lines. He mentions German theorists of industrial democracy as well as minority currents on the fringes of the workers' movement and the Catholic world in interbellum France. He calls for a reassessment of Simone Weil's critique of oppression in the workplace, which predated her experience as a worker. The first critiques Georges Friedmann leveled at Taylorism in the 1930s tallied with Weil's views. Then as now, concludes Trentin, even if the impact of these experiences and currents remained limited, it was nonetheless possible for a policy to take shape on the left aimed at changing labor.

### **Rethinking the employment contract**

In addition to these historical considerations, the final chapters of the book address the inadequacies that persistently plagued socialist thought. In postponing the liberation of labor to the very end of the emancipation process, socialist thought effectively incapacitated itself from weighing in on the problem that was at the root of many a social conflict and that afflicted the life of the worker in general. Trentin brings out the inherent contradiction in the employment contract between the buying of labor regarded as a quantifiable commodity and the employer's taking control over specific individuals. The right of trade is at odds here with personal rights, both the right to employment and the rights of the worker as an individual. The worker, an enfranchised citizen with a say in the governance of his state, is by and large deprived of his individual say in decisions made about his own labor. Collective action intervened merely as a palliative to this contradiction, which was exacerbated by the jobs crisis. Clearly, to Bruno Trentin's way of thinking, there can be no revival of a modern left without tackling this contradiction head on.

Hence the urgent need, insists the author, to rethink the employment contract in legal terms, specifying the terms of employment and job description at the level of each individual worker. Rather than defending the corporatist aspects of the welfare state, it should be reformed with a view to developing what the author calls a "solidarity-based society of opportunity" actively involving public institutions, local communities, associations and private enterprise. The issues to be addressed concern education and social safeguards, in view of our increased working life expectancy and, above all, the increasingly precarious situation of workers. Trentin zooms in on the central importance of renewing the link between citizens' rights and workers' rights. He is averse to public aid designed to compensate for the destruction of jobs and heavily critical of the themes of the end of work which have persisted for a long time since they were first broached, advocating instead a full-scale overhaul of the terms of participation in making decisions that define labor. Specifically, he suggests that the work to be carried out should be the subject of a contract, the terms of which could be recast thanks to new capabilities in respect of information and coordination, before laying down the rules of its execution and funding. Lastly, he suggests

revising on this basis the intervention efforts of collective solidarity aimed at redynamizing the job market.

In a brilliant introduction to the book, Alain Supiot insists on the need for the left to make a critical return to its roots, in keeping with Bruno Trentin's argument, and to put labor back where it belongs: at the core of its politics. Supiot stresses how topical the book's analyses are. In a certain sense, the recent Europe-wide debates over flexicurity, on the one hand, and the quality of life in the workplace, on the other, attest to the enduring pertinence of these problems and reflections. Still, the distinction between these two spheres, employment and work, appears to be one of the obstacles to the change of paradigm that this book calls for. Without this change, which involves redefining the place of work in society, left-wing politics well remained divided between efforts to palliate the nefarious effects of free-market policies and ineffectual protest by radical currents. One might add that the social sciences have contributions to make towards redrafting the political prospects for labor. History's blind spots in this area and the fragmentation of sociology into subdisciplines are but two areas among many in which Bruno Trentin's analyses invite further research.

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