

Opening and Innovation

Partito Rifondazione Comunista

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Opening and Innovation

Changing ourselves to transform society

Partito Rifondazione Comunista

This paper was prepared for Rifondazione's 5th Congress in Italy in April 2002.

It may just be that the world is now moving towards a situation in which a new beginning can be made in the revolutionary process, for a conscious commitment to the highest task imaginable for politics: the overcoming of the existing order, of capitalist society itself.

I

It is possible to take up the work again – even though we are well aware our strength is dwarfed by the task – along with others all over the world, all concerned with the issue of “the transition”: a different world is possible.

It could be that the birth of the peoples of Seattle, of the “movement of movements”, which is the great happening of our time, the first real movement after the 20th Century, marks not the death, but the birth of a new workers’ movement.

It is possible, and this is our main challenge at the present stage: but it is not a certainty to be counted on. Another epoch-making event, the tragic attacks of 11 September in New York and Washington, marking the return of murderous terrorism and the getting up of new “winds of war” around the globe, lead in exactly the opposite direction. We may say, once more, that nothing will be the same again; and that at the heart of our political action we find ourselves obliged to restate our core commitment to the struggle for peace, against the twin fundamentalisms of terrorism and war. It is a critical task, and one that cannot be divorced from the movements’ fight, from the critique of capitalist, neo-liberal globalisation.

The political task of *Rifondazione*, then, is to contribute to finding a way out that is to and of the Left – from the grass roots, and in a pluralistic way – a way which moves beyond the disarray of the

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workers' movement and its crises. One which leads in the opposite direction, we might say, to that in which traditional left-wing forces have gravitated within the centre-left, during its time in power in both the United States and Europe.

The failure of this tendency also gives impetus to the anti-capitalist movement. The same alternative to the right wing which consolidated its position in government in Italy just as in the United States is closely linked to this search for a new strategy. The separation between the two has been put into question both by the Left and the Right.

Rifondazione even while heavily engaged in the day-to-day commitments of resistance, continued to defend the cause of a Left that was alternative as well as Communist, throughout the time when capitalist restoration had the upper hand. It has won one battle, and as a result can today invest in the new phase that has now begun to help to bring the European alternative movement to maturity and re-open a process of change in the world. In order to do that today, *Rifondazione* is opting for openness and innovation. We want this, unequivocally, to be the watchword for the opening of the preparatory stage of the Party Congress. That is why we have decided to have, before the Congress, a dialogue and an exchange – about the political direction that Congress should take – with other groups, organisations, publications, movements, associations and individual personalities of the critical (anti-capitalist) Left, whatever their stance, provided only they are interested in the same wide-ranging quest. We promise to take their views into account, while still assuming full political responsibility, as we should, for the conclusions of our Congress. Our path starts with opening up the political culture, practices and forms of organisation of our Communist movement with a view to its renewal.

II

A review of our Party's re-foundation may help us tackle this new undertaking. There were steps taken then, and breaks with the past, which demanded courage. These are what have made it possible to safeguard the Party's very existence and, with it, an alternative political voice. This is no small achievement; but these steps have

brought us now to a meeting point with the movement which requires a qualitative shift. It demands that innovation itself should not proceed only by exception, but should make itself a system embarking upon an open struggle against the faults, the conservative reflexes, which stand in the way of the major goals of our quest. The rupture with the centre-left, with our exit from the majority supporting the Prodi government, was one of these acts of re-foundation; it is a rupture also with the culture prevalent among the Italian Communist Party's leaders, and with the legacy of Togliatti, though that is still strong and something to be reckoned with. With this break, there began a questioning of the government's priorities for political action, and also a shift of attention from the field of parliamentary politics to that of social politics. What began to be discovered is that there can be no two levels, a "realistic" one of the "here and now" (and in particular of policies in government), and a utopian one, of socialism in the future. The issue that has been raised, though not resolved, is that of the nexus between practical everyday politics (including government action) and the transformation of capitalist society. The problem that insistently arises now is that of the shift of focus from centralised nation-state politics, institutions and organised groupings to the dynamic of social forces, mass movements and mass struggles. This is in some sense a return to the origins of the Communist movement. The analytical critique of neo-liberal globalisation has strengthened this new development, and brought another in its wake: in the definition of international relations, in relationships among the parties and even with states, the shift from emphasis on affinities of ideology and class background, to an emphasis on experiences and the working out of critiques of capitalist modernisation, and alternatives to it, placing within this framework the Europe-wide search for the construction of an alternative viewpoint of the Left.

The radical break with Stalinism found its main grounds and impetus, so far as the Italian Communist movement was concerned, in the issues of the rights of the individual and democracy. Our radical break with Stalinism recognised and developed these in the name of Socialism, of liberation from wage slavery, of the critique of alienation, the critique of the separation between the bourgeois citizen and the State, of the revolution as an indivisible, world-wide phenomenon.

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This was not only a historic necessity, but a contribution to the full understanding of where we should seek to begin afresh, and with what baggage. Our definitive separation from Stalinism is today the necessary condition for bringing up the subject of Communism and, indeed, a permanent warning that we must free ourselves of every last trace of it in our daily practices.

The Livorno meeting (on 21 January 2001) was designed with this in mind. We have set these breaks with the past together with our accumulated – now long-accumulated – environmental awareness, with our Marxist apparatus for interpreting society critically in terms of class, and above all with the long, difficult and still incomplete scrutiny taught us by women's experience and gender politics, as well as with our own concrete mode of existence. All these have brought us to a point where we have re-established the presence of the *Rifondazione* in the field, in elections which, with the Right victorious and the Centre-Left defeated, could have been fatal to the survival of an anti-capitalist Left working within national institutions and faced with the problem of government. Now we have become not just a political partner of, but an actual – and recognised – element within, the anti-capitalist movement fighting against globalisation.

After Genoa, as we have said, nothing will be the same again. We are at a change of phase: on the one hand, global capitalism has revealed its contradictions and inherent instability; and on the other, the tyranny of the *pensée unique* has been shattered, and what has taken shape is a new and sustainable protest movement on a world-wide scale. Its radical newness, however, which is of course connected with this new cycle of capitalist development, brings not only a great opportunity for us and for all anti-capitalist forces, but also a danger: the danger of 'anti-politics', or the negation of politics, the marginalisation of the issues of power, property and the capitalist mode of production. To overcome this challenge we have to be radical in innovating, including in terms of our own political and organisational culture and behaviour. In other words, we need to turn to those things where we have not been so innovative, fields where we have allowed conservative and self-satisfied tendencies to accumulate, together with new vices that are the legacy of our modernisation. In a party which has managed to maintain an accurate sense of the class

enemy even as it accomplished each innovative step in its history within the workers' movement while still keeping to the Left – in such a party, today, as we face the birth of a new movement, the essential key for its re-founding is to be found. Now is the time for self-reform.

III

The movement presents us now with a difficult task of reconstruction and transformation, on the practical and theoretical levels, and at the same time makes it both possible and timely. We can learn from bitter experience that the conquest of power may fail to lead to a new society, and can even be the source of new forms of oppression. That the search for productivity does not ensure a new quality of life. We have gone so far as to learn that even for the working class the challenge of the future has no assured outcome. Still we keep our firm hold on the basic principle that informs our very origins: that history, the past, the present, and the way society is organised are not objectively given; and that to know them and change them we need a science of the society in which we live, which is a capitalist society and therefore contains dialectic tensions. Working people cannot be reduced to mere possessions of capital. For this reason, class conflict and antagonism are always likely. People are not prepared to be reduced to sociological statistics, or to be rated simply according to their working performance, be it as an assembly-line worker or a skilled worker. In this way we can begin to understand how it becomes both possible and necessary to look for the connections, the social and cultural links between the traditional working class and the new critical actors now emerging.

Today, under neo-liberal globalisation, labour dependent on capital is growing in absolute terms world-wide; but this growth (also in terms of its relative weight within society) is combined with a fragmentation and dispersion in the social composition of class, with an individualisation and apparent increase in autonomy of so many of its elements, and with a re-establishment of relations between the classes and between the enterprise and the worker. It feeds on the uncertainty and insecurity which is the predominant feature of the new social condition. Moreover, the central role of workers has never depended on their numbers so much as on their opportunities and

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capacities for uniting. Nor has it ever depended on their power as consumers so much as on their resistance to the reduction of the workforce to nothing more than a mere element in production dependent on capital, countering this tendency with an insistence that they are real men and women, and thereby holding open some prospect of liberation. This is why it is not mere nostalgia to return to the years 1968-9 or ponder them. It is the tiger's leap which lets us grasp once more what is essential and proclaim it again: the radical, unquenchable refusal to accept labour as merely the pivot of capitalist accumulation; the refusal to accept labour as a human activity dependent on capital; and the assertion that, on the contrary, what is central is practical critique and the social individual who generates that critique, both within the workplace and outside it. The ambiguous dual nature of work in capitalist society takes another turn under globalisation; it does not vanish, in some society where 'work is finished', nor does it unite the masses in sociologically uniform working conditions. Instead, it takes on the paradoxical character of lengthening working hours for some while the jobs of others vanish completely. It may make the execution of work tasks either dependent or autonomous, but they are always directed by someone or something else. It may be offered as a permanent or as a temporary job, but is always inherently precarious. The work ethos spreads everywhere, yet it does not bring any automatic social harmony. It amounts, rather, to a new class division. The process of uniting alienated and exploited social actors does not lie in things; it may be built of subjective decisions from politics, but no organised force can impose it from outside.

The first challenge for us, then, is to stimulate and take part in the movement for this new search that is not only possible but utterly necessary, even though it is as difficult as it is unfamiliar.

IV

The organisation of the movement's political strength and the reorganisation of the political strength of the alternative Left in Italy and in Europe are distinct issues, but already have their close structural interconnections. After Genoa, the latter can no longer be achieved effectively without tackling the former – and the relationship

between the two. Every lasting movement comes up with its forms of self-organisation, of rooting itself in its territory, and of relating to others: and so the subject of direct democracy arises once more. The crisis of representative democracy, and the nature of the movement that calls globalisation to account (the same globalisation which is the main cause of that crisis), suggests a radical critique of delegated power and the search for a loom of social experiments on which forms of direct democracy might be woven. It is quite significant, moreover, that just as the Italian Metalworkers' Federation (FIOM) is breaking the industrial truce agreed at union confederal level, and the engineering workers regain the weapon of the general strike for their sector, suddenly the question of democracy arises as an issue in developing it. The organisation of a programme built on the autonomy of objectives arising from the relationship between needs and the critique of neo-liberal globalisation; industrial action in a diffuse, prolonged, many-sided conflict; and the construction, within it, of a web of positive relationships and unifying elements; a process of setting up the 'movement of movements' able to provide it with founded structures: these are what presently outline the first building-blocks of a project which finds its first political outlet in the growth, quantitative and qualitative, of the movement itself.

The central axis of this activity is the construction of another world, a possible world. A qualitative leap can be made in this growth by the constitution of an alternative Left. Genoa marks a boundary, one of potentially enormous importance. Our own proposals for an alternative Left and for a pluralistic Left must themselves be radically re-thought in the light of this. The thaw that we had observed already has, with the metalworkers' strike and the mass experience of the Genoa Social Forum, become a breaking-point and the start of a new phase in politics. Analyses of the nature of the government of the Right as a rearrangement of the bourgeois bloc, even though cut across by the contradictions between the two Rights (the global and the local), and the analysis of the irreparable crisis of the Centre-Left, its strategies for government (moderate liberalism for the general governance of capitalist modernisation) are becoming still more radical as a result, if such a thing were possible. The crises among the Left Democrats and in the CGIL [the Italian Trade Union

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Confederation] have their fundamental causes in these, and in the refusal to abandon the position which is the cause of their enduring crises.

There is a hard pill to swallow, and a hard forecast to make. We are not going to have, for the next few years, a political Left like those we have been used to in Italy, or southern Europe, or even northern Europe, since the last world war: not the Communist version, nor the social democratic one. And, in Italy at least, we are not going to have, for the next few years, a united trade union movement which is independent, democratic, and class based. This does not mean we cannot create a pluralistic Left, in Italy and in Europe, capable of aiming at the achievement of a majority and presenting candidates for government with programmes of reform. But it does mean that to do so we shall have to walk down different roads from the traditional one-way political ones; and in the first instance we shall do it by ensuring that the break the movement represents, influences all left forces and affects all their mutual relationships.

In the same way a critical analysis of the trade union movement at confederal level, and of the CGIL, which has trapped itself in the crisis of the Left Democrats, does not mean that we cannot now confidently expect, in the next few years, independent unionism and mass action. On the contrary, it indicates that for collective social representation as well there are different roads from those tried in recent years. It also indicates, after the metalworkers' strike, that a new chapter is beginning for the trade union Left, too. This is manifest in the opposition platform in the CGIL Congress, and in the open reflections on the ups and downs of the grass roots committees (*Cobas*). It can be seen most of all through the building of experience in social conflict and new organisations for united struggle outside the lifeless pattern of 'joint determination' and industrial peace. Only from the combination of all these developments, in fact, can a new means of expressing aspirations arise in the trade union movement, with a radical agenda of reforming its organisation and with a trade union Left capable of organising independent mass movements and rebuilding collective bargaining that works. The building of a platform of opposition to the right-wing government could, in such a fast-moving and complex situation, offer a nodal point of strategic

significance, a crossroads where, without surrendering their own individual features, social and political organisations and movements might converge: an open laboratory in which the work in progress is constantly checked and validated by means of experience on the ground here in Italy such as those on the major subjects (from work to the environment, from the welfare state to schools, from the Tobin Tax to the social wage, to the reduction of working hours). A sort of Italian Porto Alegre, ongoing: a programme that is no paper exercise, nor just a struggle against the budget law, necessary though that is; but one that works at the rebuilding of the movements' reach, of the capacity for effective intervention, of social conflict and of political critiques of institutions and of the economy, so as to enable an alternative society to grow.

The right-wing government is not invincible. There is indeed a solid majority of Liberal orientation, but it has to cope with a difficult phase. Our country is experiencing at present a major social unblocking, and movements are gathering pace; the economy is at a stage where sources of instability and uncertainty are on the increase because the contradictions within this development are coming to light. Both phenomena are putting pressure on political alignments, though from different directions; and they could produce real changes. An effective social and political opposition could therefore offer successful moves towards significant objectives and a renewed questioning of the consensus behind the right-wing government. The undertaking is not an easy one, since it requires a drastic exit from the merry-go-round of the centre-left and the overturning of the present paradigm; it requires a move from ensuring that social organisation is compatible with competitiveness, to ensuring that the economy is compatible with the needs which the movement is bringing to the fore: the construction of the programme for the 'internal link', the bundle of objectives which this founding impetus of movements and critical social and political organisation have the task of bringing to maturity by preparation and by conflict.

Rifondazione has engaged itself in this process. It finds in it a first reason for the openness and innovation which it feels called on to adopt. The idea is to rediscover in this process the means of launching an alternative Left that is capable of responding to the grand theme

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of effective critique, protest and opposition to capitalist globalisation and neo-liberal policies.

V

The decisive and fundamental place in which openness and innovation have to be practised is within the Party itself. We have defended the Party's role in contemporary society against the devastating wave of the crisis of the first Italian Republic, against the political crisis brought on by the revolution to re-establish capitalism, and against the corrosion of the society by mass communications, with its sensationalism, celebrity-worship, hyper-individualism, and the reduction of all life, including political life, to a series of consumption moments. We have defended the Party's role in representative institutions against the undermining influence of the culture of majorities, gentlemen's agreements and the primacy of coalitions. We have defended the *raison d'être* of a Communist party after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc countries, during the time of *pensée unique* and throughout a period of a deep reflection even among anti-capitalists. We have also defended the Communist party's *raison d'être* and its future against the claims to sole legitimacy coming from a Centre-Left which at the time was still supreme. This resistance was grounded in our refusal to throw out the baby with the bath water. In order to make a success of our struggle – a struggle for survival which we fought again, and won, in the latest government elections – we have paid tribute to a conservative attitude which went beyond what was, as it were, obligatory. Innovative experiments there were, but we have not managed to transform our Party in a process of self-reformation. We have produced elements of innovation in the culture of our organisation (such as the work of the Chianciano conference), but these have not driven a real process of opening up to society, the real key to reform. And so, while strong contributions to a re-foundation have been made in theoretical research, our political line, our relations with the movements, the Party's functioning all remain imprisoned in their impoverished traditional forms, despite living in a society convulsed by capitalist modernisation in the workplace and in the field of social reproduction, in culture and in the structure of ownership, in the places of socialisation and communication and in

our towns and cities. So the Party's situation remains one of detachment, split between on the one hand the rich contribution its members, men and women, give to the Festival of *Liberazione* (our daily paper), to the mass demonstrations, the mobilisations, both in general politics and on more specific matters including those on unfamiliar subjects, actions reflecting a party which is broadly spread throughout Italy wherever there is struggle and participation and, on the other hand, a more shadowy side, a self-perpetuating closed group which rejects the lessons of this same movement into which it nevertheless throws itself. The Party often presents itself as over-centralised, exclusively masculine, closed to experimentation, sclerotic to the point of nourishing bureaucratic tendencies (paradoxically, in a Party with practically no bureaucracy), or of continuing very strong institutional tendencies (in a Party which often tends to go so far as even to say that there is no point in being present in institutions).

All this was harmful, but perhaps politically bearable, until yesterday; not any more. Not today, as we enter a new phase in our movement, when what is at stake is the nature of the movement and the future of the Party. Openness and innovation have become a strict necessity. They must inform our political culture, the Party's behaviour and model of organisation, the whole shape of the Party, so as to give birth to a Party shape consistent with our draft of a new Communist Party, one which will work, alongside the contestation of neo-liberal globalisation, for a return in the real movement to the study of how to overcome capitalist society. We believe that even in the present phase the Party, as a permanent organisation of men and women who choose to form themselves into a political community in order to create together a plan for a new society, is indispensable if there is to be a connected and united plan for the current struggle in society, in economic life, in the organisation of government, national or supra-national; and that in the present crisis of democracy and the nation-state such a Party continues not only to represent a vehicle for participation, but to offer an opportunity for the masses to find their way into the political arena. This is also the moment, once again, for the Party to achieve an international dimension, in this time of globalisation. And it is here that it is necessary for *Rifondazione* today

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to achieve at least an unequivocal European dimension, with the creation of a united political organ of the alternative Left.

In this situation of a rise of manifold movements, our own partisanship, our interpretation of society in terms of class, and our advocacy of the issue of Communism form a resource and a historical necessity. But in order to be able to deploy its full potential, this resource must be available in practice to the movements, to a new generation which may use it to tackle politics, to the men and women who might find it worthwhile, but who are at times held back by repugnant features of what they imagine the Party to be like, or what they imagine Communism to be like — images which we have to acknowledge some responsibility for, not just historically but even in our regular practices today. They would be held back by our hanging on to what exists; they would be held back by our Party remaining closed. The movement might then choose other paths, less burdensome politically — and the Party would then have lost a great opportunity to escape from its minority position.

It is becoming clearer now that we have not been championing, in opposition to the shifts of the centre-left, a historical conservatism of the workers' movement, but rather promoting new moves in the opposite direction towards liberation Communism. The grounds of our opposition to other shifts have not been fear of contamination of our Party by contact with a wider society, a capitalist society, or the contamination of our Party's culture with the general culture of the times which is, in reality, the culture of the dominant classes. On the contrary, we are all for the 'contamination' of our Party, its culture and practices, by those of the movement who protest against the world as it exists, which today is the 'movement of movements', or the 'peoples of Seattle'. These are the moments which breathe life into insurgency and its break with the existing world, or at least the distance it takes critically from the capitalist revolution and its political and cultural apparatus. To this process our experience allows us to contribute a history that has been critically assessed, and the great knots that are to be untied are the ones our political life is dedicated to: power, property, and the capitalist mode of production. But our experience must make us ready to accept the findings of different experiences, different histories and different cultures. Our mode of existence must

be converted to this opening process, and for this it has to re-invent itself from its very roots: and in the first place it has to banish all separatism.

Opening up requires a break with the one-dimensional relationship between the Party and society; and the construction of a multiplicity of relations. We would even say that symbolically the circle connotes a closed space from which political work radiates after being decided on within; just as the federation and the Party leadership are places of internal discussion and decision. Our own know-how, and its comparison with the know-how and experience of others, are marginalised in this way. Openness consists of according equal political respect to others, both in these traditional venues of representative politics, and in other places where political action is becoming possible, and whose increasing numbers could play a part in the formation and training of people; places of study, of recreation, places where people eat, watch a film or a show, where music is made and listened to: places where, without pressure from élites, authorities, or organisations, social and cultural attitudes are formed, rewarding relationships forged. All these contribute to the formation and education of a people of the Left; all help to build its new special spaces. We have to be open towards these movements, to the experiences of struggle, to the different cultures of protest, both in the sense of setting up relationships of give-and-take and in the sense of allowing this continued contact to do away for ever with the Party's avant-garde posture. It is necessary to continue to work for the Party to be well-rooted in the workplace, in the neighbourhood, in cultural activity, in society; and that work will prosper if it is founded on mutual exchange and a common plan, or at least a good approximation to one, which is capable of generating the basic elements of another world, a possible world.

Opening up to society – by respecting the skills of others and being open to their movements, their experiences and their critical abilities – so as to bring about the elements of a different society, needs to be combined with an opening up of our Party, once and for all. It is not enough merely to accept dissent and acknowledge it as dissent. We must have the ability to arrange for truly free discussion which can take us forward. Those who observe us with interest from the outside

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must be able to understand so that they can make a difference; still more our own members, the men and women of the Party, so that they can all contribute to the formation and determination of its policies. No one should have anything to fear in maintaining a point of view which contrasts with the prevailing one – of course; but at the same time we should uproot the old, mechanical, self-protecting ‘yes, but’, which merely serves to hide a disagreement which if directly expressed might be risky (if not to oneself, then to one’s own political positions).

Opening also consists of a crystal-clear transparency in political debate, of the setting out of positions (‘let thy yea be yea, thy nay, nay’). This is not mere moralising or political preaching; it is not just the issue of a Party’s democracy – though that is essential. What is involved is the very idea of the political society we wish to get across and, still more, success or failure in comprehending the new political phase we are in, and the issues with which we are faced. These movements do not grow through the development of sweeping ideologies, solid and for that reason also frightening. They are not fostered by ideas of the primacy of the Party and its leadership role within movements; their growth is to be found elsewhere. By its awareness of this, *Rifondazione* has chosen to give life to its own independence and in the same way to stand within the movement, as one of its components. And it is this awareness to which we owe the success of our action. The construction of a new and fruitful relationship between a new Communist Party and a movement such as this, which has become emblematic of our times, demands that we achieve mutual recognition and respect: and mutual respect must include the ability to be frank and clear with a view to mutual understanding. Opening is a necessity today; and it requires from everyone readiness to change, and even to change oneself.

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