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A number of possible developments of the idea of connective party.

This paper is divided into four parts:

- Exposure of the difference between mass connective party and mass traditional party.
- Description of the attempt to build a connective party in Italy; analysis of the political reasons for the failure of such an attempt.
- Opinions on the structural reasons for failure.
- Specification and transformation of the idea of connective party.

1) The mass connective party in response to complexity and social differentiation.

The traditional mass party, during the era of Fordist-Keynesian capitalism, was presented as the sole owner of the political action of organised masses. Its activity was aimed at the take-over and administration of the government and of the state structures and its main means were on the one hand the use of the struggle of the organised masses and on the other electoral mobilisation and ideological political propaganda. All the other social activities (industrial action, mobilisation of students and women, cooperation and popular mutualism) were carried out by formally independent associations, yet largely dependent on the party. The transformation of the popular classes into ruling classes (historical task of the Workers' Party) was implemented by selecting from among the masses the cadres capable of managing the party, the union and especially the State, in its central and peripheral structures. In its most organic forms (such as the Italian Communist Party), the mass party was contemporaneously where policy, ideology, culture and the same ethic of the masses was developed.

This type of party, which played a decisive role in the first two post-war decades, experienced difficulty firstly due to the growth of differentiation and complexity in Western capitalist society. Little by little, in fact, every social context (not just politics and economics, but also the family, education, land, etc.) became the focus of a *specific* and *original* conflict between the requirements of capitalist reproduction and those opposing it. The conflicts subsequently increased and the actors of these conflicts became more diverse: it is not possible to manage society solely through the authority of the State and it is not possible to condense all the conflicts within the simple action of the party. 1968 was only the first explosion of this differentiation.

To the growth of complexity and differentiation were then added the crisis of the social democratic agreement and the neo-liberal dissolution of organised labour. The mass party was unable to cope with all these changes: its leadership

groups adapted by developing their own tendency to integration in the State structure, until renouncing, in the name of participation in the government, every notion of alternative society; its members, who had previously represented themselves primarily as workers, progressively become ordinary citizen-voters. In this way, the neoliberal wave no longer found before it any organised political form that could counter it, and when social conflict resumed with the vast anti-globalisation movement, this movement no longer referred either to the mass party or to any other form of party .

And it was precisely within the context of the anti-globalisation movement that a number of the leadership groups emerged from the crisis of the traditional party (such as the Communist Refoundation leadership) that became aware not only of the impossibility of reproducing the mass party, but also of the fact that the “classic” functions of the Workers' Party (transformation of the popular classes into ruling classes, cultural and programmatic development, political management) had not become useless and superfluous but on the contrary were even more necessary in a society that tends to dissolve any identity alternative to capitalism. These leadership groups sensed (though often not progressing beyond such an intuition) that after the crisis of the mass party, these functions could no longer be performed by *a single* political entity (or by associations subject to it), but were spread across several “institutions”: movement organisations, trade unions, civil society associations, independent media, computer *networks* and, finally, also generally traditional parties.

What was thus developed, in a generally conscious manner, was the idea of *mass connective party*, understood to be *political connection* (and *not*, therefore, as *organised centralism*) of several structurally autonomous “institutions of movement”, each capable of assuming, from time to time, the direction of the overall subject, and each empowered to continue, as well as with the common action as “party”, their own specific activity. For such a party, the unit was not a prerequisite, but the result of constant political mediation, and its construction was based on the strong ability to manage the differences that represented the stable and irreversible contribution of the anti-globalisation movement to the struggles for social emancipation. If and when that unity is achieved, the autonomy of the “institutions of movement”, which for the mass party was a *limitation* as it brought into question its political monopoly, may become a *resource* for the connective party, since it provides a penetration into languages and social environments that the traditional mass party, because of its identification between politics and the State, is no longer able to achieve.

The connective party “reaches” the masses not because it unifies them directly within itself (like the old mass party), but because it unifies the autonomous associations that represent them. This result, in principle, *can be obtained in several ways*: through the formation of a very large network, combined with occasional political agreements; with the formation of *hubs* capable of

managing the network with horizontal and not *top-down* means; with the establishment of a single party of cadres, with, however, several interfaces that connect it to all the relevant associations; with the formation of a stable federation between parties, associations, movements. The important aspect is that, in any case, the autonomy of individual members is preserved, the idea being accepted that each member can play, from time to time, a hegemonic role, the possibility being accepted of a partial divergence on individual issues and that in any case the construction of effective forms of unity is achieved every time.

2. difficulties with the connective party: the Italian case.

Italy is perhaps, among Western countries, one of the countries with the strongest rhetoric on “political renewal”, one of the countries with the most concrete opportunity for building a connective party, where disappointment at the failure of that hypothesis was greatest (and more fraught with negative consequences). In the period between 2001 and 2006, a large group of associations met in Italy which had, at that time, a strong tendency towards a general political initiative, parties of the trade union movement capable of bringing about situations that were not purely economical, and a neo-communist party traversed by strong currents of “heretic” Marxism (consiliarism, anti-statism, direct democracy, environmentalism and feminism). This meeting helped to forge a common language between the various actors (although, in truth, the neo-communist party was more receptive to the new languages because the associations proved to be open towards the Marxist themes), as well as strong periods of unity in the struggle of opposition against both neoliberalism and the Berlusconi government. But it produced a very weak version of the connective party, that is an *informal* and *implicit* political agreement, never actually discussed or clarified, between communist Refoundation and the movements. An agreement that has formed no public basis, transparent and recognised in terms of comparison and verification, no “common institution”, as temporary and revocable, in which to define, in addition to the acts of opposition, also those relating to the management of the government. The feeble attempt to build a new party, that is “the European Left”, in which each member would converge on an equal footing, maintaining its own identity, was blocked not only by the hesitation of the associations, but also by the choice of the leadership of the PRC which preferred, on the eve of the elections, a more secure and experienced solution.

The “front” of the Italian anti-liberal left was now on the threshold of government rule with a common *language* and *culture*, but without a clear common *political program*, without a common *definition of the political stage* and of what were the *main* and what were the *secondary*

objectives, without a commitment to *discussing publicly* and frequently the strategy and tactics in order to obtain, acting from within and from the outside, all that could realistically be asked of the centre-left government. In short, a connective *language* but not a truly connective *party* was established. In consequence, the PRC didn't really act within the government according to the demands of the movements, and conversely the movements and associations never really supported the positions of the PRC in the government, ranging from mild *pressure-group politics* against Romano Prodi and strong opposition against the entire government, or practicing, even, contemporaneously both stances. As such, none has managed to push the centre-left towards those measures of mere limited redistribution that would have allowed it a longer life. And so the end of the Prodi government was not treated simply as a heavy defeat, but as a real tragedy that gave rise to serious fragmentation of the whole "front".

There are at least four relevant political reasons underlying the failure to build a mass connective party and the inadequate management of the rule of government,:

- a. The inadequacy of the "political machine" of the PRC, which has shown itself unable to manage even the basic tasks of connection between the various representatives of the party in the government, parliament and movements, demonstrating the dominance of a *rhetoric* of political *communication* rather than the *practice* of political *work*.
- b. The insufficient independence (despite the numerous anti-statism declarations) of many civil society associations against the State and the government (and therefore against the same moderate left), namely the need, for these associations, to take a cautious approach in order not to undermine the public funding of their activities.
- c. The limitations of the strategic model of the Italian anti-liberal movement (partly shared by the PRC), a model based on the idea of the progressive withdrawal of state resources and capital to the benefit of "society". This model has led to an underestimation of the need to develop a specific proposal for the operation of the government and of the state structure, and has thus made "seizure" of the party and movements by the same government easier.
- d. The erroneous identification among associations, movements and "the people". For too long, it was thought that the associations of civil society, due to their ideology of solidarity, represented the entire "people" or could in any case influence this orientation. These associations instead only account for an important *popular elite*, or one that has the time and cultural resources to devote to a solidaristic action, while the vast majority of the "people" suffer the burden of severe daily problems that drive them either towards political passivity or towards a "selfish

mobilisation” that cannot be intercepted and transformed with the language of altruism alone, but with the organisation of the class struggle.

These four political reasons (to which must also be added an insufficient distancing by most of the associations away from the “moderate left”), are however, only the tip of the iceberg. Behind these move deep structural forces, relevant not only for the Italian situation, which raise serious doubts on the idea of the connective party and demand its transformation.

3. The structural reasons for the crisis of the connective party.

There are at least two structural barriers that the connective party is facing: a) the growing gap between *skilled* and *unskilled* workers, b) the increasing weight of government (national and supranational) in the management of capitalism as a result of the emergence of the economic crisis . Let us briefly examine each in turn.

Upon closer inspection, the traditional idea of the mass party assumes the convergence of *skilled* and *unskilled* workers within organised collective action. The *unskilled* workers (which at the time of the mass party were mostly manual workers) found in this action a valuable tool to achieve important economic and political goals; the *skilled* workers (who at the time of the mass party were mostly intellectual workers) found in the party (and in the trade union) a way to use the surplus of knowledge, of which the “mechanical” discipline of Fordism did not permit exploitation, as well as a channel for the obtaining of work in the structure of the *welfare state*. The convergence of *skilled* and *unskilled* along the same organisational horizon made a relaxation of the internal differences for the “class” possible, facilitating the political socialisation of the *unskilled* workers and permitting the *skilled* to “criticise” their own specific knowledge (of teachers, doctors, magistrates, engineers ...) freeing it from the task of reproducing hierarchical social relations.

The crisis of the social democratic compromise and of the *welfare state*, the uncertainty of work and especially the full transformation of the cultural and communicative activity (previously managed in large part by the State) in a *capitalist industry* of enormous size, have made the previous convergence between workers of different skills impossible.

Unskilled workers (now: the intellectual lower-skilled workers), deprived of social hope and of effective organisation, veer towards populism. *Skilled* workers (now: the intellectual highly qualified workers) no longer move toward the binomial party-state, but towards the *company*, which now uses much more than before cultural, linguistic and communication skills. While the *unskilled* workers are exposed to the passive *medium* par excellence, television, and to the inevitably populist structure of its language,

the *skilled* workers are exposed to the ideology of the *web* that, based (at least in appearance) on horizontal and easily revocable relationships, generates the illusion that the entire social reality is freely available to the communicative activity. And it is for this reason that the *skilled* workers often tend to reduce all their political activities to the self-organisation of *web communities*, avoiding both the problem of public control of the capital and that of the alliance with the *unskilled* workers; on the other hand, the *unskilled workers* respond by increasing their distrust of the holders of specialised knowledge, all regarded as members of the *establishment*, and making them the subject of the populist revolt against all the social “mediators”: political class, experts, intellectuals of various kinds. The *skilled* workers are thus one of the bases of the moderate left and of the projects of democratic transformation, the “softs” and “greens” of capitalism; the *unskilled* workers are one of the bases of the populist right and of defence and securitarian policies.

One of the limitations of the idea of the connective party, in its initial formulation, is that it doesn't take into account this growing gap and does not place explicitly the question of unification among the different layers of workers. One might even say that the idea of the connective party is also based on the erroneous tacit assumption of the convergence tendency of all the fractions of the subordinate labour: only this can explain the confusion between “associations” and “people” and the illusion that the construction of a unit organism and a common political strategy can be an “emergent quality” of spontaneous interaction between the various components of the hypothetical connective party. The idea of the connective party, instead of building a positive dialectic between multiplicity and unity, favours the former at the expense of the second precisely because it thinks that mere “communication” among the “many” is sufficient to create an acceptable and effective form of unity. In this way, however, the connective party becomes, once it manages to establish itself, the political organisation of only the skilled workers, since it is only for these workers that the occasional and spontaneous unification in the *web* may, in some cases, be sufficient to obtain certain results, at least in terms of visibility and self-representation.

This limitation becomes even more evident in the face of the effects of the crisis. In this age of rising globalisation, it is possible to imagine a tendency for capitalist power to spread within transnational flows of wealth not mediated by the State: the anti-liberal movement could therefore stand as a reversal of this spread through the construction of dispersed forms of alternative social relationships. If capital can manage without the state, even its opponents could completely circumvent the problem of political power and imagine a leak from capitalism through the progressive growth of social autonomy, self-government, a solidaristic and decentralised economy. But the era of the crisis of globalisation shows that capital can only survive by concentrating a large

amount of financial resources through the liberal use of the state (which has again become, in many ways, the “business committee of the bourgeoisie”) and all this stands in the way of any attempt at autonomous growth of society that does not even involve the capture of a significant influence on the state itself. What I mean is that today the transnational flows of capital and also the processes of internationalisation of whole sectors of production (such as the car), would not manage to develop if capitalist rule had not become an absolute dominion over the entire public resources managed by the State. Even those wishing to “disperse” and distribute power democratically today must first regain control of the capital through the control of its fundamental state unity.

The struggle to regain this control passes both through a spread of forms of social democracy and through the *concentration* of force of the anti-liberal “front”, and therefore requires a model of strategic action other than that which is purely “dispersive” created precisely, upon its inception, by the anti-liberal movement, and by a form-party consistent with this action.

4. How can the idea of connective party be changed?

All this does not mean the abandonment of the concept of connective party (nor the loss of the concept of “plural subject” developed by the anti-liberal movement), but instead its transformation. This does not involve going back and switching from plural movements to the political monopoly of the party, from the “many” to the “one” but rather a switch from La Boétie to Machiavelli. The anti-globalisation movement owes much, whether this is known or not, to Etienne de La Boétie and his theory of *voluntary servitude*: we are servants, says the great French thinker, only because we accept voluntarily being submitted to the dominion of the sovereign. It is therefore enough for us to revoke the consent that we offer to the sovereign to see all its power collapse. This form of action may be valid for an aristocracy against the absolute rule of the king, and may seem valid for those who, like the elite of *skilled* workers, believe they are holding the keys of power only because they are used to producing the languages of the *web*, which the capital exploits *ex post*. But it is completely inadequate when the sovereign does not reign solely by the consent of the subjects, but due to *the conditions of survival* of the same subjects being in place, namely the means of production and money. Labour cannot withdraw consent from the capital, or stop working for the owner, if at the same time the objective conditions of production are not reclaimed.

As is known, Machiavelli however knows very well that to establish a new social order (a “new republic”, in the language of the Florentine Secretary), it is first necessary to seize power. But Machiavelli also knows, unlike what is commonly believed, that the seizure of power is not the sole purpose of political action and that the management of a new republic cannot be implemented using

the same means that are used for its foundation . As is written in his *speeches*, if to *establish* a new republic, it is necessary to be “one” - that is to build a united political will, then to *manage* a new republic, it is necessary to be “many”, as only this ensures the plurality of views that allows an organism to adapt to changing conditions in its life. Not even Machiavelli , who is the philosopher par excellence of political power, considers politics to be reduced to “on”: it is rather a constant dialectic between the “one” and the “many”, a dialectic which for us is not realised during two distinct periods in time, but one which accompanies all the stages of the political struggle, since there is always the need to be “many” to fully understand a social situation and to better manage the effects of policy action, but it is always necessary to be “one” when the political action should, as at present, concentrate its forces on the objectives from time to time required to acquire progressive control of the state and social wealth.

Today we must unite two distinct modes of action: one that lies in the linear time of the cumulative growth of social democracy, and one that lies in the discontinuous time of the changing political situation and the changing objectives around which it is necessary to concentrate, from time to time, as much force as is possible. We must contemporaneously be both many and one, passing continually from the liquid to the solid state.

How therefore should the idea of connective party be transformed?

First of all, it should pursue the explicit goal of the alliance between *skilled* and *unskilled*. This alliance is not only the effect of a political program, but is first and foremost the creation of a network of associations that aggregate not only *skilled*, but also others. These cannot be solely altruistic associations but must be mutualistic associations that respond specifically to the problems of survival of the masses in the era of the crisis of capitalism and the further reduction of the *welfare state*. In brief, to build what in Italy is called “social party”, which is already implemented in many situations by the PRC: a political entity whose elementary cell is not simply the territorial section in which members discuss politics, but the unity of popular acquisition, the self-managed nursery for children, the time bank, the school of computer literacy and so on. The mutualistic form of these associations enables their penetration into the popular strata hitherto excluded from this advanced mode of aggregation and *self-empowerment*. At the same time it allows an aggregation and a circulation of knowledge and experience between *unskilled* persons, holders of specific material interest and *skilled* persons, holders of capacity for self-organisation and basic languages of collective political action. It thus allows for *development of the associative nature of the anti-liberal movement turning it into a universal form of popular action*. While the purely solidaristic and altruistic action of the *skilled* workers is becoming paradoxically one of the

causes of populism, as it evokes the reaction of sections of the people who are excluded from it, the extension of the culture associated with all sections of the people through the creation of mutualistic associations is a powerful antidote to populism as it develops those *intermediate social bodies* which tend to be independent of the capital and of the state, which are the true enemy of the direct relationship between “head” and “people”. In short, to perform a truly “connective” action aimed at all the people, the party must first become a “social party” and accustom their militants to the building of mutualistic associations and to the provision of “services” for the popular strata. In any event, it should make all possible efforts to encourage the establishment of autonomous networks of social organisations that are popular in nature ensuring that these come into close contact with the altruistic associations already established by the anti-liberal movements.

At the same time the connective party must know how to perform, under the changed conditions, the job of *political leadership* that has characterised all the socialist, communist and popular parties worthy of this name. The connective party must therefore be aware that the essential political program, the general purpose of the action (socialism), the strategy and tactics, cannot be the result of a spontaneous convergence of cultures and languages of the various forces that compose it, but are the result of *the conscious action of specific political and intellectual groups*. If in the first definition of the connective party the construction of the program was the result of the convergence between different associations and different parties, in the new definition it is instead the political agenda that makes convergence possible.

It is necessary to reiterate that this is not a return to the old idea of vanguard “enlightened” politics because the political leadership takes effect immediately in the manner dictated by the logic of the connective party.

As the anti-globalisation movement has taught us, no one has the “absolute social knowledge”, thus the program, purpose, strategy and tactics of the connective party can only be processed by drawing on the reflections of a large number of social subjects. The pluralism of theoretical approaches, and also the typical syncretism of the anti-globalisation movement are still today a key resource. But pluralism, while certainly *an excellent method* of producing suitable ideas, is not in itself a sufficient enough idea to understand the present and to plan for the future. It is therefore necessary for the results of pluralistic debate to be redeveloped by one or by several intellectual and political groups that openly propose to understand, for any given historical period, which are the social classes in power, how they hold power, which are the classes that can oppose and which social model these classes can offer. Alternatively pluralism leads to chatter. Alternatively the condensation of the Marxist, environmental, feminist approach, etc. in a unified approach never occurs, even if there is no theoretical obstacle standing in the way, simply

because each of these matters has become an ideology for the recognition of certain leadership groups, fearful of losing a linguistic monopoly and thus an advantageous position.

Furthermore, once the party line is defined at a certain stage, the management of such a line and therefore the actual political management of the anti-neoliberal “front” cannot be implemented by a single political entity, but must be endorsed by a cross sectional” leadership formed of the most open minds, of the most disparate associations and different experiences. Whatever the subject that within the connective party from time to time takes the upper hand and “called” the political line (be it a true party, association, union, magazine) this will never manage such a line without the involvement of a wider leadership group.

Finally, although the political leadership seems to be a typical activity of the “classic” approach, it is not at all certain that the group able to propose such a direction may actually emerge from any of the political parties that exist today. It is in fact true that a member of a party is often led to reflection and “general” action more than it is as a member of a *single-issue movement*. But it is equally true that the political parties that exist today are more often than not organisations dedicated more to daily survival, to tactics, mediation between the different currents, than to the capacity for general development. It is therefore very probable that the input of a basic program, the design of a new form of socialism, the beginnings of a strategy and of a tactic stem from political and intellectual groups are also formed by members of political parties, but which do not immediately correspond to the parties themselves. Moreover, the strength of the connective party lies also in understanding that these “informal” mechanisms of policy-making, that for the traditional mass party were unacceptable, are instead essential developmental resources. The possibility of the constitution and of the success of a connective party also lies in the ability to accept a policy statement from whatever party it comes from, and to thus transform a result of its internal diversity into a unified strategy, shared and binding.

Summarising our argument, we can say that within the concept of the connective party must remain: a) a reference to the plurality of its members, b) the acceptance of the autonomy of these members, c) the establishment of the fact that each member can, from time to time, exert a hegemonic role within the party itself. However, what must be overcome is: a) the use of organisational models that favour *skilled* workers and do not promote reunification between the different factions of the work, b) identification of the connective party with a strategy based *solely* on the linear growth of social autonomy, and therefore indifferent to the matter of the state, c) the inability to develop a project, a tactic, a strategy, and to define concrete targets, variable according to the political situation, around which to converge each time, the greatest possible number of forces.

The growth of social democracy must apply to all workers and this will be effective only if the social wealth now monopolised by capitalism is able to subordinate to itself, mainly through state control. The connective party is contemporaneously the party of the growth of social autonomy and of the transformation of the state.

In conclusion it must be added that the first definition of the connective party suffered from two theoretical limitations.

There was a functionalist definition that deduced the form of the party through the single consideration of the growth of social complexity, without paying sufficient attention to the morphology of the classes or the dynamics of their struggle. A more complete idea of the party must also be developed on the basis of analysis of the current features of capital and labour. In addition, there was a purely formal definition: it insisted on the *form* that the party should take without specifying adequately the *content* of the action of the party itself. The definition and construction of a new connective party must take place during the process of defining a new idea of socialism. The current absence of adequate political parties is also the effect of the absence of appropriate and non-generic social projects, of visions of the world able to mobilise the majority of the people: because a party is many things, but above all the way in which the individual and collective subjects combine to create an idea of society.

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