

BOOK REVIEW

La libertà viene prima. La libertà come posta in gioco nel conflitto sociale. Nuova edizione con pagine inedite dei Diari e altri scritti

by Bruno Trentin, edited by Sante Cruciani, Florence, Florence University Press, 2021, 284 pp., €17.90 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-5518-281-2

Joseph Francese

Michigan State University, USA (emeritus)
Email: francese@msu.edu

This volume is a significantly amplified re-edition of a 2004 book by Bruno Trentin (1926–2007), General Secretary of the CGIL from 1988 to 1994, then member of both the Italian and the European parliaments. The addition of previously unpublished texts, including but not limited to sections of Trentin's *Diari* – as Giovanni Mari, editor of the series in which this work appears, writes in his introductory note – motivate and justify the new edition. They reconstruct the intellectual context in which *La libertà viene prima* (*Freedom Comes First*) came to fruition and facilitate further consideration of the original's main themes. For this reason, according to Mari, this text must be considered a new publication (p. 7). Moreover, with remote work currently the rule and not the exception, the attention given by Trentin to changes wrought by the revolution in information technology makes this new collection all the more topical, raising and answering questions about today's workplace.

Mari also contributes an afterword in which he analyses the idea around which the volume is organised: Trentin's concept of socialism. As Trentin defines it, socialism is the continuous quest to liberate individuals through the creation of new opportunities for self-realisation. To that end, socialism – when it joins together social and individual freedoms in the struggle for 'equal opportunity, a social safety net for all, a voice in the organisation of the workplace, and the dissemination of knowledge as an instrument of freedom' (p. 261) – intensifies the conflicts within and the failures of capitalism and the market economy.

Trentin's thought is examined and illuminated also in a foreword by Iginio Ariemma and in an introductory essay by Sante Cruciani. The thrust of Cruciani's essay is Trentin's efforts to keep the labour dynamic in Italy abreast with trends in Europe and the world at a time when the third industrial revolution, in information technology, continues to abolish boundaries restricting capital's ability to flow unimpeded through national borders, that is, without the passports and linguistic skills required of workers.

Globalisation has altered the relationship between power, political and economic, and the rights and freedoms of workers who now, as Alain Supiot synthesises in his appendix to this volume, are confronted with both heightened responsibilities and job insecurity within a context determined by the 'permanent reorganisation of businesses' (p. 254).

Trentin, in partial response, distinguishes between permanent employment (*il posto fisso*), on the one hand, and, on the other, the 'quality of work' and the 'employability of the individual' (p. 270).

In the first (Fordist) industrial revolution, and to an extent in the second (Taylorist), enlightened managers compensated for worker alienation with wages, benefits, and a better standard of living. This way of thinking, according to Trentin, 'continues to dominate the thinking of the Left' (p. 254). However, with the third revolution, 'which is grounded in innovation and progress of knowledge', the Left should now demand, additionally, investments in human resources, in the cultivation of workers' ability to learn, think, and create (p. 254). This would guarantee workers their employability over the entire course of their lives (on this, Trentin's thoughts on '*La riforma del welfare e l'invecchiamento attivo*' [pp. 99–102 and *passim*] are also of great interest). Worker employability, Trentin reminds us, is of critical importance, not only for workers but also for the Right. The ready availability of a qualified workforce is *conditio sine qua non* for productivity, profitability, and competitiveness. However, he contends, today's Right lacks the 'enlightened thinkers of the first two industrial revolutions who in the past knew how to humanise the workplace' (p. 255).

Cruciani argues that Trentin's is an 'epistemological revolution' (p. 27) because his thought constitutes a break with the Leninist conception of workers as revolutionary subjects and as members of a class. For Trentin, workers are complex individuals who have been divided by Taylorist systems of production. That is, in one setting they are required to set aside their intelligence and skills, and they are reduced 'to the status of docile instruments, completely subordinate to the power of their bosses' (p. 254). Outside the workplace, they are functional members of society.

Therefore, the struggle for better working conditions, for rights and for the freedom to develop as a person and a worker is the antecedent to any discussion of power. If businesses, to remain competitive, must be afforded a level of planning flexibility that excludes stable, long-term employment, then workers, employed and unemployed, must be empowered to act as free agents in a fluid marketplace of labour. In other words, reduced job security is to be exchanged for ongoing opportunities – funded by employers, the worker, and the State – to (re)train. This would enhance the worker's employment prospects and leverage in today's fluid job marketplace (p. 89). They would be transformed from employees (*lavoratori dipendenti*) into autonomous providers of services (*prestatori d'opera*).

These ideas are articulated throughout the volume and especially in a chapter titled '*Lavoro e conoscenza*', the *Lectio doctoralis* given by Trentin at the Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, in September 2002. The theme of '*Lavoro e conoscenza*' is that of making work 'an ongoing process of updating one's knowledge and therefore ability to choose' (p. 85). Where we work and the quality of our employment (the gratification potentially gained from work) are important elements of our personality. However, flexible accumulation – the intensification of Taylorist specificity, and the planet-wide dispersion of the Fordist mode of assembly, both by-products of the third industrial revolution – has led to a widespread 'lessening of expertise', as Trentin avers, one result of which is the 'creation of a veritable *second labour market*': significant segments of the population are relegated to the ranks of the working poor, an 'enormous waste' of human and professional resources, due in large measure to the lack of 'possibilities to keep pace with *innovations*' (p. 86; Trentin's emphases).

The second section of this book, '*Il laboratorio intellettuale di Bruno Trentin (2001–2006)*' includes a selection of '*Interventi politici coevi*', one of which sheds important light on Trentin's views on the centrality of worker participation (as individuals and as a group), in the organisation of the workplace. Even those who do not work in Italy can

cull his thoughts on this topic from '*La partecipazione dei lavoratori nella Costituzione italiana*' ('Worker Participation in the Italian Constitution'), which reads Article 46 ('the Republic recognises the right of workers to collaborate, in the ways and limits established by law, in the management of firms') against Article 1 ('Italy is a democratic Republic, founded on work').

In sum, *La libertà viene prima* is very topical and of great interest across the academic spectrum, and it is sure to catalyse thought and discussion.