

Valentino Parlato and the Question of the Environment

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(translated by saed)

Much has been said and written, in the sad days of his passing on 2 May 2017, about the extraordinary figure that was Valentino Parlato. He was an important intellectual and a brilliant journalist endowed with the capacity to synthesise issues, balancing profundity with levity. A comrade and gentleman, he thrived in self-irony. Generosity was for him a way of life. He was presumptuously modest, a rare-breed of a free-thinking communist who eschews common-sense rhetoric and ideological traps. This is only to cite a few ways in which comrades and friends have remembered him through the mass media.

But here is some history. Valentino was born in Tripoli, Libya, in 1931, from a family originating from the province of Agrigento, Sicily. At age 20, in 1951, he was kicked out of Libya, then a British protectorate, because of his communist militancy, and repatriated to Italy. Following his jurisprudence studies at the University of Rome, thanks to his parents' support, he worked first at *L'Unità* newspaper (founded by Antonio Gramsci) and afterwards for *Rinascita*, the glorious Italian Communist Party (PCI) weekly edited by Palmiro Togliatti. He worked for the weekly until he was expelled from the PCI in 1969 for having signed onto the new editorial initiative of *Il Manifesto*. *Il Manifesto* is an independent communist daily that first started as a monthly. It was founded by a group of intellectuals, among whom Luigi Pintor, Rossana Rossanda, Luciana Castellina, Lucio Magri, Aldo Natoli, and Ninetta Zandegiacomi. Frequently taking on director's duties, Valentino worked for 40 years at *Il Manifesto*, until the 2011 forced liquidation of the paper's co-operative. He then left the daily along with others as a result of political differences. His dissent did not prevent him from continuing to write for the paper (on this, see the documentary by Salinas, Catucci, and Parlato 2005).

A lot has been said about Valentino, but there remains a lot more to be said. One is about his ecological sensibility. It was thanks to him that James O'Connor's Second Contradiction Thesis came to Italy, who was then mainly known for his *Fiscal Crisis of the State*. It was in 1991 that Valentino, at the time director of *Il Manifesto*, agreed to publish *Capitalismo Natura Socialismo*, the Italian corollary to *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. He assumed directorship of the periodical for several years, until the rise of the Berlusconi Right in 1994. Following the principle of "everyone is boss in their own house", the Berlusconi government undid all environmental legislation that had been approved in Italy during the Ecological Spring, in the 1960's and 1970's, and worked towards undermining the culture that undergirded that ecological awakening.

The Italian periodical was part of an international network of journals that shared copyright for all materials published. The network included the head periodical, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, founded in the US by James O'Connor and Barbara Laurence; *Ecología Política*, founded in Spain by Joan Martínez-Alier; and *Écologie et Politique*, founded in France by Jean-Paul Deléage. It was an attempt to remake leftist thought, starting from the environmental question, as Parlato and I explained in a lengthy series of introductory editorials to the journal. For us, the global crisis that opened up with the fall of the Berlin Wall does not allow for national responses. It requires of the Italian (Marxist) Left to become open to the new contradictions brought to light by environmental movements, pacifists, and feminists. We then emphasised the need for theory that "cannot be satisfied ... by fencing off the house garden and doggedly growing one's vegetables" (Parlato and Ricoveri 1991, 5-6, translation by saed). With this last remark, we were questioning the "presumed" superiority of Italian communism. Such statements retain their actuality, if one thinks of the intensification of the global crisis. And they remain even more remarkably unheeded when we think

of how Italian politics and the Italian Left continue to underestimate environmental problems and to banish them from their political actions.

His subsequent, more recent work shows deep grasp of the ecological question (Parlato 2012). In that book, dedicated to the crisis at *il Manifesto*, Valentino concludes that we must keep our contact with the Earth as we are to survive and succeed. His attentiveness to ecology not only does not contradict, but underlines the main political connotation of his being a different and independent communist, one who refutes ideological traps, which he regarded as “false consciousness.” At the end of an interview in the above-mentioned video, he asserts that communism is a path that each of us and each generation must undertake to attain as much as possible the French Revolution’s ideals of “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” That is, as long as it is understood that such achievements will never be completely realised and knowing that there are unfavourable phases, like the current one, and favourable ones, like the post-war period in Italy, informed by antifascist resistance. It is precisely for this reason that one must constantly return to the path, just like Sisyphus.

The third and last piece I would like to call to attention is the one he published in *Il Manifesto* on 9th of April, hardly a month before his passing (“*In Viaggio per Capire il Nuovo Mondo*,”—On the Road to Understand the New World). Valentino there decries in broad strokes the crisis of the historical Left, whose social base was “living labour,” presently displaced and humiliated through globalisation, the exasperating search for productivity, and finance—the real power during this historical phase. In the article, Parlato asserts that we are living in an epochal shift that will not be going in a positive direction without understanding the changes that affect the youth of today. He therefore concludes that there is much work to be done and that there will doubtless be errors made, but in the end some Karl Marx will arrive on the scene. The importance of referring to this article is that it is exactly the environmental crisis—not only climate change but the waste and destruction of resources and human lives—that must guide the main transformations of the Left so that it can be updated to contemporary times in comprehending and studying these epochal shifts, and transform these understandings and studies into coherent political choices. To exit its crisis—a crisis no less serious than the Left’s—, financial capitalism discharges its costs on people and nature, as Pope Bergoglio never tires of repeating.

References

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