

Research program:
“How to reconstruct critical political economy after *Production of Commodities by means of Commodities*? The broken paths of the Italian debate: 1968-1983”

Annex C

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Description

The publication of *Production of Commodities by means of Commodities* by Sraffa (1960) opened an important debate among Italian economists. The re-emergence of the surplus within a circular production perspective, brought back to a conflictual view on distribution and an internal criticism of the dominant theory, for which profit was the remuneration of capital as an aggregate factor of production. The debate involved economists, philosophers, sociologists and social scientists, and lasted until the early 1980s.

The recovery of a Classical-Ricardian approach contributed to give new life to the discussion about the Marxian theory of value, capital and crisis. The debate on the “transformation” of values into prices of production had been until then dominated by Dobb’s canonical interpretation according to which the determination of equilibrium exchange ratios goes through two approximations: the first constituted by values, the second by prices of production. Sraffa’s theoretical scheme was presented as the conclusion of the logical structure of Marxian argument, as well as the starting point of a far-reaching reconstruction.

In 1973, a group of young economists from the University of Modena proposed to rebuild Marxism through an original synthesis between a Sraffian approach to price determination and Keynes’ principle of effective demand, and opened a discussion in the theoretical journal of the Communist Party, *Rinascita*. A deep disagreement came especially from those scholars who were rethinking the logical structure of Marx’s work, particularly on the theory of value. Since 1968-69 (when Colletti published two seminal essays that criticized the traditional reading to the Marxian theory of value) until 1983 (in which many conferences dedicated to the hundredth centenary of the death of Marx and of the birth of Keynes and Schumpeter took place) the debate went on: not only in conferences, books or scientific articles, but also in theoretical-political journals or even newspapers.

The purpose of the present research project is to provide a “backwards” reading of that debate. Even if it ended in an unfruitful polemic between “Marxists” and “Neoricardians”, nevertheless it showed an unequalled vitality of Italian Political Economy. The aim is to individuate the roads not taken and the starting points from where a critical political economy rooted in a critique of political economy could begin again, considering also the contributions which may come from the Schumpeterian, the Circuitist, and the Kaleckian traditions. The aim is to look at Marx’s theory of value also as a macro-monetary theory of capitalist production, which is not divorced from the economic problematic of value and the philosophical problematic of contradiction.

As a consequence, special attention will be devoted to some themes which were not adequately dealt in the 1970s and early 1980s: (i) the categorical, qualitative and methodological, articulation of the Marxian/Classical discourse on value and its contemporary reprise; (ii) the conceptualisation of money and crisis, and how it affects the interpretation of capitalism; (iii) how the abstract inquiry about capitalist dynamics interacted with the economic policy debate.

It would then be possible to test a double hypothesis. On the one hand, if the non-communication between Marxian scholars and Sraffian scholars may be at least partially

overcome looking at the problem from an Italian window, exploiting aspects which were present in that discussion but not adequately valorised. On the other hand, if the limits of that debate were not due to an inadequate methodological self-understanding coupled with a limited perspective on the role of money: both points were at the heart of the discussion in Marxian theory since 1980.