

Lelio Basso and the Missed Opportunities of Italian Socialism

Lelio Basso was a major figure of the postwar Italian left who urged its parties to follow through on their revolutionary programs and avoid subordinating themselves to the ruling Christian Democrats. Italy's Socialists and Communists should have heeded his advice.



Lelio Basso in Milan, Italy in 1953. (Wikimedia Commons)

The Italian Marxist thinker Lelio Basso always sought to bridge the gap between theory and practice, a goal that is often aspired to and rarely achieved. Basso was a key figure in Italy's wartime anti-fascist resistance and in the creation of the postwar Italian Republic. During the Cold War, he tried to steer a path between the two dominant ideological trends of the European left: reformist, pro-American social democracy and orthodox, pro-Soviet communism.

Rosa Luxemburg was a crucial reference point for Basso, and he worked tirelessly to promote her political thought. He sought to advance his distinctive understanding of socialism through the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), the second party of the Italian workers' movement during the postwar decades, operating in the shadow of its Communist rival. Basso later broke with the Socialists because of their drift to the right in a governing alliance with Italy's Christian Democrats.

There are many facets of Basso's approach that are highly relevant to the politics of our own time, from his humanistic view of socialism to his emphasis on democracy and his internationalist work with the Russell Tribunals that documented US atrocities in Vietnam. He is a figure who deserves to be better known in the Anglophone world, and the publication

for the first time in English of Basso's [translated essays](#) is an excellent opportunity for a closer look at his legacy.

In Mussolini's Shadow

Born in 1903, Lelio Basso first joined the youth wing of the PSI in Milan in the aftermath of the First World War. Basso stuck with the Socialists rather than the Italian Communist Party (PCI), formed in 1921 by figures on the PSI's left wing such as Amadeo Bordiga and Antonio Gramsci. He was influenced by Protestant values and had close relationships with some key intellectuals of the time.

When Mussolini established his dictatorship, Basso set about organizing anti-fascist networks. The Fascist police force arrested Basso in 1928 and sent him to confinement on the island of Ponza. After his release from Ponza, Basso became a key activist in the PSI's "internal center," always refusing to leave the country for the life of an exile. This work led to another period of internment by the regime in 1939–40.

During the war, Basso helped build a new left-wing current, the Movement of Proletarian Unity (MUP). MUP activists took part in the resistance to the Nazi occupation of Northern Italy after the ouster of Mussolini in 1943. The MUP later merged with the Socialists to form the PSIUP (Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity), under the leadership of PSI veteran Pietro Nenni.

The PSIUP won more votes than the Communists in Italy's first postwar election in 1946, although they would be unable to retain this advantage over Palmiro Togliatti's PCI for long. Basso represented the PSI in the Constituent Assembly and played an important role in the drafting of Italy's new democratic constitution. From January 1947 until the summer of 1948, he was the PSIUP's secretary.

During this period there was a fierce debate inside the party between the left-wing Socialists, with Basso as one of their most influential leaders, and a faction led by Giuseppe Saragat. Saragat eventually led his followers out of the PSIUP to establish a small pro-American social-democratic party as the Cold War intensified. Meanwhile, the Socialists reverted to their old name.

In the crucial election of 1948, the Socialists formed an electoral alliance with Togliatti's PCI, the Popular Democratic Front, to challenge the Christian Democrats (DC) of Alcide De Gasperi. With strong backing from the United States and the Catholic Church, the DC defeated the left-wing bloc by a decisive margin. Saragat's party joined De Gasperi's coalition. This ruling bloc of the DC and minor centrist parties held power until the early 1960s.

An Italian Road to Socialism?

Basso was critical of the Popular Democratic Front experience, arguing that it was more like a short-term electoral cartel than a longer-term project for empowering the popular classes. In the years that followed, facing the governments led by De Gasperi, Basso proved to be a strong voice for the left-wing opposition in parliament, as it faced a hostile political climate. This included an attempt by the DC to rig the electoral law in its favor, which the opposition parties defeated.

The review *Quarto Stato*, which Basso had founded in 1946, served as a platform for a radical and unconventional left. Basso denounced the "betrayal" of the social objectives set out in the postwar constitution and opened up the debate on a distinctive "Italian road to socialism." He was strongly critical of the Cold War straitjacket that constrained European politics. In 1956, he condemned the Soviet invasion of Hungary and had a brief rapprochement with Pietro Nenni's leadership of the PSI.

In the wake of Hungary, Nenni distanced his party from the PCI, which had supported the

invasion, and began moving closer toward the Christian Democrats. This eventually led to the Centre-Left coalition of the 1960s, with the blessing of the Kennedy administration in the United States. Although he supported the idea of political dialogue, Basso opposed the coalition, which he saw as a shift to the center and an abandonment of working-class politics. In 1964, the left-wing opponents of the pact with the DC broke with Nenni to form a new group, the PSIUP, which took its name from the postwar Socialist organization. Lelio Basso became the PSIUP's first chairman. As Basso told the Italian parliament when the split came: In our opinion, there is only one thing that cannot be done, and that is to sacrifice the autonomy of the working-class movement, to subordinate its political choices to the overall plan of the dominant class. And it is exactly that overall plan that we now see in the [Aldo] Moro government.

Later Years

The PSIUP took thirty-eight deputies and senators from the PSI with it. The trade-union leader Vittorio Foa, a resistance veteran like Basso, was another prominent adherent of the new party. Basso continued his intellectual work with two publications, *Problemi del Socialismo* (still published today, under the name *Parolechiave*) and the *International Socialist Journal*.

Writing for the [Socialist Register](#) in 1966, Basso's assessment of the Centre-Left experiment was scathing:

Nenni was not concerned with actual policies; his main objective — perhaps his only one — was to get into the government and stay there, and to do this he was prepared to accept almost any conditions. This kind of approach easily transforms a position of strength into one of weakness . . . not only has every single promised reform been postponed under the pretext of the difficult economic situation and the need to safeguard the lira, but economic planning, which was supposed to be the foundation of the Center-Left, has continually been postponed to allow an incessant series of amendments to be made to the first Five-Year Plan, mainly to satisfy the demands of big business.

Basso described the PSIUP as “an important factor in the Italian Left” that could “play a dynamic role of considerable importance.” (His remark that the PSIUP had approximately 150,000 members — “not much in a country where party membership figures are extremely high” — stands as a reminder that this was a different age in European politics.) He called for a form of unity with the PCI that would “not mean trailing along behind the Communists,” encouraging the larger party to democratize its internal life and take a more independent line towards the Soviet Union.

However, Basso warned against any attempt to bring the Communists into the ruling Centre-Left alliance, in a presentiment of the “historic compromise” strategy that the PCI would adopt in the following decade:

An alliance with the Christian Democratic Party, which is the party of Italian capitalism, cannot possibly be the way to reach socialism, not even the way to obtain structural reforms: it is only the way to the integration of the workers. The purpose of the Left cannot be to fight for a better Center-Left or some kind of new alliance with the Christian Democrats, which would only lead to the same results, but to fight to defeat the Christian Democrats, to try and break Catholic unity on the basis of an aggressive strategy encompassing all the centers of capitalist power, mobilizing the masses for political goals and for options antagonistic to those of capitalism.

The electoral high point for the PSIUP came in 1968, when it won 4.5 percent of the vote, overtaking the neofascist Italian Social Movement to become the fifth-largest party in the Italian parliament. However, when the PSIUP failed to criticize the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia later that year, Basso left the party and began to concentrate on international

issues. The PSIUP lost its parliamentary foothold in 1972 and the majority of its members joined the PCI, which was soon attempting to form a governing alliance with the Christian Democrats, just as Basso had previously feared.

Basso's key interest in these years was the Russell Tribunal on US war crimes in Vietnam (1966–67), sponsored by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, later followed by the second Russell Tribunal on military dictatorships in Latin America (1974–76). In 1972, he was elected to the Italian Senate as an independent candidate on the lists of the PCI and PSIUP. The following year, he established the Lelio and Lisli Basso Foundation as a vehicle for cultural and intellectual initiatives. Basso continued that work until his death in 1978.

Socialist Subjectivity

Basso was part of the generation who grew up in the aftermath of the First World War, a conflict that was a watershed for European society. His understanding of socialism was revolutionary and opposed to what he saw as the reformist deviations of the Second International. Materialist in its view of reality, it was also “voluntarist” in its commitment to bringing about a new society. He criticized the philanthropic and paternalistic tendencies of nineteenth-century socialism and put forward a vision of the proletariat striving to acquire human dignity.

The theme of working-class consciousness was crucial for Basso's political thought. He believed that the working class had to become aware of its historical role in order to be an effective agent of radical political change — in today's language, it had to constitute itself as a social and political subject. Rosa Luxemburg had a major influence on Basso, who wrote a book summarizing her ideas. He stressed that in her understanding, socialism would not simply involve the socialization of the means of production, but also “a reversal of the relationship that exists today between the product that dominates and the producer who is dominated, so that workers gain full control over collective social processes.”

Basso insisted that there was no contradiction between the daily struggles of workers to improve their conditions and political action geared towards overthrowing capitalism, so long as those struggles retained the capacity to undermine the existing relations of production. He rejected the distinction between reformist and revolutionary programs that was typical of the Second International. In the post-war decades, he was involved in debates around the concept of structural reforms or “revolutionary reformism” as a way to overcome the polarization between social democracy and Leninist-style insurrection, both of which seemed incapable of delivering a socialist transformation in the conditions of Western Europe.

For Basso, revolution was not the violent and abrupt seizure of power, but a historical process that would produce a radical transformation of social relations. In his words, “the socialist future is already there in the capitalist present,” and we should never separate immediate battles “from the overall vision of the struggle itself, the daily struggle for reform from the prospect of revolution, from the final goal.”

Rosa Luxemburg also served as a crucial influence for Basso's view of the “totality of the historical process” and of the contradictions that emerge within it. In this interpretation, the proletariat is the universal class, the subject of transformation, while the socialist political party is the form taken by proletarian class consciousness. The task of the party is to combining daily struggles with long-term objectives. Basso envisaged it as a well-organized force, able to educate and guide workers as the active vehicle of class consciousness.

Collective Liberty

Basso founded his political action on three key values: equality, freedom, and dignity. He combined influences from Marx and neo-Protestant thinking. From Marx, he derived a conception of humanity as being immersed in the material conditions of social life. From

neo-Protestantism, he acquired a sense of man's inner freedom, a deep spiritual need that he considered to be part of the universal human essence.

From his early writings, freedom in Basso's understanding was not the expression of natural rights, but rather of the rights enjoyed by citizens as members of a political community. He emphasized the link between freedom and participation, valuing freedom in collective terms, seeing it as the point of equilibrium between individuality and sociality.

Basso strongly influenced the composition of Article 3 of the [post-war Italian constitution](#), which translated these ideas into the law of the land:

All citizens shall have equal social dignity and shall be equal before the law, without distinction of gender, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It shall be the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the country.

Basso developed his vision of democracy as requiring the participation of the masses in all aspects of the country's political, economic, and social life. He believed that the political struggle of the working class had to make use of the instruments of bourgeois democracy, arguing that these institutions were themselves the product of struggles against the ruling class, giving workers an "effective, albeit partial, way of participating in power" and of limiting conservative reaction.

This led Basso to reassess the legal and institutional terrain in the light of Marx's analyses. He argued that changes in power relations would open up new opportunities for the subaltern classes within political institutions. The state is not just a monolithic bloc by which the ruling class exerts its authority. It can also be a tool for the subaltern classes to use in pursuit of social transformation. In the same way, we should not perceive the legal system of rights and rules simply as an instrument of the bourgeoisie, but rather as an expression of society as a whole, with all of its struggles and divisions.

International Justice

In the 1960s, Basso's political work increasingly concentrated on international questions. He took a keen interest in the national liberation movements of the Third World, while harshly criticizing the role of the US and distancing himself from official Soviet positions. In 1965, he summarized his view of world politics in the following terms:

Peaceful coexistence must be pursued and defended as the framework of peace within which the workers' movement and the peoples of the Third World must conduct their class struggle and their liberation struggle, without allowing imperialism to export counter-revolution to every country. Class struggle in the developed capitalist countries and the struggle for emancipation from neocolonial exploitation in developing countries are therefore two sides of the same struggle against the common enemy: this solidarity, which is not only moral but based on a community of interests, arises from the fact that imperialism is a unitary system governed by a single mechanism.

Such arguments went completely against the grain of West European social democracy at the time, which firmly supported the US camp in the Cold War. This included Basso's old party, the PSI, whose leader Nenni had now become a strong defender of NATO. However, Basso also rejected the idea that socialists should accept Soviet leadership on the international stage, and strongly condemned the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

He showed a remarkable capacity to bring together national and international struggles by forging political networks across borders. In November 1966, he worked with figures like Bertrand Russell and the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre to establish the Russell Tribunal. Its goal was to investigate violations of international law by the US military in

Vietnam. The tribunal held two sessions in 1967, with testimonies and a final verdict. Basso thus played a key role in the invention of public tribunals, based upon universal principles and claiming the moral authority to judge major violations of international law by states. In the 1970s, he became chair of the Second Russell Tribunal that examined human rights violations by the military regimes in Brazil, Chile, and other Latin American countries. The initiative led in turn to the establishment of the [Permanent Peoples' Tribunal](#). This body, based on the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples that had been proclaimed in Algiers in 1976, was formally launched in Bologna in 1979, the year after Basso's death. Hosted at the Lelio and Lisli Basso Foundation, the tribunal has since met more than thirty times to scrutinize major violations of political, social, and economic rights around the world. In the [last decade alone](#), it has taken up the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Rohingyas in Burma, and the Kurds in the Turkish state, among other questions.

In his presentation to the Second Russell Tribunal, Basso warned that the spread of dictatorships was a universal menace: "What is at stake is the future of humanity . . . no man could be safe from the risk of a modern slavery." The purpose of the tribunal, he insisted, would be "to hear in the depths of our conscience the voice of truth, to make this voice speak to the oppressed of the world and to the free men who can still save themselves from a dark future threatening us all."

Basso's life spans the history of what Eric Hobsbawm called the "short twentieth century," from the First World War and its aftermath to the tragic decades of fascism and renewed conflict, the post-war phase of democratic reconstruction, the decline of traditional party politics, and the rise of international activism on human rights. He was an original, dissonant voice within the socialist tradition, whose understanding of socialism and attempts to apply it in practice offer many important lessons for our own time.