

Tribute to Lelio Basso*

by Giancarlo Monina

Over the course of his life, Lelio Basso played numerous distinguished public roles in Italy, Europe and the wider world: he was a political writer, a theoretical Marxist, an essayist, a publicist, a member of the legal profession, a historian, a lawyer for major political processes, a party leader, a parliamentarian, a man of culture, and a promoter of editorial initiative and international organisations.

His thoughts and actions do not lend themselves to simplification, and when – all too often – people try to label his political and intellectual positions, or to pigeonhole them, they end up betraying the essence of the man.

The narrative thread that links the stages of his route through life may be represented by the tension between ideals, theoretical elaboration, and political commitment; from the weaving between the “socialist struggle” (in which he was a real party militant) and the “theoretical battle”, a connection derived from his somewhat novel rethinking of Marxism.

Among the many citations that may be taken from his writing, there is one phrase that I believe properly represents the difficult and complex course of his biographical journey:

“When you reject both horns of a dilemma in order to propose a new and more difficult solution, you run the risk of remaining alone.”

And while it is a good idea to reject simplification, it is nevertheless possible to extract the two key themes from Basso’s thinking and actions:

* This succinct political and intellectual profile draws on the most recent studies about Lelio Basso, which we reference here for further reading: C. Giorgi e G. Monina, *L'utopia di Lelio Basso*, in *L'AltroNovecento*, vol. II, Milano 2011, pp. 363-380; G. Monina, *Lelio Basso e il finanziamento pubblico dei partiti (1963-1974)*, in "Parolechiave", 47, June 2012, pp. 71-94; G. Monina, "Problemi del socialismo". *le origini della rivista di Lelio Basso*, in "Parolechiave", 52, December 2014, pp. 183-198; C. Giorgi, *Un socialista del Novecento. Uguaglianza, libertà e diritti nel percorso di Lelio Basso*, Rome 2015; G. Monina, *Lelio Basso, leader globale. Un socialista nel secondo Novecento*, Rome 2016; G. Monina, *Lelio Basso e as Origins Ideias e Políticas do Tribunal Russel II*, in G. Tosi e L. de Fátima Guerra Ferreira (Editors), *Ditaturas militares, Estado de exceção e resistência democrática na América Latina*, João Pessoa 2016, pp. 107-127; G. Monina, *Origens e exórdios das "Fundações Basso"*, João Pessoa 2017.

1. The first is his radical interpretation of the theory and practice of democracy, which he aligned substantially with the “long road to socialism”.
2. The second key point is internationalisation. For Basso this represented the necessary complement to a conception of democracy aimed at the creation of a human liberation project.

Initially it was the natural choice to deploy himself “on behalf of the masses”: a choice that Basso made in the initial post-war period, when he realised the extent of disruption caused by the people’s re-entry into public life, which he considered to be a true cultural revolution: a “democratic revolt [and] political and moral togetherness.”

Domestic and international democratic battles were the common thread between the political and intellectual parts of his life. This was a connection that passed across time and distance, with its theoretical foundations in the original conception that Basso had begun developing in the 1930s, based on the principles of freedom, on the individual, and on the law. Albeit very briefly, I will try to illustrate these basic characteristics.

In the context of a dialectical and antiauthoritarian Marxist interpretation, Basso proposed an idea of liberty that is closely connected to the idea of active participation in community life. This is an interpretation that contrasts with, and exceeds, the individualistic vision of liberal classical thinking; instead it defines freedom as the equilibrium between the individual and social dimensions. Hence, his conception of the *person* is defined as the active subject of social relationships in which the terms of equality, dignity and freedom converge.

The person, and so the *people*, are the true historical subjects of rights, which – according to Basso’s conceptions –also need to lose their individualistic and abstract character to become a dynamic element of change. In this vision, a right becomes a tool that is aimed towards the full development of the person (and people), and a tool for participation in the life of the community: an area of tension that is constantly redefined in the struggle for democracy.

Basso thus interpreted the relationship between legal order and social reality, and did so as a member of the constitutional assembly. Famously, in Article 3, paragraph 2 of the Italian constitution, Basso inserted elements that bring “legal norms into contact with actual reality”, and this reflects one of his particular

interpretations of the link between society and the institutional system. Namely, on the one hand the organisation of the law must reflect the conflictual dynamic present in society, but on the other it must avoid squandering the innovative potential of the norm – which in itself is capable of pushing for social change – in order to induce a material constitution to adapt itself to the contents of a more advanced formal constitution: “we cannot hold the law to be a static, closed expression, of fixed and unchanging relationships, because class struggle is a political struggle, and these relationships change each day and thus affect the juridical order.”

It is on this foundation of democracy that the elements of Basso’s thinking about liberty, the person, and on the law, are built and converge in the concept of people’s rights: the key direction of his international commitment. In Basso’s conception, democracy thrives in the union between equality and freedom, and can only be achieved through the experience of conflict, i.e. through an active social practice that gives people awareness of their rights and of their personality. For Basso, the recognition of the sovereignty of the people as a subject of democracy does not anticipate mediation, and cannot be translated into the intangible and misleading forms of the broader “national interest”. The concept of ‘the people’ is interpreted in concrete terms as the “real men that make up [the populace, and] the basis of collective life” and it is this tangible populace that is the true recipient of the law, even above the State. A fully democratic idea, including international law, thus cannot limit itself only to recognising the formal and political independence of the people, but must aim toward their total independence. Basso’s struggle for the establishment of global democracy thus extended the defence of personal rights from national rule of law to the creation of a new international legal order.

Democracy and internationalism therefore marked Basso's thoughts and actions throughout his life, in a constant interweaving that continued throughout the years and across the miles: for example we hear echoed in the acts and judgments of the second Russell Tribunal – which in the early nineteen-seventies denounced and condemned human rights violations perpetrated by oppressive Latin American regimes – the words that he spoke before the Constitutional Assembly and then in the many courtrooms where in the 1940s and 50s he defended partisans and

hundreds of workers and militants accused of crimes committed during social struggles.

Obviously this is not the place to elaborate in absolute detail on Basso's rich political and intellectual journey, so I must therefore confine myself to highlighting only the key points.

In this sense, it may be helpful to recall (in the words of Stefano Rodotà) Basso's "constituent" vocation, which led him to found the *Istituto per lo studio della società contemporanea* (ISSOCO) – the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Society – in 1969, then in 1973 the Lelio and Lisli Basso Foundation, and finally in 1976 the International Lelio Basso Foundation for the Rights of the People.

The idea of founding a centre for study, research, and political/cultural initiative had always been at the core of his being, but only began to take shape in the mid-nineteen-sixties, when the great changes that were shaking the world in those years convinced him of the urgency to deepen the study of contemporary global society. In 1965 Basso lamented: "the lack of cognitive and conceptual tools, fearful ignorance in the face of societal evolution, and the total inadequacy of workers' responses to the problems posed by society". At the heart of the project was the opening of its library – now enriched with more than 40,000 volumes, and celebrated throughout Europe – with the aim of "offering post-fascist generations an open, non-provincial and non-dogmatic tool for cultural and political education." The opportunity to realise this ambitious project finally became concrete in 1967, with Basso's move from Milan to Rome, and following the restructuring of a dilapidated mediaeval hall in Via della Dogana Vecchia in the Italian capital.

Regarding the dialectic between continuity and innovation, Basso began with the "crisis of traditional strategies" of the left, and from the emergence of the new subjectivity, highlighting the serious problems deriving from the lack of coherence "between the old and the new"; he called for "a careful study of the dynamics of development of modern capitalist society". ISSOCO was founded in November 1969, and its activity hinged on a program of socioeconomic research into the nature of power, and power in advanced industrial societies.

On the subject of the involvement of new generations, in 1971 Giorgio Bocca described the building in Via della Dogana, in which "groups of scholars and students continuously come and go" moving between the labyrinthine shelves "from

which revolutionary and sociological books and periodicals overflow, from revolutionary journalism to the latest mimeographed '*gauchistes*'. There are publications in Cyrillics and in Albanian, in Greek and in Chinese."

From 1971 onwards Basso had the idea of making ISSOCO the scientific branch of a more structured foundation "for the study of the history of democracy and the workers' movement", which involved the management of the library and the completion of its opening to the public: he considered it to be his legacy to posterity. And so in 1973, the Lelio and Lisli Basso- ISSOCO Foundation was founded, and its first act was the purchase of valuable libraries and documents, including the first correspondence in the twentieth century between Gorky and Bogdanov, and a collection of historical books and periodicals on the The International Workingmen's Association. On June 18, 1974, the Foundation received public recognition for its appointment as 'moral institution".

Since its inception, the Foundation has shown an autonomous dimension that, has even surpassed the management and spirit of the founder to create a multifaceted history of people, ideas, knowledge and cultural organization. Of that attitude and of that spirit I recall the effort put into the theoretical renewal of Marxism and historiography of the workers' movement. Marx and history were the fields of analysis and reflection that Basso had chosen and joined with since the time of his youthful education, and his thoughts were moulded precisely into the historical writings of the German philosopher.

This was also the grounds on which Basso developed his conception of socialism: antidogmatic because it adhered to the changing reality of the historical process, and on which he intended to promote a renewal of Marxism based on the philological reconstruction of the history of the workers' movement and that of its sources. In fact, the establishment of the Foundation coincided with that of its historical section, at the heart of preparation for the first "International Week of Marxist Studies" (dedicated to *Rosa Luxemburg and to the development of Marxist thought*) which took place in Reggio Emilia and Siena in September 1973. This is an occasion that was repeated in the years that followed. Attention paid to the texts and the sources of socialism, confirmed by the constant work of expanding the library's collection, also translated into the setting up of the historical archive.

“Philological Erudition, theoretical renewal, rediscovery of texts, frenzy and activism in organizing encounters, and creating forums for international debate”: an intense program that encountered many scholars along the way.

The Lelio and Lisli Basso – ISSOCO Foundation, however, coincided with only a part of the vast amount of international activities that Basso had been developing for a very long time.

Since at least 1966, with his participation in a leading role in the Russell Tribunal on US war crimes in Vietnam, and then in 1971, with his own preparation and launch of the Russell Tribunal II on Brazil, Chile and Latin America, the socialist leader placed internationalist commitment at the centre of his affairs. Following the conclusion of Russell Tribunal II in January 1976, Basso decided to create a second centre of study and research, specifically dedicated to international issues, aimed at investigating “at all levels the mechanisms of imperialist domination, and thus providing theoretical support to the actions of the masses.”

The establishment of the *Fondazione Internazionale Lelio Basso per il diritto dei popoli* (FILB) – the International League for People’s Rights– was incorporated into an organic international action plan, which would then be called the “Basso System” and consisted of three elements and three organizations: *study and research*, realised in the International Foundation; *mobilization of the masses*, which took shape in the International League for People’s Rights; finally, *jurisdictional activity*, which came to light in the People’s Permanent Tribunal, which was set up by Basso but which actually began a few months after his death in June 1979. The inspiring principle of the Basso System was that of rights of the people, which was incorporated into a specific act on July 4, 1976 in the *Universal Declaration of People’s Rights* at the International Conference of Algiers and convened by the new International Foundation. In this one finds a formulation built on a theory of the rights of the people that, above and beyond the individualistic and abstract egalitarian principle that stands at the base of a human right, gives a juridical role to the people as a collective entity, which does not necessarily correspond to sanctioned boundaries, but rather is rooted in history, and can act as the new theme of a global democracy.

As already mentioned, Basso started out with a reflection that leads us to analyse in depth the causes of violations of international law by recognising the complex

interaction of social, economic and political reasons, in the context of his prophetic analysis of the globalisation of capitalism. The anti-imperialist struggle simultaneously took on both the ethical and legal dimensions that were able to anticipate so much of “today's developments in international law” that, in fact, the “perspectives of globalization are destined to sweep away any residual Eurocentrism still so profoundly rooted in the same contemporary Marxist literature”. Participation and the establishment of international judiciary agencies were accompanied by Basso's attempt to promote a worldwide public opinion that can bring its weight to bear on the definition of new international law.

The International Foundation was thus constituted in 1976 (officially it commenced in February but its founding action can really be considered the Algerian conference) and among its first activities I remember the continuing commitment to the people of Latin America (in April 1977 an international seminar devoted to *the role of the armed forces in Latin America* was organized in Bologna, and in March 1979 at The Hague, the international conference entitled *Churches and Revolution in Latin America*) paying attention to the themes of “scientific/technological domination” and “cultural domination”.

The most important initiative focused solely on cultural imperialism took place while Basso was still alive: the second International Conference in Algiers (11-15 October, 1977), the first conference at an international level to deal with the topic in such a wide and effective way. At the centre of reflection was the defence of cultural identity as an indispensable element of the very existence of the people. To quote the man himself: “Destroying or contaminating a culture means destroying the dialectic of the individual moment and the social moment that is the rhythm of a man's life; it means depersonalising, casting into anonymity, into the void of a purely material existence, which no longer carries the heat of life; which no longer has a human dimension.”

Basso considered opposing resistance to the destruction of cultural identities to be the first battle in asserting the rights of the people, and in describing the forms assumed by cultural oppression he then proposed a field of inquiry that pre-empted much postcolonial discourse. The preservation of traditional cultures was not naturally interpreted as a return to the past, but as an enrichment opportunity so that all people, with equal dignity, could participate in the process of history. It was

the “spring of the people” that would mark the end of the “Eurocentric period” and began the “true history of the world”.

After Basso’s death in December 1978, both the historical foundation and the international one spent more than thirty years operating autonomously, although intertwining their human and cultural experiences as they progressed. Via della Dogana Vecchia, the headquarters of both institutions, became the *genius loci* of shared inspiration, passions, sentiments, prospects, aspirations, and idealistic and material battles.

For three decades, these parallel paths have been marked by fervent study, research, training, dissemination, and a host of initiatives, projects, and publications. There is still a story to be written, that tells of the women and men, the successes and defeats, about concrete utopias, and that would propose an important reflection of the ‘most important’ parts of national and international history between the late 20th and the beginning of the 21st century.

For organizational reasons, and under the pressure of the processes of globalization – which have made the subject distinctions less and less justified – in 2005 the two entities merged under the sole name of the Lelio and Lisli Basso-ISSOCO Foundation, integrating their own experiences but at the same time keeping the historical origins alive. This is the legacy of Lelio Basso – to which I would also like to add that of Linda Bimbi – one that still inspires the activities of the Foundation, which aspires to propose itself as a benchmark and gathering place for the struggle for democracy, for the study of social and juridical/institutional history, of the culture of fundamental rights, of peace, and of opposition to all forms of war, dominion, and inequality.