Labriola-Plekhanov: the parallel lives, dissimilar and analogical, of two pioneers of Marxism

Dear colleagues, first of all I would like to apologise with You for the effort You will do in listening my speech that is not in Your mother tongue. I would like moreover to thank the organisers of this conference for having granted to my Institute the possibility to participate in this important meeting about the person of G. V. Plekhanov on the occasion of his birth anniversary. My name is Emilio Gianni and I am speaking on behalf of the Institute for the Study of Capitalism, Genoa, Italy. For an Italian historian of the workers' movement, speaking of G. V. Plekhanov means, almost automatically, linking the thinking and the action of the Russian intellectual to the thinking and the action of his Italian "homologous", A. Labriola. The political-personal path of both Plekhanov and Labriola shows in fact clear dissimilarities and peculiar analogies. Besides the difference of age and the different social roots – Plekhanov was born in 1856 to a rural noble landowner family, while Labriola in 1843 to a modest secondary schools' teacher – also their beginning is completely different. Plekhanov engaged himself immediately into the political activity of the Russian democratic currents and was later banished for almost forty years; during his exile he dedicated himself only to literature and politics. However, he had developed his Marxist positions already at the beginning of the Eighties, when he was not yet thirty years old. Labriola, who had been combining for a long time his moderate positions with his philosophical studies and took on a career in the academic world that would engage him lifelong, got to the materialism and joined to the socialism only between the end of the Eighties and the beginning of the Nineties, when he was over forty-five years old. Both of them, though, - and here is the first analogy – were the pioneers of Marxism in their own countries. But the most significant feature they have in common is their being interpreters of such primogeniture in countries characterised by a very backward capitalistic development, where the socialist and workers' issue was still mixing up with unresolved democratic-bourgeois problems. Also this role of standard bearers of Marxism in their motherlands is though marked by some similarities and by deep differences. Plekhanov and Labriola have in common the high level of their materialistic conception of history, which makes of them two international-level theoreticians, whose works are read and studied also outside their countries. From his "*Anarchism and Socialism"* of 1894, promptly translated and published in Italy the following year, Plekhanov, who would spend some time in Italy, would be later one of the most translated and read authors in the Italian workers' movement. Meantime it was always the Russian intellectual, who carried on with Labriola a long and solidary correspondence, that contributed to diffuse and to highlight among his own readers the works of the Italian Marxist. About the *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History* of 1895 by Labriola, which were appreciated also by the, at that time, 19-year-old Trotsky, as he would later acknowledge in his own autobiography, Plekhanov wrote that they were a «rare» and «not vacuous» work, in his review of 1897 on *Novoe Slovo*. The elective affinity shown by Plekhanov and Labriola in the theoretic extent did not nevertheless reflect in politics. While Plekhanov actively participated in the political struggle, becoming one of the most important leaders of the Russian socialdemocracy, Labriola, practically at his very beginning, refused that activity and that leading role, committing himself exclusively to the philosophy of Marxism. The activism of the one (Plekhanov) among the Menshevik ranks and the role of criticism of the reformist turn taken by the Italian socialism of the other (Labriola) were the prelude for a common and specific acquisition of Marxism, which would be really visible only at the end of their political life. Plekhanov's justification of the first imperialistic world war and the latest positions of Labriola supporting the Italian colonial politics, are the result, in our opinion, of an interpretation of the materialism that is more deterministic-objectivistic than dialectical. This reduction (simplification) of materialism, one can say, strengthened, both in Plekhanov and Labriola, the inclination to consider the development of the various historical phases more in terms of evolution than in terms of "jumps". Moreover, the same background-scepticism they showed against their respective workers' classes (which they considered to be not yet ripe for socialism), helps better understand how their thinking could concretise into a vision of the capitalistic transformation that is more scholastic-evolutionary than dialectical-revolutionary. Such approach led them to underestimate the possibilities of revolutionary utilisation of the moments of crisis and of split-ups of the world imperialistic order. Something different and higher are the valour and the activity of such a person like Lenin. The whole of his scientific elaboration, aiming at the definition of the frame for an international strategy – not only Russian – of the proletarian revolution, remains the sole successful example of utilisation of the dialectical method as the key to grasp the concrete and contradictory "growing" of the

real movement. Therefore, being able to fix its moments of scission, of break, “the weak ring of the chain”, and expressing the determination in seizing it have been his highest teachings and an example of political skillfullness. Along his political career he wrote a lot on this topic. But it was in his last fight, before the unanimous criticising chorus of the “philistines of reformism” and the “philistines of revolutionarism” and before the false goodwill of the *smenovekhist* clubs, that Lenin, in our opinion, was able to write, with the NEP, one of the best pages of the historical and dialectical materialism, page that not even the following defeat of the Russian *“assaut du ciel”* could ever cancel. Thank You for the attention.