



THE ITALIAN COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE

By **Mattia Granata**, *President National League of Cooperatives Study Centre, Rome and Director of the Ivano Barberini Foundation, Bologna*

The first page of the periodical “la Co-operazione Italiana”, “organ of the National League of Italian Cooperatives and Welfare ,” in August 1895 contained an article on *Cooperative Education* (“a matter of capital importance for the future of co-operation”), and one on *True and False Worker Cooperatives*.

Let’s say that, given the evergreen topics, it could have been the first page of a cooperative periodical from August 2020, where, however, we are going to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the founding of the International Cooperative Alliance.

In turn, the same page opened with the message that the then President of the Italian Cooperatives, Antonio Maffi, had arrived in London to accompany Italian delegates led by Luigi Luzzatti, along with Luigi Bodio and Leone Wollemborg among others; in it, the President greeted the “Masters and Fellows” gathered at the Congress, on behalf of all of those Italian co-operators “waiting to learn the watchwords for new struggles and the teaching for new conquests”.

In effect the “gratitude and affection” towards the brethren of the various cooperative movements gathered in London had deep roots in previous years and had already had repeated testimonies during the founding moments of the Italian cooperative movement. In 1886 in Milan, above all, Ed. Vansittart Neale, with G.J. Holyoake and other foreign representatives, had “baptised” the Federation of Cooperatives, which in 1893 would soon be renamed “Lega” (“League”).

Milan had been the incubator of this gestation period; here, in the context of one of the most advanced markets in the country and towards the end of the Nineteenth Century it was already greatly interconnected with international economic flows, various economic, social, political, and cultural factors such as to promote the “new” cooperative phenomenon.

The different cultural matrices of the origins phase, between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, had already been synthesised, roughly speaking, into the two orientations of the major political families which subsequently became rooted in the country, i.e. the radical-socialist secular matrix and the Catholic denominational matrix that wanted to promote the

social inclusion and cultural and material elevation, in the countryside and in the cities, of the disadvantaged classes, and to broaden the social bases of the recent Italian state, in order to modernise it.

The relationship between Italian co-operation and the newborn International Cooperative Alliance was therefore deep, precisely because it was based upon this original bond, and only the affirmation of Fascism and Nazism, a few decades later, was able to temporarily interrupt it.

The Fascist dictatorship strengthened in society in taking possession of pre-existing social structures. Co-operation was an intermediate body with a long tradition, and that is why it was one of the targets. Since the dawn of the 1920s, for ideological and economic reasons, the Fascist movement had been hard at work against cooperatives. The Fascist Party had then compressed, distorted, and subjugated cooperatives with the removal of the pre-Fascist elites, to make it its own instrument of control and direction of society and the market.

Understandably, therefore, the ICA came to firmly condemn the fascistisation of the Italian cooperative movement and decided to exclude it from its bosom, only re-establishing contact from the 1930s onwards.

During the post-war period, also during international phenomena, such as the Cold War, which deeply marked both the life of the ICA and the presence within it of the Italian cooperative movement, characterised by strong ties with Twentieth Century political families, the cultural and ideological link based upon the principles of the international cooperative movement did not disappear.

The years of the movement's maturity sanctioned the consensus for “contemporary cooperative democracy” again in support of the weakest, of peace, and of the promotion within the world of cooperatives as an ideal and as an instrument of social and economic emancipation.

This strong bond was established, we like to remember it upon this important anniversary, by the election of Ivano Barberini as President of the International Cooperative Alliance at the Seoul General Assembly in 2001.

He was the first Italian to hold, for two subsequent mandates, that office: the most prestigious position for a co-operator. His presidency was marked by a commitment to peace and social justice, values common to the various international movements that in this difficult historical moment of time will certainly have to be pursued with ever greater conviction.