

**GUILDS AND
CO-OPERATIVES
IN ITALY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649131839

Guilds and co-operatives in Italy by Odon Por & G. D. H. Cole

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ODON POR & G. D. H. COLE

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GUILDS

AND CO-OPERATIVES
IN ITALY. BY ODON POR

Translated by E. Townshend
Introduction by A. E. and an
Appendix by G. D. H. Cole



LONDON

THE LABOUR PUBLISHING COMPANY LTD.
38 GREAT ORMOND STREET

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INTRODUCTION

THE movement whose ideals and achievements are explained in this book has excited enthusiasm among many social reformers. The revolution in Russia by its sensational intensity made the needles of being to veer to it, and the imagination of millions was stirred with regard to it, and turned away from a movement much more intellectual and inspiring. A social revolution cannot succeed without technical competence and administrative ability on the part of the revolutionaries. Nor can it endure unless it fosters some lovable and desirable life. The new organization of Society, which superseded the old in Russia, does not excite affection because of its humanity, or admiration because of its efficiency. Something may yet come of it, but the heart cannot live long on deferred hope. There are many concerned for human welfare as deeply as any revolutionary, and no less desirous of a complete change in the social order, but, being students of history and psychology, they realize the reactions which are inevitable after violent action, and how much of what is finest in human nature perishes during prolonged social disorder. They believe the way of evolution is the right way, and intellectual and moral victories are the only ones which do not leave the victors

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bankrupt and desolate in spirit when the goal is won. The Italian movement Odon Por describes, the most varied, fascinating and intellectually interesting in the evolution of economic democracy, attained its present stature through incessant economic activity. Groups of Co-operators playing into each others hands, concerned first, and rightly so, about the world immediately about them, and unhampered by any complete theory of a highly organized State, developed in endless variety enterprises which excite the enthusiastic interest of reformers. Odon Por might have told much more about the varied character of these Co-operative enterprises if he had not wished to combine the philosopher with the historian. He is probably right, however, in thinking the time has come for some attempt at co-ordination of the associations created by the rich social imagination of Italian Co-operators. As there is a tendency to discount the statements of enthusiastic workers in any movement it might be well to refer to the reports on European Co-operation made by Strickland and Darling. Darling, referring to the Co-operative farm and labour societies, says the Italian achievement is brilliant and beyond anything attained elsewhere. He notes the enthusiasm among the members which he did not find to the same extent among Co-operators elsewhere. Strickland also speaks of the zeal and fire of the men; and he gives a delightful account of how a suggestion by a stranger in the office of a national federation excited a delirious discussion in which all, from the office boy to the president, took part on a democratic footing, the conclusion being

excellent and unanimous. He describes the evolutionary progress, from the small groups of craftsmen in a shop, and the gangs of navvies who undertake enterprises of increasing skill and grandeur, until the stage is reached where the Guilds employ their own experts, craftsmen, directors and thousands of workers. We are told of Co-operative farming societies where theatres have been built out of undistributed profits, local artists being employed to decorate the walls with frescoes. Both reports might be read with profit by those who desire to know more about this fascinating movement. Reformers in other countries find it difficult to kindle any deep or lasting enthusiasm, and I think this is because they too often begin by expounding social theories too vast and unrelated to the immediate interests of those they would organize. They speak of the nation rather than the parish. To talk about a regenerated humanity or an ideal State is like talking about heaven, and excites a thin and abstract enthusiasm. To make something spring up on the earth around us, to unite those who know each other, to give full play to local initiative seems to be the right way to kindle the heart and bring about the intensive cultivation of human life. I am sure it is right to begin with regional development and leave thought of the State to the last. The parish is more truly the cradle of the nation than Parliament, for it is there national character is begotten. The tendency of State departments is to obliterate character by insistence on regulation and formula to bring all into an unvital harmony. I am a little frightened when Odon

Por speaks about an alliance with the State ; but I am sure he knows what power has already been generated in the Guild organizations, and is confident they can hold their own against the Cæsarism which so easily springs up in administrators and Government officials. Besides I realize that sometime the warming of "the coldest of all cold monsters" must be attempted ; and it can only be done when the humanity of the people is powerfully entrenched in organizations which they have themselves created and which are true expressions of their character. The Italian guildsmen have done so much that they may accomplish the miracle of making the State the kindly big brother of the individual ; and no doubt it will become more efficient by the creation of Vocational Councils through which the thought of the wisest in every branch of national life may converge purely on the State, not muddled by an admixture with non-expert opinion, as it is in democratic assemblies where everybody's finger may legally be inserted in everybody else's pie.

I hope Odon Por's book will find many readers, and that it may suggest to reformers in these islands the evolutionary route to a transformed human society. If they continue their studies in Italian Co-operation they will find it is not necessary to convert millions first or to overturn the State in order to get great changes made. Groups of reformers can begin anywhere, gaining experience, which is a nation's best wisdom, and that practical competence in managing affairs, the lack of which was the cause of the failure in Russia. Something is growing under the eyes all the time,