

Are There Laws Governing the Movement of History?

Salvatore Prinzi¹ and Emiliano Brancaccio²

ABSTRACT: The text translated below is an excerpt from *Libercomunismo: Scienza dell’Utopia*, by Italian political economist Emiliano Brancaccio, published by Feltrinelli in 2026. In this book, Brancaccio advances a bold and theoretically rigorous rethinking of political economy, seeking to rehabilitate the concept of utopia as a scientifically grounded and materially rooted project. Moving beyond both orthodox determinism and liberal reformism, Brancaccio proposes “liber-communism” as a framework for confronting contemporary crises of capitalism, including inequality, financial instability and democratic erosion. The present excerpt is introduced and translated by Salvatore Prinzi, whose contribution situates the text within broader debates on critical political economy, while also making Brancaccio’s complex arguments accessible to an English-speaking audience. Together, the introduction and translation aim to highlight the contemporary relevance of Brancaccio’s intervention and its potential implications for reimagining transformative social change.

KEYWORDS: Liber-Communism; Political Economy; Utopia; Capitalist Critique; Social Transformation

Translator’s Introduction by Salvatore Prinzi

How can we understand what is happening on a global scale – the crises, political upheavals, the wars that in recent years seem to have occupied the public sphere far more than in the past? Should we look to the psychological profiles of leaders, to differences between liberal and authoritarian systems, to the “destiny of nations” as conceived in geopolitics, or to the clash of civilizations, ethnic groups, and religions? Or is it possible to find, beneath these phenomena—each of which both captures and mystifies an aspect of reality—a material dynamic that drives them? And if so, can such a dynamic be traced back to a “law,” to something impersonal and objective that determines the movement of society? And to what extent does this “determination” allow us to think of a realistic and potentially successful political action because it is in tune with history, and to what extent, instead, does it condemn us to a fatal and irreversible destiny?

These questions have troubled the Left since Marx’s time, but in recent decades—perhaps since Jean-François Lyotard’s famous essay on the postmodern, which symbolically closed the revolutionary wave of the 1970s—they have increasingly been set aside. The critique of “grand narratives” and of Marxism, understood as a kind of messianism—always awaiting a collapse of capitalism that never comes—as well as the demonstration of the impossibility of reducing social complexity, the plurality of levels and dimensions of human activity, to a single matrix, all seemed definitive. And yet, since the 2008 crisis, the need has grown ever stronger for explanations that do not treat events as mere chance, temporary setbacks, or the irrationalism of individuals or social groups. In Italy, this need has been interpreted, among others, by the work of Emiliano Brancaccio, particularly his latest book, *Libercommunismo: Scienza of Utopia*. Just released by Feltrinelli, it is already generating intense debate.

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Brancaccio, born in 1971, is one of Italy's most influential critical economists, inspired by the work of Marx, Keynes, Sraffa, and by the new methodologies of network analysis, which today make it possible to clearly describe certain economic dynamics that could previously only be sketched. A professor at the University of Naples "Federico II", Brancaccio gained international renown through his debates with some of the "cardinals of orthodoxy" (such as Olivier Blanchard, former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund, and Nobel laureate Daron Acemoglu), and through the appeal published in the *Financial Times* and *Le Monde*, *The Economic Conditions for Peace*.

Brancaccio is a constant voice in the Italian public debate through academic articles and popular interventions in newspapers, on the radio and on television. He is the author of a dozen books ranging from opposition to war—seen more as the product of conflicts between capitals than of leaders' obsessions with grandeur—to the struggle against austerity policies, from the critique of neoliberal ideology to the analysis of a liberal democracy under siege from the pressures of financial markets and major economic institutions. Available in English are his *Anti-Blanchard Macroeconomics: A Comparative Approach*, a textbook that challenges the dominant macroeconomic model, and the volume co-edited with Giuseppe Fontana, *The Global Economic Crisis: New Perspectives on the Critique of Economic Theory and Policy*.

Brancaccio's latest book is a pamphlet provocatively titled *Libercommunism*. It is provocative because, in academia as in common sense, it is generally assumed that a theoretical framework centered on freedom and one centered on equality are incompatible. And indeed, historically, these two approaches, in their "purest" manifestations—namely liberalism and Stalinism—have mutually excluded one another. But in doing so, according to Brancaccio, they have betrayed their respective promises. Liberalism, by stimulating difference, exalting merit, and celebrating the prospect of individual enrichment, has produced large monopolies and rents, along with processes of standardization and leveling-down that today heavily condition individual lives. Stalinism, instead of using the plan to create conditions of equality in which the potential of individuals could flourish, transformed it into an instrument of coercion that, by denying democracy, actually allowed differences to persist.

For Brancaccio, the point is not to imagine an impossible synthesis between the two traditions, but to reject both in order to return to certain Marxian intuitions that have only now fully unfolded. Only today is it possible to fully grasp how the freedom of capital has devoured all other freedoms, and how Marx's 1848 metaphor of the "sorcerer's apprentices unable to control the subterranean powers they themselves have evoked" has become concrete. Only today, having reached such a stage of development and such a socialization of the productive forces, is it possible to imagine how planning and freedom not only do not exclude one another but can be dialectically articulated. But, to do so, a theory is needed. Here, the subtitle of Brancaccio's book—*Science of Utopia*—is no less provocative and oxymoronic than the title itself. The aim is to detach the Left from wishful thinking, idealistic visions, and the moods of the moment, by giving it an objective and verifiable analysis of material mechanisms: a method based on concepts and data, yet directed toward an end other than mere repetition—toward a place never before seen, reachable only through the exercise of political imagination.

So, it is no coincidence that *Libercommunism* concludes with a reference to Jacques Monod and Louis Althusser, and to the central relationship they identified between necessity and chance. For them, nature – biological as well as social – produces patterns but also variations, and it is often unforeseen variations that inaugurate a new pattern, just as Althusser believed had happened with the accidental encounter between peasants dispossessed by the enclosures and capital owners,

which gave rise to capitalism. But Brancaccio goes further: not only does chance produce a new necessity, but necessity itself—that is, the very laws of the capitalist mode of production—also produces chance. These laws, in fact, do not concern merely the reproduction of the system as it is; they also identify the perpetual shaking that characterizes it. The destabilization to which it is subject thus increases the possibility of *emergencies*: it multiplies accidental, unforeseen, potentially revolutionary encounters. Science moves toward utopia; utopia comes to meet science.

It is not the aim of this introduction to criticize the text or some of its assumptions, nor to emphasize its pedagogical value for a generation of activists that began mobilizing against the genocide in Gaza and Trump’s policies, nor to discuss some of the political positions to which it opens. The sole aim here is to present the following excerpt as comprehensively as possible, in order to introduce non-Italian readers to a work situated within a major international current of Marxist renewal. And to attempt, from this starting point, to foster a debate that is more necessary than ever if we are to move beyond the “artisanal” improvisation that too often characterizes the Left’s analysis and political action.

For this reason, we have chosen to present the second of the thirteen available chapters, titled *Tendency*. Here we are in the introductory part of the book, but the full meaning of Brancaccio’s intellectual operation already emerges: to recover the Marxian tradition in order to dismantle that “static”—and ultimately anti-scientific—vision of the world typical of postmodern thought. This recovery, however, does not seek to read tendency as a predetermined fate or a religious messianism, but to identify it so as to proceed to a rigorous scientific investigation of it. Now, according to Brancaccio, there is at least one tendency on which virtually all economists agree, because it is detectable in any empirical analysis: the dynamic of the centralization of capital in fewer and fewer hands.

In particular, the new network analysis techniques used by Brancaccio and other researchers make it possible to demonstrate that, today, less than 1% of global shareholders control over 80% of total world equity capital. This is such an evident fact that it cannot be ignored, yet many major economists, because of what Brancaccio calls “epistemological idiocy”, fail to grasp its significance. In doing so, they deprive themselves of the ability to predict crises or explain geopolitical shifts, such as the tariff war and the neo-protectionist turn of the Trump administration. Furthermore, for Brancaccio, the centralization of capital is not a purely economic phenomenon, but also the primary cause of the global “democratic recession”. The more economic power concentrates, the more it pushes for a parallel concentration of political power, hollowing out parliaments and strengthening executive command. It is this process that paves the way for what Brancaccio calls “overfascism”, a form of transnational authoritarianism that serves to manage the system’s difficulties.

To avoid catastrophe and preserve individual freedoms, it is therefore no longer possible to return to a liberal era, which was based on a multiplicity of competing capitals that consequently gave rise to a plurality of viewpoints, parties, and cultures. Instead, as Brancaccio will argue in the following chapters, we must have the courage to break a taboo—that of control over the productive forces—and take a step, indeed a leap, forward, using this centralization in a different direction. *Libercommunism* is therefore a dialectical necessity: the freedom of large capital must be negated—for example, by expropriating multinational energy giants or Big Tech firms, placing their infrastructures and resources at the service of democratic planning—in order to liberate the creative energies of the “social individual”. The excerpt we offer here thus represents the theoretical premise—the recognition of the force and objectivity of the tendency—necessary to develop a winning praxis, one that is up to the times we live in.

Chapter 2: Tendency in *Libercomunismo: Scienza dell'Utopia*

Dorian Gray envies his portrait's immutability. Its absolute indifference to the passage of time fascinates him. He is captivated by the beauty of the unchanging and by the eternal that repeats itself and never ages. He allows himself to be seduced, to be carried away by that reassuring permanence. One could say that, in recent years, prominent intellectuals have all been like Oscar Wilde's Dorian. They are captivated by the immutability of their own obsessive idea: that of a perfect world, itself deemed static and unchanging. This is the beautiful world of globalized and triumphant capitalism, after the collapse of the Soviet threat.

The love for the world's immutability began in 1979, with Jean-François Lyotard and the thesis that made him famous: the "end of grand narratives." He had argued that history has no predetermined destiny and that, ultimately, humanity is going nowhere. And he had criticized the idea of progress, especially progress toward communism. For Lyotard, the only true progress concerns the development of technical means. But as for the rest, there are no noble ends, no grand destinies, and no glorious horizons to reach. Announcements of magnificent future progress, particularly toward communism, are mere nonsense. With the contribution of this influential French intellectual, the so-called "postmodern" era of rampant skepticism was born.

Lyotard was not entirely wrong. He wanted to get rid of those old propagandists who still celebrated humanity's magnificent and progressive destiny. He had it in for the heirs of Condorcet and Enlightenment optimism, but above all, he had it in for the children of Stalinism. They kept repeating a hackneyed refrain: humanity is destined for the sun of the communist future, and the Soviet Union is called upon to chart the course toward that magnificent dawn. Even the communists themselves had grown weary of the tales of those archangels. Lyotard's skepticism took root in fertile ground.

All well and good, so far. The problem is that Lyotard's critique went far beyond his stated intentions. The postmodern conception of reality, in fact, did not simply bury the fanciful "grand narratives" of the Stalinists. It also did something greater and more serious: it consigned to the scrapheap any study of the actual movement of society, any analysis of long-term dynamics, any research into the so-called "laws" of tendency, in the rigorous sense of Steve Fleetwood and others. In other words, in rejecting the messianic parables about humanity's radiant future, any scientific investigation of historical trends was abandoned.

Lyotard's misunderstanding thus paved the way for Fukuyama's crudeness. That is to say, for the idea of a world that, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, reaches its final destination and undergoes no further change. A capitalism without rivals, stable and eternal, which decrees "the end of history." Coincidentally, the perfect ideology for those who control everything and want to change nothing. The banishment of any notion of historical movement and the rejection of every possible trend within the system produced a political effect that the ruling groups held dear: public opinion became convinced of the impossibility of moving beyond global capitalism. Everyone has internalized Margaret Thatcher's mantra: there is "no alternative" to the triumphant and definitive capitalist society. Anyone who dares to criticize it is a pathetic dreamer, a laughable idealist.

The censorship of the concept of "tendency" has thus produced a political result of undoubted significance: the ridicule of the idea that another world was possible. However, that same censorship has also triggered a scientifically deleterious effect: a total inability to explain the advent of the catastrophes of our time. The catastrophe occurs; its origin is not understood; no plausible explanation is found. A truly embarrassing phenomenon, beyond the realm of the ridiculous.

Consider how prominent ideologues interpreted the global financial crisis that began in 2008. For the high priests of scientific, cultural, and media orthodoxy, that crisis struck like a bolt from the blue, an unexpected misfortune. A disaster of such causes and magnitude that top economists could not have anticipated in the slightest, as admitted by Henry Paulson, head of Goldman Sachs and later Treasury Secretary under George W. Bush. To the point that when Queen Elizabeth asked, “Why didn’t you foresee it?”, the venerable professors at the London School of Economics began staring at the floor, like schoolchildren caught unprepared in the middle of a test. A tremendous loss of reputation for the so-called “mainstream” scientists.

Yet, on closer inspection, they did not even learn the lesson from that disgrace. A few years later, following the global financial crisis, an even more serious problem struck the leading nation of the system, the United States: a loss of competitiveness, a trade deficit, and, as a result, a foreign debt that continued to grow, reaching potentially unsustainable levels. Under the weight of that debt, the United States was forced to radically change its political course. First, it favored liberal globalism; then it became an advocate of unilateral and aggressive protectionism. First, it supported military expansionism through bombings and invasions; then it found itself forced to hesitate, retreat, and redefine the scope of American military hegemony. In short, the debt owed to the world has rendered the American empire incapable of dominating it.

Well, faced with this gigantic crisis of the American-led global order, how did the cardinals of orthodoxy react? Once again, they were caught off guard. Unable to believe that their idealized picture, which they considered flawless and immutable, was entering a crisis. Distressed by the great transformation. And therefore, stubborn in denying it. Even at the highest levels, as is the case with the International Monetary Fund, which for a long time insisted that the enormous American debt to the world was in line with the “fundamentals.” That is, translating from the obscure jargon of economists: an American capitalism indebted up to its neck but always solvent, in perfect health.

But then, stubborn in this denial of the crisis of the American order, how did the trendy ideologues explain the United States’ turn toward protectionism? How did they justify Americans’ reluctance to remain in the theaters of war they themselves had created in previous years? If they had observed the underlying trend, they would have had no difficulty answering. It would have taken little to recall that, well before Trump’s arrival in the White House, there were already signs of a trend toward American economic protectionism and the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from various theaters of war. A trend that began under Obama and continued under Biden. Inevitable, given that American debt had already begun to bite following the 2008 crisis. But prominent intellectuals preferred another explanation for the shift – one that was more immediate and simplistic: a White House governed by a madman. Protectionism? A folly of Trump’s. Military reluctance in Ukraine? An absurdity of Trump’s. In practice, by refusing to accept the reality of America’s declining economic primacy, the cardinals of orthodoxy denounced not their own clinical case but that of the commander-in-chief. After all, the grotesque Trump lent himself rather well to the role. He seemed the perfect madman in power who hears voices in the air. He, therefore, could be considered pathological, not the regime ideologues stubbornly ignoring historical trends. By admiring the immutability of the ideal portrait of the world, while the real picture is in full upheaval, one can become a true epistemological idiot.

That, in the empire’s decline, its paid fighters lose their wits and credibility, is predictable, after all. The problem, however, does not concern only the regime’s cheerleaders. Even the most authoritative dissidents, the most respectable critics of the system, seem to have given up on detecting the signs of historical change. A notable example is the famous debate between Jürgen

Habermas and Wolfgang Streeck on the fate of capitalism, both in Europe and globally. The two thinkers are aware that something within the capitalist mechanism is causing a frightening democratic decline. Both, however, are careful to point out that there is no movement, no “law of tendency” to be revealed. In some ways, this position echoes that already advanced by Michel Foucault: the forces at work in history ultimately respond to mere “random conflicts.” In essence, it is the denial of any objective tendency within the system.

A similar, unconscious skepticism toward historical trends has struck, like a disease, even the most popular anti-system polemicists: from Naomi Klein to Mark Fisher, from Noam Chomsky to Slavoj Žižek, to Paul B. Preciado, and others and others. All of them comment on historical change but fail to grasp its “laws” of tendency. Perhaps worried about falling back into the old myth of “grand narratives,” they end up unwittingly endorsing a random interpretation of the world. It doesn’t end there. Condemnations of the study of historical trends have even come from self-proclaimed Marxists. Although the discovery of the “laws of motion” of capitalist society was the primary scientific objective announced by Marx, various of his followers are now quick to distance themselves from it. They are concerned with keeping their distance from the risk of “determinism,” an epistemologically meager term, a vacuous anti-Marxist scarecrow. And so they create the oddity of a static, unchanging, immutable Marxism. A contradiction in terms, a useless thing. Even otherwise thoughtful scholars, such as Michael Heinrich and David Harvey, fall into a surprising methodological misunderstanding: they lump both the teleological mysticism of popularizers and the scientific study of capitalist trends into the same cauldron of errors. And so, they too end up in Lyotard’s postmodern trap.

In such a scenario of cognitive disintegration, the current success of so-called “geopolitics” comes as no surprise. Today, considered by many to be a critical science, it actually conforms quite well to the ideological fads of the historical phase. Even at its most mature levels, as in the case of John Mearsheimer, geopolitics is a contingent discipline, malleable depending on the case and the moment, which, rather than historical trends, seeks captivating analogies between facts and circumstances. To the point of generating embarrassing backtracking. As in the case of Graham Allison, who attempted to interpret the current competition between China and the United States in light of the ancient Thucydides Trap, to argue that a clash between the two powers will be inevitable. But who then hastened to clarify that it was not his intention to propose a “law” of historical tendency, nor any empirical regularity. Never. The historical trend is therefore not considered a worthy scientific subject today. Lyotard’s postmodern myopia wins across the board, beyond any foreseeable academic boundary. And with him, as it happens, all of Marx’s enemies win.

And yet it moves, the world moves! Amid a thousand terrifying upheavals. But then, what happens when reality follows its own course of motion? And crises follow one after another, and disasters pile up, and catastrophes heap up one after another? What happens when the reassuring immutability of the system is continually contradicted, when the reassuring image of capitalism as static and eternal is denied by the facts? Well, the result is a tremendous aporia, a disruptive short circuit. Having buried the study of historical trends, the great luminaries of contemporary thought—whether mainstream or heretical—find themselves bereft of a rational interpretation of the upheavals of the historical process. And so they are forced to take a step back, to retreat. To cede the stage to a resurgent breed of communicators, interpreters, and ideologues, whom we believed were now buried: they are the preachers, the shamans, the new sorcerers.

This explains the resurgent political mysticism of our time. For which the facts of history are not symptoms of objective, scientifically verifiable trends. On the contrary, they are signs, announcements, divine prophecies, voices from heaven. And so politics once again becomes religion, and in turn, religion becomes politics. And the leader is gradually transformed into the Lord's anointed, the embodiment of a people's destiny, the messiah of an entire nation's future. The growth of wealth becomes a sign of predestination. Famine is considered a divine punishment. And military conflict, of course, is legitimized as a holy war.

Until recently, it seemed like a fanatical drift limited to the imperial peripheries—from Modi's India to Bolsonaro's Brazil, to a Russia once again proudly Orthodox, where Putin criticizes the "materialism of Catholics and Protestants" and goes so far as to declare "we are the true Christians," the sole custodians of Byzantium's moral legacy, from the far eastern peripheries of Russian territory all the way to, coincidentally, Crimea and Ukraine. We believed that in the secularized West, just as in the scientific and materialistic former Soviet Union, this resurgent sacralization of politics could not return. Well, today we know that it pervades even the heart of the system, the United States, where the influence of evangelical fundamentalism, among others, is now decisive for election outcomes. And where Trump, after the Meridian shooting, declares: "I was saved by God to make America great again." Once again, there is a general trend. A shadow gathering over the world. An epistemological darkness. It is what György Lukács called "irrationalism." And which he rightly considered a harbinger of terrifying political turns.