

Continuity in Change: The Parallel Evolution
of the PSI and the PCI

When I first thought about this paper, I considered writing it as a future historian recounting the story of the "PCRI," the "Partito Comunista Italiano." This hypothetical history would have started with the Congress of Genoa in 1892 and would have spelled out the different phases of the organization's action until 1921, when the stages would have repeated themselves with graver consequences due to the deterioration of world conditions. I actually started writing the paper in this whimsical vein and got further than I thought before I ran out of courage.

I believe that the Italian Marxist left has traversed remarkably similar phases only to wind up at the same spot after forty or so years. It is quite unfashionable for me to say that, but if we consider the major actions and justifications of the PSI during the Giolittian period and compare them to those of the PCI after World Wars I and II and avoid ideological hairsplitting, polemics, and the intellectual snobbery which is a characteristic of many leftist scholars, perhaps a case can be made for my thesis, i.e., that the Italian Socialist and Communist parties have passed through phases which were basically similar and have responded in essentially the same manner to similar challenges.

We might call the first stage in the history of these organizations that of affirmation. The major concern of the PSI after its foundation in 1892 was how to establish itself clearly as the party of the "proletariat." Since workers had no place to go before the 1880s, they supported factions of what was then called the radical democratic left, led by Felice Cavallotti. The attempt to disengage the Socialists' natural constituency from Cavallotti had begun with the Partito Operaio Italiano in

the 1880s and led to violent polemics, including a challenge by Cavallotti to duel Fillippo Turati, future founder of the Socialist Party. Turati himself enunciated the Socialist policy of affirmation in a speech at the 1893 International Congress at Zurich. Rebutting the Belgian Socialist Emile Vandervelde, Turati argued that the new Italian Socialist Party must pursue an intransigent policy in order to assert its independence and to avoid confusing the workers. Once the workers understood which party really protected their interests a policy of alliances with other parties to achieve further gains could be initiated. Turati's Milanese socialists indeed, followed a rigidly intransigent policy during this early period.

Turati and the early Socialists, however, put liberty and reality -- "le cose" -- above ideology. When Crispi and the fin-de-siècle crisis threatened liberty the Socialists chose liberty above ideological purity. "For the first time...liberty is being tried," Turati wrote, "and it is surrounded by danger: Periculosa libertas." With all its imperfections, existing bourgeois liberty in Italy must be preserved and expanded, by the Socialists if need be, because it worked for the Socialists and the bourgeoisie was prepared to overthrow it. The PSI succeeded in preserving liberty through a skillful policy of alliances, but when the Party wished to expand the policy to achieve reforms which, its leaders argued, would gradually lead to socialism -- a much more subtle and difficult endeavor -- factionalism paralyzed the organization. Later the Communist Party had the opposite problem, maintaining discipline and suffocating factions but undervaluing "bourgeois" liberty. As late as 1922 the Communist Party maintained that "No new form of government could have more contempt than the present

one for freedom; for rights already won and sanctioned; for the lives of the workers."

This sweeping statement represented the Communist Party's judgment on the parliamentary regime which had had its full flowering under Giovanni Giolitti supported by the Socialists, and which was then fighting for its life.

The Communist Party had a similar problem of affirmation at its birth in 1921, but perhaps its closeness to the Socialists explains the brutality of Communist methods against the PSI in its agony. The Communists fought the "illusion" that the PSI was the party of the workers; in other words, the Socialists were to the Communists what the radical democrats had been to the Socialists -- only more so. The Socialists had entrenched themselves as the protectors of working class political and economic interests and had created institutions which had threatened capitalist interests to such a degree that the industrialists and landowners had launched a major attack on them by means of Fascism. The Communists joined in this attack for their own reason: the capture of the working class by the "true" revolutionaries, the ones who had been successful in Russia, a goal which blurred their ability to perceive the true danger of Fascism.

Thus the Communists set out to destroy Socialist political and trade union organizations. The "Rome Theses" of 1922 described the methods Communists should use to gain control of the "misled" workers who supported the Socialists. "The bitterness of the polemics and struggle directed against the socialist parties," we read in the "Theses," "will be an element of prime importance in bringing these workers back on to the revolutionary terrain." The Socialists had failed as revolutionaries because, as Antonio Gramsci wrote, they "have a horror of civil war, as if one could reach socialism

without a civil war," and because they continued to "see socialism as a distant goal." Over the next fifty years the Communists modified these views, but in the 1920s affirmation took precedence.

As we have seen, the Communists gave ideological consistency priority over liberty. This was the reverse of what the Socialists had done, and the results were tragic. In the 1950s, however, the Communists adopted the Socialist view without acknowledging their debt.

The 1890s represented the second important period for the Socialists -- defense. For the Communists the parallel period is the 1930s. Both parties employed similar tactics, alliances with the radical democrats and Republicans for the Socialists, the "Popular Front" and "Unity of Action Pact" for the Communists. In other words, both allied with the former seducers of the working class in order to defend the proletariat itself. The Socialist did it in time, doing violence to their theories, the Communists did it too late, preserving their ideological virginity. The different circumstances of the 1930s (which were partially a result of Communist and Socialist errors) made it very difficult to undertake this defense because the Marxists were in exile. Italian Communism was now captured by Stalin, creating major problems for the future, even if the link conferred short-term advantages. Palmiro Togliatti had to check his more humanistic instincts, greatly influenced by Gramsci, if he wished to remain a force in the Communist International, or even alive. Between the wars the Russians, not the Italians, directed Italian Communist policy.

The attraction of the successful Marxist revolution in Russia undoubtedly constituted a new and most important element in the dialectic of the Italian left. During the Second International the pull of other Marxist parties had a minimal effect on the Italians compared to the Third Interna-

tional. Furthermore, the Stalinist legacy with which Togliatti was tainted perhaps hurt the Communists more than any other single factor during the next phase.

After 1901 the Socialists believed that they had entered a stage of "conquest," i.e., one in which the proletariat would make great gains, and the Communists believed the same thing after Fascism's demise. Rather than "conquest," however, this phase may be labeled one of "normalcy" for both organizations -- interaction with other political groups having their own ideas and goals and exercising their own political options. In a normal situation, both parties become more reasonable, collaborationist, and reformist. Even their interpretations of Giolitti coincided. The Socialist reformists were friendly to Giolitti, a collaboration which Gramsci and the Communists condemned until 1950. In that year Togliatti praised Giolitti for going as far as possible, given the historical circumstances, to help the working class, and chastized the Socialists for not being collaborationist enough.

Under the leadership of Socialist leaders later labeled "reformists" and denounced by the left wing, and later by the PCI, the Socialists kept the liberal Zanardelli-Giolitti cabinet in power (1901) and cooperated with Giolitti as the most progressive Italian politician of the period. Both practical and ideological reasons explained this policy. The Socialist leaders, with Turati in the lead, wished to avoid reaction which they believed to be inherent in Italian society. Liberty, the first and greatest "reform"; was essential for socialism and the preservation of liberty became the basic tenet guiding Socialist action. The left wing contested this argument, believing that reaction had been definitively defeated and stressing instead political intransigence and violence.

From these contrasting interpretations came a major ideological split which paralyzed the PSI's politics, although its social and economic policies were less affected. Before World War I the PSI never chose between reform and revolution; it appeared to make the choice during the postwar period, when the left wing failed miserably to implement its revolutionary rhetoric and helped provoke a reaction which ended Italian liberty for twenty years. The biennio rosso brought about the real crisis of the PSI, with the Communists splitting off in 1921 and the reformists and revolutionaries (maximalists) finally separating in 1922. Unlike 1898 the Socialist camp split further instead of closing ranks in order to fight reaction.

As we have seen, the Communists failed to recognize the danger in which Italy found itself in 1921 and 1922, preferring to hack away at the Socialists and becoming, according to Giacomo Matteotti, the "involuntary" accomplices of Fascism. Having paralleled the PSI's other stages of development, the Communists also entered the period of "normalcy" with a vengeance. Their revolutionary rhetoric remained intact, but the wildest reformists would have been shocked at the extremes to which Communist collaborationist policies led them.

After Mussolini's overthrow the antifascist parties refused to collaborate with Pietro Badoglio, the reactionary Piedmontese general who had profited from Fascism, brutally repressed the Libyans, and conquered Ethiopia. In 1944, immediately upon setting foot in Italy, Togliatti announced that the Communists would support Badoglio's government, thus cutting the ground from beneath the other democratic parties. The Communists advanced excellent tactical reasons for this "svolta di Salerno," none of them as convincing as those advanced by the Socialists to explain why they could not overthrow the monarchy before World War I, a failure for which Communist historians have still not forgiven them. The partisans who had fought Fascism dreaming of a new Italy

-- "la rossa primavera" -- found that their leaders preferred business as usual, cemented by Togliatti's excellent personal relationship with his fellow Piedmontese, Badoglio. As Minister of Justice Togliatti helped make a farce out of the antifascist purge, while purging the Communist Party of its revolutionary elements in order to transform it into an electoral organization, the "partito nuovo." During the Constituent Assembly the Communists even hoped to placate the Church by voting to incorporate the Concordat into the Italian Constitution, although Pope Pius XII proved to be rather ungrateful for this concession.

Communist actions thus significantly contributed to dash the high hopes for a better, fairer, more democratic society which so many Italians hoped for and believed to be attainable immediately after World War II. The historian Arturo Carlo Jemolo has eloquently described the rapid disillusionment of these hopes in his memoirs of this period, Anni di prova.

The political realities which the PSI had also encountered during its own period of "normalcy" also explain the changes in Communist policy. Given the objective limits of the Italian and international situations, the Communist Party had and has to choose among a number of bad choices. As Turati said more simply than Togliatti, "We do what we can."

In other words, the Communist Party became reformist, just as its predecessor forty years earlier. It made its choices based upon the political conditions of the moment, it tried to ameliorate the working conditions of the workers, it championed civil rights, it renounced revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat, and it worked within the system.

As the Socialists had discovered, such a switch could not be made suddenly explicit, and in the Communist case international ties and the Cold War complicated the issue. Just as the Socialists did, the Communists

changed their policies and justified themselves later, but their rhetoric and tradition of "democratic centralism" kept the party together. The PCI's justification, like Calvin's, is marked by dogmatic rigidity and by a tendency to burn opponents at the stake and is further complicated by a healthy fear of God (the USSR), but the terms of the change are quite clear. They can be found, for example, in an article published by Giorgio Amendola in 1973 ("Situazione italiana e movimento socialista italiano in Togliatti," in Istituto Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Annali, XV, 1973).

Here it becomes obvious that the codeword signifying Communist conversion to reformism is "autonomy," ironically, the same term used by the reformists of 1901. The Socialists meant the autonomy of the local sections vis-à-vis the central party hierarchy, while the Communists mean autonomy of the Italian party vis-à-vis the equivalent of the central hierarchy, the Russians. At the VIII Party Congress in 1956, Togliatti declared the PCI's "autonomy" by announcing the "Italian road to socialism." Togliatti believed that the participation of the Italian people in their own liberation from the Fascists and the role of the Italian workers in the struggle had created the conditions of a march towards socialism in Italy, i.e., "the conditions for a democratic transformation." In short, Togliatti officially recognized the incompatibility of intransigence and violence with the "new party" he had created.

The Communists acknowledge that the struggle for socialism in "advanced capitalist countries" such as Italy necessarily had to be different from the one which had achieved victory in the more backward countries of Eastern Europe, including Russia. At the turn of the century Turati had made the same argument, writing that Socialist tactics had to be dif-

ferent in Italy than in more backward countries, where violence may have been necessary. (Ironically, he cited Russia and China.) In Italy, Togliatti had now come to the conclusion that the struggle for socialism was the same as the "struggle for liberty and democracy," and that this fight demanded

a new disposition of class forces, and, most importantly, an alliance between the working class and the middle class. Participation in electoral and parliamentary struggles; a continuing presence within the government, even in collaboration with bourgeois parties, above all to repulse fascist attacks and to develop new democratic forms; the search for and implementation of new forms of direct democracy and autonomy -- all these constitute a democratic platform for the struggle of the popular masses for the attainment of a new and different redistribution of the national wealth and for the improvement of the conditions of work and of the quality of life.

Furthermore, considering Italian political realities, the transformation of Italian life through reforms must necessarily occur gradually and only when Italian society has matured them, when the demand for reforms has become overwhelming and capable of overcoming all resistance while, at the same time not endangering the nation's economy. According to Amendola, the "Italian democratic road to socialism" dictates that the PCI cannot limit its objectives to obtaining power, thus confirming Togliatti's intuition that a socialist revolution cannot take place in Italy "as the work of narrowly-based advanced guards which act from above, either through the employment of violence or through action conducted by centralized governments supported by restricted parliamentary majorities." Having returned to the position of the Socialist reformists of the 1890s, the Communists fear the violence of the ruling classes, now backed by "foreign imperialists"; they continually cite the example of Chile as an

admonition to their own hotheads.

The PCI reasserted all these principles in the recent break with Moscow over Poland. In its response to the Russian "excommunication," the PCI expresses wonder that the USSR has not understood the Italian position, which it claims to be of long-standing duration. Appropriately enough, the state-ment frequently cites Togliatti. Perhaps one day the psychological atmosphere will change sufficiently so they can also cite Turati, as segments of the Italian press are already doing.

The similarity of Communist ideas and actions after World War II with those of the Socialist reformists before World War I are striking, and it would be easy enough to cite chapter and verse. The major difference is that when the right wing of the reformists went as far as Togliatti in advocating collaboration with the government, their reformist colleagues contested them, their party expelled them, and the people rejected them. The Communists have skillfully come full circle while managing to remain intact. Given Italian realities, this happy situation probably will not last. We can expect rising polemics and splits. Hopefully history will not repeat itself in the consequences those new divisions may have in an increasingly dangerous world, but this is an open question.

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