



Italy's New Communists

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When the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party met in February, 1973, PCI Secretary Enrico Berlinguer reported that "membership in the party and, to a less satisfactory extent, in the Youth Federation (FGCI), shows a constant increase." During the past several years the PCI has again become a point of reference for an increasingly high number of people who either join the Party or at least gravitate around it. Such a "return"—to be understood literally in some cases—is particularly interesting because it involves a high proportion of Italian youth, especially students, and some prestigious representatives of the Italian cultural world.

Some well-known intellectuals whose "return" has been greatly publicized have accepted regular membership cards; most young people simply move within the Party orbit, participating in initiatives, collaborating in the activities of the Party section in their neighborhood. This is a form of support that the PCI has always encouraged, and it does not contradict Berlinguer's remark about the slower progress of the Youth Federation in terms of actual members.

In the past ten years the PCI has not significantly changed its political line. If we want to account for its renewed attraction we must go back to the events of 1968—the political turmoil in Europe, the Soviet crushing of Dubcek's efforts toward liberalization in Czechoslovakia—and the movement which they spawned, back to their peculiar impact in Italy, to their consequences on the political-ideological level, to their present outcome years later.

The movement, as it manifested itself in Italy, was, in my opinion, largely ideological. I do not mean to give priority to an ideological superstructure. Certainly structural variables explain the development and the destiny of the ideology of 1968. The

ideology, however, is relatively "autonomous" to the extent to which it erupted as an external element. Essential among its components is the role played by China and the "cultural revolution." The latter had, in fact, a double function. First of all it showed how it was possible to break through the stagnation of social processes, to keep alive their conflictual elements, to do away with the bureaucratization that stifled both capitalist and socialist society, to inject new life into the old apparatus both of the State and of the working-class parties. It showed, then, by logical extension, how it was possible to break with any "tradition," not only "bourgeois" but also "pseudo-Marxist" like the Western Communist parties. Secondly, and consequently, China came to represent the living model of the possibility, nay, the actuality, of revolution.

The Soviet Union had been, at least until 1956, the guarantor of ideology, the guarantor of an historical development that was inevitable because it coincided with the very progress of the "country of socialism," the guarantor of the existence of a "spiritual fatherland" (to use Lukacs's words) toward which hopes and concrete action, theory and praxis, could be projected in order to make its coming-into-being a reality.

The destruction of the myth of Stalin, the revolt in Hungary, the plurality of revolutions around the world (from China itself to Cuba, Korea, Vietnam) caused the unity of ideology and history to break. Many people (within the Italian Left, for example) called for an analysis of causes, a scientific nonideistic appraisal of the situation in order to arrange a suitable political strategy. While that, in fact, was not accomplished, the changed image of the Soviet Union drained from the ideology of Western Communist parties the millennial and utopian elements that had, since the October Revolution, played such a big role in shaping the political organization of the working class.

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China, as a reality alternative to the Soviet Union, reconfirmed the belief that progress and change did exist and were guaranteed by historical progress, that revolution and socialism were not to be pushed forward into some nebulous morrow of history, but were indeed a part of the present. Theory and praxis had thus again a definite goal, the validity of which was guaranteed by its very existence in historical reality.

Such millenarian conceptions of revolution, linked to China and its "cultural revolution," entailed specific consequences. (1) A preeminent function was ascribed to ideology as against material, objective conditions in the revolutionary process. (2) From an international point of view, the Soviet experience, seen as an antirevolutionary, revisionist development of socialism, was rejected. At the same time, the "true" socialism of China was exalted in a sort of black-and-white perspective (a further trait that is typical of millenarian conceptions, where good and evil stand as concrete opposites). (3) These changes entailed a critique of those Western Communist parties (and, in our particular case, of the PCI) that still sided with the Soviet Union and were hampered both by internal bureaucratism and by a revolutionary but impotent verbiage. The critique charged that bureaucratism and reformism not only accounted for the lack of development (*immobilismo*) of the PCI, but also justified an appraisal of the PCI as a more or less conscious accomplice of the bourgeoisie. (4) There was, finally, the exaltation of voluntaristic elements, which asserted that a true critique of the "system" could no longer take place through traditional political institutions. The latter, in fact, legitimized the system, providing its only apparent opposition. Critique could only be absolute *negation*, outside and beyond the system. One can well recall here the role played by Herbert Marcuse's "negative" thought in lending theoretical content to the ideology of 1968.

I have mentioned the external character of the ideology of 1968—external, that is, vis-à-vis the Italian situation. Its specific "carriers" were new with regard to the traditional area of the Marxist Left, historically so strongly permeated with class elements and connotations. Students and intellectuals were the main recipients of the ideology of 1968 and felt ready to take upon themselves the role of historical agents for revolutionary change. It is not accidental that they were the strata most removed from the productive structure, from a clearly working-class situation.

The locus of ideological coalescence was the Italian university. It should be noted that in Italy—as in other European social contexts—the university, the spreading center of higher learning, turned in a relatively short time from an élite into a mass institution. It tried to cope with an enormous quantitative

increase of the student mass without undergoing at the same time any significant qualitative change in its structures, although they were patently too old and unfit to train the intellectual labor force required by advanced capitalism.

The debate about the "proletarianization" of intellectuals significantly *preceded* the explosion of 1968 and reflected a situation in which many university graduates were either rejected from the economic market or were unable to find an occupational role according to the expectations fostered by their training. The Italian university, designed to "form" a selected élite—essentially humanist and projected toward its future integration into a ruling class—was unable to cope with the general economic development of the country. The university became the place where some patent contradictions of industrial society became manifest. There a level of society not previously politicized, or without a strong political consciousness, became the carrier of the new ideology of refusal, negation, antiauthoritarianism and anti-institutionalism at all levels, and anti-imperialism (witnessed by the protest against the Vietnam war). This stratum was composed of students and intellectuals, outside of the traditional class organizations, upon whom ideology, even in its most "utopian" aspects, could get a firmer grip. It is true, however, that the movement of 1968 in Italy also touched young people and intellectual forces close to the PCI, partly because the latter—in contradistinction to the French Communist Party, for example—took a relatively flexible attitude toward the student movement.

The widening of the movement and its vitality in the following years cannot be explained, however, by simply taking into account its essentially ideological nature. Nor is its connection with the university as the seat of objective contradictions a sufficient explanation. The phenomenon spread, in fact, outside its original locus, and encompassed issues that went far beyond the crisis in the school system. The final outcome was, in fact, a political critique at the level of global society and of forces traditionally considered to oppose the democratic-bourgeois system.

It is necessary at this point to turn to the structural situation, to the relationships of production of Italian society: more precisely, to the chronological coincidence between the ideological movement and a specific structure of the labor market in Italy. It is this element that helps to explain, in my opinion, the translation of ideology into a properly political conception and into political organizations.

A few words are necessary to clarify some aspects of the structural situation of the Italian economy in the decisive years 1968-70. The movement of 1968, which reflected a specific crisis of the educational system, was at the same time

confronted with an extremely dynamic industrial working class and with a pervasive ebullience within the labor market in general. As many recent studies have pointed out, Italian capitalism developed in the 1960's according to a pattern that is considered typical for capitalist systems at a certain stage of "maturity" (cf. Massimo Paci, "Le Contraddizioni del Mercato del lavoro," in *Inchiesta*, Spring, 1972; and Carlo Donolo, "Sviluppo ineguale e disgregazione sociale," in *Quaderni Piacenti*, 1972). On the one hand, there is an increasing need and, consequently, a strong demand for industrial workers in the modern sectors of the economic structure. This portion of the labor force is subjected to a profound qualitative selection. Demand for labor, in fact, concentrates upon "male workers, preferably married, with at least eight years of schooling, neither too young nor too old, already socialized in the urban-industrial environment (Paci). These workers are in a position of strength, since full employment is now guaranteed to them.

At the same time, however, a progressively larger "marginal" mass is created on the side of the industrial working class: a mass made up of unemployed or underemployed people who do not have the requisites and skills required by the labor market. In Italy this group is made up of women, youth and older workers and a substantial quota of immigrants of rural origin (essentially from the South). The labor market thus tends to be divided into a "strong" component (the industrial-urban working class) and "marginal" labor.

The mechanism of capitalist development, therefore, creates contradictions within the labor market. The position and class consciousness of a part of the proletariat, in a general meaning of the term, are strengthened; on the other hand, centrifugal tendencies are favored and reinforced so that different sectors within the proletariat are set one against the other (e.g., employed at good or average conditions vs. unemployed or underemployed, potentially or actually on the brink of chronic unemployment). Naturally, it is the smaller, qualitatively selected industrial working class that is in a position to struggle for more advanced goals. Demands may range from higher wages to better and safer working conditions, democracy within the factory, refusal to accept the capitalist organization of work, abolishment of job hierarchy and specifically of differentiations between manual and nonmanual workers (technicians, clerks, etc.).

In 1969-70, when national contracts for all sectors of the working class were renewed, the industrial proletariat showed their strength in the platform of national bargaining. The "strong" component of the labor market (chiefly the metal workers) became the leading force in an offensive thrust against the industrialists. It served, at the same time, as a point of reference for the protest of all sectors of a labor

force demanding to share to some extent in a society that, amidst gross inequalities, had reached the standards of advanced industrial countries, especially in terms of patterns of general consumption.

The different positions occupied by the various levels of the working class in 1969 within the labor market colored their demands. The industrial workers of the North, and generally of the advanced sectors, presented eminently *political* demands which went beyond the immediately economic and touched upon the whole network of social relationships of production within the factory. The "marginal" masses demanded fuller integration in the productive structure, first and foremost through stable employment in the modern sectors of the economy.

Relationships with trade unions, and in general with the institutional political forces of the working class, became relevant at this point. On the one hand, the traditional political and union organizations of the Left had organic ties with the industrial working class, but not with the new marginal masses. On the other hand, the political content of many demands put forth by the traditional working class seemed to go beyond the boundaries of the classic trade-union framework, limited as it was to more traditional goals, such as full employment.

This situation created—at least in the short run—a justifiable impression that a gap existed between trade unions and party on the one side and the working class/masses on the other. While, in fact, the traditional social entity represented by the unions seemed to pass to the left of its representatives in the economic sphere, the properly political organization (the PCI) did not appear to be able to respond to the political nature of the economic demands and the generally widespread politicization of the class. This failure was due, among other things, to the long separation between economic and political spheres of action in the Italian Marxist tradition and the consequent differentiation of competences between trade unions and party. Furthermore, as I have noted, traditional organizations, both political and economic, had not enlarged their contacts with any group other than the properly industrial working class (and, to a certain extent, the peasants).

Given this situation it is possible to discern two possible courses of action in attempting to translate the movement and ideology into a specific political line and organization. One was to keep the movement within the boundaries of its original site, trying to organize according to new models the social forces set in motion by the antiauthoritarian, anti-imperialist ideology. The student movement is the paradigmatic example of this solution. It represented the attempt to create organizational formulas, essentially different from traditional party formations, or at least different from the classic Leninist organization where centralism had

been replaced by bureaucratic "verticalism," as exemplified by the PCI.

However, the tendency to create political groups that were loosely organized alternatives to the very notion of "party" was not predominant in Italy. The Leninist tradition, very strong in the Italian working class and in its traditional organizations, permeated most of the political "translations" of the 1968 ideology. This demanded close ties with the working class and favored a party-type organization with a strategy founded upon a real contact with the workers.

Two possibilities were present and reflected the characteristics of the working class and the condition of the labor market in those years. Precisely that condition, in fact, encouraged the belief in the existence of a "space" generated by the apparent gap between institutional organizations and the working class. The so-called "extra-parliamentary groups" arose as embryos of political organizations, potentially alternative to the institutional forces of the Left. On the one hand, all the "groups" had the same ideological matrix: a radical critique of the PCI which developed in the 1960's and which the wave of 1968 confirmed and strengthened. The critique was directed essentially to the impact of anti-imperialism and of a renewed internationalism, to the conviction that it was actually possible to take advantage of the present situation and to lead a truly revolutionary movement according to pure Leninist principles instead of the reformism of the PCI.

Beyond the complex and refined nuances that differentiate each "group" from the others, a line may be drawn within the "groups." There is a rough dichotomy that reflects the different social entities to which the groups related themselves and, in turn, parallels the twofold nature of the Italian proletariat. Such "groups" as Potere Operaio (Workers' Power), Avanguardia Operaia (Workers' Vanguard) and Il Manifesto (at least in the years 1970-71) claimed a base among the employed working class.

The politicization of this sector of the proletariat and the new content of the workers' "economic" demands were interpreted as a strong symptom of the gap between the older organizations that claimed to represent the workers and the working class. The latter, in this view, had developed a political consciousness that was far more advanced than the Party's or the unions', that had grown independently of them and in opposition to their efforts to contain it within boundaries predetermined by the organizational leadership. It was asserted that the PCI's detachment from industrial reality and from its basic unit, the factory, led to an idealization of the productive centers as the specific locus where political consciousness was forged. The complementary distortions of reformist practice and Stalinist organization were criticized, and traditional Leninism was retrieved and supplemented with basic elements drawn from Rosa Luxemburg: the organization was

to be protected against spontaneity on the one hand and yet remain responsive to the demands of the workers and of class dynamics on the other.

Other "groups" (mainly the Marxist-Leninist *Unione* and *Lotta Continua*, while upholding the Leninist notion of organization, tended to give greater weight to the ideological dimension, and found their social base among the "marginals," the underemployed and unemployed. The latter were seen, in fact, as the potentially explosive, disrupting element of the capitalist system. The notion of working "class" was thus replaced by a more general aggregate, a "mass" that encompassed all those excluded from the most advanced productive sectors and from the benefits, albeit partial, deriving from it. From the housewife to the peasant, from the mental patient to the prison inmate, from the exploited immigrant to the inhabitant of the bidonvilles around the big cities—these constituted the "marginal mass" that, in this view, demanded political leadership and organization.

The millennial content of the 1968 ideology is reflected in both positions, despite the different social entities they worked with. In the former case, it was represented by a belief that there already existed in the working class a revolutionary consciousness which—were it not for the PCI—would explode, a consciousness that needed only to be released and guided according to new tactics responsive to strategic directions coming from that working class. In the latter case, the millennial content is even more evident: the insistence upon the contrast of "rich" and "poor" (the replacement of "class" with "mass" is more than a semantic accident) and a correspondent belief in personal "salvation" attained through a purifying contact with the oppressed *people*, who are the depository of all virtues antithetical to the corrupted and corrupting attitudes and way of life of the bourgeoisie.

Not much has remained of the ideological fervor of the 1968 movement. From the point of view of the goals the "groups," in different ways, attempted to reach, an *a posteriori* evaluation must conclude that the experience has not borne consistent results. No solid, durable alternative to the traditional forces of the Marxist Left has been created. The new leaders have remained, on the whole, an intellectual, ideological élite. The main reason is probably that they overestimated the possibilities inherent in the late 1960's, that they were swept along by the movement of 1968, and that they were turned away from the necessary long-term, admittedly less glorious, scientific analysis of the conditions needed to establish both a new tactic and, especially, a new strategy. The main presupposition of all attempts to establish an alternative to the PCI—namely, the necessity and actual possibility of realizing an organic contact with the working class and

the masses—has collapsed because the groups lacked mass support. The mandate the workers, rightly or wrongly, had entrusted to their traditional organizations of both Party and trade unions has survived the more advanced wave of 1969-70.

Failure to understand the contingent character of the gap between Party and *certain sectors* of the class in those years was in turn related to a lack of analysis of the global society and especially of capitalism. The latter was inaccurately judged to be on the verge of yielding to the working class it supposedly was no longer able to dominate, a working class the PCI itself was no longer in a condition to control and restrain. The Italian capitalist class was indeed divided by internal contradictions that, together with the renewed combativeness of the subordinate classes, partly justified such a view. These contradictions derived from the concentration of capital, a process that tends to expel from the market the weaker and less competitive productive units. On a political level, both the progressively sharper turn toward the right and the alarming increase of neofascism should be interpreted as the repressive intervention of the ruling class in order to regain control over the working masses.

In this situation the PCI, with its electoral strength (it is, after all, the second electoral party, with 28 per cent of votes) and its compact, well-knit organization has again acquired credibility. It remains the only organization that can critique the bourgeoisie on an institutional level. Of the components of the proletariat that were supposed to constitute the base of alternative organizations, the employed working class has maintained ties with the traditional institutions of the Left. The "marginal" unemployed and underemployed mass, never fully politicized and organized under the PCI banner, has maintained contacts with some groups (especially in the South). These tend, however, to become progressively meaningless as the "groups" fail to establish a political presence and, therefore, have no bargaining power.

The student movement, still existent in certain local situations (especially Milan), has also suffered among students. The issues proper to the Italian university—its obsolete structure, a large mass of students facing potential unemployment—have not, on the whole, been the concern of the student movement, which has tended to consider them mainly as an expression of corporatism. The student movement defined its "being political" as an attempt to expand outside the university and the educational sphere proper, and to create links between students and the proletariat for joint political action. The attempt has been largely unsuccessful, and the student movement is ever more defined in generational terms. The few leading figures, mostly "formed" in the high tide of

the 1968 movement, appear progressively detached from the new students.

The student movement leaders share with those of the "groups" the difficulty of making the ideological contents of 1968 plausible in the 1970's. Beside the change in the domestic situation, the millennial element of the ideology has clashed with modified international relationships. Aside from the more or less satisfactory solution of the Vietnam war, the anti-imperialist contents of the movement have had to reckon with a much more severe blow: the encounter of China and the United States (of which even the Far Eastern settlement is partly a by-product). It has become progressively more difficult to explain and rationalize it on the basis of a *purely ideological* opposition of systems. Even China, then, can no longer fulfill the role and the mission of "spiritual fatherland."

The Western Marxist movement, and especially its intellectuals, had already experienced disillusion and frustration of vast proportions when, in the late 1950's, the Soviet Union ceased to be the leading force and intransigent champion of a new order. The present reflux and individual reactions, however, are taking place in a different framework. Failure to attain optimal goals (a revolutionary organization) must not, however, obscure the fact that the ideological movement of 1968 has politicized in a general left-wing direction thousands of people. Particularly in the students' case, the university itself acts as a sort of incubating agency where the need to be politically active thrives and is enhanced by group support and legitimation.

For many, feelings of frustration lead to a withdrawal from active politics (*not*, though, to political apathy). For others the PCI appears the only alternative, even though the rapprochement is cautious. When in the dilemma of reform or revolution the scale weighs on the former's part, the upper hand rests with those forces that seem capable of a long-term strategy and have an objective organizational and political strength. Correspondingly, in a situation of political and economic reflux, a "revolutionary" policy decreed by small, elitist groups is more likely to betray elements of voluntarism, ideological emphasis and intellectualistic detachment. The dream of riding the tide of history with the revolutionary masses becomes difficult or impossible to sustain.

It is difficult to tell what motivations and attitudes guide one to the PCI at present. Especially for the young, the want of cohesion and the need for a group that fills an emptiness, even on a psychological level, may have the same relevance as, or even more than, meditated reflection and critical appraisal of the PCI. Such an appraisal is difficult to make now. But no matter what the individual motives prompting this choice, for many "children of 1968" the parabola seems for the moment concluded.