

The PCI Artists

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*Antifascism and Communism
in Italian Art, 1944-1951*

By

Juan José Gómez Gutiérrez

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-8003-5
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8003-9

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank everyone who helped me complete this book. Without their support, I would have not been able to bring my work to a successful completion.

Paul Wood and Steve Edwards: for guidance. Also, I thank The Open University, Rome's National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome's Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Rome's National Library, Bagheria's Renato Guttuso Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Bagheria's Municipal Library, the Sicilian Regional Library, the University of Palermo, Palermo's Gramsci Institute, the University of Bologna, Bologna's Municipal Library, Bologna's Gramsci Institute, Rome's Gramsci Institute, Turin's Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, the Piedmontese Regional Library, the Venice 'Biennale' Archive, the Aldo Borgonzoni Archive and Study Centre, the Aligi Sassu Foundation, Medicina's Chamber of Labour, the Parma Province, the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Parliament, Madrid's Foundation for Marxist Research, the Cortocircuito Squatted Social Centre, the San Lorenzo Squatted Social Centre, Luciano Leonesi and Giambattista Borgonzoni.

INTRODUCTION

After World War II, the Italian anti-Fascist democratic parties had achieved a high level of organisation and massive support.¹ The PCI was one of the biggest of them and became a serious contender for power, which placed Italy in an ambiguous situation regarding the other Western countries.²

Above all, the strength of the Communists was in evidence in the cultural field. This was partly because they had been excluded from government in 1947; and partly because they took as their starting point Antonio Gramsci's perspective on the political importance of culture and its reception in Italy from the point of view of the working class movement. Gramsci rejected the possibility of taking power only by means of the violent insurrection of an organised political vanguard. He believed instead that to reach cultural hegemony in society, a national consensus based on the worldview of the working class, was a preliminary task.

The sine qua non of achieving hegemony was the working class' ability to articulate a progressive bloc that comprised the peasantry, sectors of the lower middle class and the intelligentsia, as well as the proletariat as such.³ When Palmiro Togliatti, Gramsci's successor as party

¹ The Italian Communist Party (PCI), the Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity (PSIUP), the Centre-left 'Partito d'azione' (Pd'a) and 'Demolaboristi' (Democratic Labour), the Italian Liberal Party (PLI) and the Christian Democracy (DC).

² See Stuart Woolf, 'History and Culture in the Post-war Era' in Emily Braun (ed.), *Italian Art of the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1900-1988*, Prestel-Verlag and Royal Academy of Arts, Munich and London, 1989, p. 273. See also David Ward, *Antifascisms, Cultural Politics in Italy, 1943-46*, Farleigh University Press and Associated University Press, Madison-Teaneck and London, 1996, p. 75.

³ The notion of 'Hegemony' was coined by Georgi Valentinovitch Plekhanov and later developed in different ways by V.I. Lenin, Gramsci, Stalin and Mao Zedong. See Vladimir Ilich Lenin, *Opere complete*, Vol. XVII, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1966; Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, New York and Chichester, Columbia University Press, 1996; Joseph Stalin *The foundations of Leninism*. Quilon. Mass. 1994; Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review*,

Chair, undertook the practical development of the latter's theories during the 1940s and 1950s, this policy of alliances became the basis of the PCI political programme.

1. Historical Context

The distinctive feature of post-war Italian politics was its tendency to divide into two opposed camps, each heavily inflected by ideological allegiance. While the PCI remained firm as the head of the Left-wing bloc, the 'Democrazia Cristiana' (DC) became the organic party of the bourgeoisie and the Catholic hierarchy. Alongside these, a restricted group of intellectuals oscillated and took sides, depending on whether they were anti-Communist or anti-Clericalist.

Such a political and ideological division grew partly out of the international state of affairs after the outbreak of the Cold War, but also represented the recurrence of a situation that had emerged after the Italian unification of 1861-1870. This brought the country a combination of modern, secular public administration and bourgeois Liberal government that achieved its most developed ideological expression in the Idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce. This Liberal state, however, immediately entered into contradiction with both the growing working class movement and the established Catholic Church.⁴

The Liberal period was structurally undermined by the crisis of the First World War. In 1922, Fascism rose to power and set out to re-found Italy according to an authoritarian mass political model. Mussolini's regime was reactionary in politics. Nevertheless, Fascist ideology was undetermined enough to attract a significant number of intellectuals to its ranks.⁵ These thought that the Regime's combination of Nationalism and

London, November 1976-January 1977; Valentino Guerratana, 'Il concetto d'egemonia nella opera di Gramsci' in Giorgio Baratta and Andrea Cattone (ed.), *Antonio Gramsci e il Progresso Intellettuale di Massa*, Milan, Unicopoli, 1995; and Tom Bottomore, 'Hegemony' entry in Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought.*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991.

⁴ See Geoffrey Warner, 'The Roman Catholic Church', Open University course materials *Liberation and Reconstruction: Politics, culture and Society in France and Italy, 1943-1954*, The Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1989.

⁵ See, for example, Emily Braun, Mario Sironi and Fascist Art', in Emily Braun (ed.), op. cit. (1989). Also Emily Braun, 'Speaking Volumes: Giorgio Morandi's

mass Workerism would continue the political unification of the country at a social and cultural level. Other intellectuals, however, headed by Croce, remained attached to the democratic values of the Pre-war State and exercised a lasting opposition to the regime.⁶ Croce warned Fascist intellectuals that mixing culture and politics was mistaken⁷ In effect, he was one of the prominent intellectuals who first declared his anti-Fascism. He remained in Italy and became the reference point of those who viewed his thesis of the categorical distinction between culture and politics as a defence against the nationalising and totalising ideology of the Regime.

2. Italian Art and The Cultural Politics of the PCI

After Fascism was defeated in 1944, both by the Allies and an armed coalition of anti-Fascist parties that comprised Christian Democrats, Communists, Liberals and smaller, short-lived Centre-Left organisations such as the Action Party and the Democratic Labour Party, the Communists pursued a wide progressive social alliance based in the common experience of the war and the resistance. The PCI policy towards the arts was tailored to this end, but the emergence of associations of artists for broad anti-Fascist political purposes was itself a spontaneous occurrence. Those who reached maturity in the late 1930s had in common the rejection of Fascist classicizing and Nationalist art, and they put aside their different aesthetic conceptions to take up the task of renewing Italian art in the light of international developments.

The anti-Fascism of many of these artists was not merely cultural but it was also expressed in overtly political terms. Since the 1930s, many of them viewed Croce's opposition as rather ineffective in combating the dictatorship, because his radical distinction between culture and politics prevented his anti-Fascism from evolving in the direction of a clear oppositional programme; and this helped the Communist party to draw them to its side. Somewhat paradoxically, however, these artists did not go underground or marginalise themselves from the official artistic milieu. Instead, they fully participated in the regime's artistic initiatives, and took advantage of these to create an unofficial network that developed a series of Anti-Fascist centres all over the country. According to the journalist Nello Ajello, 'This spontaneous organisational work, developed in Italy,

Still Lives and the cultural Politics of "Strapaese", *Modernism and Modernity*, Vol. 2.3, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995, pp. 89-116.

⁶ David Ward, op. cit.

⁷ See Ibid.

was very useful to ease Communism's passage from its 1920s clandestine tradition to that "new party" sponsored by Togliatti.⁸

After the war, some of these artists withdrew from the political arena, but many others moved towards explicit Communist beliefs. The majority of these had been intellectually formed by Croce's version of Modernism, but they experienced a deep transformation in their work after they became politically involved with the Left. This was conveyed not only by conscious changes in their subjects, their style and their material means of expression, but also in the public they addressed and in their own conception of themselves as artistic authors. They thought that, by conforming to the demands of Communist politics, they were also overcoming the subjective isolation, which they regarded as the main limitation that afflicted 20th Century Modernism. The painter Renato Guttuso wrote that, in these years, there was born 'a new kind of intellectual, in which the figure of the man of culture and that of the Socialist militant came to form the same thing, quite different from the traditional intellectual (generally academic and aristocratic).'⁹ The 1930s Pablo Picasso of *Guernica* and *Dreams and Lies of Franco* became one of the symbols of this generation.¹⁰ According to Ajello, Communist politicians such as Togliatti and Gramsci similarly 'represent a model in that way. To distinguish [in them] the two moments of cultural research and political action would be impossible and even offensive.'¹¹

The convergence of culture and politics in Italian art was also spurred on by the influence of Socialist Realism which, since the mid 1930s, had become the official artistic doctrine of international Communism. In Socialist Realist aesthetics, the criticism of Modernist individualism and detachment evolved into a kind of party-inspired art that regarded Modernist subjectivism and self-referentiality as the distinctive features of the organic culture of Capitalism in its terminal period.

Socialist Realist artists opposed their 'healthy', optimistic and politically engaged work to 'decadent' bourgeois Modern art. Yet, not just a negative reading of the separation of art from other aspects of life existed in these years within the Left. While hard-line PCI officials called on

⁸ Nello Ajello, *Intellettuali e PCI, 1944/1958*, Laterza, Rome and Bari, 1997, p.41.

⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰ See Mario De Micheli, *Le avanguardie artistiche del novecento*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1986.

¹¹ Nello Ajello, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.

artists to conform their art to the exigencies of the revolution, others, even within the party, regarded unrestrained freedom and disinterest as the main characteristic of art; and insisted on the non-viability of a politically explicit aesthetics. The unorthodox Communist writer Elio Vittorini, for example, viewed all-out politically engaged aesthetics as the result of the persistence of a negative romantic component in Modern culture, the nostalgia for a lost spiritual unity in the face of post-war uncertainties, that lay at the basis of what he called ‘the Communists’ disposition to Totalitarianism’. He went on:

The idealisation of belief (and, therefore, of not doubting, of giving up criticism and research as the sources of life) by which the young people found themselves needing to have a “superior” thing to believe in, [pushed many] to put themselves in the hands of any organism (of any police) that does not depend on our state of mind and can eventually make of us good and brave people, with the incorruptible virtue of a force alien to us.¹²

At the outbreak of the Cold War, artistic freedom and social commitment were presented in mutually antagonistic terms. In this situation, many Left-wing artists and critics set out to achieve a compromise between both perspectives of all-out engagement and individual critical detachment; and reflected upon how the artist or writer could participate in politics without renouncing his independence. In the *Secondo manifesto di pittori e scultori* (*Second Manifesto of Painters and Sculptors*, 1944), the painters Ennio Morlotti and Ernesto Treccani developed a philosophy of the history of art, from the Renaissance to the 20th Century, that conceived Communist political engagement as the culmination of a long period of crisis. They argued that the emotional state of the intellectual in the face of the schism in taste and outlook between masses and elite, which mirrored the extreme division of labour under the conditions of Capitalism, could be taken as the starting point of a process towards Communist art. Such art was not, for them, the result of a mere personal adhesion to the revolution. Neither did they believe that it should be born out of the liquidation of Modernism, as had been the case with Socialist Realism. Rather, the new art would constitute Modernism’s logical and historical consequence:

Until Raffaello Sanzio [i.e. until the Renaissance] we have art as a social product expressed by the individual... Henceforth, the crisis between man

¹² Elio Vittorini, ‘Il comunismo come apocalissi. Carattere romantico della disposizione anti-liberale al comunismo (e della disposizione comunista al totalitarismo)’, ‘La Stampa’, 6 September 1951, reprinted in *Diario in pubblico*, Milan, Fabbri, 1991, p. 379-380.

and society opened up; that is, the individual claims to overcome society. He becomes exasperated and critical: there is exasperation in Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Delacroix, Van Gogh, Modigliani and the 'Fauves'... After them, the crisis became even more exacerbated and gave rise to alienation, disorientation, and mysticism (in the Surrealists, Dadaism and Metaphysical Painting). Therefore artists have to confront once more the question of the individual in society... Picasso reproduced decadence in himself. Eventually however, the twentieth Century learned from Cubism and, with its new means, was able to express the crisis of a faltering bourgeois society. Picasso... simultaneously closes the crisis period and shows the way forward in the visual arts, to a Proletarian society.¹³

This perspective of critically recovering the achievements of international Modern art and linking it to political revolution was quite distinct from the anti-Modernism of Soviet-inspired aesthetics which, since 1934, had developed separately from the main course of 20th Century art. However, from 1947, the increased intensity of the Cold War resulted in the political isolation of the Italian Left and its electoral defeat in 1948. As a consequence, many voices in the PCI placed under review the policy of alliances and openness that the Party had pursued so far and a Stalinist anti-Modernist trend became dominant. In line with the Soviet tendency to organise artists for explicitly political ends, the PCI set up a 'Central Committee Cultural Commission', an administrative cultural apparatus. Moreover, the Italian Communist artists began to become integrated in the artistic circles of the East European countries and, at home, they worked on initiatives aimed exclusively at the Italian Left-wing world.

This went hand in hand with an almost exclusive focus on political subject-matter; and an artistic technique governed by the imperative of comprehensibility to the working masses; in essence, the abandonment of experimentalism for a more legible realism. When seen from the point of view of the traditional cultured Italian, educated in the Liberal tradition, this stress on comprehensibility and engagement seemed to propose an unacceptable subordination of culture to politics, alien to the national tradition of freedom of research, and leading to an impoverishment of intellectual production. But, on the other hand, when seen from the perspective of the PCI officials in charge of cultural politics, sensitive to the rise of the masses into the political arena, this strategy seemed to

¹³ Ennio Morlotti and Ernesto Treccani, *Secondo manifesto di pittori e scultori*, 1944, reprinted in Paola Barocchi (ed.), *Storia moderna dell'arte in Italia*, Giulio Einaudi editore, Turin, 1992, p. 42.

promise the democratisation of culture, hitherto in the hands of an elite engaged in Byzantine abstract discussions of little interest for the majority.

Eventually, many artists found the Communists' pressure to make explicitly political art unacceptable, and this caused the 'Fronte nuovo delle arti' (New Art's Front), a group that was the artistic counterpart of the political Left, to split. Tension also increased within the party cultural apparatus, which had itself become divided between Socialist Realists and others who defended a cultural policy more relaxed and attentive to the characteristic concerns of the Italian intelligentsia.

After 1951, the serious risk of deeper divisions within the Left-wing intelligentsia moved the PCI to rectify its line and return to the policy carried out prior to 1947. As a result, although a wide alliance of artists of the 'Fronte's' sort was never recomposed, the Communists managed to maintain their privileged relationship with the intellectual class. This enabled them to increase their social prestige and be seen as 'the party of culture', albeit at the expense of a clear Communist cultural paradigm.

The central role of the PCI in Italian culture throughout the post-war period, however, contrasted with its inability to displace the Christian Democrats from political power. Stalinist party members stressed the mass dimension of culture, and intended to use intellectuals to shape highly politicised masses. Conversely, in the preceding and following periods, hegemony was conceived as becoming the political point of reference for the intelligentsia. Ironically, however, the Communist attempt to achieve influence in the world of high culture coincided, from the second half of the 1940s, with the rapid decline of the role of these traditional intellectuals, indeed of high culture as such, in providing social influence and shaping public opinion. The new means of mass communication, including cinema, first, and then television, seemed to act upon the public more strongly than the traditional intellectuals and, to a large extent, these media were in the hands of the anti-Communist bloc. Therefore, from a political point of view, debates about how to integrate a social sector so jealous of its independence and intellectual sophistication were, in reality, losing their importance. Despite a series of clashes and controversies, the PCI attempt to frame the fine arts in its organisational strategy was largely a success. Yet, their focus on the traditional intelligentsia also meant a lack of long-term perspective. It ultimately functioned as a limit on the party policy of winning hegemony, insofar as that aim did not become articulated with a consistent policy towards the new hegemonic apparatuses.

PART ONE:

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF THE PCI

CHAPTER I

‘THE NEW PARTY’: BETWEEN THE DEFEAT OF FASCISM, THE CRISIS OF LIBERALISM AND THE HEGEMONY OF THE CHURCH

1. The PCI and the Political Evolution of Italy during the Post-war Period

After the Allies landed in Sicily in 1943, Vittorio Emmanuele III ordered the arrest of Mussolini and appointed Marshall Pietro Badoglio as the head of a cabinet charged to negotiate peace. Then, Italy surrendered, the Germans occupied the North of the country and a Partisan movement was immediately organised, under the direction of the ‘Comittati di liberazione nazionale’ (National Committees of Liberation), that included the major anti-Fascist political parties from the Left to the Centre.

In the first instance, the Left-wing parties boycotted this government and called for the immediate abdication of the King for his earlier support of Mussolini, while the Centre and the Right remained undecided. The interregnum ended with the USSR’s recognition of Badoglio’s government and Togliatti’s arrival from Moscow in March 1944. In a crucial policy speech at the port of Salerno, he made clear that the immediate objective of the Communists was liberation and not revolution; and that the PCI would leave the form of the new State to be decided by popular vote. Accordingly, the Communists accepted an offer to join the Government. Their idea was to form a preliminary cabinet with all democratic parties: PSI, PCI and DC, until the elections were held. However, these were repeatedly postponed until 2 June 1946, when they were conducted together with a referendum on the monarchy. The

referendum proclaimed the republic, but the DC gained the majority in the elections, while the PCI was relegated to third place, after the Socialists.¹

The bad results in the polls forced the PCI to continue its policy of alliances and postpone the revolution further. The Communists joined the ensuing DC Government, but they had, by then, very little influence on it, and were expelled the following year. After the new constitution came into effect on 1 January 1948, Socialist and Communists worked together in the 'Fronte democratico popolare' coalition (People's Democratic Front), until the first Republic elections on April 18 of the same year, but they were defeated again. From then on, the Left had to acknowledge its new oppositional role and prepare for a long period of isolation.²

The DC presented the PCI exclusion from government as the result of an effort to consolidate democracy, saving Italy from a Stalinist dictatorship. However, the measures employed meant the beginning of a process of political regression from the immediate post-war period and, for some years, there was a serious risk that the law would be employed to limit the Communists' activities. Trials and police repression followed; and Leftist-orientated cultural initiatives were banned.³

¹ The DC gained 35.2% of the vote, and the PCI 18.9%.

² This time the DC achieved 38% of the vote, followed by the 'Fronte' with a 31%. In the June 1953 election, the DC won 40% of the vote but the Communists and Socialists recovered their support with 37%. A small group of centre parties achieved 9.3%, but of greater significance was the relative recovery of the extreme-right. 13% of the vote went to the post-Fascist 'Movimento sociale italiano' (MSI) and the monarchist 'Partito nazionale monarchico,' which was particularly strong in the South. The centre parties, the remnants of the previous progressive Liberals, would never support the 'Fronte,' but also refused to form a government with the DC. De Gasperi attempted to govern alone and then approached the extreme right, but the moderate majority in the DC forced him to resign in August 1953. The Centre-right slight majority was recomposed in 1954 by Mario Scelba, signalling the final victory of the DC in the post-war struggle for power and creating a situation that would continue in the following years.

³ For example, the 1950 campaign for peace included the art show called 'Arte contro la barbarie' ('Art Against Barbarism'), the continuation of a *L'Unità* initiative that first took place in 1944. In its initial form, the exhibition entries illustrated the events of the war, but, in 1951, it focused on protests against the atomic bomb on the occasion of a visit to Italy of the American President Eisenhower. Despite the assertive political scope, the show gathered artists of all trends, from the broadly non-figurative Renato Birolli, Antonio Corpora, Emilio Vedova, Pietro Consagra and Giulio Turcato, to the 'Realisti' Guttuso, Giuseppe Migneco, Armando Pizzinato, Leoncillo Leonardi and Giuseppe Zigaina, as well

2. The PCI and Stalin's Soviet Union

When reviewing the relationship of the PCI with the Italian State during the post-war period, Luciano Gruppi has argued that:

These years witnessed what could be called, to use somewhat pompous language, the production of a "Conventio ad Excludendum" -which, leaving aside that this was never a concept of Roman law anyway, is certainly a practice forbidden by the Constitution... It is evident that, from 1948 onwards, there was a permanent tendency to repress democratic freedom, with Fascist public security regulations being widely invoked to ban demonstrations and manifestos.⁴

The PCI's international relations largely contributed to its isolation on the home front. The Third International had been dissolved by Stalin in 1943 due to Allied pressures on the USSR, but in September 1947 the first meeting of Cominform, a board of information among the European Communist parties, was held in Poland. This signalled a turning point in the policy of alliances of anti-Fascist mass political parties that international Communism had pursued thus far. The expulsion of the PCI from government had been preceded by a similar measure in France that year, and followed a combined action by the Western occupying powers in Germany to exclude the USSR from economic decisions by issuing a new currency, the 'Deutsche Mark', in the area of their jurisdiction.

In this context, Communist politicians presented the USSR as a 'great and peaceful country' whose, at times, aggressive foreign policy was aimed to 'break the iron ring that had put her under siege since 1917... [with the help of] the peoples' liberation movements of her neighbour countries.' NATO, however, was viewed as 'an association of criminals';

as the 1930s figure Mario Mafai. On the opening day, anti-riot police closed the building and surrounded it, arguing that the exhibition was not licensed. A furious Guttuso talked in *L'Unità* of 'an explicit violation of the most elementary rights of Italian artists, that is: the right to express their thought with their work' and accused the Minister of Interior, Mario Scelba, of personally giving the order. A few months later, the same Scelba refused to grant the East German playwright Bertolt Brecht and his theatre company a visa to perform *Mother Courage* at Venice's Fenice theatre.

⁴ In Luciano Gruppi, Prologue to Palmiro Togliatti, *Opere*, Istituto Gramsci and Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1979, Vol. 5, p. XCIX.

and PCI politicians stressed at the earliest opportunity that 'the Soviet fleet is not in our seas, but the American fleet.'⁵

Ajello argues that the international situation forced the PCI to fight battles which were not really its: 'Togliatti's strategy intended to acclimatise his party to the Italian tradition. His obsessive desire to make it "accepted in society" was at the risk of failure due to these external pressures.'⁶ However, Cominform was not the International. The member parties were not mere sections of a single organisation, but could pursue their own politics according to national particularities.⁷ After the Yalta agreements, moreover, the Italian Communists knew that the USSR would not become decisively involved in October-like revolutionary uprisings within the American sphere of influence. The Western powers, in turn, were stationed in the peninsula, and the referendum on the monarchy had been won by a very narrow margin: 12,717,923 votes, most of them concentrated in the North, against 10,719,284 votes, with Southern cities such as Naples supporting the King by 80%. Insofar as it is permitted to speculate, a Communist uprising in Italy could have led to either a long and unwinnable civil war, such as in Greece, or the partition of the country, such as in Germany. Both choices seemed unacceptable for the PCI, but they still thought that it was possible to initiate a series of reforms from a Socialist perspective, as long as they were able to forge for themselves an image of moral and intellectual authority.

The independence of the European Communist parties increased after the horrors of Stalin's dictatorship were unveiled at the 1956 XX Congress of the Soviet Communist Party.⁸ But as early as 1954, just a year after Stalin's death, Guttuso explained to party cell representatives gathered in Perugia, on behalf of the Central Committee, that 'it is evident that the idea of the USSR as leader-state has been overtaken by the situation.'⁹ He

⁵ Renato Guttuso, *Unpublished Notes for a Speech at Piana dei Greci for the 1949 Sicilian Electoral Campaign*, Guttuso Archive, Civica Galleria Renato Guttuso, Bagheria, 1949 (a).

⁶ Nello Ajello, op. cit., p.142.

⁷ See Luciano Gruppi, op. cit.. (1974).

⁸ See Nikita S. Khrushchev, *The Secret Speech on the Cult of Personality*, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 2nd Session, 22 May-11 June 1956, pp. 9389-9403, in the Internet Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham university, WWW.Fordham.edu.

⁹ Renato Guttuso, *Unpublished Speech at the Perugia Congress of Party Cells*, Perugia, 1954, Guttuso Archive, Civica Galleria Renato Guttuso, Bagheria.

listed personality cult and bureaucratisation as the main mistakes of the USSR. At the same time, however, he stressed that the PCI would firmly defend the unity of the international Communist movement:

We do not accept... a division between Stalinist and democratic Communist parties... We see some positive things in the Soviet Union, and do not conceive Stalinism solely as degeneration. If we were to do that, we would risk losing an important part of Socialism. We would fall into opportunism, and lose those principles that Stalin defended, despite his mistakes and crimes. We neither accept nor reject Stalinism, but want to move forward... There are problems and uncertainties, but we have to examine them together... The deep reasons why we are Communists remain today, as much as ever, deeply rooted in our minds and hearts.¹⁰

More graphically, Rossana Rossanda, a young intellectual who belonged to the Cultural Commission, explained that, for the party members:

The USSR was the first Socialist state. It was a poorer society than ours (we were not idiots), but it was a fairer one. Moreover it was Stalingrad that had broken the Wehrmacht's bones. It was a great country, a great ally of the opponents of Nazism. Yet, in the post war period, worrying news began to filter through: the condemnation of Yugoslavia, the coup in Prague... However, during the Cold War, [the USSR] had the same enemy that we did... The Government and the Capitalists had decided: Democracy yes. Communism no. Even if we won 51% of the vote, we wouldn't reach power. There would have been a coup. Meanwhile, however, we were far away from reaching such majority. So we worked, and cut our losses... We were not waiting for X hour. But we did believe that the Cold War would end. Sooner or later, we believed anti-Communism would collapse. From 1945, ...the PCI became a force that aimed for a future transformation... Let's imagine that we had known about [Stalin's crimes]... in 1948 or in 1951. What could we have done? Would we have quit or would we have stuck at it? We would have cut our losses and kept going... Trombadori told this story: ...when the gulag and the executions were a thing of the past, Socialism would fly again like a little bird that, surprised by the cold and the frost, had been buried under a big and warm cow shit. It is certainly shit, but it prevented the bird from dying.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ In Rossana Rossanda, Rossana 'Ancora sul'56: memorie a confronto', *La rivista del Manifesto*, pp. 58-62.

3. The Defeat of Fascism, the Crisis of Liberalism and Catholic Hegemony

3.1 Communism and Fascism as Mass Movements

It could be argued that both Fascism and Communism were different historical expressions of the same period of mass political agitation. Originally, however, Gramsci conceived Fascism as the merely repressive response of the ruling classes to workers’ agitation. He wrote in *L’ordine nuovo* that ‘Fascism and democracy are two aspects of a single reality, two different forms of a single activity: the activity which the Bourgeois class carries out to halt the proletarian class on its path.’¹² Other 1920s European dictatorships, such as that of General Miguel Primo de Rivera in Spain, had been expressions of repressive coalitions of Conservative forces in the face of workers’ agitation, and were based on a rhetoric of the restoration of law and order with only a limited ‘hegemonic effect’. But Italian Fascism produced its own ideology of collaboration between workforce, intelligentsia and capital for the superior interest of the nation; and enjoyed mass support in Italy for over twenty years.

Fascism, like the preceding Parliamentarism, took care not to become mechanically identified with a single social group. One Fascism’s distinctive characteristics, compared to other 1920s reactionary regimes, was its Trade-unionist character and its mass base, in the ideological context of the collaboration between capital and workforce. Fascist ideologues provided a discourse regarding the Marxist version of workerism which was intended to substitute class struggle by a Corporate model of state and society.¹³ Corporatism was conceived as ‘the principle of the new social order’¹⁴ that rejected the existing separation in the Liberal State, of political representation and industrial organisations, such as trade unions, between the bourgeoisie and the workforce. Instead, it

¹² Antonio Gramsci, ‘Democracy and Fascism’, *L’ordine nuovo* 1 November 1924, translated by Quintin Hoare and reprinted in the Marx-Engels Internet Archive, <http://csf.colorado.edu/mirrors/marxists.org>. For further information, see also Quintin Hoare’s introduction to Antonio Gramsci in: Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1971.

¹³ The corporations replaced the former associations of workers and entrepreneurs. They could cover a company, a trade union, or an entire industry.

¹⁴ Paolo Ricci, ‘la figura e la vita di Berto Ricci’, *Orientamenti*, number 3-4, June-August 1999.

aimed at conciliation of these different interests that would, on the basis of new forms of work organisations, incorporate the proletariat within the Liberal economy.

As early as 1920, proto-Fascist intellectuals, such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, were not declaring themselves anti-Communist tout court, but just stressing that the October Revolution ‘has its “raison d’être” in Russia and can only be judged by the Russians... We are not Bolsheviks because we have our own revolution to make.’¹⁵ On other occasions, criticism was made of the historic course that Communism had actually taken. For example, the Fascist intellectual Berto Ricci made it clear that they were not Communists, because Communism was State Capitalism, whose materialism was ‘incompatible with human nature [and it meant] a wrong response to the working classes’ legitimate desire for justice.’¹⁶ However, in Ricci, anti-Communism often accompanied a pseudo-Marxist discourse or, at least, a stress on the same set of questions that the Marxists discussed. He wrote in Giuseppe Bottai’s¹⁷ *Critica fascista*, in June 1935, that the issue, regarding the corporate organisation of the economy, was

¹⁵ F.T. Marinetti, ‘Al di là del comunismo: il cittadino eroico, Scuole di coraggio. Gli artisti al potere. Le case del genio. La vita festa’, Milan, Edizioni de la testa di ferro, 1920, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 133. Marinetti disapproved of the ‘egalitarian, anti-intellectual, anti-European, Asiatic mentality’ of the Bolsheviks (in *ibid.*, p. 129) and proposed, instead, ‘a mass of genial individuals conscious of their rights and their natural ability to shape their political future.’ (*Ibid.*, p. 130.). A further proof of the ambiguous, and often confused relationship of Marinetti with the Left was his 1911 *Proclama futurista a los españoles (Futurist Public Announcement to the Spaniards)*, where he wrote under the pseudonym ‘Tristán’: ‘[For the progress of Spain,] it is necessary to wipe out Clericalism and its corollary, collaborator and defender: Carlism. The Monarchy, admirably defended by Canalejas, is on its way to carry on such a beautiful surgical operation. If the Monarchy fails... then, it will be time for the Radical-Socialist republic of Lerroux and Pablo Iglesias. They will make a deep, and perhaps, definitive incision in the leprous flesh of the country.’ (Tristán, ‘Proclama futurista a los españoles’, *Prometeo*, n. 1, 1911, p. 15.)

¹⁶ Berto Ricci was a mathematician close to ‘Strapaese’, who wrote for the *Il selvaggio*, *La voce*, *Lacerba*, *Critica fascista*, *Civiltà fascista*, *Il popolo d’Italia*, *Il giornale di Genova*, *Il lavoro fascista*, *L’Impero* and *Il Bargello*. He founded the short-lived *Il Rosai* journal in 1930 and *L’Universale* in 1931, which ceased publication when Ricci departed for Ethiopia as a Black Shirt volunteer in 1935. See Paolo Ricci, *op. cit.*, p.14.

¹⁷ Bottai was the head of the ‘Arditi’ pre-Fascist association and a member of the Government. See Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics, Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, Berghahn Books, Providence and Oxford, 1996.

not 'to abolish property... but the proletariat itself, that is, those without property; this means to acknowledge that property... cannot be separated from the producer... [We do not intend to] eliminate human initiative, but the indefinite accumulation of private wealth.'¹⁸

Accordingly, the core of the Fascist education system consisted in helping workers to achieve 'consciousness of being the producers and... make of them, in the practice, responsible owners.'¹⁹ In 1933, Ricci, the painter Ottone Rosai and up to ten other intellectuals published a manifesto in Ricci's *L'Universale* fortnightly where they declared the need to subordinate economic questions to politics and support state interventionism. They demanded that the Corporate state should ensure trade union membership for all workers, insurance and adequate legislation to protect them, as well as the 'qualitative and quantitative limitation of property rights and... the subordination of private to state interests.'²⁰ Yet, at the same time as they took their distance from Marxism, the signatories foresaw 'the end of the Liberal system..., the gradual participation of the workers in the companies and the end of the proletariat.'²¹

From this point of view, Fascism was the opposite of a chauvinist and provincial political regime. In the words of Paolo Ricci, the system intended to become a 'third way'²² between Capitalism and Communism. In November 1936, Mussolini had said that 'today, Bolshevism or Communism is nothing but state super-Capitalism brought to its most ferocious expression; Communism does not mean, therefore, the rejection of Capitalism, but its continuation and sublimation.'²³ Within this ideological framework, many potential members of the Left had no problems lining up with Fascism, where they saw the opportunity 'to carry out the social revolution in an even more revolutionary way than Moscow.'²⁴

¹⁸ See Berto Ricci's article in, *Critica fascista*, June 1935, quoted in Paolo Ricci, op. cit.

¹⁹ This was the objective of Bottai's 'School Chapter', approved by the Fascist Grand Council on 15 February 1939. See Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 12

²¹ Ibid.

²² See Paolo Ricci, op cit. Also David Atkinson, 'Enculturating Fascism? Towards Historical Geographies of Inter-war Italy', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 25, 3, 1999, pp. 393-400.

²³ Quoted in Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

In post-war Communist literature, however, Fascism was presented as a non-Italian, Germanic force, while the PCI defined itself as a national party. Yet, the PCI did not completely deny the existence of a Fascist Left wing. Instead, it occasionally became one of the targets of the Communists' message when they called on intellectuals to join the party regardless of their religious or political beliefs. The only condition was an agreement to rethink the Italian cultural tradition, and their own work, from the point of view of the working class. For example, in *Lo stato operaio*, a PCI newspaper edited in Paris from 1936, the historian Ambrogio Donini wrote that:

We the Communists extend the hand of friendship for the first time to the honest intellectuals, Fascist and non-Fascist, who live by their own work, suffer with the suffering of the people and want to end the moral and material decadence of our Italy... The Communist Party, the party of unity and the reconciliation of all Italians, knows that its call will not go unheard.²⁵

After the war, further, albeit veiled, self-criticism was made of Gramsci's maximalist policy during the *L'ordine nuovo* years, as the Communists became aware of the need for a policy directed towards Fascism's social basis. A PCI magazine, *Il calendario del popolo*, stated in 1947 that:

The big capitalists profited from the urban small and medium bourgeoisie's desire for social justice... Fascism presented itself as the achievement of all their hopes: progress, social justice and the end of landowners. So the 'Fasci di combattimento' were born in 1919, with a Populist and Socialist-like programme.²⁶

Regarding Bottai's 'Arditi', another proto-Fascist organisation, an anonymous contributor to the same magazine argued that:²⁷

It was a movement originated in Rome with some politically dubious elements, but the Communist Party could have infiltrated it... So [the

²⁵ Ambrogio Donini, 'Gli intellettuali italiani e la riconciliazione nazionale', *Lo stato operaio*, X, n. 7, July 1936.

²⁶ Unsigned Article, 'Como e perché il fascismo giunse al potere', *Il calendario del popolo*, n. 34, July 1947, p.117.

²⁷ The 'Arditi' were volunteer assault troops during World War I. The association of veteran 'arditi' was one of the components of the early Fascist movement. (See Günter Berghaus, op. cit.)

party] let down a lively group of young people that only wanted to be well led, to confront the Fascist squads in their own field.²⁸

3.2 The PCI and Liberalism: Secularism and Modernity

In the words of the historian Gianpiero Carocci: ‘Togliatti gave concrete indications of what a component of Post-fascism should be, and laid the main outlines of a Communist party that would learn from the experience that Fascism imposed on Italy, organising large masses of people.’²⁹ Croce had used the term ‘Totalitarianism’ to equate Fascism and Communism, and had opposed both to Liberalism.³⁰ He viewed Marxism as a doctrine for changing the world, which meant that it had a practical and not a theoretical scope. Its philosophical aspect was subordinated to revolutionary exigencies, thereby declaring itself an enemy of the pure and disinterested truth.³¹ For Croce, the Marxists unjustifiably foresaw the definitive salvation of the human species, a mythical reign of freedom where history would end, instead of considering the latter as the history of freedom, fed with eternally renewing oppositions and contrasts. Their claim to know the true cause of the historical process revealed a form of theological thought that in his view was as totalitarian as other doctrines that regarded God, the race or the environment as the motor of history. For these reasons, Croce believed that, in 1944, Communism did not possess ‘any constructive force... [whereas Liberalism] will seize again its dominion.’³²

For its part, *Il calendario del popolo* stated that: ‘Croce was anti-Fascist, but he substantially agreed with Fascism in the fight against Communism. Therefore, while he led the anti-Fascist movement, he was in fact helping to sustain Mussolini’s regime.’³³ It was true that he had

²⁸ Unsigned Article, ‘Como e perché il fascismo giunse al potere’, op. cit., p.117.

²⁹ Gianpiero Carocci, op. cit. (1996), p. 71.

³⁰ See Benedetto Croce, ‘Messaggio di Croce per la indipendenza della cultura,’ *Risorgimento liberale*, 13 April 1948, in Nello Ajello, op. cit., p.167.

³¹ See Ernesto De Martino, ‘Cultura e classe operaia’, *Quarto stato*, 3, n° 1, 1948, pp. 19-22 in Carla Pasquinelli (ed), *Antropologia culturale e questione meridionale: Ernesto De Martino e il dibattito sul mondo popolare subalterno negli anni 1948-1955*, La Nuova Italia Editrice, Florence, 1977, pp. 43-44.

³² Quoted in David Ward, op. cit., p.70.

³³ Ward writes that ‘the hegemony that Croce had been able to establish over Italian intellectuals was perhaps the greatest obstacle to the formation of the new generation of organic intellectuals who maintained allegiances to the interests and development of the working classes.’ In David Ward, op. cit., p. 68.

opposed Fascism, but it was also true that he never represented a real danger for the regime, because, the Communists believed, his philosophy had operated in an ideological way, hindering and rendering ineffective his anti-Fascist practice, while providing the regime with a mask of intellectual openness. After the war, he advocated a return to pre-First World War Liberalism, but, precisely, such Liberalism had already failed to halt Fascist totalitarianism. As Togliatti argued in 1944, Croce's politics during the Post-Second World War period demonstrated 'one thing only: ... his own ineptitude.'³⁴ A year later, Vittorini would also suggest that Croceanism had played an instrumental role within the Fascist regime, and he would write that 'to only take care of the "spirit", allowing a "Caesar" to take care of bread and work, means to constrain oneself within an intellectual role and let "Caesar" dominate man's soul. Could the attempt to produce a new culture to defend, and not merely to console man, interest the Idealist...?'³⁵

Vittorini carried out an original attempt to overcome Croce's polemic with Marxism and integrate the enlightened and critical aspect of his philosophy with the party programme. He viewed Liberalism as a vaccination against the 'return to spiritual unity that every Romantic thinker envied in the Middle Ages and that, unfortunately, Marx does not manage to remove from his own doctrine. Likewise the idealisation of the ability to believe (and therefore of accepting, of not doubting, of giving up research and criticism as sources of life).' These were, for Vittorini, 'typical aberrations of the fascistised youth in Italy and Germany'. He went on: 'The writer or the artist who joins Communism in France, in England or in the United States does so precisely because he sees in the Communist effort, or in the effort of the USSR... the way to solve, together with various social problems, the different contemporary spiritual

³⁴ in Palmiro Togliatti, 'Inettitudine,' *Rinascita*, II, April 1945. In addition, many young Liberals were already aware of the shortcomings of traditional Liberalism in the 1930s. Some of them had attempted to organise a progressive political force, the 'Partito d'azione' but, despite having exercised a certain influence on the Resistance, the lack of electoral support led to the organisation's dissolution in 1948. Ward listed, among the causes for its failure, the typical weaknesses of political Liberalism: 'The lack of discipline on the part of some party exponents and its failure to penetrate the fabric of Italian society and spread its message beyond a limited group of intellectuals.' See Ward, David, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

³⁵ Elio Vittorini, 'Una nuova cultura', Editorial in *Il politecnico*, 29 September 1945, p.2.

uneasinesses that he perceives... a malady afflicting human relationships in Liberal societies...³⁶

Ward underlines the links between Italian Liberalism and Communism when he writes that Gramsci's programme consisted in doing what Croce had been reluctant to do –namely, to 'spread... an intellectual and moral reform to be carried out on a national scale in a way that Liberalism failed to do and only achieved for small sections of the population.'³⁷ Togliatti seemed to endorse this reading when he retrospectively declared in 1964 that the biggest success of the PCI cultural politics during the post-war period was 'the victory, among the working classes, of a democratic civil consciousness.'³⁸

As a political force, the PCI excluded the PLI and Croce himself from its strategy of alliances, but attempted to absorb its electoral and social base. PCI leaders had clear in their minds that Liberal ideology influenced Italian society in a deeper and more diffuse way than the weak Partito Liberale Italiano did. This involved, however, a complex historical and theoretical work of adaptation by 1940s and 1950s Marxism. Despite the climate of social engagement of these years, many members of the 'intelligentsia' did not feel comfortable with the constant necessity of taking political sides, something that was implicit in Cold War politics as a whole. For these reasons, Luigi Russo, the director of the *Belfagor* review, underlined the similarities of Communist culture with basic Fascist sloganeering 'to believe, to obey and to fight.'³⁹ Yet, in practice, the political brainchildren of Liberal secular Anti-Fascist intellectuals, such as the Centre-Left Partito d'azione (Action Party) and the Demolaboristi (Democratic Labour), had failed, sunk in their lack of organisation and discipline and their elitism; or, as in the case of the PLI, had become a conservative force with a secondary role relative to the DC. Consequently, if the choice was either clerical obscurantism or Communist 'barbaric' politicisation of culture, the majority of secular intellectuals preferred to support the Left-wing bloc, though with reservations.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ David Ward, op. cit., pp. 67-84.

³⁸ 'Sette domande al direttore, interview with Palmiro Togliatti in *Rinascita*, 27 June 1964, reprinted in *La rinascita della sinistra*, Rome, 10 October 1999, p. XIX.

³⁹ Luigi Russo, 'Dialogo con un lettore di Belfagor, *Belfagor*, I, n° 5, 15 September 1947, p. 612 in Nello Ajello, op. cit., pp.42-43.

This situation demanded that the party leadership did not provoke fears of ideological control. Instead, they presented the PCI as the result of a generic alliance of labour and culture. As Togliatti put it to the party membership:

The Capitalist world creates the conditions that aim to destroy the freedom of intellectual life. We must become the champions of free artistic creation and scientific progress. This demands that we do not abstractly oppose our conceptions to currents and trends of a different nature but, on the contrary, we must open a dialogue with these and, in this way, we must make an effort to deepen the understanding of cultural issues in the manner they are put forward today. Not everybody who is far away from us, in the different fields of culture, philosophy, the historical and social sciences, is our enemy or an agent of our enemies. It is reciprocal understanding, conquest by means of continuous debate, that gives us authority and prestige and, at the same time, allows us to discover our real enemies, the false thinkers, the charlatans of artistic expression, etc.⁴⁰

3.3 The PCI and the Christian Democrats

The Catholic question also became a central issue for the ‘partito nuovo’. Both Croceanism and Left-wing Fascism came from the same tradition of secular culture that had viewed the Church as the main obstacle for the Risorgimento programme of Italian unity. Moreover, in the post-war period, the Catholic hierarchy was doubly discredited for its dubious behaviour with regard to Fascism. This favoured the moves of the PCI towards Liberal intellectuals, on the basis of anti-Clericalism and what they regarded as a contradiction between their lay, progressive and modern character and their political alignment with the Christian Democrats on the basis of anti-Communism. In the confrontation with the Catholics, however, the post-war PCI, in accordance with Gramsci’s analysis, sought to distinguish between the progressive and regressive impulses of Catholicism and regarded it as a necessary component of the bloc that the proletariat had to forge.

Despite the evident reactionary discourse of the Church hierarchy, a large part of the working population attended mass every Sunday. Catholicism was part of the national culture and, because of this, the Communists had to reach an agreement with it, if they wanted the Italians to view them as a national force, rather than as the puppet of a foreign

⁴⁰ Palmiro Togliatti, ‘Sullo sviluppo de nostro movimento’, *La rinascita della sinistra*, Rome, 10 October 1999, p. XX.