

Italian Lessons

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AMID TWINKLING FINGERS and Guy Fawkes masks, few were pining for central committees. Occupy's emergence was welcomed. The movement galvanized radicals, bringing the language of class and economic justice into view. Yet an unwarranted arrogance underlined the protests. Occupy, in part a media event that mobilized relatively few, was quick to assert its novelty and earth-shattering significance.

"Our model worked" was the refrain, cutting short debate with representatives from the gloomy socialist left. A disconnect from the lineages of past movements — movements that energized more, accomplished more and were only half as self-congratulatory — was a point of pride. The posture was all the more tragic, because Occupy's potential went beyond the minuscule core that laid its foundation. It rested in the millions who saw in it their discontent with austerity regimes, wage cuts, unemployment, and financial abuse. OWS, now drifting towards irrelevance, lacked the experience and political strategy to rally these people to action.

Of course, no diverse movement emerges out of an apolitical era and latches immediately onto a unified and comprehensive critique. Politicization is a process.

In this context, the translation of Lucio Magri's *The Tailor of Ulm*, a history of the rise and fall of the Italian Communist Party, once the most powerful and influential one in the West, is perfectly timed. With the Communist movement long dead and Italian politics vacillating between the dry and technocratic and the bombastic and corrupt, that's an odd pronouncement. But the history of the PCI is the history of a vibrant and deeply political organization that in a few short decades embedded itself within the Italian working class, attempting to chart a new course between Stalinism and social democracy. Its premature disappearance left that class in disarray. And today, Italy's anti-austerity movement is as weak and scattered as our own.

So Rome inspired no one at Zuccotti. Unlike, say, Athens. In Greece, the far left has come close to leading a governing coalition and a radical extra-parliamentary movement has been fighting for years to stave off the European austerity packages.

But it goes unnoticed that the Left's rise in Greece is a result of a unique history. Almost alone in Europe, Greece's unapologetically Stalinist Communist Party and its Eurocommunist splinters clung to life after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This tradition of working class organization, even in its ossified "Party" form, has fueled eclectic protests that make Occupy look like a tea party. Or the Tea Party.

"Eclectic" and "ossified" seem as if they don't belong together. Today, the Old Left is invoked as a convenient foil: humorless, militaristic, rigidly holding onto a stale ideology. It's a critique that has roots in the New Left. But the revolution danced before Emma Goldman, much less Abbie Hoffman.

AS MAGRI EXPLAINS, the Italian Communist Party incubated a social movement and a real community:

In the evening you went to a meeting on your bicycle or moped, where you would discuss the newspaper articles or membership campaigns; then you came back late to eat a plate of tripe or have a drink or two at the cafe attached to the House of Labor.

The web of solidarity made it possible for the unemployed to get by with no income and to feel a sense of belonging and power, whatever their personal ability or status. It was similar to the way the early German Social Democratic Party earned the loyalty of workers by filling the holes in the Bismarckian welfare state. Late night dances and sporting events were just as important as propagandizing.

But what made the Italian Communist Party, so different than the Soviet monolith it followed and then sparred with? Though he documents the Great War's disorienting effect on an ascending European workers' movement, the core of Magri's history starts in 1944, the year party boss Palmiro Togliatti returned from exile. The Italian Communist Party had long been a marginal force, with only a few thousand members throughout the fascist era. Its main asset was an intellectual inheritance from Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci critiqued Stalinist orthodoxy and grappled with the unique problems revolutionaries had to deal with in the West, where capitalist hegemony stood not just in the coercive power of the state, but within civil society.

But, for all his effort preserving Gramsci's prison writings, Togliatti was for most of his life an orthodox Stalinist. He was, however, also a skilled organizer who was able to position the communists at the vanguard of a growing resistance movement. The PCI emerged from World War II with widespread popular support and a base so militant that it had to be restrained. The creation of a mass party capable of governing, after all, would require more than a putsch.

This so-called "Salerno turn," which disarmed Communist partisans was supported by Stalin, as well. But something unusual happened after. Togliatti set in motion a model that would pose an alternative, democratic road to socialism and challenge aspects of the Soviet model. His protégé Enrico Berlinguer, a father of Eurocommunism, would make the rupture between the PCI and Moscow absolute.

But in the immediate postwar period, the contradictions of an avowedly revolutionary party shoring up the state did not come to the fore. Italian conditions — war-ravaged, underdeveloped to begin with—favored this approach. The PCI played a major role in drawing up one of the most progressive constitutions in Europe and, despite being excluded from national government after 1947, ran local and state administrations efficiently, proving that it could also "make the trains run on time." Its success paid off. Within a decade, with membership well over one million, the PCI was not only the largest Communist party in the West, it was second only to the German SPD as the largest mass membership party in Europe. A little more than a decade before, the PCI was an isolated Leninist vanguard composed of a few hundred, largely expatriated, anti-fascist intellectuals.

Most importantly, the party played a vital role in fostering civil society after Mussolini's long interlude. The Left presided across much of postwar Italian culture. To the PCI, cultural predominance was not meant to be an achievement in its own right, but a necessary prerequisite to power.

BUT PERHAPS CONFIRMING Max Shachtman's distinction between Stalinism in power and "official Communist" movements, this vibrancy was not a result of a break with the Soviet Union. The party received millions from Moscow annually until the 1980s and its leadership not only joined the Cominform in denouncing Tito, it supported the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, as well. As Magri notes, the PCI was neither a Soviet shill or completely independent during this transition period — and its leadership showed a parallel mix of rigidity and creativity.

After joining as a young man in the mid-1950s, Magri gravitated to the left-wing of the party.

Critiquing an increasingly reformist leadership, amid the upheavals of Italy's "long 68," Magri and other dissidents created the journal *il manifesto*. Student and worker radicalization in the Sixties had taken the party by surprise. Amendola, an ex-resistance member and a leader on the PCI's right, saw streaks of anarchist nihilism in the protests. Other apparatchiks followed suit, fighting a two-front battle against the bosses and the "ultra-leftists." Pier Paolo Pasolini's sentiment on witnessing the Italian student movement, "*Poliziotti figli di proletari meridionali picchiati da figli di papà in vena di bravate*,"* was not unique.

But Magri saw potential in the new upsurge and thought the party's gradualist approach did not fit the moment. New contradictions had emerged over the past decade, he argued, and the conservative posture that might have made sense in the immediate postwar period no longer did now. The central committee had other plans. Under Berlinguer, the PCI distanced itself further from Moscow, but this distancing was under the banner of "Eurocommunism," not the quasi-Trotskyist leanings of Magri's group. Magri soon found himself, along with his co-thinkers, expelled from the party, a party that he still pledged allegiance to, seeing it as not only redeemable, but the Italian working class's legitimate representative.

As general secretary from 1972 to 1984, Berlinguer formulated the "historic compromise." In the same way the early capitalist class made peace with elements of the ancien regime and remade society in its own image, while keeping the symbolic trappings of aristocracy around, Communists, he postulated, could share power with capitalists, while cementing working class hegemony. Practically, it was a stupendous failure. The PCI ended up propping up a fragile Christian Democrat-led government which made concessions to them for their service. The uproar after the ultra-leftist Red Brigades assassinated that party's Aldo Moro put a quick end to the experiment. The PCI, a long target and frequent denouncer of the Red Brigades, received a public backlash after the killing.

WHAT WERE THE ITALIAN COMMUNISTS doing? They had helped create a republic, had garnered the support of more than a third of the population, and governed major cities and whole regions, but had nothing to show for it at the national level. When there was finally working class militancy at the base, its reaction was to turn rightwards, help restore conditions for stable accumulation, and seek accommodation with the Right. Before long the party, still with a mass base and significant electoral support, would make the rightward turn official, dropping the iconography of October and embracing the language of social democracy in 1991.

But they did so at a peculiar moment. The crisis of the Western socialist tradition was two-fold: traditional social democracy had withered almost as much as official communism. For decades, the center-left had tasked itself with the burden of governance, delivering welcomed doses of socialism within the capitalist framework. The crowning achievement of postwar social democracy, the welfare state, represented a high point in human civilization. The state was wielded, not smashed, and class compromise, not class struggle, fostered economic growth and shared prosperity previously unimaginable.

But social democracy faced the structural crisis in the 1970s that Michal Kalecki, author of *The Political Aspects of Full Employment*, predicted decades earlier. Contra Leninist predictions, near-full employment and a cushy welfare state made workers bold, not docile. They made militant wage demands. Capitalists were able to keep up with them when times were good, but when stagflation hit — the intersection of poor growth and rising inflation—capital suffered from a crisis of profitability. Neoliberalism's success came in curbing this inflation and restoring profits through a vicious offensive against the working class.

Social democratic parties that sought to administer advanced economies in the neoliberal age, especially with the pressures wrought by globalization, had to adapt their platforms to this new reality. It has often meant, such as in the case of New Labour in Britain, betraying the principles and constituencies that these parties built their legacies around. But, at its best, it has yielded a "progressive neoliberalism," with certain European nations, like Sweden, maintaining much of their social safety net.

The PCI's failures then can be chalked up to historical circumstance. It could have neither moved right nor stayed in its contradictory posture. But looking back at then leader Achille Occhetto's decision to push for the party to be renamed the Democratic Party of the Left, the remnants of the Italian far-left are less forgiving. They see it as an unnecessary action that dissolved decades of hard-work and organizing. Magri agrees, but he doesn't see the PCI's dissolution into social democracy and later social liberalism, as the natural result of a creeping reformism that first emerged at Salerno.

After all, the PCI's motive, finding a "third way" between Leninism and social democracy in Western European conditions, was not necessarily reformist. Even the term used by the Italians, "structural reforms," was the same used by New Left theorist André Gorz: certain reforms short of revolution, short of smashing the state, not only improve the conditions of people in the present, they lay the terrain for more sweeping structural changes in the future. Attempting such a political strategy within the traditional "Party form," was not unusual either, since that organizational structure predates Leninism, something that Lenin, self-consciously modeling the German SPD to clandestine conditions, would not have disputed.

Magri knows the last point and writes cogently about the early social democratic movement. He laments the dissolution of the PCI, while acknowledging objective factors that led to it — an aging membership, the onerous legacy of the Communist experiment. But his way forward is nothing more than left-wing "umbrellas," organizations that can take scattered resistance and identitarian movements and rally them together. One, two, three World Social Forums. It's an absurd facile solution for a man who was an unrepentant Marxist, aiming to abolish classes, a set of social cleavages that have existed since the Neolithic Revolution. It's a simplicity replicated in Occupy's stance towards finance and expertise: irreconcilable to democratic equality.

When activists energized by Occupy do look towards one of the few bright spots on the radical left — the rise of Syriza in Greece — they show a similar naivety, imaging that Greek "resistance" can be easily replicated domestically. They fail to see the way in which serious, disciplined organizations, both social democratic and socialist, rooted in the Greek's working class, made this resistance possible.

Given the Left's lofty goals and the political impasse it finds itself in, a look back at the Italian Communist Party, despite its ultimate failure, is a strong reminder of the merits of conscious political work and of the path not taken between the horrors of state socialism and the bankruptcy of modern social democracy.