

FROM 'SUPREMACY' TO 'EXTINCTION':
ITALIAN COMMUNIST HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE NARRATIVES ON 1989

Giulia Bassi

ABSTRACT

In the great reconstructions of the history of the Italian Communist Party produced between 1989 and 1999, the great social-democratic transformation of Italian communism appears almost like the 'ghost' that Michel Foucault spoke about. The issue has simply been avoided in many cases, and in others it has barely been mentioned, focusing instead on the 1970s, the apogee of approval for Italian Communism. Above all, the main ICP history texts have, starting from 1979, talked of a history 'in decline', 'on the way down', of 'failure', and especially of 'crisis'. This latter, a truly dominant discursive and cultural register of those years, was, after all, the underlying current running through the investigations which, only touching upon the great upheavals of the Soviet system in Central and Eastern Europe, had Italian society and politics as their main (if not only) analytical horizon. This essay will retrace these narrative paths, analysing the main historiography on the ICP published in the decade 1989-1999, but also taking into account the early 2000s so as to record the arrival of new paradigms.

Keywords · Italian Communist Party, History of Historiography, Narratives, 1989, Crisis.

I. INTRODUCTION

For Italian Communism, 1989, an important metonymy of the great democratic transformation and the end of the Cold War, was a period of transition, both gradual and impetuous. As symbolic extremes of this path we can point to, on the one hand, the German 1989 and the demolition of the Berlin Wall in the autumn of 1989, and on the other, the so-called 'Bolognina Turn', when, on 3 February 1991 in the Navile (previously Bolognina) district of Bologna, the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*) announced its dissolution and official reinvention as the Democratic Party of the Left (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra*). The whole process was contained within the brief gap between two congresses: the 19th, held in Bologna between 7 and 11 March 1990, and the 20th, held between 31 January and 3 February 1991 in Rimini. Within this narrow time frame, in fact, the ICP created a new progressive party which it then launched at the second congress.

The memoirs written by some important party members recounted these events as a decision taken by the then secretary Achille Occhetto, in total autonomy from the rest of the central committee following the German events. Moreover, the whole narrative of the time was conducted like an account of the crisis, a general systemic crisis that affected not only the party, but the whole political system.¹ Such was the message of the party secretary himself, who recalled the events in his symbolic volume *Un indimenticabile*

¹ See, for example, in order of publication: Giuseppe Chiarante, *Da Togliatti a D'Alema. La tradizione dei comunisti italiani e le origini del PDS* (Roma; Bari: Laterza, 1996); Miriam Mafai, *Botteghe Oscure, addio: com'eravamo comunisti* (Milano: Mondadori, 1996); Luciano Barca, *Cronache dall'interno del vertice del PCI*, vol. 3 (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005); Pietro Ingrao, *Volevo la luna* (Torino: Einaudi, 2006); Giuseppe Chiarante, *La fine del PCI. Dall'alternativa democratica di Berlinguer all'ultimo Congresso (1979-1991)* (Roma: Carrocci, 2009).

1989 (*An Unforgettable 1989*),² which consciously echoed another date of historical importance and another famous essay, that of Pietro Ingrao, *L'indimenticabile 1956 (The Unforgettable 1956)*.³ Most of the historiographic production on Italian communism that came out in the same period, regardless of the perspective and political affiliation of the writer, introjected and re-proposed these narratives, which in the public, political and scientific debate (especially in the left-wing arena), have represented a real hegemonic discourse for a decade. The present work aims to isolate, reconstruct, and highlight these dominant narratives, analysing the most important texts of the ICP's history published between 1989 and 1999. However, the analysis will also take a look at the early 2000s, recording the arrival of new paradigms.

II. NARRATIVES ON THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST METAMORPHOSIS

Even a cursory examination of the main texts on the history of Italian communism published between the late 1980s and the early 2000s results in the appreciation of one or two fundamental issues.

First of all, there is a general lack of work about 1989. This peculiarity is not limited to the texts printed in the wake of events, but also extends to the general reconstructions of the party's history that were published in the following decade. In fact, there are few studies on the ICP that contemplate the analysis of 1989 in their periodization or that even come close to it, a question that is surprising given the vastness of the bibliography on Italian communism. And yet, most of the texts focus on limited time spans or dwell on some of the fundamental junctions of the party's history, and in particular its beginnings in the 1920s as the Communist Party of Italy (*Partito Comunista d'Italia*), a section of the Third Communist International, and the Resistance period during the 1940s. It is significant that a very important collection in this field of studies like *Il PCI nell'Italia repubblicana, 1943-1991 (The ICP in the Italian Republic, 1943-1991)*, published in 2000 by the Roman publishing house Carocci,⁴ does not contain even one essay on 1989, although it contemplates 1991 as a *terminus ad quem*. The volume was edited by Roberto Gualtieri, former member of the Democrats of the Left and now Minister of Economy and Finance for the Democratic Party in Conte's government, but who was at the time a researcher at the La Sapienza University in Rome.⁵ Even in the most extensive reconstructions of the party's history, there are few texts that extend their analysis beyond what was called 'national solidarity' (*solidarietà nazionale*),⁶ or the 'third phase' (*terza*

² Achille Occhetto, *Un indimenticabile 1989* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1990).

³ Pietro Ingrao, *L'indimenticabile 1956*, now in Pietro Ingrao, *Masse e potere* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1977), 101-154.

⁴ It is symbolic that Carocci was a publishing house that in a certain sense was close to the party, having inherited many of the authors from Editori Riuniti, founded in 1953 from the merger of the communist Edizioni l'Unità, Edizioni Rinascita, and Edizioni di Cultura Sociale. See in particular *Il destino del libro. Editoria e cultura in Italia*, ed. by Nicola Badaloni (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1984).

⁵ *Il PCI nell'Italia Repubblicana 1943-1991*, ed. by Roberto Gualtieri (Roma: Carocci, 2001).

⁶ In this regard see the well-known volume by Giorgio Galli, *Il decennio Moro-Berlinguer. Una rilettura attuale* (Milan: Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 2006); and in general, Raffaele De Mucci, "La via italiana al consociativismo", *Democrazie in transizione*, ed. by Arend Lijphart, Raffaele De Mucci, and Luigi Di Gregorio (Roma: LUISS, 2002), 85-112. See also the more recent Simona Colarizi, *Un paese in movimento. L'Italia negli anni Sessanta e Settanta* (Bari: GLF Laterza, 2019), chapter 3, 1976-1979.

fase), following the formula of ICP's historic rival, the Christian Democratic Party (*Partito della Democrazia Cristiana*).⁷

Secondly, it is necessary to document the lack of an in-depth analysis of the subject in the volumes that *also* deal with 1989. For example, in the 1993 edition of Giorgio Galli's historical-political study, *Storia del PCI. Il Partito comunista italiano: Livorno 1921, Rimini 1991 (The History of the ICP. The Italian Communist Party: Livorno 1921, Rimini 1991)*, the issue is evident even from a quantitative point of view.⁸ In fact, the Milanese historian, who was very close to the left-wing networks critical of the communist tradition,⁹ as well as to the group founded by Giulio Seniga, Communist Action (*Azione Comunista*),¹⁰ dedicated practically the entire volume to the events between 1914 and 1975, while subsequent events were crammed into the last three chapters of the seven that make up the fourth and last section of the volume, and which were in any case much less substantial than the previous chapters.¹¹ This is even more evident since the text was also the first to reconstruct the history of the party as a whole, taking into account aspects often omitted from other general histories.¹² A similar reasoning applies to the significant essay *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano 1921/1991 (History of the Italian Communist Party 1921/1991)*, written by an authority in the field of studies, Aldo Agosti, who was a historian and member of the committee of Istituto Piemontese per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea

⁷ The ICP's ingress into the area of government is described with such definitions when, in 1978, the ICP did not give the Christian Democratic government led by Giulio Andreotti a vote of no-confidence in 1978 in response to the terrorist emergency.

⁸ Giorgio Galli, *Storia del PCI. Il Partito comunista italiano: Livorno 1921, Rimini 1991* (Milano: Kaos, 1993).

⁹ Symbolically, the first edition of his most important book was published by the Arturo Schwarz' Trotskyist publishing house; see Giorgio Galli, Fulvio Bellini, *Storia del Partito comunista italiano* (Milano: Schwarz, 1953). However, it is very difficult to pinpoint the political position of an author like Galli. Moreover, one must take into account not only that the history of the party in 1993 was a rewriting of that of 1953, but also that this first edition was written together with Bellini, a former partisan and in some ways closer to Schwarz's ideas than Galli was.

¹⁰ As Galli himself stated: "The connection with Communist Action was a relationship that resulted from *Storia del PCI*. I became – I don't know how to put it – a kind of consultant, and sometimes a ghost writer". See "Giorgio Galli", interview by William Gambetta, *Zapruder*, 27 (2012): 120-127, 125; see in particular the pages dedicated to the historian's political commitment, 124-126. Moreover, this comment highlights how even the early history of the ICP eluded a precise political positioning.

¹¹ Specifically, the first part of the volume (*Il processo di formazione*), 11-71, the second part (*Gli anni dell'esilio*), 75-133, the third part (*Il partito di massa*), 137-222, and most of the fourth part (*Nel bipartitismo imperfetto*), 225-272, are dedicated to the period between 1914 and 1975. The last part of Enrico Berlinguer's secretariat and the events connected with the end of the experience of Italian communism are confined to the final three short chapters of the fourth section of the volume: chapter 5, *L'alternativa: confusa e tardiva*, 273-284, chapter 6, *Il consociativismo*, 285-296, and chapter 7, *Dal primato all'estinzione*, 297-313.

¹² For example, Galli devoted an entire chapter to the deliberate movements within the party's leadership between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the following decade, to the assignment of the vice-presidency to the young Enrico Berlinguer in 1969, and to the relations between the party and the youth movements of 1968 and the extra-parliamentary left, noting the importance of political people and dynamics crucial to the evolution of the party and its subsequent transformations.

(Piedmontese Institute for the History of the Resistance and Contemporary Society).¹³ Looking through the volume of historical synthesis, published in 1999, so ten years after the events considered, it can easily be seen that the author dedicated only a short chapter to the events after 1979,¹⁴ and less than two pages to the end of Italian communism.¹⁵

In any case, the issue is more general, given that most of the great reconstructions of the party's history dedicate, at most, a few pages or a brief final chapter to the period following the killing of Aldo Moro in 1978 by left-wing terrorist groups, in this case the Red Brigades.¹⁶ Moro is very relevant to the history of the ICP, having been the president of the Christian Democrats and the main counterpart to communist leader Berlinguer (who became secretary in 1972¹⁷) in the conceiving of the 'historic compromise' (*compromesso storico*)¹⁸. The purpose of this potential agreement was a future alliance of all progressive forces: Catholics, Communists, and Socialists.¹⁹ In Italy, the union of this political group was to solve the decade-long problem of political instability and constitute a front, or at least a barrier, to left- and right-wing terrorism. The salience of this juncture, therefore, is undeniable, but it is certainly surprising how the subsequent events were in most cases only hinted at; this peculiarity could partly be due to a more or less conscious choice by historians not to analyse the transformations taking place within the party or to the analytical difficulty of extricating themselves from a context such as the Italian fall-out from the breakdown of the Soviet system, where the internal and international dimensions were closely interconnected. For example, Berlinguer's turn towards a 'democratic alternative' (*alternativa democratica*) with the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano*)²⁰ – then led by the charismatic leader Bettino Craxi, a controversial figure who was to be implicated in the next great season of scandals that hit

¹³ Aldo Agosti, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano 1921/1991* (Roma; Bari: Laterza, 1999). The Institute was named after the historian's father, Giorgio Agosti, who was a partisan of the Justice and Freedom group (*Giustizia e Libertà*) and one of the founders of the anti-fascist Action Party (*Partito d'Azione*).

¹⁴ The chapter in question is significantly entitled *I comunisti italiani tra declino e mutazione* (*The Italian Communists between Decline and Mutation*), 115-125, in A. Agosti, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*.

¹⁵ The pages dealing with 1989 are 124-125, in A. Agosti, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*. Likewise, Donald Sassoon's encyclopaedic volume, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London: IB Tauris, 2014), reserved only a short chapter (pages 572-593) for the conclusion of the experience of Italian communism, mostly analysed in comparison with the French Communist Party. Furthermore, the chapter is almost entirely dedicated to the period between the 1970s and the early 1980s; the central figure of Occhetto is only briefly hinted at on page 752 in a general chapter symbolically entitled "The Great Crisis of Socialism".

¹⁶ See Agostino Giovagnoli, *Il caso Moro. Una tragedia repubblicana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2018); see also Pino Casamassima, *Attacco al cuore dello Stato. Le Brigate Rosse da Sossi a Moro* (Roma: Salerno, 2016).

¹⁷ On the figure of the communist secretary, see the biography of Francesco Barbagallo, *Enrico Berlinguer* (Roma: Carocci, 2007). The volume edited by the party after the death of the secretary is noteworthy: *Enrico Berlinguer*, ed. by the Italian Communist Party (Roma: Edizioni L'Unità, 1985).

¹⁸ See in particular, *Una vita, un Paese. Aldo Moro e l'Italia del Novecento*, ed. by Renato Moro and Daniele Mezzana (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2014); Guido Formigoni, *Aldo Moro. Lo statista e il suo dramma* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2016).

¹⁹ On this, see the famous articles written by Enrico Berlinguer: "Riflessioni sull'Italia dopo i fatti del Cile", *Rinascita*, 38, 39, 40 (October 1973): "Imperialismo e coesistenza alla luce dei fatti cileni", "Via democratica e violenza reazionaria", "Alleanze sociali e schieramenti politici".

²⁰ Regarding this, see the essay by Francesco Barbagallo, "Enrico Berlinguer, il compromesso storico e l'alternativa democratica", *Studi Storici*, 45, 4 (2004): 939-949.

the country for years²¹ – is generally little analysed. All this has made and still makes the intrinsic causes of the metamorphosis of Italian communism much less clear.

On the other hand, the absence of a datum can be analysed, in itself, as a datum. Certainly, in interpreting these shortcomings, a number of unquestionably important factors must be taken into account. First of all, the recent past does not generally fall within the subject matter and interests of the contemporary historian, even if, in this case, the disciplinary encroachment into political studies is averted by the organic reconstruction of the entire experience of the party. Moreover, it is significant that, while there are dozens and dozens of collections of documents, speeches, articles, and publications from the party itself relating to the previous decades,²² this cannot be said for the last ten years of the ICP's history, during which bibliographical-documentary production was (and still is) scarce, if not even absent.²³ The persistent lack of analysis on the subject has, moreover, generated a vicious circle which has long shifted the interest of research to other moments in the history of the party where there was already a broad debate, and in particular, to the 1940s, 1950s, and 1970s, or to other subjects, historical periods, and sectors in conjunction with the end of the cycle of the early republican system and the subsequent political transformations.

Nevertheless, this absence can give us some data, even interesting data. These first two highlighted points, in fact, make one think that not talking about the conclusion of the communist experience, or talking about it in a cursory manner, or touching upon it only superficially, was for many historians, like many politicians, a way to avoid it, to not deal with it, also from a personal point of view: as individual people and citizens, before as historians. Without wanting to stray into psychology, we can draw a whole series of historiographical considerations from this, which certainly need to be investigated. One hypothesis, for example, is the difficulty of historiographically defining a transformation that was at times as ambiguous as it was clean-cut. For Italian communism, 1989 did not – and still does not – correspond to a serious debate on the role played by the ICP in the history of republican Italy in changing the policies of the parties that derived from it. The change, in fact, was not sudden: the party changed over time, without severing, at least initially, its roots.²⁴ It is no coincidence that initially the traditional symbols of the party,

²¹ On this important political figure, see the book by Simona Colarizi and Marco Gervasoni, *La cruna dell'ago. Craxi, il partito socialista e la crisi della Repubblica* (Roma; Bari: Laterza, 2005).

²² Some of the most significant examples of documentary collections from the period under consideration are as follows: *La politica del Partito comunista italiano nel periodo costituente. I verbali della direzione tra il V e il VI Congresso 1946-1948*, ed. by Renzo Martinelli and Maria Luisa Righi (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1992); the five important volumes *Da Gramsci a Berlinguer: la via italiana al socialismo attraverso i congressi del Partito comunista italiano 1921-1984*, ed. by Orazio Pugliese *et al.* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1985). As simple examples of work edited by the ICP, see *La politica dei comunisti dal quinto al sesto congresso. Risoluzioni e documenti raccolti a cura dell'ufficio di segreteria del PCI*, ed. by the Italian Communist Party (Roma: La Stampa Moderna, post 1947). Among the collections, note: Palmiro Togliatti, *Opere*, ed. by Ernesto Ragionieri, Istituto Antonio Gramsci di Roma *et al.*, 6 vols. (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1967-1984); Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. by Felice Platone, 6 vols. (Torino: Einaudi, 1948-1951).

²³ Exceptions to this are the Congress documentary collections such as *Documenti politici del PCI dal XVI al XVII Congresso*, ed. by the Italian Communist Party (Roma: Publisher not identified, 1986); *Tesi, programma, statuto. I documenti approvati dal XVII Congresso del PCI*, ed. by the Italian Communist Party (Roma: Editrice l'Unità, 1987).

²⁴ Think of the resistance to the turn by the important political leader Pietro Ingrao, who remained opposed to any hypothesis of division. See his memoirs in this regard: Ingrao, *Volevo la luna*.

the red flag and the hammer and sickle, were placed at the base of the oak tree, the new emblem of the Democratic Party of the Left;²⁵ similarly, at the time of the political transformation of the party and in the following period, the post-1989 communists, the “*piddiessini*” in Italian (from the Italian acronym PDS), did not tend to call themselves ‘socialists’ or ‘social democrats’. Yet, the majority of the leaders had decided, in 1991, to remain in the reformed party while the more intransigent wing founded the Communist Refoundation Party (*Partito della Rifondazione Comunista*) together with radical groups from the Proletarian Democracy (*Democrazia Proletaria*) and the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Italy (*Partito Comunista d’Italia marxista-leninista*).²⁶ In spite of this, many of the ex-communist leadership clearly did not fully accept the liberal-democratic compromise.²⁷

One of the consequences of this uncertain political-cultural climate has been the entrapment of historiographic production on the ICP published in the decade between 1989 and 1999 within the mesh of two meaningful, different but intimately connected, narratives.

II.1. *The Compression of 1989 into the 1970s*

Closely related to the points highlighted above, a general compression of the historiographic analyses of the ICP of the 1980s into those of the 1970s must be noted, with the general consequence of an under-determination of the importance of the changes and transformations that took place in that decade. This issue is evident in the important 1992 volume by the historians Marcello Flores, also scientific chief of the Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri, and Nicola Gallerano, president of the Istituto Romano per la Storia d’Italia dal Fascismo alla Resistenza, entitled *Sul PCI. Un’interpretazione storica (On the PCI. An Historical Interpretation)*.²⁸ The two authors, in fact, explicitly stated in the epilogue that they wanted to end the history of the party in the 1970s and with the end of the policies of the ‘historic compromise’ and ‘national solidarity’, considering the subsequent years merely “residual” (*residuali*).²⁹

²⁵ The communist secessionist leader, Armando Cossutta, sarcastically commented on this choice in the pages of the newspaper then edited by Gaetano Scardocchia: “The new symbol? It looks like a carnation”, with a clear polemical allusion to the symbol of the socialists; in *La Stampa*, 11 October 1990. On the difficulties of abandoning the symbol of an important section of the leadership see Galli, *Storia del PCI*, p. 313. On the importance and permanence of mythology linked to communist symbols, see in particular Franco Andreucci, *Da Gramsci a Occhetto. Nobiltà e miseria del Partito comunista italiano 1921-1991* (Pisa: Della Porta, 2014).

²⁶ On the new political organisation, see Simone Bertolino, *Rifondazione comunista. Storia e organizzazione* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2004).

²⁷ As Gianfranco Pasquino recently said: “The Bolognina comrades were disconcerted when they heard Occhetto say that their god had never existed, and that in any case it should no longer be venerated. However, they were reassured by the permanence of a religion: which, as we know, often disregards a faith and in any case survives it”; “Once upon a time there was the vow of belonging”, *Mondo operaio*, 12 (2014): 13-16, 13. See also the transcriptions of Achille Occhetto’s speech at the Rimini Congress of January-February 1991, “The error of war, the future of Italy, the new politics that the PDS proposes”, partly published in the daily newspaper: “La relazione di Occhetto al Congresso di Rimini”, *l’Unità*, 27, 1st February 1991.

²⁸ Marcello Flores, Nicola Gallerano, *Sul PCI. Un’interpretazione storica* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1992).

²⁹ Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, 257-258.

Most ICP historians focused on, or stopped at, *primarily* the 1970s, at secretary-general Berlinguer, and thus at the moment of maximum popular support for the party.³⁰ In addition, in most of the texts examined here, the analysis was focused on just some key issues. First of all, historians concentrated their research on the question of the *conventio ad excludendum*, a formula coined by the well-known Christian Democrat jurist Leopoldo Elia³¹ indicating the tacit agreement between the parties to exclude the most radical parties – the Communist left and the Italian Social Movement right (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*) – from the area of government.³² Many ICP scholars therefore concentrated on trying to understand whether or not the *conventio ad excludendum* had actually broken down at the end of the 1970s together with the end of the external support of the Communists for the government.

Most of the authors focused their investigations on the link between the ‘historic compromise’ (1973) and ‘national solidarity’ (1978-1979), thus searching *a posteriori* for continuity in the policies of the ICP. First of all, they questioned whether ‘solidarity’ and ‘compromise’ were the same thing. Secondly, they wondered whether the latter was a direct continuation or a derivation of the former: an ideal common thread that linked ‘national solidarity’ to the ‘historic compromise’, and before that to the ‘Italian road to socialism’ of 1956, to the ‘new party’ and the ‘progressive democracy’ launched in 1944 by Palmiro Togliatti, who himself had already rhetorically traced it back to the thought of Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s and 1930s,³³ recognized as the party’s legendary founder.³⁴ Finally, much research has focused on the question of the ‘failure’ or ‘success’ of the party: whether ‘national solidarity’ was a degeneration of the ‘historic compromise’, its inevitable vent, or whether the agreement underlying democratic solidarity was really a credible bargaining chip. In practice, considering the outcome of these premises, many historians have tried to show how the party *should* or *should not* have acted in the 1970s, almost as if to avert an end that had already occurred, thus criticising or praising the party for its own political choices, and in the end speaking in evaluative terms of the defeat or, contrariwise, the triumph.

This interpretative approach had a matrix that could be traced back to the party itself,

³⁰ In 1975, at the local elections, the party had made a real leap forward, going from 27.9% in 1970 to 33.5%. A year later, at the general elections, support had increased further, and the party managed to reach an all-time high of 34.4%. Data in Simona Colarizi, *Storia politica della Repubblica. Partiti, movimenti e istituzioni, 1943-2006* (Roma; Bari, Laterza, 2007), 120-127.

³¹ Already succinctly contained in the famous paper given at the conference promoted by the Lombardian Christian Democrats held between 18 and 19 September 1965 in Cadenabbia, it is now in *Costituzione, partiti, istituzioni*, ed. by Leopoldo Elia (Bologna: il Mulino, 2009), 115-141. Elia reformulated the issue during the 1970s, later defining it in “Forme di governo”, *Enciclopedia del Diritto*, vol. XIX (Milano: Giuffrè, 1985), *ad vocem*.

³² See in particular Pietro Scoppola, *La Repubblica dei partiti. Evoluzione e crisi di un sistema politico 1945-1996* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1997), 154-159.

³³ On the rhetorical construction of the Italian communist leadership, see Giulia Bassi, *La formazione della leadership comunista tra ‘utopia’ e ‘compromesso’. Dalla nascita del partito al Memoriale di Yalta (1917-1964)* (Parma: Athenaeum University Press, 2020).

³⁴ On the rhetorical and political construction of the communist tradition, see in particular Franco Andreucci, *Falce e martello. Identità e linguaggi dei comunisti italiani fra stalinismo e Guerra fredda* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2005), in particular 55-83. On these specific narratives, created by the party itself, see Giulia Bassi, “Political Tropes of the PCI in Party Discourse and Historiography: the Case of ‘Progressive Democracy’”, *Storia della Storiografia*, 76, 2 (2020): 117-143.

whose official interpretation had created a split between the ‘correct route’ and ‘wrong applications’. Already at the end of the 1970s, as part of the process of self-criticism initiated by the ICP after the end of the coalition governments, in the book symbolically entitled *In mezzo al guado* (*Midstream*), the leader Giorgio Napolitano defended the party’s choices during the period 1976-1979 “against summary liquidations” and “hasty judgments” and “purely instrumental judgements”. Napolitano thus tried to show not only how the ICP had ultimately “avoided the worst” (*evitato il peggio*), but also how it had tackled the crisis of capitalist and societal development by launching “processes of recovery and renewal in various fields”. The substantial failure of the governments of national solidarity had therefore to be linked not “to the exceptional nature of the trial experienced by the ICP”, but to the enormous difficulties that the party, “in midstream” (no longer in opposition but not yet in government), had encountered in those years in order to “make its way” (*farsi strada*), ultimately failing to achieve lasting and conclusive results.³⁵ Years later, in the 1986 volume *Le scelte della solidarietà democratica. Cronache, ricordi e riflessioni sul triennio 1976-1979* (*The Choices of Democratic Solidarity. Chronicles, Memories, and Reflections on the Three-year Period 1976-1979*), the communist Gerardo Chiaromonte explained how a policy of “true” (*reale*) democratic solidarity had never actually been achieved.³⁶ The Neapolitan leader in fact considered the experimental agreement with the Christian Democrats to have been carried out only in connection with the emergency of the situation and the serious difficulties the country was experiencing at the time; therefore, he concluded, a “government of broad democratic concentration” to cope with it was not to be considered “nothing extraordinary”.³⁷ The author directly linked the ‘historic compromise’ with the Togliattian formula of the unity of the democratic forces and interpreted consociationalism, in terms of how it had developed and ended, as “a dramatic and ultimately losing experience” (*un’esperienza drammatica e perdente*).³⁸ In conclusion, for Chiaromonte the party had suffered a dangerous disconnection not only from the various movements of society, but also from its traditional electorate. In fact, the ICP proved to be completely unsuitable to taking up governmental responsibility that had been denied to it for too long and then built on an anomalous and completely unprecedented premise, which had forced it “outside the government” and which, however, had forced it “to reject attacks” not only by “movements and groups of various extremist inspiration”, but also “by those who were supposed to be the co-partners in the policy of solidarity”.³⁹ Chiaromonte thus came to

³⁵ Giorgio Napolitano, *In mezzo al guado* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1979), XX. In a convoluted speech, Napolitano explained that the failure of national unity could have been countered, on the one hand, by “a more vigorous movement of working and popular masses” or at least by a clearer and more unambiguous direction than those struggles, and on the other hand, it could have been curbed by adequate political and mass action throughout the country by the party. Nevertheless, he concluded in any case by once again tracing the shortcomings of the party to the inadequacy of the social struggles: “if it was not possible to animate a real movement of opinion and the masses for objectives of renewal and economic development, then it was essentially because too many parts of the workers’ and left-wing fronts themselves did not make a sure contribution and unitary commitment and instead were often pushed in the opposite direction, and because the Communist Party itself was unable to overcome its limits and contradictions”, XXI.

³⁶ Gerardo Chiaromonte, *Le scelte della solidarietà democratica. Cronache, ricordi e riflessioni sul triennio 1976-1979* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1986), 179.

³⁷ Chiaromonte, *Le scelte della solidarietà democratica*, 179

³⁸ Chiaromonte, *Le scelte della solidarietà democratica*, 195.

³⁹ Chiaromonte, *Le scelte della solidarietà democratica*, 166

conclusions similar to those of Napolitano:

A block condemnation or even just a dismissal of what happened then, and of the choices we made then, and of the limits our actions had, would not only be useless, but would be extremely harmful. [...] Even if in very difficult and tortuous conditions, and making mistakes, showing insufficiencies, we tried, in very reconciling terms, with regards the real problems of the country, of overcoming the crisis, of the immediate policies to propose and support. [...] We couldn't back out. Of course, it was very hard. For all of us.⁴⁰

Implicitly, the leader asserted that any choice the party made at that time was fundamentally an obligatory choice. Likewise, in his self-criticism between the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, Fernando Di Giulio traced the “failure” of “national solidarity” to an error of judgement by the ICP or, rather, an error of underestimation of the situation of the country, “brought to its knees” by thirty years of Christian Democrat management, and of mere “illusion” that a programmatic agreement could really change this state of affairs.⁴¹ On the other hand, according to Di Giulio the party showed on that occasion all its “programmatic ingenuity” (*ingenuità programmatica*) in the management of political power resulting from a deficient “culture of government”.⁴²

Narrations of this type have also migrated into historiography. Thus Leonardo Paggi and Massimo D'Angelillo, in their 1986 volume entitled *I comunisti italiani e il riformismo. Un confronto con le socialdemocrazie europee (Italian Communists and Reformism. A Comparison with European Social Democracies)*, sketched a substantially negative picture, underlining the responsibility of the experience of ‘national solidarity’ in the crisis of the political-programmatic identity of the communist party, which originated in part and in turn from the fact that the centrist coalition had instead come out substantially unscathed.⁴³ On the basis of Chiaromonte's considerations, a year later in the volume *Tra compromesso e solidarietà. La politica del PCI negli anni '70 (Between Compromise and Solidarity. ICP Policy in the 1970s)*, Giuseppe Vacca, historian and member of the ICP (afterwards of the Democratic Party of the Left and the Democratic Party), spoke of a real “defeat” of the party at the end of the 1970s, a failure due to the limits of its “political culture”, which led to an evident “lack of analysis” and an insufficient understanding of the movements and processes in place.⁴⁴ In agreement with the communist leader, Vacca explained how the ICP had essentially failed to grasp the link between “crisis” (*crisi*) and “restructuring” (*ristrutturazione*), with the serious consequence of being unable to provide either an efficient development policy or a resolute welfare reform, losing the consent gained in the middle of the decade. Thus, there would have been a gap between “the effectiveness of short-term measures” and “the

⁴⁰ Chiaromonte, *Le scelte della solidarietà democratica*, 195.

⁴¹ Quoted in Giuseppe Vacca, *Tra compromesso e solidarietà. La politica del PCI negli anni '70* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1987), 83-86. See also the autobiography *Un ministro-ombra si confessa*, ed. by Fernando Di Giulio and Emmanuele Rocco (Milan: Rizzoli, 1979). On the Grosseto-born leader, see the biographical summary by Francesco M. Biscione, “Fernando Di Giulio”, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani online*, vol. 40 (1991): http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fernando-di-giulio_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ [as of 2 May 2020].

⁴² Fernando Di Giulio, “Poteri occulti e alternativa democratica”, in *Politica ed economia*, XII (1981), 7-8.

⁴³ Leonardo Paggi, Massimo D'Angelillo, *I comunisti italiani e il riformismo. Un confronto con le socialdemocrazie europee* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986).

⁴⁴ The aforementioned Vacca, *Tra compromesso e solidarietà*, 77.

failed achievement of structural targets”.⁴⁵ On the contrary, according to Stephen Hellman in his 1988 volume *Italian Communism in Transition. The Rise and Fall of the Historic Compromise in Turin, 1975-1980*, the ICP faced isolation and stagnation from the late 1970s onwards in a similar way to other European Communist parties, but unlike them, it had done so from a position of relative strength on the left.⁴⁶ The Party’s history at this juncture thus had to be explained not by the Party’s difficulties, but by its relative success. However, he explained:

Communist parties have had to rely heavily on their own structures to provide everything from funding to communications to mobilization to various means of satisfying their rank and file. It is therefore not at all surprising that this machinery would undergo immense stress when the conditions under which it must operate are dramatically altered, for example, when the party strategy changes from one of opposition to one that aspires to (or actually does) govern, or when society undergoes profound changes that call original organizational schemes into question.⁴⁷

Ultimately, concluded Hellman, the party’s strategy was an extreme response to one need (the legitimation of the party) to the detriment of all the others (providing a convincing response to the country’s crisis).⁴⁸

All these positions can be understood in the light of a series of events, such as the so-called ‘march of the 40,000’, when, on 14 October 1980, thousands of FIAT employees demonstrated in Turin to protest against the long labour and trade union struggles that had been blocking work in the Turin company for over a month.⁴⁹ For this reason, and starting from the end of the conflicts in the big factories, especially in the north of the country, a whole series of new labour relations were established in the companies in which trade unions and the political left had less weight.⁵⁰

On the other hand, an important factor was the progressive loss of the party in electoral dynamism, especially when compared to Bettino Craxi’s ISP. As Edoardo Novelli explained, between the mid-1970s and the end of the following decade, the organisational models of mass parties, based on centralized, verticalized apparatuses and a radicalised base in the territory, proved increasingly inadequate in a rapidly changing society,⁵¹ in which very different forms and models emerged.⁵² From this moment on, mass parties gradually began to lose consensus. As Celso Ghini pointed out, starting from the end of

⁴⁵ Vacca, *Tra compromesso e solidarietà*, 93.

⁴⁶ Stephen Hellman, *Italian Communism in Transition. The Rise and Fall of the Historic Compromise in Turin, 1975-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.

⁴⁷ Hellman, *Italian Communism in Transition*, 5.

⁴⁸ Hellman, *Italian Communism in Transition*, 5.

⁴⁹ For a summary see Alberto Baldissera, “La marcia dei quarantamila: una critica delle interpretazioni correnti”, *Le ricerche sui lavoratori non manuali e il sindacato in Italia*, ed. by Antonio M. Chiesi (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1983), 135-170.

⁵⁰ See especially Valerio Castronovo, *FIAT, 1899-1999. Un secolo di storia* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1999); Alberto Baldissera, *La svolta dei quarantamila. Dai quadri Fiat ai Cobas* (Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1988).

⁵¹ Edoardo Novelli, *Le campagne elettorali in Italia. Protagonisti, strumenti, teorie* (Bari: GLF editori Laterza, 2018, ebook), 110.

⁵² A phase that not surprisingly was called “post bureaucratic”: *The Post-Bureaucratic Organization: New Perspectives on Organizational Change*, ed. by Charles Hecksher and Anne Donnellon (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994); Bruce A. Bimber, *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

the 1970s the Communist Party itself, the main Italian political organisation rooted in the territory, reversed the positive trend of enrolment that had been continuous since 1969.⁵³ On the other hand, Craxi's socialist party carried out a sudden political, ideological, identitary, cultural and communicative transformation, based on a radical break with tradition: it changed its symbol, entrusting the design to the artist and friend Filippo Panseca who replaced the scythe and the hammer with the carnation, echoing the image of the rose of François Mitterrand's socialist party.⁵⁴ During the 42nd party congress, held in Palermo in April 1981, the decision was also taken to abolish the central committee, breaking with the traditional Marxist-socialist organisation.⁵⁵ Through these means and a strongly leader-led campaign, Craxi succeeded in becoming Prime Minister in 1983, dealing a hard blow to the ICP, which just over two years later suffered a heavy defeat in the 'wage escalator' (*scala mobile*) referendum.⁵⁶ The tragic death of the beloved secretary Enrico Berlinguer in 1984 had hit the party with unprecedented violence, a symbolic, political, and above all organisational blow for a party, the Communist party, in which the figure of the leader had always played a crucial role from the 1930s onwards.⁵⁷

All these events, therefore, in the years under investigation here have been analysed as 'failures' by both the party and much of the historiography. It was Occhetto himself, from the pages of the communist newspaper then edited by Massimo D'Alema, who clarified the problem in terms of the need "to face [the] failure" (*guardare in faccia al fallimento*) of an entire historical experience, the communist one.⁵⁸

Similarly, in 1992, and therefore approaching the dissolution of the party, Flores and Gallerano spoke of a "drift" (*deriva*) of party politics and of a "consociational democracy" (*democrazia consociativa*), an analytical category that in the essay acquired a profoundly negative meaning. From this point of view, the ICP was transformed into a sort of catch-all party at the end of the 1970s, another category used in a negative sense. In practice, they argued, the ICP was more interested in the logic of the alignments than in the programme of reform, an attitude intended as a true feature of political continuity. By identifying the terrain of the historic compromise in the "parties' democracy" rather than in "democracy in a generic sense", they underlined how the ICP, remaining "halfway" between being a mass party and a catch-all party, ended up strengthening the political system without building a real alternative, neither democratic nor revolutionary:

[It was] the activity of the alliance and the existence of a vast governmental front that characterized the experience of the mid-1970s, and not so much the content of a vague and generic programme.⁵⁹

⁵³ Celso Ghini, "Gli iscritti al partito e alla FGCI", *Il Partito comunista italiano. Struttura e storia dell'organizzazione 1921/1979*, ed. by Aris Accornero and Massimo Ilardi (Milano: Annali Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 1982), 227-292.

⁵⁴ Filippo Panseca himself remembers the experience in Tano Gullo's interview, "Filippo Panseca: 'Cosi inventai il garofano per il mio amico Bettino Craxi'", *La Repubblica*, 1 June 2015.

⁵⁵ For an overview of the transformations of the ISP during these years, see Giorgio Galli, *Storia del socialismo italiano da Turati al dopo Craxi* (Milano: Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 2007), 414-437.

⁵⁶ Regarding figure of the secretary, see Luigi Musella, *Craxi* (Salerno: Roma 2007).

⁵⁷ In this regard, see Giulia Bassi: *La formazione della leadership comunista tra 'utopia' e 'compromesso': "L'eroico cammino alla testa del popolo". La costruzione discorsiva della leadership nel Partito comunista italiano (1944-1964)*, *Nuova Rivista Storica*, 2 (2020): 703-732.

⁵⁸ Achille Occhetto, *l'Unità*, 31 December 1989.

⁵⁹ Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, 245.

In fact, they saw a “perverse spiral” (*perversa spirale*) in those 1970s which caused the emergence of two trends with the consequence of a zero-sum game: on the one side, the continuous call of the parties to a ‘state of emergency’ – with respect to terrorism, the economic crisis, the massacres, and so on – therefore, a continuous political solicitation, and on the other side, a substantial political immobility. This characteristic of the Italian political system, of which the ICP itself was a part, determined the birth of a “total and omnivorous partocracy” (*partitocrazia totale ed onnivora*).⁶⁰ This harsh expression meant that the Communist Party had, over the course of the decade, become similar to all the other parties, especially those in government. In essence, Flores and Gallerano, in their interpretation (from a more leftist position) of the communist tradition, spoke of the failure of the ‘historic compromise’ and ‘national solidarity’, a failure that the party tried to hide behind the image of the party of order and the fight against terrorism.

Three years later Stephen Gundle’s book was published, who, like Giorgio Galli, carried out his reconstruction in an organic manner until 1991.⁶¹ In his *Between Hollywood and Moscow: the Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943-1991*, the author shifted the *focus* of his investigation – in view of the spread of cultural history studies – analysing the party not from a political and politological point of view, but through its political culture. However, despite the change of approach, the viewpoint remained anchored to a perspective looking for failures. Gundle also recognised in the 1960s and especially in the following decade the moment when communist intellectual hegemony began to blur the edges towards a progressive decline. The leadership had failed to understand, he explained, the difference between “conquest of power” and “conquest of culture”, thus continuing to move between tactical manoeuvres and political strategies. In practice, the party entered a sort of ‘cultural deficit’: even though it had adopted a flexibility never experienced before, it still found itself too distant – operating as it was within “a plan thrashed out around a table” – from a society in full evolution, the significance of which it had not yet fully understood.⁶² This inability to fully grasp the situation was ultimately one of the main reasons for the party’s failure, a failure overshadowed at the time only by the intense period of collective mobilisation. In 1996, even the British historian Donald Sassoon spoke explicitly in terms of “The Failure of Italian Communism”.⁶³

From the end of the 1990s, although some historians re-proposed the theme of political failure,⁶⁴ others began to look at the issue in other terms, no less conditioned but recording

⁶⁰ Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, 253.

⁶¹ Stephen Gundle, *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca. La sfida della cultura di massa 1943-1991* (Firenze: Giunti, 1995). A similar, though not identical, version is also available in English: *Between Hollywood and Moscow: the Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943-1991* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁶² From the first Italian edition, Gundle, *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca*, 347.

⁶³ Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, 572.

⁶⁴ While for Giovanni Gozzini, in the essay “Il PCI nel sistema della Repubblica” (“The ICP in the Republican System”), ‘national solidarity’ had constituted “a compromise without dignity”, for Guido Crainz “the objective of the participation of the ICP in government decisions” determined the “[slipping] into the background of the contents”, “at the cost of programmatic and continuous renunciations [...] endorsements of deferments and cover-ups”. The ICP thus ended up clouding its own strategy at the very

a paradigm shift.

This is the case, for example, of the 1998 volume *Seguendo il PCI. Da Togliatti a D'Alema 1955-1996 (Following the ICP. From Togliatti to D'Alema 1955-1996)* by Giuseppe Galasso, a member of the Italian Republican Party (*Partito Repubblicano Italiano*) between 1970s to 1990s and a historian particularly attentive to the southern question.⁶⁵ The author placed all emphasis on the entirety of a well-defined trajectory now historically concluded, re-evaluating its path through the focus, all positive, on the Togliattian period as a democratic drive in unison with the other political forces. This different approach had the obvious dual function of rehabilitating the memory and civic function of the party at a time of important change, with the new transformation from Democratic Party of the Left to Democrats of the Left (*Democratici di Sinistra*) and the inclusion of the other social components of the Left (social-reformist and Catholic), and of giving historiographical-cultural support to the turn. A year later, even Agosti in his *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano* emphasised the democratic role of the ICP. The author explained that it is true that at the last party congress, the one held in Rimini in 1991, “the conflicts” had taken precedence over the “constituent spirit”,⁶⁶ so much so that two new parties were born from the ICP that same year. However, Agosti repeatedly used the theme of “courage” (in the positive sense) to describe the transformation of the communist party into a social democratic party based on the model of European social democrats. Thus, for example, he spoke of “a bold choice in favour of renewal” (*una scelta coraggiosa di rinnovamento*).⁶⁷ A few years later, Alessandro De Angelis,⁶⁸ in his 2002 book *I comunisti e il partito. Dal 'partito nuovo' alla svolta dell'89 (The Communists and the Party. From the 'New Party' to the 1989 Turn)*, also put the *vexata quaestio* into a different perspective.⁶⁹ Where for Flores and Gallerano the politics of the party, from the Salerno Turn onwards, was aimed solely at eliminating the “culture of conflict” and the ‘historic compromise’ was realised in the exaltation of political mediation in its purest state within the political game,⁷⁰ De Angelis instead understood the ‘historic compromise’ as a long-term strategy, to be achieved in two stages, the only possible democratic response to a systemic crisis, as a “project of gradual advancement in continuity”, and as a “culture of advantageous position, based on a quantitative

moment when the situation forced it to do so; the pressing call for moderation and compromise between the social partners, as well as at the political summits in the name of a governmental participation that was in reality subordinate, ended up, however, producing growing distrust and indignation and, therefore, a drastic drop in consensus. Citations: Giovanni Gozzini, “Il PCI nel sistema della Repubblica”, *Il PCI nell'Italia Repubblicana 1943-1991*, 103-140, 137; Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato. Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta* (Roma: Donzelli, 2003), 446.

⁶⁵ Giuseppe Galasso, *Seguendo il PCI. Da Togliatti a D'Alema 1955-1996* (Lungro: Marco Editore, 1998).

⁶⁶ Agosti, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, 125.

⁶⁷ Agosti, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, 125.

⁶⁸ As Franco Andreucci explained in his review of De Angelis' book, the historian (later journalist and deputy director of the Italian *Huffington Post*) belonged to a new season of “studies and research on the history of the ICP no longer anchored to a panorama of knowledge and monodisciplinary categories but open to new problems, capable of illuminating areas not obvious in the reconstruction of the universe of Italian communism”, http://www.sissco.it/index.php?id=1293&tx_wfqbe_pi1%5Bidrecensione%5D=778 [as of 2 May 2020].

⁶⁹ Alessandro De Angelis, *I comunisti e il partito. Dal 'partito nuovo' alla svolta dell'89* (Manduria: Laicata, 2002).

⁷⁰ Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, 253.

approach in the relationship between party and society, and between party and parliament”.⁷¹

II.2. *The Crisis Paradigm*

These deeply evaluative argumentative poles have influenced the narration of communist historiography in a profoundly negative sense. From this perspective, it is therefore worth noting the emergence of a sort of paradigm of the crisis. The concept of the crisis was completely contained within Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of the ‘short century’; it is no coincidence that the British historian called the period between the 1970s and the 1990s “the landslide”:

The last part of the century was a new era of decomposition, uncertainty and crisis – and indeed, for large parts of the world such as Africa, the former USSR and the formerly socialist parts of Europe, of catastrophe. As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, the mood of those who reflected on the century’s past and future was a growing *fin-de-siècle* gloom. From the vantage-point of the 1990s, the Short Twentieth Century passed through a brief Golden Age, on the way from one era of crisis to another, into an unknown and problematic but not necessarily apocalyptic future.⁷²

In the texts that came out in the first half of the 1990s, the crisis – of the parties, of the political system, of culture, of public life, of society, and so on – constituted a real dominant discursive register, starting with the frequency of use of the term. On the other hand, ‘crisis’ is a broad category⁷³ of almost unlimited heuristic value, but only apparently, precisely because explaining everything, in reality, explains nothing; yet, the very pliability of the concept was the basis of its great diffusion as a political trope. The famous 2003 volume by Guido Crainz is a prime example of this, *Il paese mancato. Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta (The Forfeited Country. From the Economic Boom to the Eighties)*, in which the concept of crisis was implicitly contained in the title. On the one hand, the ICP crisis was included in the wider (multi-level) crisis of the Italian republic and society, on the other hand, it represented one of the consequences of the end of the Italian Communist Party, together with the dissolution of all those reassuring categories connected to the imagination of the so-called ‘first republic’, of the economic boom, of reconstruction:⁷⁴ the political representation of when nothing seemed impossible for the Italy and West that were being reborn after the defeat of totalitarianism.

From such a perspective, the 1990s have been seen and interpreted by many writers

⁷¹ De Angelis, *I comunisti e il partito*, 150.

⁷² Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth-century: 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995 [1994]), 6.

⁷³ Suffice it to say that in the mid-1980s, Sidney Tarrow, in an essay significantly entitled “The Crisis of the Late 60s in Italy and France: The Transition to Mature Capitalism”, argued that the transition to mature capitalism had resulted in the end of collectivism and the definitive assimilation of the working class. Sidney Tarrow, “The Crisis of the Late 60s in Italy and France: the Transition to Mature Capitalism”, *Semiperipheral Development: the Politics of Southern Europe in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Giovanni Arrighi (Beverly Hills; London: Sage, 1985), 215-242.

⁷⁴ The expression ‘first republic’ was created within journalism to identify the years between 1948 and 1994; the category has now become common and also scientific, as evidenced by the volume of the well-known scholar of political history, Simona Colarizi, *Biografia della Prima Repubblica* (Roma: Laterza, 1996).

and historians as a period characterized and traversed by a deep systemic crisis in a monolithic, unilinear way. In the collective imagination, the collapse of the Western communist universe has merged with the collapse of an entire system and an entire political culture, and 1989 itself became a feature of crisis, of failure, of the highest – or lowest, if you like – point on journey on a collision course. While Umberto Curi had explicitly spoken in terms of a “great crisis”,⁷⁵ in the brief epilogue dedicated to the 1980s and 1989⁷⁶ – a choice motivated by the desire to avoid a “decline analysis”⁷⁷ –, Flores and Gallerano described this process in clearly evaluative terms:

Our impression is [...] that of a change already begun in the 1970s, of a cumulative process that only in the imminence of the *final crisis* can we measure the distance between the past and the path taken. [...] The revision, necessary and sacrosanct, and certainly difficult, like all processes of self-reform, is advancing in a contradictory and at the same time obligatory way; it presents itself as a progressive dismantling of casemates, modestly covered by the shouted assertion of opposition and diversity, not as the convinced and confident occupation of a new horizon of political initiative.⁷⁸

Given these premises, the conclusion appears even more judgemental:

Ignazi wrote, with reference to the Democratic Party of the Left, that the biggest handicap of the new party was to have been created upon ruins, “with a loss, a deficit compared to its past”.⁷⁹ This judgement should, in our opinion, be projected onto the entire 1980s, onto the very modalities of the revision process; with the additional observation that, before the final turn, the most appropriate interpretative feature is that of indecision and inconsistency, in spite of the apparent linearity.⁸⁰

To have failed, therefore, was the entire communist political class; the “different souls” of the party, they concluded, were “all equally inadequate”, whether they had proposed “an impossible recovery of ancient identities and certainties”, or whether they had taken pains “to show repeated proof that the party was no longer different from the others”.⁸¹

In Italy, we must trace the reasons for this hegemonic discourse to the end of the season of great protests, which began in 1968 and lasted for the whole decade; to the end of the era of mass parties and above all of the Italian Communist Party and Christian Democrats; to the judicial investigation by the judge pool ‘*Mani pulite*’ (literally Clean Hands) against the deep corruption of the political system;⁸² to the spread of the feeling of failure of a whole generation of political leaders;⁸³ to the first Berlusconi government and the advent

⁷⁵ Umberto Curi, *Lo scudo di Achille. Il PCI nella grande crisi* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1990).

⁷⁶ To which they dedicated only seven pages, Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, 257-263.

⁷⁷ Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, 257.

⁷⁸ Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, 260, my italics.

⁷⁹ This too, not surprisingly, was a volume produced at the same time, but by a political scientist: Pietro Ignazi, *Dal PCI al PDS* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1992).

⁸⁰ Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, 260.

⁸¹ Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI*, 261.

⁸² Also journalistically dubbed ‘Bribesville’ (*tangentopoli*); see Donatella della Porta, “Tagentopoli”, *Enciclopedia Italiana*, VII (2007), *ad vocem*. For a general look, see Alberto Vannucci, *Il mercato della corruzione. I meccanismi dello scambio occulto in Italia* (Milano: Società aperta, 1997).

⁸³ This reflected the tragic epilogue to what Stefano Satta Flores claimed in the famous film *C'eravamo tanto amati*, where he impersonated Nicola Palumbo, symbol of the berated intellectual class in Christian Democratic Italy: “we thought we were changing the world instead the world changed us”, *C'eravamo tanto amati*, Ettore Scola, 125’ (Italy, 1974).

of ‘Berlusconism’.⁸⁴ All these elements have gradually entered the public and historiographical debate and over the years they have become both the product and reproducers of a great meta-narrative of the definitive decline of the ‘era of heroes’. That is the disappearance of the great values, of collectivism (the party being the first expression of this), the failure of the hope of a social and political renewal of the country. It is no coincidence that Paul A. Ginsborg, in his 1989 *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*, cited an expression coined by the socialist politician Gianni De Michelis, “twilight of the gods”,⁸⁵ in relation to the last great collective moment in Italian history, even if the English historian concluded with a very vague note of hope on the revival of alternative policies.⁸⁶ Even Agosti, while noting the positive action of the ICP, spoke of “rough terrain” and “a deep institutional, political and moral crisis of republican democracy”.⁸⁷ But why talk of a crisis and not, for example, of restructuring and reformulating the political system?

The society within which the Italian Communist Party became a social democratic party was an increasingly secularised society, both with regard to traditional religions and the peculiar form of confession that is political ideology. The collapse of Italian communism has been placed within a strictly political framework, deeply dependent on internal logics and only vaguely reconnected to the international context. The title given by Giorgio Galli to the last chapter of his 1993 book on the ICP, “*Dal primato all’estinzione*” (“From Supremacy to Extinction”), is symbolic.⁸⁸ ‘Extinction’ is certainly a peculiar term, naturally more suitable to biology or ethology than to politology or historiography,⁸⁹ and although its use by the Milanese historian is monitored more than in other publications of the same period, the use of this word is in a certain sense evidence of the permanence and strength of the meta-narration that runs through it. Moreover, in the text the word ‘crisis’ appeared several times, and in fact Galli spoke caustically of 1989 in the strong terms of a “self-destruction” carried out by the party.⁹⁰

Two years later and along the same line of thought, Gundle, while recognising that the communist transformation had allowed the ICP to “survive the collapse of communism

⁸⁴ This is, for example, the account given in Paul A. Ginsborg’s little book *Berlusconi. Ambizioni patrimoniali in una democrazia mediatica* (Torino: Einaudi, 2003).

⁸⁵ Paul A. Ginsborg, *Storia d’Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi. Società e politica, 1943-1988* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989), 576; English version: *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988* (London: Penguin, 1990).

⁸⁶ After all, in the mid-1990s Ginsborg himself was a supporter of civil activism, through the “girotondi” movement and his left-wing criticism of the Democratic Party of the Left. In this he echoed the famous expression of the director and actor Nanni Moretti in the 1998 film *Aprile*, “D’Alema, di una cosa di sinistra!”, which means “D’Alema, say something left-wing!”, and is a play on the words “*sinistro*” and “*sinistra*”, meaning “sinister” and “left-wing” respectively, and was said while looking at the social-democratic political leader Massimo D’Alema coming under the blows of Berlusconi’s accusations; *Aprile*, Nanni Moretti, 78’ (Italy 1998).

⁸⁷ Agosti, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, 125.

⁸⁸ Galli, *Storia del PCI*, 297-313.

⁸⁹ Years later, the famous “scrapping campaign” (*campagna per la rottamazione*) or the “Big Bang”, launched by the Democratic mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, at the Leopolda station in 2011, had at its core the image of the dinosaur. The slogan was: “Dinosaurs did not make themselves extinct”, a reference that suggested a veiled criticism of the so-called ‘apparatus’ of the party. See in this regard Giandomenico Crapis, *Matteo Renzi dal pop al flop. Ascesa e declino di una leadership televisiva* (Milano; Udine: Mimesis, 2019).

⁹⁰ Galli, *Storia del PCI*, 309.

in a better condition than all the other communist parties”,⁹¹ spoke of 1989 in terms of the “Last Tango”.⁹² Similar in many ways was the interpretation in the book *La sinistra alla prova. Considerazioni sul ventennio 1976-1996* (*The Left Put to the Test. Reflections on the 20-year period 1976-1996*) written the following year by Alberto Asor Rosa, a scholar who collaborated with various Marxist magazines, such as *Quaderni rossi*, *Classe operaia* and *Laboratorio politico*, and a former communist member of Parliament, who, thanks to Occhetto, had been made editor of the important communist magazine *Rinascita*.⁹³ The narrative begins at the party’s peak, almost as if the aim was to talk about a history ‘on the way down’. 1976 stands out, in this perspective, as the initial moment of a change that became evident during the course of 1979, the real watershed of the book, with ‘national solidarity’.⁹⁴ The intention was to show, on the one hand, the rapid decline of the Communist Party from the unexpected results of the two-year period 1975-1976, but steady, negative trend from 1979 until the collapse of the party; and on the other hand, to underline the relationship, on the left, between communists and socialists, that is from what the author defined “the long communist wave” – the overwhelming and uninterrupted prevalence over the course of fifty years of republican history of the communist element over the socialist one in the Italian left – to the uniform and progressive attenuation between the two components precisely from 1979 until being almost on a ‘par’ in 1992.⁹⁵ Asor Rosa thus argued that between 1945 and 1975 the communist strategy remained substantially unchanged, imprinted, as it was, with the “organised democracy of the masses”⁹⁶ – in essence the “republic of parties”⁹⁷ according to an “imperfect” bipolar mould.⁹⁸ And it is on ‘national solidarity’ that the author became more rigid: first, as long as the *conventio ad excludendum* was in force, only one of the political elements was authorized to govern but, “from the point of view of the functions mutually attributed” by each element to the other, “the schema had its own logic and dignity, also from a conceptual point of view”.⁹⁹ From this perspective, it was the policy adopted by Berlinguer that was responsible for concluding the experience of the old party and leading it into the ‘mid-stream’, to use Napolitano’s well-known expression. Evading a judgement which, however, he ended up giving, Asor Rosa concluded that the party had come out of ‘national solidarity’ ‘alone’, ‘weakened’ by the ‘stream’ into which its “leader” had pushed it, “preintentionally but perhaps providentially”.¹⁰⁰

III. CONCLUSION

As we have clearly seen, there are no ‘neutral’ texts, not even the great works of synthesis and reconstruction of a particular issue, and this all the more so when dealing with an

⁹¹ Gundle, *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca*, 542.

⁹² Gundle, *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca*, 496.

⁹³ Alberto Asor Rosa, *La sinistra alla prova. Considerazioni sul ventennio 1976-1996* (Torino: Einaudi, 1996).

⁹⁴ Flores and Gallerano, like others, identify 1979 as a real turning point in the history of the party.

⁹⁵ Asor Rosa, *La sinistra alla prova*, 15.

⁹⁶ Asor Rosa, *La sinistra alla prova*, 23.

⁹⁷ Expression coined by Scoppola, *La Repubblica dei partiti*.

⁹⁸ Concept created by Giorgio Galli in his *Il bipartitismo imperfetto* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1966).

⁹⁹ Asor Rosa, *La sinistra alla prova*, 24.

¹⁰⁰ Asor Rosa, *La sinistra alla prova*, 44.

object of study as complicated and highly involving at a political and identity level as the history of the Italian Communist Party.

In these interpretations, the impossibility of a real alternative to the governing centrality of the Christian Democrats and the paralysis of the PCI, as an agent of change, led to a narrative of intolerance increasingly marked by the common perception of a self-referential party system. Therefore, the historiographic investigation has for a long time remained within a political reading, aimed in most cases at establishing how the party, for example, should or should not have acted. This reading, for studies between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, had an essential ally doom-and-gloom implication: on the long wave of disappointment that followed the end of the season of great protests, with the fall of the 'reassuring' bipolar world, with the new global multipolarity, in the midst of the transformation of the party and political system, and judicial scandals. Both for those who wrote from within the logic of the parties and for those who spoke about it from the outside, the dominant perception was centred on the idea of the failure of an entire political class, including the communist leadership, of which the historic compromise was nothing more than the most evident cause and political result. This narration was conveyed, in primis, by Berlinguer himself with the 'second Salerno Turn', that is, the end of compromise and the beginning of the phase of the democratic alternative.

Although in all the works taken into consideration reference was made to glasnost', perestroika, and the great upheavals of the Soviet system in Central and Eastern Europe, it is significant that in explaining the 1989/1991 of Italian communism the international aspect was never at the centre of the analysis, with the result that the investigation remained within Italian society and politics and therefore still anchored to the discourse of the failure of the ICP to intercept the changes. There is an echo of this discourse in the work of director and actor Nanni Moretti, who interpreted the difficulties of the painful transformation of communism into social democracy and the feeling of precariousness associated with it.¹⁰¹ Thus the famous film *Palombella rossa* (*Red Wood Pigeon*), shot in 1989 and clearly interpreting a cultural atmosphere where the perception of the end of an era was widespread, staged the ideological crisis of the Italian left generated by the end of the two blocs. The protagonist, Michele Apicella, played by Moretti himself, was an ICP official who had lost his memory due to an accident and who did not recognise himself in the political transformations of the new world.¹⁰² "Today, what does it mean to be a Communist?", Apicella kept saying aloud, absorbed during an interview on *Tribuna politica*. The journalist therefore pressed him ironically, playing on the 'end'/'crisis' word pair with reference to Italian Communism (and, moreover, not to the international one):

I happen to have a Thesaurus. Let's see what it says under 'crisis'. Worsening, failure, excess, paroxysm, modification, decompensation, difficulties, instability, recession, depression, trouble, disequilibrium, disorder, anxiety, apprehension. Sir, which expression best fits your party?

¹⁰¹ Like the character 'Bobo' created by Sergio Staino for *l'Unità*, the Communist Party newspaper. According to Gundle, Staino, an ex-Maoist close to the ICP, had skilfully transformed "his personal itinerary into a collective biography of an entire generation"; in Gundle, *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca*, 514

¹⁰² *Palombella rossa*, Nanni Moretti, 89' (Italy 1989).

Apicella, shaken to the core, responded both angry and desperate:

Why do you think it impossible that the Communist Party could govern? What's wrong? What's wrong? Is its program inadequate? What else should we do? We should innovate, open the party to all: young people, women, workers, movements! We should say: 'Come take over the party! Let's see what we can do together!'. [He starts to sing the famous Franco Battiato's song *E ti vengo a cercare* (*And I'm coming to look for you*)] 'This popular sentiment grows out of divine mechanisms, a sensual and mystic rapture blinds me to you... I should change the object of my desires, no longer be satisfied with petty daily joys, be a hermit who gives up everything. And I'm coming to look for you, needing to talk to you, because I like what you say and think, in you I see my roots...'¹⁰³

Terms such as “extinction” (Galli), “on the way down” (Asor Rosa), or “in decline” (Flores-Gallerano) echoed these very positions at the time, as evaluative terms that projected themselves far beyond mere analytical commentary. As we have seen, they were, if anything, the discursive result of a more general perception that interpreted (and lived) with unease that sudden transformation of the national and international political system that relegated the great metanarratives of the past to a minor role.

¹⁰³ From the film *Palombella rossa*, Moretti.