

REVIEW ARTICLE

## Beyond boundaries: new perspectives on Italian communist historiography

### *La dissidenza comunista italiana, Trockij e le origini della Quarta Internazionale 1928–1938*

by Gabriele Mastrolillo, Rome, Carocci, 2022, 242 pp., €27 (paperback), ISBN 9788829016402

### *Catholics and Communists in Twentieth-Century Italy: Between Conflict and Dialogue*

by Daniela Saresella, London/New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 261 pp., £100 (hardback), ISBN 9781350061422

### *Words of Power, the Power of Words: The Twentieth-Century Communist Discourse in International Perspective*

edited by Giulia Bassi, Trieste, EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2019, 470 pp., €32 (paperback), ISBN 9788855110860

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In 1989, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was going through a period of transition. The fall of the Berlin Wall posed an enormous challenge to Marxist beliefs and the communist political project. In this situation, party secretary Achille Occhetto and his close collaborators planned to embark on a new social-democratic path, as a significant part of the elderly leaders and rank-and-file members feared the abandonment of communist ideals. ‘We are a different party ... and I continue to believe it,’ a Milanese communist militant shouted while Nanni Moretti was shooting *La Cosa* (1990), a documentary about the last days of the PCI, crystallising the perceived sense of uniqueness and diversity that pervaded Italian communism despite the complete loss of meaning for the communist movement worldwide.

The extraordinary awareness of the exceptional nature of Italian communism has inevitably influenced historical research into this chapter of Italian history. The history of the

PCI did not simply become an object of academic study for Italian and European historiography; it took on an importance of its own. Writing a history of Italian communism was, instead, an effective way to reinforce the trust and allegiance of grassroots militants, as in the works of Paolo Spriano and Ernesto Ragionieri. As Andrea Possieri argues, writing and studying the past ‘served to produce the glue of identity that continued to be, despite claims of secularism, a material of necessary importance for a great mass party like the PCI’ (2007, 150).

The PCI had been working on a way to narrate its historical epic for a long time. In 1958, it began to define the project of a ‘party history’ by establishing a special commission. Nevertheless, we must not reduce historical research on Italian communism to a political design. In fact, over the decades, this historiographical framework has been complemented by autonomous and innovative research produced by eminent scholars from all over the world. These new perspectives have been crucial in breaking the monolithic nature of a historical narrative imagined by the PCI’s leadership and reinforced by its cultural ascendancy. The idea of an Italian communist history as simply a class history, progressive, linear and with millenarian features, has begun to collide with the hidden realities of its development. A heterogeneous history, which new studies are bringing to light, was already being perceived by those who had been an integral part of it: the militants. In his diary, Camillo Martino – a doctor at the PCI headquarters of Botteghe Oscure – perfectly grasps the pluralistic nature of the communist mass phenomenon in Italy, speaking of a ‘polymorphous mass’.<sup>1</sup> The subaltern and working classes were, therefore, only a part of the complexity of the communist masses. New studies may recover the PCI’s inherent diversity and polymorphism; the books by Gabriele Mastrolillo, Daniela Saresella and Giulia Bassi aim to do just that.

The three books under consideration here share the desire to expand historical research on Italian communism methodologically and theoretically. For this reason, they emphasise comparative and transnational approaches that are capable of transcending historiographical boundaries and referring to new sources and dialogues with other disciplines. On the one hand, Saresella and Mastrolillo pick up problematic nodes in the history of Italian Marxism, such as the relationship with Catholics and the internal vicissitudes of Trotskyist dissidence, using first-hand sources and critical reinterpretations. On the other hand, Bassi’s edited collection crosses disciplinary boundaries and welcomes perspectives from linguistics in order to understand how the development of different forms of discourse contributed to the diversity of communism, on both a national and a global scale. All three scholars seem to share the need to shake the foundations of a traditional historical narrative, which for years has identified the Italian communist movement with its monolithic and centralist party entity. Thus, if it is true that the PCI’s history is an essential part of the general history of the Italian communist movement, the latter cannot be reduced to the simple study of its mass party. For this very reason, ‘heretical and heterodox’ (Mastrolillo 2022, 13) voices must also be brought to light from the shadows of history.

Gabriele Mastrolillo’s book aims to re-evaluate some of the more significant ‘heretical’ groups formed within the Italian communist movement: the *Sinistri*. The author uses this term to indicate the Italian communists who followed Trotsky’s political line after his rupture with Stalin. The history of Marxism in Italy has numerous souls that, on several occasions, expressed their autonomy from the Partito Comunista d’Italia (Pcd’I) and Moscow’s ‘gospel’. If such alternative experiences blossomed in the socio-political context of republican Italy, which was governed by the great mass parties, they could not have failed to do so in a much more critical moment, like that of the interwar period, dominated by the disappearance of ‘markers of certainty’ (Lefort 1988, 228) and the emergence of a liminal creativity, capable of carving new political experiences. Indeed, in that totalitarian and

totalising moment, some still felt the need to attempt an autonomous rearticulation of meanings, especially regarding socialism and how to achieve it.

A perfect example of this aspiration is the Italian Trotskyist experience, albeit for only a brief period in the 1930s. The *Nuova Opposizione Italiana* (NOI) was in search of a new political path towards a different type of communism from that pioneered in the Soviet Union. According to Mastrolillo, the founding fathers of Italian Trotskyism – Pietro Tresso, Alfonso Leonetti and Paolo Ravazzoli – and their movement should be historically re-analysed, taking into account their struggle for a ‘democratic’ communism. For the author, research on these personal and collective political experiences is necessary to fill a gap in the historical literature – almost exclusively centred on Trotsky’s myth – and to highlight the political thoughts and actions that the exiled Russian leader inspired in his Italian disciples.

*La dissidenza comunista italiana, Trockij e le origini della Quarta Internazionale 1928–1938* is the result of Mastrolillo’s extensive doctoral research. Taking a comprehensive transnational approach, it offers an in-depth study of the ten-year political journey of Italian Trotskyist dissidence. Indeed, we cannot understand the people of this movement without placing it in a supranational perspective, as the book’s premise suggests. After all, Tresso, Leonetti and most of the *Sinistri* lived much of their political experience beyond Italian borders. Not only Mussolini’s regime and their forced exile (mainly in France) but also the need to work within the international structures of Trotskyism meant that this national affair became a matter of international history.

The book is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 offers a brief reconstruction of the events in Russia, from the uprising of the Left Opposition to the expulsion of its leader, Leon Trotsky. These introductory pages are fundamental to understanding the impact of Russian events on what was then called the Partito Comunista d’Italia; starting from the initial solidarity of the *bordighisti*, the author highlights the growing anti-Trotskyism of those members linked instead to Moscow orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> According to the author, this contrast turned into a real witch hunt, which Paolo Spriano described as ‘the greatest crisis ever experienced by the leadership group’ (1969, 50). Leonetti was expelled from the Pcd’I, becoming one of the NOI’s political architects, an active member of the International Left Opposition and the undisputed protagonist of Mastrolillo’s historical narrative.

Chapter 2 focuses on the period between 1930 and 1932 and traces the first disputes within the International Left Opposition. This period was crucial for the development of the alternative political project of Trotskyism. An internal conflict began, irreparably weakening the credibility of the *Opposition de Gauche Internationale* (OGI). The splitting of the International Secretariat, the sharp contrast between sections of different nationalities and the internal incommunicability of dissidents of the same nationality, such as the Italians, became insurmountable obstacles in the construction of a ‘political elsewhere’ different from the Soviet one. The author places significant emphasis not only on endogenous causes of disempowerment, like the contrast between the NOI and the *Ligue Communiste*, but also on exogenous factors such as the Spanish Civil War, a missed political window of opportunity for Trotsky and his fellows.

Chapter 3 is perhaps the most powerful section of the book. Mastrolillo provides a detailed reconstruction of the development of Trotskyism between 1932 and 1933, when the various European sections of the OGI questioned themselves on the need to find a new political strategy, especially in the face of Hitler’s electoral victory and the takeover of the Old Continent by the Fascist regime. In this transformative scenario, Italian Trotskyism showed its many faces. On one side, the NOI was entrusted with drafting the OGI’s programmatic manifesto on the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat, fascism and democracy’ (Mastrolillo 2022, 116). On the other, Leonetti and his comrades experienced moments of misunderstanding with the International Secretariat. Furthermore, the

author skilfully charts the mounting internal debate on the relationship with social democracy, proving once again that communism – both orthodox and heterodox – struggled to manage its alliances in times of crisis.

The last two chapters describe the breakdown of Italian Trotskyism. In Chapter 4, the author analyses the dilemma that Italian Trotskyists faced when they opted for *entrismo*,<sup>3</sup> as had already happened in Spain and elsewhere. Chapter 5 thus begins with a reflection on the Italian Trotskyists' 'silent agony' (Mastrolillo 2022, 187), which was aggravated rather than cured by the idea of a Fourth International. In this regard, the progressive diversity of Leonetti's and Tresso's political trajectories is exemplary. Leonetti, disappointed by both the negative transformation of the Soviet Union and the Trotskyists' inability to create a realistic alternative, remained a staunch Marxist-Leninist without a political home. Conversely, Tresso – who became a leader of the Fourth International – died in 1942 at the hands of orthodox communists; he was executed because of his never-ending hope, or perhaps illusion, of building an alternative to the Comintern (Mastrolillo 2022, 221).

*La dissidenza comunista italiana* fills an important gap in the existing literature, as historians have dealt with Italian Trotskyism in only a very marginal way. Hence, Mastrolillo paves the way for a new and pioneering strand of historical reflection that has already developed in other countries, such as France. However, in meeting this challenge, the author often falls into historiographical mannerisms. The range of primary and secondary sources is often too wide, and the resulting extensive use of footnotes makes the book difficult to read. It thus builds a hedge around itself, which excludes the gaze of all those readers who have no expertise in the subject. This is unfortunate, given the need to popularise such a little-known yet profoundly important event in Italian history. Although Mastrolillo's skills as a historian and researcher emerge, this is at the expense of the narrative pace. Nevertheless, his book can certainly be regarded as a reference text on Italian Trotskyist dissidence, and it is perhaps the first to deal with the theme systematically and from an undeniably transnational perspective.

Whereas Mastrolillo's work is marked by the desire to investigate an unexplored chapter of Italian communist history, Daniela Saresella seeks to provide new keys to understanding a familiar topic: the relationship between Catholicism and Marxism – a bond made all the more profound by the complexity of Italian modernity. The atavistic nature of the Catholic religion is deeply rooted in the *Bel Paese* and cannot be limited just to the presence of the Roman papacy. According to De Martino (1961), it is something 'magical': an element so internalised that it merges not only into magical rituals but into 'folklore', as understood by Gramsci.

The most prominent intellectual of Italian communism nurtured a strong interest in religion. As Rosario Forlenza has observed, Gramsci understood religion as 'an active mode of experiencing social and historical reality' (2021, 39) and not as a simple 'opium' for the people. For this reason, he often questioned himself on the possibility of understanding Marxism as a secular religion. These reflections needed to pay attention to Italian Christendom as well. The hegemony of Catholicism and the role of the hierarchy did not remain at the margins of his analysis. The results seem to bring out a critical dichotomy that perhaps lies at the root of the problematic and indissoluble relationship that is also explored in Saresella's book: the existence of a religion, a Christianity, a Catholicism of the people; and a religion of the intellectuals, the elites, the hegemonic class. It is precisely the Catholicism of the people that is at the centre of *Catholics and Communists in Twentieth-Century Italy*. Starting from the origins of 'evangelical socialism' (Saresella 2019, 16), the author traces the development of the dialogue between Catholics and Marxists until the election of Pope Francis. She thus embarks on the challenging task of investigating both the institutional and social faces of this ambivalent

relationship, arguing that the Catholics' attention to social issues, as well as the openness of a part of the communist intelligentsia, made Italy the perfect place for this in-between socio-Christian experience.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 describes the emergence of the Catholic-Marxist relationship. The author brilliantly recalls the ambivalent interaction between the Italian 'genetic' attachment to Catholic values and the even more deeply rooted presence of the Socialist Party in the rural context at the end of the nineteenth century, presenting these realities as fertile ground for successful interactions between the two realities. Indeed, it was precisely in rural areas that 'evangelical socialism' saw the light of day, thanks to figures like Camillo Prampolini and Father Romolo Murri and cultural experiments such as the newspaper *La Plebe*.

Chapter 2 discusses a crucial passage for the evolution of both Catholics and Marxists: the Fascist era. The author focuses on the birth of a leftist current within the Popular Party, banned in 1924. However, the strong opposition of some Catholics to the regime was not deterred by the disappearance of their party. In this regard, Saresella convincingly tells a number of revealing stories, such as those of Don Primo Mazzolari and Ernesto Buonaiuti. Moreover, she reconstructs the development of Gramscian thought on religion up to the first collaborative dialogues between Catholics and communists in the CLN.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 3 highlights some important experiences of the postwar years, including those of communist Catholics. The dialogue opened by the antifascist resistance penetrated individual consciences and confronted many with the dilemma of what to do in the present and in the future. As Saresella writes, Catholic communists solved that dilemma by choosing the 'Communist Party because [it] seemed to be the only [one] capable of building a new society' (2019, 63). However, the cultural and political transformation of Catholics – since the proclamation of Vatican II and the emergence of figures like Giuseppe Dossetti – created a consensus and 'fraternal convergence' towards what Giorgio La Pira defined as the 'most important political operation of the century' (Saresella 2019, 83): the birth of the centre-left government.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Saresella discusses two transformative decades of Italian history: the 1960s and 1970s. Social vanguardism spread among young Catholics, creating mythical figures such as Don Milani and Camillo Torres (Saresella 2019, 90–91). The Catholics of 1968 started contesting the Christian Democrat (DC) hierarchies and engaging in a dialogue with the communists, as happened in journals like *Testimonianze* and *Ateismo e Cristianesimo* (Saresella 2019, 101). The author recalls the efforts of the PCI and the DC in the 1970s to bring the new paradigms of that dialogue to the political and institutional level. Nevertheless, the unfeasibility of the Historic Compromise, especially after Moro's assassination, put a severe strain on relations between the Catholic and communist masses (Saresella 2019, 115). This irreversible failure marked the end of the First Republic.

In the last two chapters, the book deals with the controversial period of the dissolution of the PCI and the DC, which began with the end of the Cold War and was aggravated by the *Mani Pulite* trial. However, the most thoughtful aspect here is the author's development of an interpretative framework for assessing the evolution of Catholicism from the late 1990s to the present. She looks beyond the political declination of Christian values and considers how Catholicism has confronted the changes of the new millennium: the demise of John Paul II's crusade against communism, Ratzinger's concerns about modern hedonism and the fierce criticism of neoliberal globalisation by Francis, 'the leftist pope' (Saresella 2019, 174).

Although *Catholics and Communists* offers a comprehensive overview of the relationship between two prominent political cultures of twentieth-century Italy, it feels too condensed and aimed mainly at a non-specialist readership. In addition, while the

complexities and transformations of Italian Catholicism are accurately described, Italian Marxism is depicted as a little-changing, historical monolithic creature. For example, Saresella does not explain the basic distinction between socialism and communism. She dwells too briefly and superficially on the momentous breakthrough of 1921 that marked the history of the Italian left. Such shortcomings prevent the reader from understanding the internal nuances and, at that time, the contrasting perspectives within the Italian Marxists, and therefore the willingness – of some of them – to start a dialogue with the Catholics.

The author has written a book that can certainly serve as a guide in approaching the topic, but it does not explore all its aspects. Notwithstanding this criticism, the book's prose is effective and tightly paced. Moreover, while this work is easy to read, it is not trivial or simplistic in its content. Indeed, it is based on a variety of primary and secondary sources that the author manages perfectly in order to give substance to her arguments and reach her research objective, even if they relate more to the experience of the Catholic world than that of the communist one.

As Saresella's work shows, communist history has for too long been understood as monolithic, and the PCI's centralism has led many historians to focus their attention on party structures. Scholars are increasingly challenging these approaches, as in Giulia Bassi's *Words of Power, the Power of Words*, which brings together 19 interdisciplinary essays on international communism in the twentieth century. It combines the analysis of political-cultural processes with the study of political discourse, using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. According to Bassi, the aim is to adopt 'an analytical angle of a cultural nature and, to an even greater extent, ... linguistic-discursive approaches' (Bassi 2019, x). The first two parts are entirely devoted to the PCI, while Parts III and IV consider the Soviet area and the global South. Linguistic and discursive aspects are scrutinised to underline their centrality as 'elements of the symbolic construction of politics and indicators of understanding of historical dynamics' (Bassi 2019, xviii).

Part I deals with communist discourse, words and symbolism from the party's foundation until the 1970s, and includes essays by Giulia Bassi, Franco Andreucci, Anna Tonelli, Guido Samarani and Sofia Graziani, and Roberto Colozza. All authors offer in-depth contributions that deepen the knowledge of the PCI's history. For instance, Bassi explores the performative and revolutionary semantics in Gramsci's and Togliatti's texts between 1916 and 1928. She convincingly describes the linguistic mutations that occurred during this period, not just as a result of the rhetorical diversity of their texts, but also because of the critical changes in the political context and moral sense.

Political language is 'a set of forms of expression and communication typical of the political sphere, it is clear how many the variables of such a language might be' (Bassi 2019, 27). Perhaps this opening statement by Andreucci can help us to grasp the complexity of analysing communist language. The author uses quantitative analytical tools to investigate the totalitarian origins of the communist lexicon and language; for instance, he reveals the 'Stalinist canon' (Bassi 2019, 49) in the Manichaeic character of Togliatti's discourse. Conversely, Tonelli considers the educational efforts of PCI schools from the postwar years onwards. Yet, something is missing from her narrative when she recalls the schools' primary aim: to educate a leading class. The words that resounded in the communist classes undoubtedly helped to build an 'ideal and human community' (Bassi 2019, 74). However, many of the exceptional sources that she uses, especially those from the Emilia-Romagna Gramsci Foundation, proved more useful to Mauro Boarelli (2021) in his work on militant biographies, where he demonstrated how party schools aimed to exercise control over lived experience in order to create a prototype of the perfect militant.

This first section ends with two essays that focus on confrontation and dialogue. On the one hand, Guido Samarani and Sofia Graziani write about the power of words in

ideological controversies, like that between the Italian and Chinese Communist Parties in the late 1950s and early 1960s. On the other hand, Roberto Colozza describes the escalation of internal confrontations triggered by the ‘spirit of 1968’ and the birth of an alternative group – *Il Manifesto* – that broke with party centralism. Nevertheless, he seems to suggest that what principally emerged from this collision of languages and cultures was the development of the PCI ‘from a punitive repressive model into a more rational dialoguing interaction with the dissidents’ (Bassi 2019, 111).

Recently, visual history has been used to grasp an essential part of human communication, which has been left at the margins of political and historical research for too long. Michael Wildt argues that ‘images change the handling of history and the genesis of historical awareness’ (2008, 370). The authors of Part II – Luciano Cheles, Andrea Mariuzzo and Enrico Mannari – possibly had this kind of awareness when they decided to re-evaluate the PCI’s use of images during the Cold War. In his essay on Togliatti’s portraits, Cheles insightfully traces the visual representation of the secretary’s figure over time. One of the strengths of this contribution is the fact that the author contextualises the various steps before the dissemination of the portraits. Cheles considers what had already happened in other contexts, such as Soviet Russia and Fascist Italy. The latter, in particular, allows us to understand the initial ideological hostility to the cult and personalisation of the leader: in fact, such Mussolinian connotations could not be applied to Togliatti. After the attempt on his life, the dissemination of Togliatti’s portraits took on a double meaning, summarised in the need to reach the masses of the masses but also to mobilise the internal audience towards an increasingly proud vindication and affirmation of the party’s identity (Bassi 2019, 128).

The authors of the other two essays aim to show two faces – albeit different ones – of the same coin: while Mariuzzo engages with a previously explored topic, namely the iconographic battles of Italian communists and anticommunists in the early Cold War period, Mannari sheds light on a less explored visual history, that of graffiti between 1948 and 1955. The authors suggest that in both the propaganda battle and the occupation of public space through graffiti, the communist intent in the first postwar decade was to create a language that the Italian working class could not only use but in which it could also reflect itself. To confront, to fight, to be in the ‘new world’ meant to acquire a voice capable of becoming eternal in time and space, with just one message but many languages.

To conclude, Mastrolillo, Saresella and Bassi all show the benefits for Italian communist historiography of being contaminated by other narratives, perspectives, approaches and even disciplines. Historians of communism have so far offered important analyses, but many are still too tied to structuralism, which has become almost monolithic. Italian communist history pulsates with diversity, but this has too often been relegated to a cone of shadow generated by the party’s political use of history. The great merit of the authors, then, is precisely to put the various forms of diversity of Italian communism at the centre of their analysis.

These three volumes are only the tip of the iceberg of new studies that may be developed in the future, especially through a new reading of the most heterogeneous and representative features of communist diversity: its militants. As one of the contributors to Bassi’s volume, Joaquín Fernandois, writes, ‘[b]eing a Communist was a way of life that integrated the whole of a person into a community; in a parallel, all members of the party lived domestic and professional lives that had their own discrete characteristics’ (Bassi 2019, 344). It is precisely from the lived experience of militants – men and women – that historical research can free communism from the political and ideological disputes and controversies of the Cold War, crossing boundaries and reaching new and wider spaces of knowledge.

## Notes

1. See p. 34 of Camillo Martino's diary, *La vita a Botteghe Oscure al tempo dei comunisti*, which is held in the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (prot. no. 6993, MP/06).
2. The internal section of the Pcd'I, led by Amedeo Bordiga, increasingly clashed with the political thought and actions of Togliatti and Gramsci.
3. *Entrismo* was a political practice employed by Trotskyist sections in the Fourth International. It involved affiliation in the significant mass parties – mainly communist, socialist and social democratic – in their respective countries to change them from reformists into revolutionaries.
4. CLN is the acronym of the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (Committee of National Liberation), which led the fight against Fascism.

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