

INTRODUCTION TO ROSSANA ROSSANDA

The history of European Communism has been written in many ways, by participants, opponents, students of the labour movement. Among memorialists, Rossana Rossanda cuts an unusual figure. Born in 1924, daughter of a prosperous notary from Istria ruined in the Great Depression, she entered university in Milan, still quite unpolitical, in 1941. Two years later, with German armies in control of North Italy, and Mussolini's Social Republic installed at Salò, she joined the Resistance, at the age of nineteen. A Communist in the underground, by 1947 she was working full-time in the PCI and rose through the Milan Federation to the Central Committee in 1960. By then she was an editor of the party's influential weekly Rinascita. Togliatti, appreciating her gifts, put her in charge of the cultural department of the PCI in 1962, and she was elected a deputy in the Italian Parliament. When the student revolt exploded in 1967–68, however, she expressed sympathy for a movement viewed with suspicion by the PCI leadership, and helped to create the first periodical in the party's history critical of official positions from the left, Il Manifesto. Denounced at the Twelfth Party Congress, the Manifesto Group was expelled from the PCI in November 1969, going on to create the independent daily of the same name that continues to this day.

*For nearly four decades, Rossanda has been its most individual editorialist and commentator, writing with a cool, unrhetorical tranchant that has made hers a unique signature in the Italian press. Characteristic of her interventions has been a consistent attention to the social, in a culture more typically riveted by the political, in its narrower senses. In 2005, her memoir of the first forty-five years of her life, *La Ragazza del Secolo Scorso*, extracts of which are translated below, was published to widespread literary acclaim. In it, reflecting on her role as a young woman with responsibility in the party, and the hesitations she felt in exercising it, she remarks, in a tone that gives something of the tenor of her memoir: 'Not that women do not love power, they exercise it without mercy in private and against each other. But outside private life, we are tempted to follow, however torn, paths decided by others. We feel extraneous to such decisions, and like Virginia Woolf make a point of this, not without tears and complaints at the upshot. But we rarely question that feeling, because that leads to less violence—and that might be a virtue—but also to less responsibility, which I doubt is one'.*

THE COMRADE FROM MILAN

THIS IS NOT a history.¹ It is simply what my memory supplies when I see the dubious looks of those around me: why were you a Communist? Why do you say that you still are? What do you mean? Is it an illusion that you are clinging to, through stubbornness, through ossification? Every so often someone will stop me and say ‘You were my heroine!’ But what does that mean? The cycle of Communism and the Communists in the 20th century finished so badly that it is impossible not to ask these questions. What did it mean to become a Communist in 1943?² A Party member, not just a philosophical adherent whose position could be justified with an ‘I had nothing to do with that’. I started asking them of myself and searching for the answers—without looking at books or documents; but not without doubts.

September 1939

At the time it did not feel like a rupture. Our family was in the Dolomites, my sister Mimma and I—she was twelve, I was fifteen—looked out for the first autumn colours in the meadows that would signal it was time to leave for Milan. The days went by as normal, while Poland was divided up between the Germans and the Russians; but Poland was far away, the Soviet Union even farther. There had always been a rumble of military news on the radio. The Spanish Civil War had brought us noisy propaganda about nuns and priests with their throats cut, planes taking off from Italy, bloodthirsty Communists, the siege of Alcázar, Teruel, Guadalajara, Madrid. Our family adopted its standard approach: silence and deafness. It was not a question of fear; nobody close to us had been beaten up by the Fascists, and the violence of the Mussolini regime had abated by the 1930s. Ours was a non-fascism, not an anti-fascism; a slightly scornful attempt to stay aloof.

Even when the war began to materialize into tangible things—diversions, shortages, rules—it still seemed to have the character of a natural disaster rather than a human one. I was at the Liceo Manzoni in Milan. I plunged into the works of philosophy my father brought home for me—Eucken, Windelband—lying face-down on the carpet. I was determined to go to University a year early, starting in the autumn of 1941. I had never felt so good in my skin as when I entered that beautiful courtyard in the Corso di Porta Romana. I read History of Art with Matteo Marangoni, Philosophy and Aesthetics with Antonio Banfi. These two teachers remade me: Marangoni taught me how to look at a painting or a statue, indicating with the long shadow of his pointer on the black-and-white slide projection: ‘Look here, and here: how right it is.’ Right—*giusto*—indicated something absolute. His work on Baroque Art has remained one of the great books; it spoke of a time of upheaval, of violence and its rationalization; confusedly, we felt the need to think about such times, that, as Marangoni let us know. Banfi opened the world of the Warburg Library’s thinkers to us: Panofsky, Wölfflin, Cassirer. His approach was the opposite of determinist; he showed us the confusion of the past, the contradictory clashes and collisions that yielded a history that had neither ends nor end, woven between reality and possibility.

Spring 1943

Nobody talked about a ‘lightning war’ any more. Victory proclamations for the Pact of Steel barely masked the increasing indications of disaster. At first the Allied bombing seemed almost unreal. After the sirens had sounded my mother and I stood by the window watching the aeroplanes approaching through the sky. Right above us, one unleashed its bombs. They fell slowly towards us, then gathered speed, exploding just a few hundred yards away. We were thrown back as the window-panes blew in.

A few days later we were huddled in the bomb shelter when the impact of the explosions blew its door off. Dust cascaded onto our heads. We emerged to find our house destroyed. We salvaged what we could and set off, by tram, by cart, to find a place to stay. Eventually we found two rooms and a kitchen at Olmeda, a hill village on the Como–Cantù line, some 30 miles from Milan. The area was full of refugees. My mother

¹ These are edited extracts from Rossana Rossanda’s *La Ragazza del secolo scorso*, Einaudi: Turin 2007, paperback, 978 88 06 18816 0; they are printed by permission of the publisher.

worked for the office of an engineering firm that had been evacuated to Cantù; hers was the only regular income since my father had lost his business in Venice ten years before. I would take the tram back there from Milan in the evening, or stay at a friend's flat overnight.

One defeat followed another through the summer of 1943. The Allies had invaded Sicily but there was no 'defence of the fatherland'. Then, overnight, the regime collapsed. On July 25th Mussolini was under arrest, replaced by old Marshal Badoglio. Monarchists and Fascists fell to blaming each other; all of them—the King, the ministers, the Fascist leaders—were revealed as petty swindlers, the eagles and the laurel leaves as papier-mâché. I was stunned by the sudden dissolution of what had seemed such a powerful state machine. What did the Badoglio government mean? I pounced on the newspaper reports, dissatisfied and suspicious. The whole country seemed to be lying low, scared, wanting to get rid of the Germans, who were there and not there that summer. The first dissenting voices I heard were those of *Giustizia e Libertà*. The information they had was uncertain: papers, programmes, rumours. They were another sort of people, they seemed to take the measure of things according to a different set of dimensions.

September 1943

Badoglio had surrendered to the Allies. For less than a day we believed, with a kind of sad exultation, that it was the end of the war. It was the reverse: the King fleeing to the arms of the Allies in the South, the onset of German occupation in the North. Italy was broken in two like a loaf of bread. The long overcoats of the Germans were everywhere, their harsh orders posted on the walls. The atmosphere at the University was fraught with tension: it was time to choose—to side with the partisans, or to fight against the Allies under German command. The Italian Army had no credibility at all. We were all on our guard, careful who we spoke to, watching who was who.

Later, this period would be rewritten as one of national revolt against the Germans; but for us it was not a matter of patriotic enthusiasm. What national identity had Italy had before September 8th, 1943? The *Risorgimento* had involved the elites, not much more; if fascism had provided an identity, it had collapsed. We had been a state for two-and-a-half generations; what kind of national tradition starts—at best—with

one's grandparents? The Italians were a precarious people, never tested by the choices it had to make, whether at the time of the Reformation, the French Revolution, or later revolts; the melting pot had never resulted in a fusion. Now, in 1943, the choice was not between Brindisi—where the King had fled—and Mussolini's lair in Desenzano. We had to decide whether to stay with the Italy we knew or work for its collapse: for an end to that Italy which had blurred the border between fascism and non-fascism, and would just have carried on doing so, without the war.

I don't know how I came to the conclusion that it was the Communists who were most sure of what they were doing—or who told me, 'But Banfi is a Communist'. I was so ignorant that I marched straight up to him, between classes. He was leaning against a radiator in the common-room, next to the window. 'Someone said you are a Communist.' He looked at me. I had taken two courses with him; he must have decided that I was what I seemed—someone in need of direction, who had no idea of the lethal import of what she had just said. 'What are you looking for?' I told him about the leaflets I'd seen, about being confused, not knowing. He got up from the radiator, went to the desk and wrote down a list in his tiny handwriting. 'Read these books. Come back when you have done so.' I ran to the railway station and opened the slip of paper on the train: Harold Laski, *Liberty in the Modern State* and *Democracy in Crisis*; Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and *The Class Struggles in France 1848–1850*. A book by De Ruggiero, I think. Lenin, *State and Revolution*. 'By S., anything you can find.'

I was astounded. He really was a Communist—a Bolshevik. The images from Spain came into my head. I got off the train at Como and went to the public library. There was a kindly, middle-aged librarian. I showed him the list. He pointed me towards an old filing cabinet. The bottom drawer was unmarked, as if it were empty. I pulled it open. Everything was there, even *Das Kapital*, an Avanti! edition with a red leather cover. Nothing by S.; the only work on the USSR was a travel book by an engineer. I filled out the forms and the librarian brought me the books. 'May I take them home?' He nodded.

The evening tram back to Olmeda was crowded with people going home after work. Next to me were three exhausted labourers, with coarsened hands and blackened fingers. They looked as if they had been drinking; their drooping heads jerked to each movement of the tram. It

was with them that I would have to go. At home I read all through the night, the next day, and the next. From Laski I went on to *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, then *State and Revolution*. I ran a fever. Everything fell into place; it was not so much a discovery as an acceptance which I could no longer defer. It was the end of my well-ordered future, my praiseworthy ambition, my innocence.

I went back to see Banfi. 'I've read it all.' 'Everything?' I nodded: 'What should I do?' He gave me the name of a schoolteacher in Como. She was expecting me, a middle-aged woman with tawny hair and heavy-lidded eyes. She spoke calmly, with a slight drawl. 'You need a pseudonym,' she said. 'You will be called Miranda, alright?' Miranda: what an idiotic name. I was told to look after the sister of a prisoner whose escape was being organized: Luciano Raimondi, an extraordinary partisan. The sister was a middle-aged woman with a startled look. I brought her food, tried to keep her calm. I am not good at looking after people and I was bored, but the escape was a success. The heavy-lidded woman gave me the address of a suitcase shop in Como. The man there would tell me what to do next. He was the centre of operations, I was to work with him. I went that evening. The little suitcase shop was tucked away in a side street. A customer was being served. After he had gone I stepped forward. 'I am Miranda.' The man behind the counter had grey hair, a serious face and clear eyes. He looked at me, questioningly. We were each putting our life into the other one's hands. Many go through life without ever experiencing this kind of relationship, which has no equal; but we did, then and later, wherever we went. His name was Remo Mentasti.

Resistance

By the autumn of 1943 the deportations were no longer disguised as 'work in Germany'. Lorries packed with deportees were driven away in the middle of the night; we heard about the round-up in the former ghetto in Rome. I was often afraid. I never knew whether or not I was being watched. In Milan there were always freshly posted proclamations on the walls from the German military governor, Field Marshal Kesselring, warning that we could be hanged. The thought filled me with horror. We saw the hanged in the public squares: their twisted necks, their elongated limbs. It was not death in itself; we had grown accustomed to that, walking with lowered heads, acknowledging it as something always there. It was the fact that the dead still bore the traces of what they had gone

through, like the pile of bodies stacked, spread-eagled, their mouths and eyes wide open, in Milan's central square. The German and Italian forces kept them there all through a sweltering August day. It was as though we were being made to repudiate ourselves, forced to recognize that we dare not stand beside them and shout out, 'Me, too'.

Every non-vital question was put off till tomorrow. I tried to piece together the bits of information that came my way: Gasparotto dead, Curiel murdered, the botched contacts, the reprisals.² At the same time, I kept up with my studies. Banfi had assigned me a thesis on the aesthetic treatises of the early Renaissance and I was enchanted by the theorizations of light and perspective. And there was a love affair, the only thing that allowed me to imagine a life after the war, just as it taught me not to expect too much; we were trapped inside a cruel and indecisive time. What did it mean to be fifteen in 1939 and twenty-one in 1945? I still feel awkward about not having had a normal youth, not having danced through a single summer. It has made me anxious; probably boring, too.

As well as the luggage shop in Como there were several centres in Milan: street-corner rendezvous, coffeessless cafés, safe houses; and the University. Professor Banfi lived in Corso Magenta and it was natural enough to stroll with one's teacher along the Via Passione to the station. From Banfi I knew about the CLNAI—the Committee for the National Liberation of Northern Italy. Banfi was the only person who would answer all my questions. It was he who told me that Curiel had been shot, by an infiltrator; there were many of them in our ranks.

Sometimes it would get late, the curfew would be about to sound and I would not know what to do with the material I was carrying. At such moments, the people one could not approach seemed innumerable, and the comrades very scarce and far away. A few things accumulated at home: never guns or money, but medicine, cyclostyled leaflets that I had not managed to deliver, old sheets that Mimma and I cut into strips for bandages, rolled up tight. One morning my mother came bouncing into our room very early, in her vest. 'I've got a cold, do you have a handkerchief?' She opened a drawer: 'What is all this stuff?' There were bandages, medicines, heaven knows what. I was dumbstruck, but

² [Leopoldo Gasparotto (1902–44): fought in Lombardy with the anti-fascist group *Giustizia e Libertà*; Eugenio Curiel (1912–45): PCI militant, ran the clandestine *Unità* during the war and the Communist journal *La nostra lotta*.]

Mimma just shrugged it off: ‘So?’ Our mother may have thought this was just part of our disorderly nature; she shut the drawer and left.

One evening the train to Como was stopped by the Fascist militia, deep in the snowy countryside. Italian voices ordered us to get out with our luggage and stand in line to be searched. I was carrying material for the Brigade section in Val di Lanzo. The third-class compartment was packed with tired people, some standing, some sitting on the long wooden benches. Under their eyes, I slipped the big bag under the seat beneath me. I could not take it out. Nobody said anything. We lined up alongside the carriage. Some militiamen came by with a girl they had arrested, her face ashen. ‘What will you do with her?’ ‘Nothing. She will go to Germany to work.’ They looked through our belongings. They did not search inside the carriage. When we got back on the bag was still there. Nobody said a word. Getting out at Como it seemed as if they were all in a hurry to get away from me.

Another time our building in Olmeda was evacuated by the Germans in the middle of the night. They said they were searching for explosives that the partisans had put in a disused railway tunnel that ran beneath. I knew there was no gelignite there, but of course could not say so. As we stood in the cold and dark, wrapped in blankets, I felt some of the others were giving me fearful looks. But though they thought they might be blown up at any minute, no one said anything.

They did not speak, but people were watchful. The Germans could not tolerate the fact that the partisans—*Banditen*—were contending with them for control of territory; but in a country without hope, a guerrilla war is unbeatable. That was why the Germans were so merciless during the round-ups, why they continued to massacre during their retreat. We did not know about the camps, but we saw them at work, their helmets sloping down over their eyes, and we feared them. War against the Germans—or against the Fascists, and therefore civil war? I was amazed at the scandal that exploded later around Claudio Pavone’s book, *Una guerra civile*.³ It was obvious that it was both. Who if not Italians—the King, Mussolini, the Fascists—had brought us to this point? Who if not the Italian ruling class had handed us to the Germans? Daniel

³ [Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza*, Turin 1991.]

Guérin's *Fascism and Big Business* was an important work for us; patently, the two were linked.⁴

1944

Did we want a revolution? I rack my brains. We were Communists, we wanted a new country, but we were not preparing for an insurrection. Not where I was, in Milan, even if—I later found out—some of the partisan brigades had hopes of it, both encouraged and restrained by the elusive Secchia.⁵ But radical words and radical deeds are different things. For us, to be a Communist was, above all, to be the most decisive in action—though I got to know some very determined monarchist officers. Those who joined the Party during the Resistance were a particular type, formed during that epoch: decisive, but also resolutely realistic.

On the few occasions that I had dealings with people from other parties in the CLNAI, I felt ill at ease. A heavy-browed Liberal lawyer, a former Deputy, received me with palpable fear. His was the only request that I refused. The Fascist Federale of Como—I think he was called Scassellati—needed someone to look after his daughter in the afternoons. I looked the part, I could pretend to be a Fascist, they could supply me with recommendations. I would listen, pass on information. ‘Snoop? No’, I said, immediately. The Deputy did not insist. Soon after I did pass on military documents to the Allies. But that was not like going into someone’s house, winning their trust and then abusing it. I did not want to play the Mata Hari.

The Party cell structure was very rigid: my contacts were limited to one comrade here, one there, to guarantee the security of the network. As well as Mentasti in Como there was Dionisio, leader of the factory section at Cantù, the largest in the region. Dionisio was younger than Mentasti and more daring; a worker, but nothing like the tired figures I had seen on the tram. Even the older workers I met were not like that. They were watchful, men of few words, as if the practice of clandestinity had become a habit. Though there was nothing much about class strategies in the pamphlets that we managed to print off and distribute, there was always something to be learnt from the older workers: fragments

⁴ [Daniel Guérin, *Fascisme et grand capital*, Paris 1936.]

⁵ [Pietro Secchia (1903–73): PCI militant, political commissar of Communist Garibaldi Brigades during the war.]

of life, struggles, trade unions broken up, comrades imprisoned. From them I learnt of the splits in the Left in the 1930s. But I knew little of the trials of 1937, and of Gramsci, only the name.

In January 1944 the Americans had informed us they could not guarantee air drops during the winter: perhaps it would be better if the partisans came down from the mountains? As if a guerrilla war was an optional trip to the countryside. We were an occupied country, the Germans were hunting down the *Banditen*; those who had gone to fight with the Brigades could not just stroll back home. But the air supplies were not essential, or so it seemed to me. It was the networks in the cities that supplied those in the mountains. General Alexander's communiqué meant that the Allies would not be arriving any time soon; we had to fend for ourselves.

The CLNAI leadership could take comfort from world developments: the Normandy landings, the Liberation of Paris. Coming and going from Milan to Como, I had no such broader view. I made a mistake. There was a girl at the University who used to talk to us and sometimes lend a hand: a beautiful blue-eyed blonde. Once I asked her to look after something for me. We had managed to set up an operation against the Decima MAS unit at Brunate.⁶ They had designs for some new craft, a sailor was going to get me copies of the plans; he had a pass for Switzerland and could get away across the border. I collected the plans and handed them on. It was a day in early October and it seemed sensible for me to disappear for the afternoon. I cycled to Venegono, near Varese, where I could read a hard-to-find Leon Battista Alberti volume in the Caproni Library. Towards evening, as I was cycling home, the blonde girl intercepted me in the central square in Como. Her face was drained of colour. 'Don't go home. I've warned your father'. It turned out she was involved with a German official and had informed him about me. She said I should make a run for it. I was so shocked I could barely take in what she was saying. It was the first and last time in my life that I ever hit somebody—my hand moved of its own accord.

As soon as I had told the comrades I pedalled home at top speed, terrified that my family would have been arrested. I found my father deathly pale.

⁶ [Decima Flottiglia MAS: unit of frogmen, used against Allied shipping during the war and, on land, against partisans.]

'I have burned everything I could find in your room,' he said, briefly. 'Is there anything else?' 'No.' 'Who are you with?' 'The Communists.' 'Not the worst,' he said, almost relieved. *Meno male*—I have never understood what he meant by that. Three Germans arrived, two in uniform and a plainclothes officer, a figure of fear in Como. They found nothing. My father and I answered the few questions they put to us. They did not arrest me. As soon as they left my father asked: 'Why didn't you tell me?' 'You wouldn't have let me do it.' It was true, but then I added, 'I would do it again and not tell you anything.' It was cruel of me, not casual like the pain I have happened to inflict at other times. He winced, and left the room. It was the end of the long love between us, the special trust I had in him; the father who gave me books, who discussed all the big questions with me, all the things that mattered. He distanced himself from me and died, two years later, without us ever having talked the same way again.

I have no idea why I was not arrested. Possibly the Germans were after the Decima MAS documents themselves—there were tense relations between the two—and let me go in the hope of turning up some more important connection. That was the comrades' hypothesis, when we were able to speak. In the meantime I was isolated and guilt-stricken. People in Milan looked past me when I saw them in the street. I was summoned by the CLNAI a month later. Fabio was waiting for me in the crowd at Milan's northern railway station; later I would know him as Vergani, secretary of the city's Camera del lavoro. He was a calm, middle-aged man. Without raising his voice, he asked me whether I realized that I had put the whole network in danger by failing to follow an elementary rule. It was a simple and effective dressing-down. I felt a complete fool. His face conveyed what he thought but did not say: the problems that having to work with people like me created for the Resistance.

Vergani indicated that I would be given a signal when relations could resume. It came soon enough; the Germans started to leave the Como area that winter. In Milan there was a new wind blowing. The strikes of March 1945 were strong and almost happy: there were no trams running from Piazza Cadorna and many of the shops were shut. Bulletins from the mountains sounded a completely different note to those of the winter before: many were now going to join the partisans.

It was ending, but the losses were still severe. The short-lived Free Republic of Ossola was crushed by the Germans; the image of the hanging bodies with the signs around their necks at Fondotoce remained.⁷ Then came April 28th, Mussolini's capture by the partisans as he tried to flee with the Germans. The official press and the radio went crazy. Everyone was talking: this was it. We heard about the negotiations that Cardinal Schuster—a sort of Milanese Pius XII—tried to broker. On May 5, the partisans marched through Milan. I saw Parri for the first time in the Piazza Duomo, marching next to Longo.⁸ They were in civilian clothes. There was a kind of pride and happiness that I had never known before, nor ever would again. All around there were crowds of joyous people, climbing onto the monuments, scaling the lamp-posts. It was the same in Como, in Olmeda: the Italian tricolour was flying everywhere and people that you would have avoided the month before now had red scarves around their necks. It was the end of an epoch. Everything would start again.

I saw the bodies, Mussolini, Clara Petacci and the others, strung up by their feet in Piazzale Loreto. They looked done for, their faces swollen and anonymous as if they had never lived. Someone had tied Petacci's skirt up around her knees, out of pity. In front of them there thronged a furious mass of people, women shouting, men white-faced with indignation, screaming out their anger and their impotence: justice had been done by somebody else, on their behalf. There was some derision, but mostly rage. I turned away; it was a necessary ritual, perhaps, but terrible.

Liberation

There is no such thing as a clean war. We came out of it bruised and battered and could not just march away home, like the Russians or the Americans. A civil war does not end at an appointed hour, but only when enough time has passed to leave behind those who will never be able

⁷ [On 20 June 1944, 42 partisans were executed at Fondotoce. The Free Republic of Ossola lasted for 43 days that autumn.]

⁸ [Ferruccio Parri (1890–1981): member of CLNAI, Prime Minister of a unity government June–December 1945; Luigi Longo (1900–80): among founder members of PCI, commander of Garibaldi Brigades 1943–45; succeeded Togliatti as secretary of the Party, 1964–72.]

to forget. There were plenty of reprisals in the aftermath, some petty enough; some—like the case of Neri, a partisan leader, and Gianna, a slightly crazy girl—matters of conscience. Gianna had come down from the mountains a few times and once she was arrested in Como, but released after a few weeks. The partisans suspected her of having talked. Neri defended her. A partisan court, some of them people I knew, condemned the pair and they were executed—shot. I learnt of it from Remo Mentasti, who was in despair. He asked me to intervene, to make sure, at least, that the slur of treason was lifted. I called for an inquiry through the leadership in Milan, but came up against a brick wall; everyone did. Maybe the partisans did not want to admit their mistake; maybe they understood it was unpardonable. When the story of Neri and Gianna was resurrected in the 1970s I did not intervene. In 1945, nothing about that story had convinced me, but I did not think about leaving. I am not proud of it; nor repentant.

The Brera Picture Gallery had reopened and that winter we unpacked the books for its archive, hurriedly crated away during the Allied attacks. We worked amid jubilant disorder, stopping to read squatting on our heels as the precious volumes came to hand. There was a sense of movement in the air; painters, writers, photographers congregated at the Bar Giamaica outside the Brera. I graduated on February 6th, 1946. On February 7th I found a job, editing for the Hoepli Encyclopedia, and that evening I enrolled in the local branch of the Communist Party. It is not easy to recapture the way we thought then, buried as it is under the century's rubble. We were sure—I was sure—that only socialism, an end to the rule of big capital, would bring freedom from oppression, colonialism, fascism, war. Yet there was no expectation of imminent revolution, as there had been after the First World War. We were visibly, if amicably, occupied by the Americans, to whom the partisans had had to surrender arms. In 1945 the most compelling need was to put everything back in motion, to rebuild: Milan was devastated, the country was desperately poor. We had been cut off from the world for twenty years under Fascism; before that there had been the frivolous *Italietta* of the belle époque. The 20th century had been denied to us and now we tore into it like hungry young leopards—not just American and Soviet culture, but the whole of modern Europe. We discovered the art of the 20s and 30s amid the rubble of the postwar era: the books—my heart stopped when I picked up Marcel Raymond's *De Baudelaire au surréalisme*: a work long

sought comes to seem the key to every lock—the music: the first Marion Anderson 78s, the first *swing*; the films; the theatre. We were swept away, and at first did not notice the re-imposition of censorship, this time by the Church.

It was a time of ferment; there was a wonderful gaiety in the air. The main office of the Einaudi publishing house in Viale Tunisia was a meeting place for all sorts of writers and editors, who read, published, ate and slept there—Giulio Einaudi, Pavese, Calvino, Cerati,⁹ Vando Aldrovandi. I am still embarrassed to recall the first talk I did for them, on Hemingway; I hardly knew what to say. At midnight we used to go to *L'Unità's* office in the Piazza Cavour, to pick up the first edition of the next day's paper. Elio Vittorini was still the editor there, though soon he would leave, following a tirade from Togliatti, and set up *Il Politecnico*. If the name recalled that of Carlo Cattaneo's 19th-century journal of Piedmontese revolutionary-republicanism—in contradistinction to the Roman line of descent, from Labriola, Croce, Gramsci—what Vittorini and the others were really thinking of was Paris, New York, 1920s Berlin.¹⁰ It was the first clash—pitting not so much practical party men against intellectuals, but two ideas, political as well as intellectual: Milan and Rome. We stressed the links between Communism and modernity, Communism and the avant-garde; Rome and Naples, those between Communism and national formation, Italian tradition. We were more interested in big industry, Rome in the peasant struggles of the South against the latifundia. Florence was in between, with Luporini and Muscetta's journal *Società*; or so it seemed to us at the time.¹¹

Rome did not understand, we told ourselves, with a presumption that consorted all too well with a certain opportunism; for among the northern intelligentsia there was a feeling—not least among non-Communists, as a legacy from the joint Resistance—that it was necessary to keep in step with the backwardness of the South. (And I was taken aback by how narrowly the referendum on Republic or Monarchy passed in the

⁹ [Roberto Cerati: an editor at Einaudi from 1945.]

¹⁰ [The original *Il Politecnico* was founded by Cattaneo in Milan in 1839 as a journal of revolutionary republicanism. Vittorini's was published between September 1945 and December 1947.]

¹¹ [*Società*: founded in 1945 by a group of Communist intellectuals including Cesare Luporini and Carlo Muscetta; ceased publication in 1961.]

summer of 1946, despite the ridiculous spectacle of the runaway King.¹²) So Milan stood aside, so to speak. Vittorini withdrew from *L'Unità*. Banfi nearly had to shut down *Studi Filosofici* after protestations from the French Communists over its defence of Sartre against Jean Kanapa's attack. On the broader question of education, however, there was still a mutual understanding. Neither the enlightenment tradition nor the avant-garde were 'popular', but for a while that did not seem to be the most important problem. The people had been cut off, excluded; access to culture was a matter of privilege. There was no concession to populism and provincialism, but rather a common assumption that neither people nor culture could stay the same.

The Communists and Socialists of those days came in many stripes. The Socialists of Milan had an aura of heresy about them, thanks to Lelio Basso and Ricardo Lombardi, both of them somewhat suspect in Rome: the first for being Luxemburgist when no one else was, the second for having proposed a flat tax on shares when Rome was very careful not to create any trouble for Bresciani Turrone at the Constituent Assembly.¹³ Rodolfo Morandi was regarded with suspicion by the PCI for raising the question of workers' self-management councils after the war.¹⁴ But the Milan region failed to provide any great national political leaders, least of all on the Left. The only Lombards who counted on the national scene were products of Milan's Banca Commerciale, which stood in splendour opposite the run-down Palazzo Marino, the City Hall. The Socialist Mayor, Antonio Greppi, with his perpetually heartfelt expression, sat behind an ugly desk awaiting its resurrection while the Banca Commerciale's saturnine chief, Raffaele Mattioli—who maintained close relations with Togliatti and Piero Sraffa, via Franco Rodano—was elegantly enthroned in the building across the street, with a stack of not-at-all financial books

¹² [In June 1946 the Italian referendum decided for the Republic by 12 million to 10 million, with the South favouring a monarchy. Although the parties of the Left won 219 seats in the 1946 Constituent Assembly election, compared to 207 for the Christian Democrats, Togliatti and Nenni accepted minority roles in De Gasperi's coalition government, which retained the Lateran Treaty with the Vatican and the Fascist penal code.]

¹³ [Basso (1903–78): PSI member and Resistance fighter; edited Italian edition of Luxemburg's *Political Writings* published in 1967. Lombardi (1901–84): Resistance fighter, joined PSI in 1947. Costantino Bresciani Turrone (1882–1963): economist, appointed head of Bank of Rome in 1945.]

¹⁴ [Rodolfo Morandi (1903–55): militant in *Giustizia e Libertà* and PSI in Milan.]

on the table.¹⁵ Nearby, in an ex-workingmen's club in Via Rovello, was the Piccolo Teatro where Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi were initiating an Italian version of Jean Vilar's Théâtre National Populaire. There was enormous confusion. Milan was still full of potholes and rubble, there were barely any streetlights, crime was rife; but everything was safer than during the war. Compared to the Kesselring posters, the piles of dead, the hanged—we could live with the peace.

Party work

By February 1946, when I enrolled in my local branch of the PCI, the membership had changed. The clandestine network and the partisans had been submerged within a broader layer. I recognized some who had toiled away during the war, but there were many who had not, who had submitted to events under the Germans but who were now looking for a bearing. It surprised me that the doors were so wide open, the procedures for admission almost non-existent. It was certainly not the party of Lenin.

It was then that I discovered the world of the big industrial plants: not the little workshops of Cantù or Brianza, but the high walls and vast assembly shops of Innocenti, Alfa and Borletti in Milan; of Breda, Marelli and Falck in Sesto San Giovanni. Typically, the entrance to these factory gates would be ploughed to mud by truck tyres and the tramping of feet, as if the city had pulled back twenty yards from the plant, or vice versa. The factories always had a half-built look: concrete and corrugated iron behind the wooden frontages or the fretwork of the 1900s. Until the Olivetti buildings in Ivrea, there was no sign of the modern movement: the factory was not architecture, just a container. The only beauty lay in the machines; an oily rag among the steel rods was the trace of a worker who would help the parts move to a smoother beat, a tempo of their own.

We went there with the Party paper, to discuss and to recruit. At first some of the big factories were open to us, and we would set up shop in the plant's trade-union office, or wait for the workers to come out into the chilly sunshine at midday to eat what they had brought from home.

¹⁵ [Franco Rodano (1920–83): Catholic anti-fascist, part of wartime Movimento dei Cattolici Comunisti.]

At Innocenti, the workers' management council seemed to run the company. It was led by Muneghina, a highly intelligent comrade with a biting Lombardy wit. He amused himself by running after us with the big hook that hung from an aerial chain, sometimes hoisting us up into the air on it for a few yards. For the workers, the factories they had defended from transfer or sabotage during the German retreat seemed rightfully theirs—and therefore ours; Italy's. The women workers—grey-faced, with drawn features and iron-clad perms—were harder to get to talk to. They were always in a rush, hurrying to clock in on time in the morning, hurrying out to buy milk before the shops closed, or hurrying home to prepare the next day's lunch box at night. When the factory siren sounded the whole workforce would rush towards the trams, for the city's reconstruction had expelled them to the outer suburbs and they travelled in every morning in carriages befogged with breath and steam.

Party meetings were held in the evenings, often in the basements of the old council estates that formed a big belt around Milan, outside the *case di ringhiera*, the 'banister houses'. On one side of those courtyards there would be a door marked with the hammer and sickle, or a notice of the last meeting. Down a few steps, and you would be in the entrails of the building, with pipes running everywhere, the walls repainted by decorator comrades and the table covered with lengths of red cloth that would be carefully folded and put away at the end of the meeting. Often the room was completely full but more people would come hesitantly down the stairs, curious to see what the Communists were like, and end up perching at the back. The branch secretary's report would begin with a summary of the world situation, followed by a survey of international and domestic events, and an account of decisions taken by the leading bodies and the Central Committee; it covered everything down to the branch telephone bill. Of course there was something schematic in the transposition from world stage to Milanese suburb, from historical event to the corresponding Party resolution; but it was an enormous acculturation.

The report was followed by a discussion, which was never very long, or much of a debate. When someone took the floor to challenge the Party line—always from the Left, arguing that the Togliatti leadership was making too many concessions—others sprang reflexively to its defence, and not only from the speakers' table: anything to avoid dividing that embryo of another Italy that joined people together, saving them from

the isolation of the big city, the factory floor. This was the solid reality of the party that was slowly worn down in the 1970s and 80s, and destroyed by the political changes of 1989; a tired but living network that organized people of the left within another tradition, counter-posed to the homogenization of the mass media.

The people who packed the basement meetings, tired after the day's work, or went from door to door getting membership cards stamped, were workers, teachers, engineers, some students; mostly poor, though not all; and neatly dressed—where there was real poverty there was no *faux* pauperism. Although exploited and oppressed, they had the simplicity and self-confidence that came from being sure they understood, better than most, the laws that made the world go round. And since they were convinced that they always fell below their own ideals, they were also moralistic, stern with others and with that part of the self which risked being the other. I came down like the rest, listened, spoke occasionally, took on my share of the tasks. I learnt a lot. I was not always persuaded, but that seemed normal to me. I was no longer an adolescent, I did not seek or find a form of religiosity there. My formation was one thing; that of the speaker, or of those sitting next to me, was another. I never thought they had to coincide. This was the Party I belonged to in the postwar period.

In the cold

The bright days proved shortlived. In May 1947 De Gasperi broke up the postwar coalition, evicting the Left parties from government. The branch secretary's report had as its background Churchill's speech at Fulton, then the Truman doctrine. The Allies were pitted against each other, and we felt the brunt of the Cold War in our daily lives. The ground was shifting under our feet; we were thrown on to the defensive and had to get used to the police breaking up our meetings, beating us up; though if they got penned into a courtyard, they could get thrashed themselves. The judiciary went on the rampage, armed with the Rocco Code. Soon we needed a permit even for indoor meetings, and when a dispute started in a factory stones would fly and windows shatter.

The April 1948 elections were a turning point. I doubt De Gasperi believed his own propaganda, that the Communists and Socialists would impose a godless dictatorship, that we were just waiting for the

right moment to liquidate democracy. He was intelligent and well-informed enough to know that, in those times and with all those American bases, a revolution in Italy was not conceivable. But he feared our strength, our influence. In reality, it was the PCI that risked being ruled out of the democratic process, and many in Milan and Lombardy thought that if the Left won it would be the bourgeois state that would overturn the vote.

It was my first, terrifying electoral campaign. The villages of lower Lombardy glide past in my memory. Every time the car deposited me in one of those squares, my stomach knotted: what am I doing here? I would launch myself at the audience in a cold sweat, scrutinizing the serious, impassive faces, workers and others, farmhands in their overalls, to see if the 'girl from Milan' could make them feel they were not alone. It was a strange sensation. We were strong, the only organized party; but surrounded by a sea of priests and madonnas, whose gilded statues were taken from place to place to exorcize our baleful influence. The vote count was terribly slow, it went on for days. The first few provincial seats went to the Christian Democrats, then those in the towns; and then the flood—DC, DC, DC. After a third of the votes had been counted, the DC were far ahead of us. We couldn't believe it. Even in the working-class districts, we came in below the most pessimistic forecasts. It was a hard blow, a decisive defeat that would install the Christian Democrats as the dominant political presence for decades to come. We were out of government, the permanent opposition—even when the PCI began to score a large plurality of the vote. We did not know then about the *conventio ad excludendum*, keeping the Communists out of any Italian government; that would be formalized later, in step with the struggle between the two superpowers, the creation of NATO, the sordid conspiracies of Operation Gladio.

New spring

The 1960s were more interesting. In Italy these were years of rising labour struggles, of chaotic urban growth. For us, 1968 began in 1967, in the Architecture Departments of Turin and Venice; exploded in Trento with the occupation of the Sociology Faculty, and spread nearly everywhere from December throughout 1968. I was fighting the government's disastrous university legislation in Parliament when the student movement began

to take off. I plunged into the protests, all the more sympathetic to the students' demands because of the disparagement we had started to receive within the PCI for raising criticisms of the Communist leadership—over the 20th Party Congress, Hungary, the Sino-Soviet split.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the international scene was in tumult, and it all seemed part of the same wave: Hanoi resisted the American escalation and went onto the counter-attack, and it was clear the Soviet Union was providing material support; Dubček was trying to put in place a form of socialist democracy; while China was actively posing the question of what post-revolutionary society was. The PCI leadership had sided with the Soviet Union since 1960, and could see nothing in the Cultural Revolution but a struggle for power at the top of the CCP—i.e., nothing at all. The films of Godard and Bellocchio registered the historical scale of the Chinese turmoil far more powerfully than did the Central Committee.

Everything began to pick up speed: Vietnam, Czechoslovakia, China. Europe watched in a daze as its youth came out onto the streets, articulating things that had never been said before. At the beginning of May Nanterre erupted, rapidly spreading to Paris and becoming a symbol for the whole world. Within weeks, France was paralysed by a general strike. I went with friends; we camped at K. S. Karol's house, went down to the barricaded Latin Quarter and spent the first evening at the Odéon, packed like sardines. Everyone had the right to take the floor. 'Let them speak!' was the cry when someone stumbled, struggling to express the subjectivity of atomization. By June, as we made our way back to Milan, the clouds were already beginning to gather over Prague. Around midnight on August 21st Alfredo Reichlin phoned me from *L'Unità*: Soviet tanks were entering the city. Karol and I ran to the Cuban embassy. The ambassador was expecting the condemnation from Havana at any moment. The next morning Reichlin called me again: 'Your friend Castro is not condemning the invasion.' The days that followed were feverish. In Prague the Soviet troops were greeted with incredulity; unlike in Budapest, there was no resistance. When the Czechs berated the soldiers who stuck their heads out of the turrets: 'But why are you here?', they did not know what to reply.

¹⁶[On PCI debates in this period, see articles by Perry Anderson, 'Debate of the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party', *NLR* 1/13–14, January–April 1962; Lucio Magri, 'Italian Communism in the Sixties', *NLR* 1/66, March–April 1971; Luciana Castellina, '*Il Manifesto* and Italian Communism', *NLR* 1/151, May–June 1985.]

There was uproar at the PCI's 12th Party Congress in February, the first since the invasion. The leadership's document was ambivalent on everything: students, the internal situation, Prague. I was the first of our group to take the microphone: 'We are gathered here while the army of a country that calls itself socialist is occupying another socialist country'. Bam!—the entire Soviet delegation got up and left, led by Ponomariov, who had been at my place in Milan often enough. The other delegations followed suit—all except the Vietnamese; we thought this significant at first, until we found out they were having problems with the translation. The silence from the presidium was glacial, but there was a huge ovation from the floor. It was the same when Aldo Natoli spoke, attacking the PCI's lukewarm attitude towards the social struggles; and Luigi Pintor, who assailed the ossification and authoritarianism of the inner-Party regime. By the end of the third day we knew how strong our support was, although far fewer would vote for a document we put up against the leadership's theses—so as not to divide the Party; so as not to expose ourselves, as a minority; all the usual reasons. I was the only one with a voice on the Policy Commission who could argue for permission to put our document to the Congress; we got the go-ahead. We would get a derisory amount of votes—but still.

Then Berlinguer spoke—the inauguration of his *de facto* leadership.¹⁷ He acknowledged in passing several of the points we had been raising—though nothing about the Soviet Union. But the Congress delegates saw it as a possible opening towards our views. The few comrades who had wanted to vote for our document all clustered round me, their faces friendly, worried: they wanted to put their faith in the new General Secretary. I presented the document to the Congress, and explained why we would not be putting it to a vote. Not a glorious moment. My uneasiness was increased by the sudden warmth of the applause all around me, for declining to take an oppositional stand. I left the podium, picked up my bag, and walked out of the hall.

The next two months were unbearable. How could so much conservatism have accumulated within the Party? It still seemed something new—it was not predetermined that the Party would respond to 1968 by withdrawing into its shell. As for the Soviet Union, it was not even capable of keeping its own camp in order without the use of arms. It had

¹⁷ [Enrico Berlinguer (1922–84): PCI militant from 1943 onwards; general secretary of the Party from 1972 until his death.]

nothing to say on what was to be done in the ex-colonial countries, and limited itself to supporting a dubious progressivism in the Middle East. It was no longer a besieged fortress, yet still exhausted itself pursuing the arms race; and all the time undermining itself from within. By 1969, nothing could be hoped for unless there was a profound change in the Soviet leadership; the masses had become anaesthetized—not through terror, through scepticism. As for the Italian Party, the living body to which I had linked myself since 1943, with whom I had travelled all these years—what stage of suffering, of desire and powerlessness, had it now reached? I had grown used to operating within it as if playing on a great keyboard, one that registered my touch and sent messages in response. Now I had been distanced from its keys. But we had not given up on the Party: there was still the hope that we had lost a battle, but not the war. Why not go on the attack, launch a new monthly journal? We had nothing to lose.

The idea of *Il Manifesto* came first and foremost from Lucio Magri. Pintor, Natoli, Luciana Castellina, Eliseo Milani and I were with him from the outset, others came on board once it got started. We found a small publisher in Bari. Our blood was starting to pulse once more. Out of fairness we had to keep the Party informed. I was sent to speak to Berlinguer: ‘We’re starting a monthly review. I haven’t come to get advice, because you’d say no; I have come to let you know’. He did not get angry with me, partly because he rarely lost control but also, perhaps, because he was thinking it through. He knew who we were and that we would get a hearing. ‘Explain what you want to do.’ I told him. He advised against, without much ardour; he understood that we had made up our minds. ‘Do you think there will be any disciplinary sanctions?’ I asked him. ‘That I would exclude.’ I took my leave, promising to show him the first proofs.

June 1969

We spent hours discussing the new journal’s name before we finally settled on *Il Manifesto*—thinking of 1848. All of us wrote contributions for the first issue. I sent the proofs to Berlinguer, who rang me straight away: ‘And you call this a journal of analysis? It’s nothing but political interventions.’ ‘It’s the same thing.’ He asked me to postpone the launch for a fortnight, he wanted to attack the invasion of Czechoslovakia at the Moscow Congress and the last thing he needed was the CPSU waving

our magazine in his face. Agreed. The first edition of *Il Manifesto* came out at the end of June and sold some 32,000 copies, soon rising to 80,000, making a small fortune for the Bari publisher. Berlinguer rang me several times in August. He did not want to expel us, and proposed a series of compromises: *Il Manifesto* could continue, but with someone from the leadership alongside us on the editorial board. It was not a route we could take. A journal is not an anthology.

It was Magri's editorial for the September 1969 *Il Manifesto*, after the first anniversary of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, that brought things to a head: 'Prague is Alone' argued that the Dubček course had been too much for Moscow, too little for Washington. All hell broke loose. The Central Committee was convened and formally requested *Il Manifesto* be shut down. The paradox was that the Italian 'Hot Autumn' of 1969 was just beginning. Instead of starting up as usual after the holidays, factory after factory was being occupied by the workers, with the massive Fiat plant in the lead. Yet the PCI was entirely concentrated on our case. The Hot Autumn was the largest, most sophisticated industrial struggle since the War—not just a strike, but a matter of the workers taking the entire production process into their own hands, elbowing the management hierarchy aside. And these were not an experienced cohort, tested by decades of repression, but young workers, often without qualifications, whose education had come from the chaotic development of the society they had grown up in; who had taken something from the resounding student protests of the year before and made it their own.

Was it revolution the young workers had in mind when they marched in through the factory gates and took over the assembly lines? The decision ran like a spark from plant to plant: they fought to change their workplace, to keep it in their hands. They shook off the habit of obedience. When they spoke in the assemblies, the union leaders had to queue up for the microphone like the least skilled worker, just as at the Odéon in Paris the year before—but without that sense of atomization. They were in their own place; they talked about how things had been done up till now, what they could not take, how things could be done. The stakes were very high; for capital there could hardly be a greater challenge.

The media knew it. At first they were pleased to see the PCI and the unions bypassed, then they were frightened. This was different from the university occupations the year before: not a children's rebellion, but a

refusal of the only way the establishment could imagine factories being run. They were shocked that Fiat could be run by its subordinates, that factory workers could discuss production issues on the different assembly lines and come to an agreement, without the management having any say. If the students' mockery in 1968 was unpardonable, so too was the workers' unveiling of the shabby power mechanisms that underlay industrial production in the Hot Autumn of 1969. The more so since in occupying the factories the workers provided themselves with a platform, with the direct election of their delegates.

Autumn 1969 was, I think, the only time in the post-war era that the potential of a struggle at the heart of the system of production seemed—for a moment, was—unlimited. Europe was still shaken by 1968, the United States by the movement against the Vietnam War; echoes of the Chinese Cultural Revolution still reverberated. Latin America was in turmoil, torn between guerrilla warfare and military juntas. It was an acute crisis, in a common climate both universal and unorganized; a shudder that ran from one social sector to another. Only the Soviet Union was not traversed by the shocks of 1968 and 69; further proof of its sclerosis.

The explosion of 1969 was the rationale for *Il Manifesto*. The PCI could not have given leadership to that insurgency without besieging the means of production on an ever-expanding scale; it would need to take powers of decision over property without spurring a flight of capital. It was not easy—but nothing was tried, nothing was thought, not even one step forward from that Keynesian ambit in which the PCI had developed; and which would itself soon be overthrown. It is those years that explain the present. On November 24th, 1969 the Central Committee was reconvened to vote on our expulsion. The formula they used meant that we were not enemies, sell-outs or spies. It was just a difference of approach. Berlinguer told me that there would be no time limit on my intervention after the report. At the entrance to the hall he took me aside: 'There is still time.' 'To make a gesture of obedience?' 'No, a gesture of loyalty.' I spoke for about forty minutes, as did Aldo Natoli. They did not forgive his remark, 'You don't need a Party card to be a communist.'

No, you don't need a card to be a communist; but to lead a country you need a mass party. The PCI was not that party, or not any more. At least

Aldo and I never fooled ourselves into believing we could set up another in its stead. We at *Il Manifesto* were thrown out into the thick of the workers' struggles and the crisis in the universities. We hoped to be a bridge between the new hopes of the young and the knowledge of an older left that had had its hours of glory. It did not work out that way—but that's another story.