

THE TAILOR OF ULM

AT ONE OF the crowded meetings held in 1991 to decide whether or not to change the name of the Italian Communist Party, a comrade posed this question to Pietro Ingrao: ‘After everything that has happened and all that is now taking place, do you still believe the word “communist” can be used to describe the kind of large, democratic mass party that ours has been, and is, and which we want to renew so as to take it into government?’ Ingrao, who had already laid out in full the reasons for his dissent and proposed that an alternative course be taken, replied—not altogether in jest—with Brecht’s famous parable of the tailor of Ulm. This 16th-century German artisan had been obsessed by the idea of building a device that would allow men to fly. One day, convinced he had succeeded, he took his contraption to the Bishop and said: ‘Look, I can fly’. Challenged to prove it, the tailor launched himself into the air from the top of the church roof, and, naturally, ended up in smithereens on the paving stones below. And yet, Brecht’s poem suggests: a few centuries later men did indeed learn to fly.

Ingrao’s reply was not just witty but well-founded. How many centuries, how many bloody struggles, advances and defeats did it take for the capitalist system to reach—in a Western Europe that had initially been more backward and barbaric than other parts of the world—an unprecedented degree of economic efficiency, and for it to acquire new, more open political institutions, a more rational culture? What irreducible contradictions were to mark liberalism over those years, between the solemn ideals—common human nature, freedom of speech and thought, popular sovereignty—and the practices that constantly belied them: slavery, colonial domination, expulsion of peasants from common land, wars of religion? Contradictions whose social reality was legitimated in thought: the idea that freedom could and should only be granted to those who, by virtue of property and culture—even race and

colour—were capable of exercising it wisely; and the correlative notion that ownership of goods was an absolute, inviolable right which therefore precluded universal suffrage.

Nor was it just the onset of this historical cycle that was beset by such contradictions: they were reproduced under various forms in its subsequent development, and gradually diminished only by the action of new social subjects, and of forces contesting the reigning system and its ideas. If, then, the real history of capitalist modernity was not one of unambiguous linear progress, but was rather dramatic and costly, why should the process of its supersession be otherwise? This is the lesson that the tailor's story was meant to convey.

Yet the parable also poses further questions. Can we be sure that if the tailor of Ulm had been crippled rather than killed by his disastrous fall, he would immediately have got to his feet to try again; or that his friends would not have tried to prevent him doing so? And secondly, what actual contribution did he make to the subsequent history of aeronautics? In relation to Communism, such questions are especially pointed and difficult—above all because, at its theoretical formation, it had claimed to be not an inspiring ideal, but part of a historical process already under way, and of a real movement that was changing the existing state of things. Communism therefore always entailed a factual test, a scientific analysis of the present and a realistic prognosis of the future, to prevent it dissolving into myth. But we also need to register a significant difference between the defeats suffered by the bourgeois revolutions in France and England, and the recent collapse suffered by 'actually existing socialism'—measured not by the number of deaths or recourse to despotism, but by their respective outcomes. The former left an inheritance that, though much more modest than the initial hopes they aroused, is nonetheless immediately apparent; it is difficult, by contrast, to discern the legacy of the latter, and to identify legitimate heirs.

A premature burial?

In the years that have passed since the end of the Cold War these questions have not only remained unanswered; they have barely been seriously discussed. Answers have come in a highly superficial, self-interested form: denial or amnesia. A historical experience and theoretical heritage that marked an entire century have thus been consigned, in Marx's

expression, to the ‘gnawing criticism of the mice’—who are, as we know, voracious, and multiply rapidly in the right conditions.

The word ‘communist’ still occurs, of course, in the propaganda of the crudest Right. It survives in the electoral symbols of small European parties, to retain the loyalty of the minority devoted to its memory, or to indicate a generic opposition to capitalism. In other parts of the world, Communist parties continue to rule small countries, aiming mainly to defend their own independence from imperialism, and govern one very large one, where the Party is sustaining an extraordinary economic development that is moving in an entirely different direction. The October Revolution is generally considered a grand illusion—useful, at certain moments and in the eyes of a few; but a disaster when taken as a whole, identified with Stalinism in its most grotesque version, and condemned in any event by its final outcome. Marx has regained a degree of credit as a thinker, for his far-sighted predictions regarding the capitalism of the future; but these have been entirely severed from any ambition to put an end to it. The condemnation of memory is now extending even further, to cover the whole experience of socialism, and from there branching out to the radical components of the bourgeois revolutions and liberation struggles of colonized peoples (which, as we know, could not always be peaceful, even in the land of Gandhi).

In sum, the ‘haunting spectre’ seems finally to have been buried: with honours by some, with undying hatred by others, with indifference by most, because it has nothing more to say to them. Perhaps the most scathing but, in its way, most respectful oration at this final burial was pronounced by Augusto del Noce, one of the finest minds among the Left’s adversaries, when he said that the Communists have both lost and won. They have lost disastrously in their Promethean quest to reverse the course of history, promising men freedom and fraternity even in the absence of God, and in the knowledge that they are mortal. But they have won as a necessary factor in accelerating the globalization of capitalist modernity and its values: materialism, hedonism, individualism, ethical relativism. An intransigent Catholic conservative, del Noce believed he had foreseen this extraordinary heterogenesis of ends, though he would have had little reason to be pleased by it.

Anyone who did believe in what Communism was attempting, and took part in it, has a duty to account for it—if only to ask whether this burial

was not too hasty, and whether a different death certificate might be required. In Italy there have been many ways of getting around this central question. Such as: I became an Italian Communist because it was the first priority if one wanted to fight fascism, defend republican democracy and support the sacrosanct demands of the workers. Or: I became a Communist at a time when links with the Soviet Union or Marxist orthodoxy were already being questioned; today, I can make a limited self-criticism of the past and assert my genuine openness to the new. Is that not enough?

In my view, it is not enough: it fails to account for a collective undertaking which took place across many decades and which must be considered, for better or worse, as a whole. Above all, it is insufficient in helping us draw useful lessons for today and tomorrow. Too many people now say: it was a mistake, but they were the best years of my life. For a while, this mixture of self-criticism and nostalgia, of doubt and pride—especially among ordinary people—seemed justified; a resource, in fact. But with the passage of time, and among intellectuals and leaders in particular, it now seems an easy compromise with oneself and the world. I ask myself once again: are there rational, compelling reasons for taking a stance against denial and amnesia? Are there good grounds and suitable conditions for re-opening a critical discussion of Communism today, rather than abandoning it? In my view, there are.

Altered landscape

Since that fateful year of 1989, much turbulent water has flowed under the bridge. The novelties which that historical caesura produced and ratified have taken on clearer and more definitive shape, while other developments have come thick and fast. A new configuration of the world order, of society and consciousness is emerging. A victorious capitalism was left holding the field and its triumph allowed it to reassert its foundational values and mechanisms, now freed of all restraint. Technological revolution and globalization seemed to offer the prospect of impetuous economic expansion and stable international relations, under the leadership—shared or endured—of a single overweening power. During the 1990s, the contributions to democracy and progress made by the competition between the two systems could still be discussed, as could the toll they took on individual lives. Correctives that might reduce the worst social consequences of the new dispensation

could be debated, either to improve transparency in the re-established market or to temper the unilateralism of the dominant power. But from now on, this was the system. It was not to be contested but supported, in good faith and in line with its own principles. If the distant day were to come when it too had outlived its usefulness and must be superseded, this would have nothing to do with anything the Left had done or thought. Such was the reality that any sensible politician had to recognize—or howl at the moon.

In the space of a few years, the scene has changed profoundly. Inequalities in income, power, quality of life, both among and within the various regions of the world, are re-emerging and continue to deepen. The new functioning of the economic system is demonstrably incompatible with the preservation of long-standing social gains: universal welfare, full and stable employment, participatory democracy in the most advanced societies; the right to national independence and some protection from armed intervention, in the case of underdeveloped regions and smaller nations. New problems are looming: the accelerating degradation of the natural environment; a moral decay in which individualism and consumerism, rather than filling the vacuum of values created by the crisis of millennial institutions, instead deepen it into a dichotomy between dissipation and neo-clericalism; an advancing crisis of the political system, rendered powerless by the decline of nation-states, and replaced by institutions insulated from popular suffrage—itself hollowed out by mediatic manipulations of consensus and the transformation of parties into electoral machines geared to reproducing a governing caste. Even in the realm of production, growth rates are currently declining and economic equilibria appear unstable, a set of conditions that seem to be more than conjunctural. Financialization generates unearned income, with the frantic pursuit of immediate profits as its twin; it therefore deprives the market itself of criteria by which to gauge its own efficiency, or to judge what it should produce. Finally, and as a consequence of all this, we are witnessing a decline of hegemony, ever-multiplying conflicts, and a crisis of the world order. The natural response has been the deployment of force, even the resort to war, which has in turn exacerbated rather than resolved the existing problems.

We might concede that this framework is overly gloomy and one-sided; that such worrying trends are as yet in their early stages. We might also admit that other factors—technological innovation, for example, or the

even more surprising surge to prominence of vast, once Third-World countries—can compensate for such tendencies or check them. Lastly, we might concede the novel breadth of the social base that has benefited from an earlier, widely diffused round of accumulation, or that elsewhere hopes to attain a prosperity it has previously been denied: forces that would shore up a consensus, or reject a radical change whose outcome is uncertain. Communists have often made the mistake of advancing catastrophist analyses, for which they have paid the price.

Yet none of this alters the fact that a turn has taken place, earlier than anyone had feared or hoped. The future of the world seems to offer little reassurance—not only to suffering or rebellious minorities, but in mass common sense, to broad layers of the intelligentsia, even in some sectors of the dominant class. We are not in the turbulent climes of the 20th century, but nor are we breathing the serene air of the Belle Epoque (which, as we know, did not end well). In the space of a few years, movements of social struggle and contestation in the realm of ideas have appeared on the scene, surprising in their breadth, durability, plurality of subject positions and novelty of themes. Dispersed, intermittent movements, lacking a unitary project and organizational structure, for the most part these are more social and cultural than political. They have arisen out of the most diverse situations and subjectivities, and they reject organization, ideology and politics as they have known them, above all in the forms in which these appear today.

Nevertheless, these movements are in constant communication with each other; they identify common enemies whom they name in full. They cultivate ideals and experiment with practices radically opposed to the current order of things—and to the values, institutions and powers that embody that order: modes of production, consumption and thought; relations between classes, sexes, countries and religions. At certain moments and on particular issues—such as the ‘preventive’ war against Iraq—they have been able to mobilize a large section of public opinion. In that sense, they are fully political, and carry weight. Should we, then, feel reassured that the ‘old mole’, finally freed from the weight of doctrines and disciplines that held him back, has begun to tunnel once more towards a new world? I would like to think so, but I doubt it. Here too we must confront the facts—without despondency, but without pretence. It cannot be said that things are gradually taking a turn for the

better, or that the lessons of reality will soon produce a general shift in the balance of forces in favour of the Left.

World dynamics

The marriage of convenience between the Asian and American economies has facilitated an astonishing take-off by the former, while guaranteeing the latter imperial profits and allowing it to consume beyond its means. At the same time, the current arrangement has contributed to European stagnation, and its longer-term dynamics, costs and outcomes are difficult to grasp. The Iraq war, rather than stabilizing the Middle East, has 'lit a prairie fire'. The European Union, for its part, has not developed into an autonomous force, but has instead resumed its subordination to the Anglo-American model—and its foreign policy—in still more accentuated form. In the United States one can foresee a return from the bruising politics of the Bush variety to a more prudent Clintonite type—a shift which has little to do with a genuine turn that would be adequate to the world's new and pressing problems. In economics as in politics, no New Deal is in the offing.

In Latin America, after many years, popular, anti-imperialist forces are in power in several countries, but it is Lula who seems to have the wind in his sails. In Central Asia, as in Eastern Europe, clients of the US are multiplying. In France and Italy, the Left has never been in such disarray. Though Zapatero was re-elected in Spain, in Germany the Christian Democrats have been restored to government; in Britain Brown sticks to Blair's line and, if he loses, it will be the Conservatives who benefit. Trade unions, after a few signs of recovery, are on the defensive nearly everywhere; workers' real conditions are under pressure not just from the political context but from the blackmail of economic crisis and budget deficits.

How should we assess the forces ranged against the system? The outlook is not a comforting one. It is certainly important that the new social movements remain on the scene, and that in some cases they have expanded to new regions or contributed to a replenishment of political energies. They have, at any rate, drawn attention to critical problems that had previously been dismissed: water, climate, defence of cultural identities; civil liberties for minorities such as immigrants or gays. It would be wrong to speak of a regression or crisis—but equally so to

point towards a 'second world power', either existing or in gestation. For in the major battles in which these movements were involved as a unit—peace and disarmament, abolition of the WTO and IMF, the Tobin Tax, alternative energy sources—the results have been trifling, and initiative has declined. Pluralism has proved to be a limitation as well as a resource. Organization can be rethought as much as one likes, but it cannot forever be reduced to the internet or re-runs of world forums. Refusal of politics, power from below, making revolution without taking power—rather than being stages of a journey, partial truths which should not be renounced, these risk becoming elements of a fossilized subculture, a repetitive rhetoric that prevents self-reflection or an exacting definition of priorities. Finally, alongside the new movements—although through no fault of theirs—a different type of radical opposition has emerged, inspired by religious or ethnic fundamentalism, whose most extreme form is terrorism, but which influences and involves significant numbers of people.

Turning to the still-organized forces of the Left that have courageously resisted the collapse of the post-89 era, have taken part in attempts at renewal and worked alongside the new movements and union struggles, the balance sheet appears still leaner. After years of work in a society in turmoil, these forces remain marginal, divided among and within themselves. In electoral terms they score between 5 and 10 per cent in Europe, and are therefore caught in a dilemma between minoritarian radicalism and electoral pacts, whose onerous constraints weaken them further. In sum, to paraphrase some Marxist classics: we are once more in a phase in which 'the old world can generate barbarity, but a new world capable of replacing it has not emerged'.

Capital's ascendancy

In drastic summary, the reasons for this impasse might be defined as follows. Neoliberalism and unilateralism are an expression of a more profound and permanent alteration to the world-capitalist system, which has taken its original vocation to the extreme. Its features include: dominance of the economy over every other aspect of individual and collective life; dominance within the economy of the globalized market, and within the market of great concentrations of finance over production; within production, dominance of services over industry, and of immaterial goods for a consumption that has been induced, as against real needs.

We are also witnessing a decline of politics, as nation-states are overshadowed by agreements made above their heads, and political systems are hollowed out by a fragmentation and manipulation of the popular will that should guide and sustain them. Finally, there is the unification of the world under the sign of a specific hierarchy, with a single preponderant power at its apex. A system, then, which is seemingly decentred, but in which the critical decisions remain concentrated, in the final analysis, in the hands of the few who possess decisive monopolies: in ascending order of importance, over technology, over communications, over financial and over military power.

Underpinning the whole is property, in the shape of capital in constant, unflagging pursuit of its own valorization—a process that has become entirely autonomous with regard to territorial location and any alternative goals that might otherwise have constrained it. With the vast mediatic means at its disposal, capital can directly shape needs, consciousnesses, lifestyles; it can select the political and intellectual caste; it can influence foreign policy, military spending, lines of research; last but not least, it can reconfigure labour relations, choosing where and how workers should be recruited, and finding the best means for undermining their bargaining power. In comparison to earlier phases, the most significant novelty lies in the fact that, even where it enters into crisis or records a failure, the system nevertheless manages to reproduce its own bases of strength and interdependence, and to destroy or blackmail its antagonists. It summons, and at the same time buries, its own gravedigger.

To challenge and overcome such a system, what is required is a coherent systemic alternative; the power to impose it and the capacity to run it; a social bloc that can sustain it and steps and alliances commensurate with that goal. Freed from the myth of chiliastic conquest of state power by an opportunist Jacobin minority, there is still less reason to subscribe to the hope that a succession of scattered revolts or small-scale reforms might spontaneously coalesce into a great transformation.

The current situation in itself thus demands that a Left—at present drifting in confusion—should reflect on the ‘Communist question’. I do not use these terms by chance. ‘Reflection’—not rehabilitation or restoration—indicates that a historical phase has ended, and that the new era requires radical innovation in these theoretical and practical traditions, which

must be grounded in reflections on its origins, development, outcomes. I say 'Communist' because I am not referring only to texts, in which lasting truths might be rediscovered, or noble intentions from which there has been a pronounced decline. Rather, I refer to a whole historical experience that explicitly posited the theme of anti-capitalist revolution led by a working class, in turn organized in parties which, in Italy as elsewhere, for decades brought millions of people into this undertaking; which fought and won a world war; ruled major states, shaped societies, and influenced the fate of the world; and which in the end—and certainly not by chance—degenerated and was heavily defeated. For better or worse, it left its mark on almost an entire century.

A first task for the new era, then, is to draw up a balance sheet—in a spirit of truth, whatever the convictions with which one begins and the conclusions at which one arrives; without fabricating facts, without offering excuses or separating lived experience from its context. The aim must be to distinguish the contributions made to decisive and permanent historical advances; to reckon the tremendous costs they entailed, the theoretical truths attained and the intellectual blunders committed. We need to clarify the various phases in Communism's evolution, and within each, to examine not only the degenerative errors but their subjective and objective causes, and what opportunities there were for adopting a different course towards the desired end. In sum, to re-compose the thread of a titanic undertaking and dramatic decline, not seeking to make allowances or to pursue an impossible neutrality, but aiming at an approximation to the truth. In tackling this agenda, we possess the extraordinary privilege of knowing what course events finally took, as well as the stimulus of finding ourselves once again in a crisis of civilization. We must make use of the present to better understand the past, and understand the past so as better to orientate ourselves in the present and future.

If we avoid reflections of this kind, and regard the twentieth century as a pile of ashes; if we delete from the record the great revolutions, the bitter class struggles, the major cultural conflicts that traversed it, and the Socialism and Communism that animated these; or if we simply reduce everything to a clash between 'totalitarianisms' and 'democracy'—without distinguishing the disparate origins and goals of the 'totalitarianisms', or the concrete politics of 'democracy'—we not only tamper with history, but deprive politics of the passions and arguments needed to confront

both dramatic old problems that have resurfaced and new ones that are emerging; and which demand profound changes and a rational debate.

Re-readings

The type of investigation I am proposing here is tremendously difficult—and the motivations that should guide it no less so. Firstly, because the ‘short twentieth century’ is a large and complicated period, shot through with dramatic and closely interlinked contradictions, demanding an overview of the context. Second, because it is still so fresh in the collective memory that it is hard to attain the requisite critical distance. Further, such an investigation runs counter to the prevalent consensus of today, which not only considers this chapter closed, but in general denies that history can be deciphered, as a whole and in the long term—and therefore sees no value in situating the present within that history, or in developing the appropriate interpretative categories. Finally, at the outset of a critical reading of the past, any challenge to the consensus would require, more than ever before, the ability to provide a fitting analysis of the present and a project for future action (this was the strong point of Marxism, even in those aspects which proved transient).

For my own part, I feel a certain generational as well as individual responsibility to contribute to such an undertaking by reconstructing and investigating some crucial points in the history of Italian Communism. The motivation for this is not autobiographical, nor is it provincially restrictive. On the contrary, the choice—circumscribed, so as to be able to speak of a concrete object—implies a working hypothesis, going against the grain; one that imposes, and perhaps ultimately permits, some general conclusions. Today there are two prevalent readings of Italian Communism, mutually opposed for a variety of reasons. The first argues, in more or less crude form, that from the end of the Second World War at least, the PCI was always in substance a social-democratic party, albeit without wanting to admit as much, and perhaps without realizing it. Its history was one of a long, excessively slow but steady march to self-recognition; the delay cost it a prolonged exclusion from government, but the party’s substantive identity gave it strength and ensured its survival. The second reading holds that, on the contrary, despite the Resistance, the republican constitution, the party’s role in extending democracy, despite some evidence of autonomy, and its hostility to the idea of insurrection, the PCI was ultimately an

articulation of Soviet policy, and its aim was always the imposition of the Soviet model. Only towards the end was it forced to surrender and change its identity.

Yet both readings are contradicted by innumerable historical facts, and they also erase what was most original and interesting about the Communist experience. The thesis I would like to put to the test is that the PCI represented, intermittently and without ever fully developing it, one of the most serious attempts to open up a Socialist ‘third way’; that is, to combine on the one hand partial reforms, pursuit of broad social and political alliances, commitment to parliamentary democratic means and, on the other, bitter social struggles and an explicit, shared critique of capitalist society; to construct a highly cohesive, militant party, with ideologically trained cadres, but a mass party nonetheless; to reaffirm its affiliation to a world revolutionary camp, enduring the constraints of the latter but still winning a relative autonomy. This was not a matter of mere duplicity: the unifying strategic idea was that the consolidation and further evolution of ‘actually existing socialism’ did not constitute a model that could one day be implemented in the West, but rather the necessary background for realizing a different type of socialism in the West, that respected liberties.

It is this that explains the growth of the PCI’s power in Italy—continuing even after capitalist modernization—and the extent of its international influence even after the first glaring signs of a crisis of ‘actually existing socialism’. But by the same token, its subsequent decline and eventual dissolution into a force more liberal-democratic than social-democratic compel us to explain how and when the attempt failed. They make it possible, that is, to identify the objective and subjective reasons behind a particular trajectory, and to ask whether better paths were available that might have served to correct that course.

If this hypothesis is correct, then the history of Italian Communism might have something important to say about the overall experience of republican Italy and of the Communist movement in general—helping to gauge the latter in its best version, and to grasp its limits. (In an entirely different context, perhaps the equally singular Chinese experience would be a comparable field for investigation, with its entirely unexplained past and indecipherable future.)

Many historians have written on the history of Communism—providing a wealth of information and scholarship on the period between the Russian Revolution and the years after World War Two; in more episodic form, full of lacunae and prejudices, with regard to the subsequent decades, running up to the present. Yet we still lack a comprehensive assessment and balanced judgement of either period. At fault for this are not so much the controversies that have arisen—more than justified—as a discrepancy between accurate examination of the available sources and partisan pamphleteering. This is, of course, unsurprising, since both in the past and more recently, historians' work was influenced first by a climate of bitter political conflict and then by the sudden, unexpected collapse. The effects of these were to inspire some with the sobriety of the specialist while leaving others to produce convenient simplifications.

Internal culture

Yet beyond such considerations, there is a further obstacle to the research of even the most scrupulous historians: the limited nature of the sources, and the difficulties of their interpretation. Communist parties—by virtue of their ideology, organizational form and the conditions in which they had to operate—were far from transparent. Debates on fundamental questions were concentrated within highly restricted and often informal party gatherings; participants were bound to confidentiality and even amongst themselves spoke cautiously, out of concern for unity. Political resolutions took genuine account of the positions of party activists, and lower-level debates were often lively and well attended; but the decisions were ultimately accepted and defended by everyone, albeit with shades of nuance. Proven ability was valued in promoting party leaders, but the process took place through co-optation from above, and measures of loyalty also carried weight. In some countries and at certain moments, there was no hesitation in censoring the facts or providing only cursory explanations of policies to the outside world or even to the party's own base; the goal of consolidation and mobilization took precedence—if need be at the expense of truth. But even when and where spaces developed in which a degree of dissent would be tolerated, for example in the Central Committees—as in Italy from the start of the 60s—it was expressed in prudent, partially coded language. Record-keeping was meticulous at all levels, but also very sober and often, whether willingly or out of official duty, self-censored.

At the moment of the 'turn', the governing principle became that of 'renewal in continuity'. Since the party was a living community, those who distanced themselves or were distanced from it suffered a deep human isolation which, in the long term, served to fuel mutual partisanship. Serious reading of the journals and documents of the period, of a few posthumous interviews, and access to archives that have finally been opened, still do not provide enough of a basis for reconstructing the real history, without ambiguities or censorship. We also need the mediatory memory of those who took part as protagonists or direct, informed observers, and who can add something regarding those areas where the documents are silent, or read the meaning and importance of what lies beyond the words. But we all know how many snares the individual memory contains—not just the deteriorations of age, or the tendency to grow selective by dint of having shouldered serious responsibilities or suffered an undeserved wrong. It is easy to re-read history through the lens of one's own experience. There is nothing wrong with this. Proust, Tolstoy, Mann or Roth have contributed more perceptively to an understanding of their times than many of the historians who were their contemporaries. But the 'mediation of memory' is suggested here in a different sense: the need for memory disciplined by the test of documented facts, by comparison with the memories of others, and rendered as objective as possible, so as to attempt to treat one's own experience as if one were dealing with someone else's life; and thus to move towards a plausible interpretation of what actually happened, or might have done.

Formations

For my own part, I became a Communist a decade after the turbulence of Fascism and the Resistance had ended, after the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and events in Hungary, and after reading not only Marx, Lenin and Gramsci, but also Trotsky and heterodox Western Marxism. I therefore cannot say that I joined in order to further the fight against Fascism, or that I knew nothing about Stalinism and the 'purges'. I joined because I believed, as I have continued to do, in a project of radical social change whose costs had to be borne. I was active in that party—in modest roles but by chance, and perhaps some merit, in direct contact with the leadership group—over the course of fifteen years of lively debate and important experiences. I took part in these from minority positions, but with a degree of influence and with a full awareness of what was happening. These were decisive years, about which still too little is known

or too much repressed. I was expelled from the party in 1970, along with other comrades, because we had created a journal, *Il Manifesto*, which was seen as unacceptable: first, because its very existence was a breach of democratic centralism; second, because it explicitly urged a sharper critique of the Soviet model and policies; and lastly because it called for the PCI's strategy to be rethought, accepting suggestions from the new workers' and student movements. No one, I think, would accuse me of having stayed silent or parroted old orthodoxies; but I in turn am compelled to ask why—as a result of what errors or limitations—so many good arguments and often far-sighted analyses remained isolated, and failed to reach their goal.

Together with a number of comrades, I returned to the PCI at the start of the 1980s, aware of the limits of an extremism about which we had deluded ourselves, but not penitent: Berlinguer's turn seemed to have settled many of the differences that had divided us. As part of the PCI's leadership this time, I had direct knowledge of the processes that first constrained and then hollowed out this turn, demonstrating at the same time its belatedness and its limitations. It is a period about which there is still great reticence, and with regard to which the most rabid criticism goes unopposed. In the early 90s I took part, this time in the front line, in the battle against the decision to dissolve the PCI: not because this was too innovative, but because it innovated in the wrong manner and direction—senselessly liquidating a rich identity, and opening the path not just towards a social-democratic model, itself already in crisis, but to a fully fledged liberal-democratic politics. The leadership disbanded an army that had not yet scattered, compensating for a conceptual vacuum with a fanciful 'newism'. I remain one of the few to believe this operation to have been completely groundless—but am all the more compelled to ask myself why it carried the day.

Finally, I participated in the foundation of Rifondazione Comunista—with some doubts, because I feared that it would lack the ideas, will and strength to take its name seriously; feared, in other words, a maximalist drift followed by opportunist accommodation. I distanced myself from it because, though I continue to believe in the project, I did not see sufficient determination or ability to carry it forward within that organization, or in the diaspora of the radical Left. Hardly anyone knows or understands much of this more recent, tortuous experience, and it might prove useful

merely to speak honestly about it—if only to understand the processes that led to its electoral obliteration in April 2008.

I am, then, a living private archive, in storage. For a Communist, isolation is the gravest of sins, which must be accounted for to others and to oneself. But if sin—forgive this ironic concession to the fashion and expediency that today moves so many to a sudden search for God—opens the way of the Lord, isolation might help in approaching the tasks outlined here, by allowing for a certain useful detachment. I cannot claim ‘I was not there’, ‘I did not know’. In fact I said one or two things when it was inconvenient, and so now have the freedom to defend what should not be disowned, and to ask myself what could have been done, or might yet be done, beyond the bric-a-brac of everyday politics. It is not true that the past—of Communists, or of anyone else—was entirely predetermined; just as it is not true that the future is wholly in the hands of the young who are yet to come. The old mole continues to dig, but he is blind and does not know where he is coming from or going to; he digs in circles. And those who cannot or will not trust to Providence must do their best to understand him, and by doing so help him on his way.