

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mourning the demise of the Italian Communist Party: Turinese memories of the PCI

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Abstract

On 12 November 1989, three days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Achille Occhetto, the Secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), announced that the Party needed to transform itself, implicitly including changing its name. His announcement launched a 15-month-long process that culminated in the dissolution of the PCI and the rise of a new political organisation, which became a member of the Socialist International. Drawing on the individual and collective memories of former Turinese PCI officials, this essay examines the complex, tortuous abandonment of the communist reference and the disintegration of the political community surrounding the Party. Because of their highly varied reactions, the dissolution of the PCI caused fragmentation of the subsequent careers and paths of former Party 'comrades'. To this day, the 1989 turning point continues to inspire highly diverse memories among former Italian communists.

Keywords: history; politics; history of communism; oral history; individual and collective memory

Introduction

In a 2019 interview in *La Repubblica*, Achille Occhetto proclaimed: 'My *svolta* [political turning point] has been forgotten. Thirty years later, however, we need another one.'¹ Occhetto, the last Secretary of the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI, Italian Communist Party), used the term *svolta* to describe a process that he launched in a speech on 12 November 1989, three days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the Bologna district of Bolognina. Occhetto's proposal to transform the Party, which became known as the '*svolta della Bolognina*', began a process that resulted in the dissolution of the PCI in 1991 and the foundation of the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS, Democratic Party of the Left), which joined the Socialist International.

Despite widespread support for Occhetto's proposal,² however, the metamorphosis of the highest-profile Communist Party in the West traumatised numerous party members because it entailed abandoning the Party's self-appointed identity. Like the animal, 'the Giraffe' resembled no other political organisation. The PCI had indeed long cultivated 'difference' from its Western counterparts, notably the French Communist Party (PCF) (Lazar 1992, Di Maggio 2014). From the peak of its influence until its dissolution, the Party – long regarded with circumspection as well as fascination by fellow left-leaning European parties – never inspired indifference. After 1989, the Party, known for its unity, a product of

its ‘democratic centralism’, began to disintegrate. In 1991, a few hours after its final collapse, opponents of the transformation founded an organisation that they hoped would preserve the name and symbolism of the ex-PCI: the *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (PRC, Party of Communist Refoundation). However, a substantial number of PCI members refused to join the new organisation – the PDS –, and remain to this day the orphans of the Party, as a political but also social organisation. It was a powerful political, ideological, and electoral machine, but the PCI also represented a vast community bound by strong ties that time has not completely effaced but that were irreparably altered by the Party’s collapse.

This political turning point was unique in the Western European communist landscape, and did not fail to attract the attention of historians. Some scholarly studies of the period have focused on the national Party apparatus and the complex mechanisms by which the PCI transformed itself (Ignazi 1992, Liguori 2020). They also include a semiological analysis emphasising the identitarian capital of communism (Dormagen 1995 and 1996). Many key figures behind the *svolta* (Occhetto 1990 and 2018) and other national party leaders, have also published their own accounts, many of which seek to justify the positions that they adopted at the time either in support of the *svolta* (Fassino³ 2003 and 2021, Petruccioli 2020) or in opposition to it (Ingrao 2006). Previous studies have not, however, examined the memories and lived experiences of activists and local party leaders.

The purpose of this study is to address this neglect by analysing extensive interviews with 19 representatives of the Turin Communist Party identified as local party leaders. The interviews were conducted between July 2019 and February 2020. As shown by the Table 1, 17 of these informants were local Party leaders or held higher positions, ranging from local Party sections to the Federation secretariat. Eleven informants were deeply involved, to the point of making politics their profession (Weber 2003), seven of whom continued to occupy high-ranking positions in the Turinese PCI in 1989. Ten informants also held elected public posts as PCI representatives. Their ages and the duration of their Party memberships appear to define three approximate generational groups. The first group, consisting of three men and one woman, joined the PCI after the Second World War: two of them had participated in the Resistance. The second group includes seven primarily working-class men who joined the Party early in their working careers, in the early 1960s. The third group – four men and four women – came from more diverse backgrounds, with a few working-class members and the remainder employed in the service sector. Thirteen informants were originally from Turin or the surrounding province, while the six others moved to the area as children or early in their careers. The sample was primarily of Northern Italian origin, which suggests that few of the many post-1950s Southern Italian migrants who joined the Turinese working class became local Party officials.

The study focuses primarily on Party officials for two reasons: first, because they were easily identifiable, and second because they participated actively in the 15-month-long period of debates that culminated in the Party’s transformation. The sample raises a legitimate question concerning the representativeness of a thoroughly non-random sample of 19 individuals. The nature of the informant group, as well as the methodology used, do not allow in-depth individual case studies or comparisons between informants’ social and professional backgrounds. This diverse profile of local Party officials, however, constitutes a *qualitative* sample that ensures an authentic form of representativeness, with no claim to illustrating a perfectly effective model that would apply to *all* former Italian communists.

The city of Turin represents an excellent location in which to study Italian communism, due to its network of PCI activists and the prominence of the Turinese PCI Federation, and has been the subject of a number of studies (Maida 2004, Yedid Levi and Cavallo 2006). As the birthplace of FIAT, the city hosts a robust working-class population that is reflected

Table 1: Social and political characteristics of the study informants

Surname and first name	Gender	Birth year	Original profession	Father's profession	Mother's profession	Province of birth	Year of joining PCI	Highest elected post representing PCI	Highest rank in the PCI	Official position in the PCI (P) or trade union (T) in 1989	Motion in 1989	Party in 1991	Party in 1998	Party in 2007	Party in 2019-2020
ARDITO Giorgio	M	1942	Insurance broker	Agricultural worker	Caretaker	TO	1966	City councillor	Secretary of the Turinese Federation	P	I	PDS	DS	PD	PD
ARIEMMA Iginio	M	1940	Research fellow	Worker	Housewife	TO	1960	None	Member of Central Committee	P	I	PDS	DS	/	/
BAJARDI Sante	M	1926	Worker	Craftsman	Craftswoman	TO	1944	Regional councillor	Member of the secretariat of the Turinese Federation	P	I	PDS	DS	PD	AU
CARUSO Armando	M	1944	Worker	Worker	Worker	TO	1963	None	Member of Turin federal committee	T (P)	I	PDS	DS	PD	/
CASADEI Luciano	M	1943	Worker	Craftsman	Craftswoman	RA	1961	None	Member of the secretariat of the Turinese Federation	(P)	2	PDS	DS	/	AU
CASSI Marina	F	1954	Journalist	Company head	Housewife	TO	1973	None	Member of Turin federal committee	/	I	PDS	DS	PD	PD

(Continued)

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Surname and first name	Gender	Birth year	Original profession	Father's profession	Mother's profession	Province of birth	Year of joining PCI	Highest elected post representing PCI	Highest rank in the PCI	Official position in the PCI (P) or trade union (T) in 1989	Motion in 1989	Party in 1991	Party in 1998	Party in 2007	Party in 2019-2020
CHIAMPARINO Sergio	M	1948	Research fellow	Worker	Employee	TO	1972	City councillor	Member of the secretariat of the Turinese Federation	P	I	PDS	DS	PD	PD
CREMA Pierino	M	1954	Employee	Craftsman	Housewife	TV	1978	City councillor	Member of Turin federal committee	T (P)	I	PDS	DS	PD	PD
DE MARTINO Vittorio	M	1955	Worker	Worker	Worker	TO	1979	None	Member of Turin federal committee	T	2	/	/	/	/
ENRICO Gaspare	M	1950	Teacher	Farmer	Shopkeeper	TO	1976	Mayor	Member of the secretariat of the Turinese Federation	P	I	PDS	DS	PD	PD
GIAMBONE Gisella	F	1931	Employee	Worker	Housewife	France	1944	None	Member of Turin federal committee	/	I	PDS	DS	PD	PD
GIANOTTI Lorenzo	M	1939	Worker	Technician	Housewife	TO	1959	Senator	Member of Central Committee	P	I	PDS	DS	PD	PD

GRITTI Ilaria	F	1972	Student (in 1989)	Teacher	Teacher	TO	1988	None	None	/	1	PDS	DS	SD	PD
LIBERATORI Andrea	M	1924	Journalist	Company head	Housewife	GE	1945	None	None	/	1	/	/	/	/
NOVELLI Diego	M	1931	Journalist	Technician	Housewife	TO	1950	Deputy	Member of Central Committee	P	2	LR	LR	/	/
PROVERA Marilde	F	1953	Employee	Police officer	Housewife	AO	1974	None	Member of the secretariat of a local section	T	2	PRC	PRC	PRC	PRC
QUAGLIOTTI Giancarlo	M	1942	Worker	Worker	Worker	TO	1960	City councillor	Member of the secretariat of the Turinese Federation	(P)	1	PDS	DS	PD	PD
RAFASCHIERI Delfo	M	1942	Employee	Worker	Housewife	AT	1963	None	Member of the secretariat of a local section	/	3	PRC	PRC	PRC	PRC
SESTERO Maria Grazia	F	1942	Headmaster	Technician	Housewife	TO	1975	Regional councillor	Member of Central Committee	/	2	PRC	DS	/	/

Province name abbreviations: AO = Aosta; AT = Asti; GE = Genoa; RA = Ravenna; TO = Turin; TV = Treviso

Official position abbreviations: P = the informant exercises an official position in the PCI in 1989; T = the informant exercises an official position in CGIL or FIOM in 1989; (P) = the informant has exercised an official position in the PCI, but it was no longer the case in 1989

Party name abbreviations: AU = Article One (*Articolo Uno*, since 2017); DS = Democrats of the Left (*Democratici di Sinistra*, 1998-2007); LR = The Network (*La Rete*, 1991-1999); PD = Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, since 2007); PDS = Democratic Party of the Left (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra*, 1991-1998); PRC = Communist Refoundation Party (*Partito della Rifondazione Comunista*, since 1991); SD = Democratic Left (*Sinistra Democratica*, 2007-2010)

in the backgrounds of the study informants. The sample also reflects the fact that Turin was long a bastion of voters for the PCI – who controlled the city government from 1975 to 1985 – as well as a pool of potential Party officials, some at the national level. These factors underscore the specificity of the Turinese sample.

The present essay reports the findings of macro-analytical and micro-historical data analyses based on an oral history methodology (see Mak 2021 on the strengths and challenges of this approach). Data were collected by analysing transcribed, semi-guided interviews and consulting PCI archives held by the Gramsci Institute in Turin. The overarching objective of the essay is to describe the experiences of a group of Turinese informants who either participated in or witnessed the PCI's unravelling. The chronological distance between the events under discussion and the interviews with the protagonists also suggests the need to examine the memories which, for some, were associated with a critical historical juncture in the history of the Italian left, but for others with a destructive and even traumatic period. Finally, the study provides an opportunity to reconstruct the trajectories – inevitably influenced by major changes following the Bolognina turning point – of a group of local political figures who have been far from forgotten.

Communists facing the end of the party of their lives

The influence of the PCI peaked in 1976, when it attracted 12 million votes 34 per cent – in the election for the Italian Chamber of Deputies. The Party even came close to acquiring significant political power in a planned 'Historic Compromise' that would have linked it to the Christian Democrats in the government, but that failed in the wake of the Red Brigade's assassination of Aldo Moro. The Party subsequently underwent a crisis, haemorrhaging activists and voters and, after 1984 and the sudden demise of its 'most-loved' Secretary, Enrico Berlinguer, experienced a leadership crisis that neither the brief secretariat of Alessandro Natta⁴ nor that of Achille Occhetto was ever able to fully repair. Immediately after taking office as PCI leader, Occhetto (b. 1936) announced the need for a '*nuovo corso*' (new course) including changes consistent with the Party's political practices. The purpose of his proposed policy of '*discontinuità*' (discontinuity) was to breathe new life into the PCI through traditional communist initiatives that were programmatic (feminism, ecology, the market economy), organisational (forming a rejuvenated secretariat, ending democratic centralism), and ideological (conciliation with the SPD (Social Democratic Party) of Germany and the French Socialist Party, an attempted union with the PSI (Italian Socialist Party), support for Gorbachev). At the 18th Congress in March 1989, Occhetto proclaimed the need for 'a new PCI', although the possibility of renaming the Party had not yet been raised.

The Bolognina shock wave

On 12 November 1989, Achille Occhetto participated in the commemoration of the Battle of Bolognina, a symbolic victory of Italian Resistance fighters over Nazis and Fascists. During the ceremony, he delivered a short speech that would irrevocably alter the future of the PCI, in which he claimed that the Party could no longer 'follow old paths', and that the time had come for 'new directions to unify progressive forces'.⁵ Occhetto had foreseen that the fall of the Berlin Wall would lead to the collapse of the entire Soviet bloc and the failure of communism, ultimately providing the PCI with an opportunity for a clean break with the past. The audience seemed unable to grasp the full implications of Occhetto's speech. Many activists and even Party leaders learned of the PCI's new name from the media that evening. A number of informants reported initial disbelief, including Luciano Casadei, a former member of the secretariat of the Turinese Federation, who

recalled: 'I thought it was a joke ... Once I understood a few hours later, I was stunned. Because after I saw the reaction of Ingrao⁶ and the supporters of the *svolta* [...], I was really upset. You could even say I was furious, because I just couldn't believe such a thing was possible.'⁷ Maria Grazia Sestero, a regional councillor and member of the Party's central committee (CC), described the move as 'insanity, a liquidation, even a form of treason'.⁸

Occhetto's announcement provoked diametrically opposed reactions, including relief among some Party officials. As Gaspare Enrico, a member of the Federation secretariat observed, 'I was very pleased. Yes, the *svolta* was necessary. And we were late ...',⁹ citing a series of warnings of the failure of communism in the preceding months (including the quelling of the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing). The *svolta* also revived a desire to participate in the life of the Party. In December 1989, six secretaries of Party sections at the FIAT Mirafiori factory sent a letter to the Federation arguing that Occhetto's proposal had 'instantly stirred stagnant waters' and 'raised new hopes'.¹⁰

There was broad agreement, however, that the Party faced a bitter breakup. Reading Delfo Rafaschieri's notes from late 1989, it is difficult to believe that the supporters and opponents of the *svolta* still belonged to the same party: 'The quality of the interventions is rather disconcerting, or rather the arguments that I heard in favour of the other motions, with a few exceptions, are quite disappointing. I was above all struck by the non-chalance of certain comrades who supported Motion 1, whose judgements swept away the history of the Party, as though it were an episode of little importance, with at best superficial analyses of the end of communism.'¹¹ The CC approved Occhetto's proposal in late November, although widespread discontent caused the CC to convene an extraordinary congress that would vote on three competing motions in December 1989.

The agony of the PCI: the decomposition and re-formation of the Turinese party leadership

Motion 1, which was promoted by Party Secretary Occhetto, summarised views that he had supported since 12 November, centring on the need to create a new political entity. The second motion concurred with Occhetto regarding the need for change and innovation within the Party but its content differed from the first motion and its proposed steps, including the dissolution of the Party. Motion 3 completely opposed 'liquidating' the Party, instead proposing that it reaffirm an anti-capitalist focus that had allegedly weakened during the 1980s. The three motions were concrete proof of the divisions that had haunted the country's communists in the wake of Occhetto's dramatic November announcement. Pierino Crema, a senior official in the CGIL (a trade union close to the PCI), acknowledged that 'what was feared was what actually happened. In other words, that in transforming the Party, parts of it would be lost in the process ...'¹²

The 19th Congress of the PCI was held in March 1990 in Bologna. After the first motion garnered 65.8% of the votes (with 30.8% supporting Motion 2 and Motion 3 earning 3.4%), the assembly pronounced itself in favour of opening up to the creation of a new political organisation. Some supporters of Motions 2 and 3 joined together in anticipation of a 20th Congress in Rimini in February 1991. Another faction rallied around the third motion, whose leading advocate was Antonio Bassolino. In the end, Motion 1 won 67.4% of the total vote, Motion 2, 27%, and Motion 3, 5.6%. Unsurprisingly, with substantial majority support, the Rimini Congress voted to organise a new political party under the name *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS, Democratic Party of the Left). Although, like the PCI's last meeting, the Rimini Congress proved to be somewhat perfunctory, it took place in a highly charged atmosphere that was punctuated by unusually heated exchanges. On the last day, one faction of delegates openly endorsed an already obvious split with the announcement of the setting up of the Movement for the Communist Refoundation, which would become the future PRC.

Thirteen of the study informants had supported the *svolta* and served as spokespersons for Occhetto's proposal to persuade Party militants of its merits before section votes. The Secretary of the Federation, Giorgio Ardito, acted accordingly: 'Did we have to be divided about how we're supposed to call ourselves or should we not instead define values in such a way as to unite a democratic left based on bonds of solidarity and common actions? This second path seems preferable to me. [...] Out of the crises that the country experienced, out of the crisis of the left, of the hopes and worries of Italians, is born a demand for a new, powerful, democratic, leftist political force that, with the support of Catholics and progressive secularists and ecologists, makes it possible to build an alternative to the power system built by the Christian Democrats.'¹³

Our six remaining informants had resolved to oppose the Bolognina turning point. Maria Grazia Sestero proudly recalled that certain meetings of the opposition were notable successes: 'Novelli and I were working to promote the second motion in Turin. We organised the first "no" protest and filled a three-thousand-seat theatre.'¹⁴ Matters were more difficult for the third motion. In 1990, its lone representative among the informants, Delfo Rafaschieri, wrote: 'The two major motions, through the different channels of power, reached the base, who had considerable means and influence, as well as a capacity to organise and mobilise; and the third had only its strong political motivation.'¹⁵ In Party section votes, Occhetto's motion won 59.4% in Turin, six points lower than the national average, while the second motion gathered 36.2% of supporting votes, and the third motion received 4.4%.¹⁶ In a Federation as powerful as that of Turin, the rejection of the *svolta* among some local leaders strengthened the opposition.

In the end, the debates surrounding the *svolta* coincided with the municipal election campaigns of May 1990, a first in the history of an Italian party. Indeed, the PCI campaigned under a name and a symbol that had been voted down at the 19th Party Congress in March. More importantly, the Party was divided between members who favoured the new orientation and those who struggled fiercely against it. The PCI promoted a candidate in Turin – Diego Novelli – who had opposed the Party's dissolution, while the campaign was headed by Federation Secretary Giorgio Ardito, who supported the *svolta*.¹⁷ Although the PCI came first in the election, with 28 per cent, by comparison with the 1985 municipal election it lost seven points and failed to win the mayoral post. Despite attempting to hold together the various camps, the Party's campaign was undermined by its divisions.

Supporters and opponents: an experiment in interpretive sociography

Is there a correlation between a given socio-political variable (see [Table 1](#)) and the position adopted by the leaders with respect to Occhetto's proposal?

It is tempting to conclude that the oldest and most longstanding members were most likely to oppose the PCI's dissolution because their political and personal identities were closely linked. However, there appears to have been no convincing correlation between age and position. Occhetto's supporters included Party officials of all ages, and most of the older members of the local Party. This was equally true of social origins and socio-professional categories. Being a worker or the children of working-class parents did not necessarily mean that members either rejected, or supported, the *svolta*. Nor was gender a variable that predicted support or opposition to the transformation of the Party.

On the other hand, an informant's party rank does appear to have been correlated to their attitudes. Three political variables appear to be at play: the position of a party official (*funzionario di partito*), the public post that they held, when relevant, as well as the position of their rank in the Party. This latter criterion applies to 17 of the study informants who held a position in the Party for at least one term during their careers.

Indeed, the higher an informant's position in the Party was, the more likely they were to support the *svolta*. This includes the three Turin Federation ex-Secretaries, who joined the ranks of supporters of Motion 1. Every informant who remained a member of the Federation secretariat or administration also supported the *svolta*. Interpreting the *curricula vitae* of opponents corroborates that the opposite is also true: Delfo Rafaschieri and Marilde Provera, whose party responsibilities extended no further than leading their sections, both supported the 'no' vote, as did Vittorio De Martino, who held a position just above theirs in the federal committee. There were two exceptions among the informants, however: Maria Grazia Sestero and Diego Novelli, both of whom were members of the CC. These patterns confirm that the more of these variables combined, the more likely informants were to have supported the *svolta*. The two most predictive criteria for all informants, with the exception of Diego Novelli,¹⁸ were *funzionario* status and a position in the Party hierarchy at least at the federal secretariat level. This could be due to the intermediate positions held by informants, high enough to develop a genuine bond – including a material connection – that contributed to their unwavering faithfulness to both the Party and its apparatus, but too low to consider themselves as legitimate protesters against the *svolta*. Local officials thus differed from some national Party leaders, who had access to political resources and even recognition within the Party that made it possible for them to oppose Occhetto's decisions.

Memories of the Bolognina turning point

Although memories of the *svolta* vary among former Party leaders, principally according to whether they supported it or not, their attitudes about the dissolution of the PCI also reveal convergences that transcend their opinions at the time. Similarly, while those who supported the same motion share memories of the *svolta*, there are wide divergences in their memories of the period surrounding it, thereby exemplifying problems associated with scholarly efforts to reconstruct a 'collective' memory. More specifically, it is the passage from individual to collective memory that often proves difficult (Rouso 2016, 17). In a pioneering discussion, Maurice Halbwachs (1997, 63) inverts this problem by arguing that the challenge resides less in constructing a collective memory than in establishing an individual memory. According to Halbwachs, individual memory, understood as a means of remembering that exclusively belongs to an individual, does not exist without prejudgements regarding the group to which he or she belongs. Individual and collective memories are therefore interdependent: 'Each individual memory is a point of view on collective memory' (Halbwachs 1997, 94–95).

A dominant memory

It would be unsuitable to make claims about an 'official' memory of the *svolta* in the same manner in which long-sustained memories of the Vichy Regime or the Algerian War were described in France. The organisations that succeeded the PCI¹⁹ never sought to elicit a univocal version of a communist memory, preferring instead to simply suppress it (Lazar 2011). Perhaps it is preferable, as Henry Rouso (1987, 12) recommends, to refer to a 'dominant memory' sustained by the majority of the leaders interviewed, who represent a numerically larger 'yes' camp.

As Occhetto declared after 1989, for its supporter, the *svolta* was the only response to the dilemma faced by the PCI after the Soviet Bloc collapse: either change or cease to exist. Although steeped in the Italian communist culture of 'difference' and pleased with Berlinguer's *'strappo'* (his supposed break with the USSR), the study informants sought to resituate the PCI within the international communist movement. Ilaria Gritti,

for example, who joined the Party only in 1989, observed: ‘I considered the name-change like a gesture of anticipation, a way of not being swept away by history. It is obviously tied to events in Europe, with the collapse of the USSR and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even if there had already been genuine changes beginning with the Berlinguer period and with his declarations about the USSR.’²⁰ By taking note of the agony suffered by international communism and metamorphosing itself before becoming buried in the ruins of its Soviet home base, the PCI appears to have saved itself by engaging in a series of transformations (see below) that helped create a new party – the *Partito Democratico* (PD) that to this day remains one of Europe’s most robust centre-left forces. The Soviet collapse also deprived the PCI of the parental model against which it had defined itself. Without a USSR as both model and deterrent, the question for the Party was how – and from whom – could Italian communists henceforth be ‘different’? The *svolta* thus seems to have served as a resource that allowed the Italian party to remain unique even after the demise of international communism.

Furthermore, according to most of the study informants, the 1989 turning point was the culmination of a longer-term process. Pierino Crema, for example, observed that ‘Berlinguer had already sent the signal announcing the “end of the vital momentum” of the Soviet Union in the course of the events taking place in Poland.’²¹ This was also true when Berlinguer declared that he felt more at peace with NATO.²² Throughout the period of the Historic Compromise or Eurocommunism, with this communist who was a bit rigid in France, Marchais, and Carrillo in Spain.²³ A few signs attracted attention.²⁴ The political changes – disregarding those that were merely nominal – that accompanied the birth of the PDS were more acceptable than the PCI’s changes during its last few years, which some party officials interviewed believed would have rendered it more social-democratic than communist. Gaspare Enrico explicitly supports this position: ‘On a number of issues, the PCI was more moderate than the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany). ... [Founding the PDS] meant responding to a pre-existing situation that had not been explicit.’²⁵

Several informants also unhesitatingly referred to the existence of political ‘currents’ in the Party – although the term was taboo in a party defined by democratic centralism. They cited the opposition between Giorgio Amendola, who represented the ‘right wing’ of the PCI and Pietro Ingrao in the mid-1960s, as well as the ascent of the *miglioristi* (reformists who favoured an alliance with the PSI, the *Partito Socialista Italiano*) two decades later. Mentioning the presence of internal political variants prior to the *svolta* makes it possible to dodge accusations that the PCI’s unity principle was disregarded in 1989. These pre-existing political strands thus allow Occhetto’s supporters to minimise the divisive nature of the *svolta*, recast it simply as an update to an existing internal split. At the same time, the *svolta*’s adversaries sought refuge behind Ingrao’s interventions in order to legitimise their opposition.

Dissident memories

These informants’ recollections can be characterised as dissident because they are typically voiced by Occhetto’s opponents as a radically different view on the 1989 turning point and its implications, although it is wise to interpret such a binary opposition with caution.

Some informants perceived the *svolta* as the first step in a power-grab motivated by the Party leaders’ eagerness to overturn the *conventio ad excludendum* that had prevented communists’ participation in the government since the beginning of the Cold War. They also called for the end to a half-century of Christian Democrat hegemony (within the context of coalitions with small centrist parties and the PSI). Delfo Rafaschieri continues to this day to express reservations about the question of power, traditionally a communist

taboo. Rafaschieri began cryptically by observing that ‘if you want to rise to power, others will ask you certain things. You have to say no to this, to that ... including the name. Obviously.’²⁶ As he continued, he revealed more about his own thinking, explicitly asserting that ‘the majority chose the path of power, of neoliberal inspiration – look at the PD today – with a few minor exceptions. Even if PD members would naturally exclaim “but no! It’s not true!”’²⁷ This entrance ticket to the path to power would cost the PCI its political identity.

Opponents of the *svolta* were not the only figures to criticise the free-market turn promoted by Massimo D’Alema in the mid-1990s (and later by Walter Veltroni).²⁸ Although he supported Occhetto in 1989, Giorgio Ardito expressed a similar view: ‘Who was it who spread Chicago School neoliberalism in progressive European circles? It was Blair! And D’Alema! And D’Alema’s economic adviser, do you know who he was? Professor Nicola Rossi. Massimo D’Alema even helped him become a Senator. And D’Alema has enormous responsibility for Italian neoliberal politics. I could never stand Renzi. I don’t like him. But D’Alema conducted a more neoliberal policy than Renzi. Unfortunately.’²⁹

Finally, although opposing memories tend to highlight conflict between the supporters and opponents of the *svolta*, on closer inspection, certain aspects of the turning point blur the positions they adopted at the time. This is true, for example, of the question of how long the process lasted. Ilaria Gritti, a supporter of the turning point, deeply regrets the dismissive treatment of activists who were viscerally attached to the Party’s name and symbol: ‘Liquidating the question in this way amounted to ignoring the feelings of those who were against the transition. And these activists did not receive sufficient attention at an emotional level.’³⁰ Giancarlo Quagliotti, another representative of Motion 1, believes that prolonged debates weakened the operation because they undermined the initial effectiveness of the Bolognina announcement: ‘The debate, which as you know, lasted a long time – another error – and drove everyone’s positions apart instead of reconciling them. It could have been managed with less bitterness. [...] The problem lingered for almost two years, two congresses, and several Central Committees. It was agonising.’³¹ Pierino Crema’s response exemplifies mixed feelings concerning the timing of the *svolta*: ‘It went too fast. After that, it took at least two years ... (Pause.) We probably could have managed it better.’³² The outcome of the *svolta*, tainted by the indelible stigma of fragmentation, plunged Party leaders into indecisiveness. Whether too slow or too short, the process ended with the single outcome – a schism – that communists had hoped at all costs to avoid.

The time factor: has the mourning period ended?

Former members observe that the PCI was more than a mere political organisation and that its dissolution forced them to experience a period of profound mourning. Even many of those who accepted the idea of a name-change in 1989 after decades of living amid the PCI found it difficult to turn the page. For Senator Lorenzo Gianotti, the change caused an identity problem. Gianotti, however, had supported the *svolta* from the very outset: ‘I must confess that for the first few years after the change of the Party, it was difficult for me to recognise myself as a non-communist. These were psychological, cultural problems.’³³ They had also to mourn the disappearance of a human community. This is what Diego Novelli admitted, saying: ‘For me, it was ... I’m not saying “everything”, but ... (Pause.) It was a family. There was a spirit of solidarity and friendship.’³⁴

Mourning can be defined as regret about the loss or absence of a missing person or entity, but some Party officials embraced the PCI’s dissolution as an extension of a gradual ideological shift during the Party’s final years. The change remained inconclusive as long as the Party retained its name and its membership in the International. As Sergio

Chiamparino, a member of the Federation secretariat, recalled: 'You had comrades with whom you had done things, for the love of God, obviously, it was emotional. But I remember a period that was personally liberating.'³⁵

Although Luciano Casadei was the only informant who spontaneously referred to 'nostalgia', every party official interviewed expressed some degree of regret at the thought of an entire social world swept away by the dissolution of the Party. Does this suggest that Party officials interviewed for this study can be said to be nostalgic for the PCI? The answer to this question is complex, in part because some study informants, including Chiamparino, explicitly argued the opposite: 'I don't feel any nostalgia. I have very nice memories from the period. I remember people ... From a personal point of view, it was certainly a more beautiful period than those that followed. [...] So, there are also pleasant memories. But that's as far as it goes ...'³⁶

What became of these informants in the post-PCI period?

Even while they were united under a single banner, the study's informants had colourful backgrounds, well before their paths and careers diverged in the wake of the PCI's dissolution. Albert Hirschman's model (1970) provides a useful index for ranking their choices in 1991, between acceptance of the PCI's transformation into the PDS without protest (loyalty); criticism of the *svolta*, but ultimately adhering to the PDS (voice); or opposition to both the turning point and membership in the PDS (exit). This is also true of the subsequent organisations. An initial phase of transition from the PDS to the *Democratici di Sinistra* (DS, Democrats of the Left), which was intended to include members of other political parties (ultimately only a handful of former socialists and left-wing Christian Democrats³⁷), was acceptable to former communists. A second phase took place during the creation of the PD, which was opposed by a relatively substantial fringe group because it endorsed the fusion between the heir of the PCI and the heir of the *Democrazia Cristiana*. And finally, a third phase occurred during the takeover of the PD by Matteo Renzi, whose divisive personality and open embrace of the free market offended a segment of the membership.

Fragmented political paths

After 1991, comrades who had been previously united under the PCI banner splintered into at least three groups: those who chose the PDS, those who joined the *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista*, and those who refused to join any new party. Some informants also decided to join a party with non-communist roots, such as Diego Novelli, who helped create *La Rete*, the product of a split in the DC.

Approximately two-thirds of Italian communists ultimately joined the PDS after the demise of the PCI, a proportion that is also reflected in the pool of informants for this study (13 out of 19 individuals). A number of supporters of the second motion, including Luciano Casadei, eventually joined the PDS: 'I stayed with the PDS because for me, it was still the Party. People who stayed with the PDS were the ones who were in the PCI'.³⁸ Moreover, although 13 informants registered for the PDS, only nine are currently still PD members.

The ebb and flow of former PCI officials in the aftermath of the Party's dissolution merit closer examination. The first wave of departures occurred during the transition from the DS to the PD: 'When the Party became the Democratic Party, with leaders whom I have never appreciated, I said no. It was different because the PD included both former communists and Christian Democrats, and that changed everything'.³⁹ Like Luciano Casadei, Iginio Ariemma and Ilaria Gritti, Maria Grazia Sestero also declined to

join the PD. Sestero's motivations were identical to Casadei's, but for the other two, the problem was less related to the fusion with The Daisy (*La Margherita*) than the form of the new party, which replaced the previous coalitions, The Olive Tree (*L'Ulivo*) and The Union (*L'Unione*).⁴⁰ Ilaria Gritti ultimately joined the PD in 2012, while Luciano Casadei currently supports Article One, a party formed in 2017 after the splitting of the PD's left wing.

The PD experienced a second wave of departures after 2016 that were linked to policies promoted by Matteo Renzi. For example, the former Resistance member and regional councillor Sante Bajardi did not renew his membership in 2017 and decided to adhere to Article One: 'I left the PD because Renzi's policy was incomprehensible for a worker. You know, the world is like that – everyone has their own life. And it leaves traces. When you see somebody like Renzi, who thinks only of himself, arriving ... From that point of view, my break with Renzi was immediate, because it was a profound separation from the interests of people that I thought I represented.'⁴¹ He was followed by Armando Caruso, a former worker and trade union leader at the FIAT Mirafiori factory: 'There had already been a radical change between the PDS and the DS. Between the DS and the PD, what a disappointment! I lost interest and didn't get a new party card after 2018.'⁴²

The decision to join the PRC seemed longer-lasting. Delfo Rafaschieri proudly proclaims that he is still a member, 'from '91 until this morning'.⁴³ Marilde Provera is similarly resolute: 'I remain a member of the Refoundation. I am no longer a party leader. I go, I listen, and I rarely speak. At least there, there's still some debate.'⁴⁴ Maria Grazia Sestero joined the PRC in 1991 after a 15-month period of opposition: 'I made the decision during a kind of ethical upsurge linked to the suffering of the members and the sense of betrayal they felt. It was almost a problem of coherence.'⁴⁵ She became aware that her profile clashed with the very different backgrounds represented in the PRC: 'A more extremist component joined the party. And a somewhat authoritarian concept of the party emerged inside the Refoundation. So, the way of running the party was less open, a bit sectarian, a bit authoritarian, and that caused some of us to say we could no longer support something like that.'⁴⁶ Maria Grazia Sestero left the PRC in 1995. By default? '[To join the PRC] was a forced choice if we wanted to stay involved in politics. It was the only real place that still existed, since Refoundation had backed positions that led it to receive 1.5 or 2 per cent of the vote ...'⁴⁷ Like a growing number of former Party leaders in the study sample, Sestero is presently not a member of any party.

Two informants made the same decision in 1991, including the trade union leader Vittorio De Martino and Andrea Liberatori, a former editor-in-chief of the Turin edition of *L'Unità* and a PCI member since 1945. By 2019, six informants no longer adhered to any party, although this does not suggest that they no longer vote in the different elections. Liberatori voted for the heir to the PCI, the PD: 'It seems to me to be an organisation that's no longer "left left", but I tell myself that it's the useful left.'⁴⁸ In other words, a type of 'useful vote' or 'vote by default' came to replace the membership vote that had predominated during the PCI period. This also reflects the problems of the present-day Italian left, which one-third of the study informants believe lacks credibility.

Fragmented political careers

The *svolta* also constituted a turning point in the political careers of a number of former communists. As a result, the transition to the PDS marks the true beginning of the careers of some informants. Sergio Chiamparino is a typical example. After a single term as city councillor representing the PCI in the Turinese suburb of Moncalieri, he attained the principal elective functions in the Piedmont region with the PDS, DS, and PD. His official functions with the Turinese Federation ended in 1985, however, after he opposed a referendum promoted by the PCI about the sliding wage scale. In 1991, Chiamparino

succeeded Giorgio Ardito as chief of the Turinese Federation of the PDS and later successfully ran for deputy in 1996. In 2001, he was elected mayor of Turin, earning a second five-year term before ultimately serving as President of the Piedmont region in 2014.

PRC representatives also won greater responsibilities in the wake of the PCI's dissolution. Maria Grazia Sestero (a regional councillor from 1985 to 1990) and Marilde Provera (who was neither elected nor a PCI candidate) successfully campaigned to serve as PRC deputies, respectively in 1992 and 2004. Their advancement resulted from a two-fold process in which, on the one hand, the PRC's modest size improved the exposure of those who joined it, while on the other, their experience with the PCI provided stature that was an asset to their new positions.

Other previous Party leaders became more involved in trade unions after 1989. The turning point allowed Vittorio De Martino, for example, to abandon politics in favour of union commitments: 'I immediately decided I would no longer be a member of the Communist Party. I became free of the debates, which ultimately became hurtful. I lost interest. What interested me and continues to interest me is workers' rights. Which is why I decided to devote myself entirely to overseeing the FIOM [a branch of the CGIL, which represents metallurgical workers and employees] and labourers.'⁴⁹

Others abandoned the world of politics entirely in favour of new, and in some cases, very different careers. Among study informants, however, their decisions are unrelated to the disappearance of the PCI. Indeed, the career paths of Giancarlo Quagliotti, as director of a motorway management company, and Luciano Casadei, a concert organiser, had begun to evolve even prior to the events of 1989. Although they abandoned full-time political activity, however, even informants who completely changed professions never lost their passion for politics.

Politics at heart

Political sociology has demonstrated that political disengagement is a complex process that includes factors such as structural dynamics and an individual's psychology and personal itinerary (Fillieule 2005). Giorgio Ardito's loss of interest in politics (he resigned from his rank – Secretary of the Federation – in 1991 after a confrontation with Massimo D'Alema) was ultimately short-lived: 'Today, for the Turin PD, I promote – as a digital caveman – digital initiation classes for PD circles coordinating for peace, and I lend a hand in a few circles.'⁵⁰ As Maria Grazia Sestero attests, politics remain important in the lives of these men and women: 'I do not currently recognise any group, but my political passion has always been unwavering.'⁵¹ Sestero remains president of the ANPI (National Association of Italian Partisans) of the province of Turin, a sign of the difficulty faced by former Communist Party members in leaving behind their political commitment. Those who have left politics refer to a subsequent sense of emptiness after this abrupt interruption: 'Abandoning political activity, given the totalising prominence of the PCI, was traumatic in a number of respects that I gradually managed to overcome.'⁵² Those who have new political or associative commitments are in part seeking to avoid such a vacuum or 'trauma', as Iginio Ariemma describes it. It is almost as if they have difficulty living without politics, while these new involvements may also provide distant contact with the era of the PCI.

Conclusion

Qualcuno era comunista (Somebody was a communist) 'because his grandfather, uncle, or father was', 'because Berlinguer was a good guy' and 'because he didn't believe he could be happy if others were not happy as well'. As Giorgio Gaber sang, the men and

women who were the pulse of the PCI had a variety of reasons for being communists because, while proudly cultivating difference from other parties, they were also internally quite diverse. Although from a wide range of backgrounds, they were united under the banner of the PCI, a powerful collective machine. This fundamental unity to which Italian communists had dedicated their lives disintegrated in 1989 after Achille Occhetto initiated the transformation process. This irrevocable split caused a number of former Party stalwarts to suffer problems of identity and to experience fragmented political itineraries after 1991. For supporters of the *svolta*, however, the justification for Occhetto's initiative was compelling. The Bolognina turning point was ultimately a clear interpretation, by the Secretary of the PCI, of the history that was being written before his eyes. The *svolta* was a necessary evil, and the only means of avoiding the inexorable decline that the European counterparts experienced, in particular the French Communist Party.

Thirty years after the PCI ceased to exist, conversations with former Turinese Party officials interviewed for this study reveal that with the passage of time, the mourning period has abated. The informants' itineraries and narratives have also shown that many of them remain politically active in the parties that inherited the PCI mantle or the organisation that proposed its 'Refoundation'. Their memories of participating in the Italian Communist Party are charged with emotions that resonate through their recollections of Enrico Berlinguer, the social environment that surrounded the PCI, or episodes such as the Turinese electoral victories. The personal narratives of these former Turinese Party leaders confirm that many of the memories – and the scars – left by 'the' Party remain vivid to this day. They willingly dedicated part of their lives to the Party, which in turn profoundly changed them. Parts of the PCI continue to survive with – or rather, through – these faithful guardians of its memory.

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Notes

1. *La Repubblica*, 3 November 2019, p. 10.
2. See snapshots of the process of the PCI's transformation and the debates that paralleled it (Valentini 1990 and the documentary by Nanni Moretti, *La Cosa*).
3. Secretary of the Turinese federation from 1983 to 1987, Piero Fassino became the leader of the PCI and the parties that succeeded it in the Piedmont capital.
4. The indecision increased under Alessandro Natta (1918–2001) during the four years (1984–1988) that he headed the PCI. After experiencing a heart attack in April 1988, he left the position two months later in favour of his assistant, Achille Occhetto.
5. *L'Unità*, 13 November 1989, p. 8.
6. Pietro Ingrao (1915–2015), President of the Chamber of Deputies from 1976 to 1979, was considered one of the principal representatives of the Party's 'left' wing after the mid-1960s. He was the first PCI leader to voice opposition to the turning point proposed by Achille Occhetto.
7. Interview 22 July 2019.
8. Interview 13 September 2019.
9. Interview 18 February 2020.
10. IGT FFT (Istituto Gramsci di Torino, Fondo della Federazione di Torino); 041 78.1, letter from the 'Guido Rossa' Section, Turin, 20 December 1989.
11. Private archives, Delfo Rafaschieri, 'XIXth Congress du PCI, 1989–1990: considerations'.
12. Interview 23 July 2019.

13. IGT FFT 045 81, Speech by Giorgio Arditto, Federation Secretary at the 22nd Provincial Congress of the Turin PCI, Turin, 18–20 January 1991.
14. Interview 13 September 2019.
15. Private archives, Delfo Rafaschieri.
16. IGT FFT 042 78.2, Reports of the 21st Provincial Congress, Turin, 15–18 February 1990.
17. IGT FFT 486 23, 1990 Municipal elections, ‘miscellaneous notes’.
18. Diego Novelli was one of the Party leaders with national prominence who were irritated not to have been consulted beforehand by the secretary and decided to join the opposition: ‘I did not agree with the Bolognina turning point, less because of its contents than how it was presented.’ (Interview 12 September 2019).
19. The PCI became the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) in 1991, which became the Democrats of the Left (DS) in 1998. In 2007, the fusion between the DS and *La Margherita* (a centrist party that included the left wing of the former DC) gave birth to the Democratic Party (PD).
20. Interview 21 July 2019.
21. On 15 December 1981, after Poland under General Jaruzelski had introduced martial law, Berlinguer declared during a press conference that the ‘progressive thrust’ of the October Revolution was ‘exhausted’.
22. Pierino Crema alludes here to Berlinguer’s other symbolic declaration on 15 June 1976, when in an interview with *Corriere della Sera* he declared that it would be easier to succeed with a socialist experiment ‘under the NATO umbrella’ than under the protection of the Warsaw Pact.
23. Eurocommunism refers to the process of increasing independence from Moscow between 1976 and 1979 engaged in by the PCI, the PCF in France, and the Spanish PC. This experiment *de facto* ended in 1979 after Georges Marchais, head of the PCF, supported the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.
24. Interview 23 July 2019.
25. Interview 18 February 2020.
26. Interview 26 July 2019.
27. Interview 26 July 2019.
28. Massimo D’Alema (b. 1949) succeeded Achille Occhetto as PDS Secretary in 1994. It was an ideological turning point (a ‘liberal revolution’ inspired by Tony Blair’s Labour Party), but also from the point of view of strategic decisions (alliance with the post-Christian Democrat centre-left). D’Alema initiated the PDS’s transformation into the DS, of which he shared the leadership with Walter Veltroni (b. 1955). Veltroni became Secretary of the DS in 1998, when D’Alema became President of the Council of Ministers. The D’Alema-Veltroni dyad at the head of the DS, which was somewhat stormy, ended in 2001 after Piero Fassino succeeded Veltroni, who was elected Mayor of Rome.
29. Interview 24 July 2019.
30. Interview 21 July 2019.
31. Interview 11 September 2019.
32. Interview 23 July 2019.
33. Interview 11 September 2019.
34. Interview 12 September 2019.
35. Interview 17 February 2020.
36. Interview 17 February 2020.
37. The PSI and the DC disintegrated in 1994 following inquiries after 1992 (the ‘*Mani Pulite*’ operation) uncovered a vast system of corruption and illicit financing schemes among most Italian political parties.
38. Interview 22 July 2019.
39. Interview 22 July 2019.
40. The Olive Tree (*L’Ulivo*) is a coalition formed in 1995 that amalgamated the PDS and the PPI (*Partito Popolare Italiano*, Italian Popular Party), which primarily consisted of former Christian Democrats. The Green Federation and the Republican Party completed the cartel that carried the 1996 elections. After returning to opposition in 2001, the members of The Olive Tree decided to broaden the coalition to prepare for the 2006 general elections. This gave rise to The Union (*L’Unione*), which included, in addition to the DS and The Daisy (which succeeded the PPI in 2002), the PRC, *Italia dei Valori* (Italy of Values, a catch-all party) and the radicals of *Rosa nel Pugno* (Rose in the Fist).
41. Interview 19 February 2020.
42. Interview 13 September 2019.
43. Interview 26 July 2019.
44. Interview 13 September 2019.
45. Interview 13 September 2019.
46. Interview 13 September 2019.
47. Interview 13 September 2019.

48. Interview 19 February 2020.
49. Interview 11 September 2019.
50. Interview 24 July 2019.
51. Interview 13 September 2019.
52. Interview 20 July 2019.

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Italian summary

Il 12 novembre 1989, tre giorni dopo la caduta del Muro di Berlino, Achille Occhetto, il Segretario del Partito comunista italiano (PCI), afferma la necessità per il partito di avviare una profonda trasformazione, che include l'idea di un cambio del nome. È l'inizio di un processo che dura quindici mesi e che conduce allo scioglimento del PCI e alla nascita di una nuova formazione politica, che aderisce all'Internazionale socialista. L'articolo, che adotta il punto di vista della memoria individuale e collettiva, si propone di analizzare il complicato e tortuoso abbandono del riferimento comunista e la spaccatura della comunità formata dal PCI. Suscitando reazioni agli antipodi in seno al partito, la trasformazione del PCI provocò una frammentazione dei percorsi politici dei 'compagni', uniti – fino a quel momento – sotto lo stesso simbolo. Ancora oggi, la decisione dell'89 suscita interpretazioni difformi nella memoria degli ex comunisti italiani.

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