Introduction

One evening in September 1987 I visited the provincial *L'Unità* festival in Modena, a prosperous city in Emilia-Romagna, the region of Italy with the strongest left-wing traditions and the highest density of Communist Party membership in Western Europe. The annual fund-raising festival of the local federation of the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano — PCI) was in full swing. As usual, the event was organized on a grand scale. In a prefabricated open-air exhibition area on the edge of town numerous eating places, stalls, and displays had been set up, and there was a full program of debates and entertainments. Families, young people, couples, and the elderly mingled in large numbers among bars, commercial stands, booths of domestic and international pressure groups, bookshops, and raffle and game stalls. The laughter and chatter, and the relaxed good humor of those dining on the rich Emilian cuisine or in the Hungarian and Russian restaurants, indicated that the festival was an occasion of some importance in community life. The only reminders of its political character were the numerous red flags fluttering in the breeze and repeated loudspeaker announcements of the day's program of attractions.

By any standard the festival was impressive. Few if any other political forces in the world could have recruited sufficient volunteer labor or have performed the organizational feat of staging an event on this scale in a provincial city. Yet as I wandered amid the crowds several things caught my attention. First, I came across a small conference area annexed to the *Rinascita* bookshop, where approximately fifteen people, mostly in their late twenties or thirties, had gathered. They were awaiting the beginning of a roundtable discussion on the curious theme of "Neo-individualism, culture of the body, and social climbing." However, half an hour after the advertised starting time, none of the speakers

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had arrived. As an official paced about morosely, the audience began to drift away.

Outside, in a large green area bordered by cake stalls, ice-cream parlors, and a fun fair, a senior member of the national PCI directorate was about to address a rally of several hundred people, the majority of whom seemed to be aged fifty or over. Beginning punctually, the speaker offered his audience a familiar, if stylishly delivered, denunciation of the government and its policies. During his speech he went out of his way to reject a prevailing conception of modernity that equated progress with constant expansion in the consumption of material goods. "Italy may be a bit richer, and there may be a few more consumer goods around, but this does not mean that the nation has progressed or become more civilized," he declared. In the next breath, and apparently unaware of the contradiction, he went on to defend the PCI against those who claimed it was not modern by referring to the enormous material progress that had been achieved under forty years of Communist local government in Modena. After touching on various themes, the official observed that, despite the lamentable tendency of young people to entrust the government parties (in particular the Christian Democrats and the Socialists) with their votes, nothing was being done about youth unemployment. Instead, he thundered, referring to the recent tour and televised concert of a visiting American pop star, the authorities offered them Madonna. At this remark much of the silver-haired crowd burst into sustained and enthusiastic applause.

Leaving the rally, I ventured into the area behind the speaker's platform to encounter a set of huge painted boards marking the entrance to "Strelax," the cabaret-bar-café-discotheque of the Young Communist Federation. Here large numbers of teenagers dressed casually in jeans and T-shirts sat talking and drinking in the shadow of billboards featuring satirical portraits of Oliver North and Pope John Paul II. In one corner a tall black-and-yellow-striped tower announced: "bienvenu, benvenido, benvenuto, welcome, wilkommen." A large panel to one side read "Foundation of Friends of the State of Strelax." Beneath this heading was a semi-serious list of idols and hero figures including Vladimir Majakowski, the mutineers of the Bounty, Brigitte Bardot, Winnie and Nelson Mandela, Sandro Pertini, Sacco and Vanzetti, Che, Mary Poppins, Sitting Bull, the Three Stooges, the cartoon adventurer Corto

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Maltese, Charlie Chaplin, Rosa Luxemburg, and the 1960s footballer Gigi Riva.

In the mid-1980s the PCI was still by any standard a large party. It had a membership of some 1.5 million, and, even after the serious setback suffered in the general election of June 1987, it held 26.6 percent of the popular vote. Every year it organized dozens of festivals similar to the one described above. They bore witness to the popular appeal and organizational capacity of the PCI, to the scale and diversity of its subculture, and to its ability to draw in people of all ages and act as a part of community life. Right up until its dissolution in February 1991, the PCI was an important force not only in terms of its electoral standing and its membership but also socially and culturally. Yet the above scenes also offer telltale signs of the crisis the party experienced in the final period of its existence as it made awkward attempts to come to terms with new themes alien to the Communist political culture, struggled to make sense of the waning appeal of an orthodox political language to younger people, and faced signs of generational segmentation within the party. For the first time evidence emerged of dysfunctions in a once impressively smooth-running organization. Moreover, the PCI was no longer sure of its capacity to project itself as modern; a certain defensiveness transpired that derived from the awareness that the party could no longer confidently sustain a cultural project geared to the whole of society. In its responses to crisis it displayed an eclecticism that suggested an uncertain identity.

In the four decades following the end of the Second World War a tremendous transformation took place in Italian society. In the 1940s Italy was a devastated country that had for nearly two years been a major theater of the war in Europe. It was also a country that had experienced most of the changes of the industrial era in a narrow and limited way. The only area that matched the social composition, level of urbanization, and standard of living of the more advanced countries of Northern Europe was the industrial triangle of the Northwest. In the 1940s some 42 percent of the active population worked on the land, between 15 and 20 percent was wholly illiterate, and for a good many more the Italian language was an unfamiliar tongue. Despite the expanding presence of the state, the existence of a national network of mass communications, and the attempts at social and cultural integration undertaken under Fascism,

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whole areas of the country and parts of even the most advanced regions lived in a manner that had remained basically unchanged for centuries. To exacerbate matters the country had little experience of genuine democratic government, and, with the exception of the Catholic Church and recently formed mass political parties, its institutions were weak.

Already by the end of the 1950s much had changed. Italy had not merely recovered from the disruption of the war but was undergoing a far-reaching process of development that would broaden its industrial base, witness a great expansion of the cities, see a shift of the population from the South to the North, and permit improved standards of living for virtually all sectors of the population in the medium term. Taken over the whole period from the postwar years to the 1980s, this transformation was a dramatic one of historic proportions. The country became a leading industrial power, and, indeed, by the late 1970s the expansion of the tertiary sector meant that it was taking on many of the features of a postindustrial society. Although economic development was uneven and in many respects chaotic, it heralded a huge improvement in educational and literacy levels and a significant process of cultural and linguistic integration. It would not be correct to say that the Italians of the 1980s had nothing in common with those of the 1940s, for, apart from any other consideration, certain old defects and disequilibria persisted, albeit in a modified form. Nevertheless, development turned Italy into a mass, predominantly urbanized, and secularized society in which democratic political procedures commanded virtually unanimous support.

Throughout this process of change, the PCI remained a powerful force and, in electoral terms, the second-largest political party. Whereas most communist parties in Western Europe declined dramatically in the late 1940s and social democratic parties lost support in the 1950s, the PCI not only conserved a substantial membership but actually saw its electoral standing rise slowly yet continuously up until 1977. This unusual fortune may be attributed to three things: objective factors arising from the nature of Italian industrialization, peculiar structural features of the country's political system, and the astuteness and intelligence of the party leadership.

The objective factors are numerous and can only be hinted at here. Above all, the shift from a long-standing system of rule that involved the repression of the lower classes in the cities and the mass of the population on the land to a system of consensual government based on liberal

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democracy and consumer capitalism was highly disruptive. Most importantly, urbanization and the development of a mass consumer culture uprooted tradition, stimulated aspirations, and undercut the influence of the Church. This did not favor the left at all levels or in the longer term, but it undermined traditional authority and contributed to the electoral growth of the PCI. So, too, did the contradictory character of Italian modernization, which held out a promise of prosperity and tolerance that prior to the late 1960s was denied by low wages, violations of trade union rights, and institutional practices that remained authoritarian.

The Communists benefited generally from these tensions because they were the only real force of opposition. The liberal center was much weaker than in other countries, and in any case the parties associated with it were subordinate allies of the dominant Christian Democratic Party (DC). For its part, the Socialist Party lost its electoral primacy on the left in 1948, and, following a long period of subalternity to the PCI, it was sucked into the DC system of power in the mid-1960s. Thus it lacked autonomy and was poorly placed to respond adequately to the pressures and demands arising in society. In this context the PCI became the home, or at least the reference point, not merely of those who sought to create a new economic and social order but of those who desired economic justice, political reform, and wider citizenship.

There were limits as to how far the PCI could effectively give voice to these aspirations. As a communist party with historical and political links to the Soviet Union, it was never considered a fully legitimate potential party of government. It possessed an ideology and an organizational structure that were geared to a total form of politics whose aim was to reorganize society completely, not merely improve it or correct its malfunctions. Yet the party managed to retain credibility, despite its long-term oppositional role, owing to the skill with which its leaders and representatives cultivated the PCI's role as a mass, national force. From the end of the war the party won a huge following among the workers and peasants of the North and Center, but it also sought to reach out to the petite bourgeoisie and to the middle classes. In contrast to a party like the French Communist Party (PCF), which was always reluctant to risk diluting its purity by mixing too freely in the waters of the mainstream of society, the Italian Communists sought, while remaining faithful to their basic purposes, to penetrate Italian society and become a force in every sphere of national life. In short, they tried to think out and put

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into practice a vision of the transition to socialism cast largely in national terms.

For the PCI cultural struggle always had a special significance. This sphere was not treated as a secondary, good only for reinforcing loyalties and forging useful alliances, although tactical considerations of this sort were always important. Culture was a sphere in which the party could assert a fuller influence than it could in the political arena, given the barrier against its participation in government. By winning support for their ideas among artists and writers, and intellectuals of all types, leading Communists thought they could determine the ideas and values that were dominant in the nation. In this way the party could shape events and policies from the vantage point of civil society. A product of Italian social and political theory, this conception of the active role of culture in the struggle for socialism was not adopted by any other political party in Europe. However, although the attention the PCI accorded to ideological and cultural struggle lent it a special fascination for outsiders, it is as well to be aware of the ambiguous status of these activities for the left. Perry Anderson, Martin Jay, and others have shown that cultural struggle first took shape in the West in response to the defeats and setbacks of the 1920s and 1930s.[1] It was not a sphere in which progress could be achieved but rather a place of refuge to which intellectuals fled when political advance seemed impossible. Cultural policy was not an expression of a fuller, more radical variety of politics but rather a symptom of the extreme difficulties revolutionaries faced and, to some extent, of their impotence. Although the PCI's greatest theorist, Antonio Gramsci, anchored cultural struggle to a political project by conceptualizing its role in preparing and improving the conditions for political advance and conquest of the state, it would be disingenuous to imagine that the PCI was exempt from problems of this nature. Nevertheless, because it was unique in its ambition and range of application, the PCI's attempt to harness the energies of intellectuals, and use them to construct a counterhegemony to that of the political, economic, and religious forces that dominated postwar society, deserves investigation.

To compensate for its loss of power in 1947–48, the party also gave rise to a subculture. Alongside workplace cells, it founded territorial sections that offered opportunities for recreation and socialization in addition to political activity. Affiliated organizations were also created for women, young people, peasants, former partisans, and so on; all of

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these had their own symbols, publications, and calendar of events that added new layers to Communist identity and rounded out the concept of party membership. In working-class areas of some northern cities and in the central regions where the party was strongest, the subculture formed a significant pole of community life.

Left-wing subcultures had existed previously in a variety of contexts. Socialist parties in Germany and Austria had consciously sought to organize the social and cultural life of workers in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and, in the prefascist period in Italy, the Socialist Party had also given rise to a plethora of recreational associations. However, the PCI's subculture was different because it was created considerably later than others, well after the heyday of subcultures of this type, which may be located between the beginning of the century and 1914. After the Second World War neither the German nor the Austrian socialist parties even attempted to reestablish cultural networks, and the other subcultures that did exist, such as that of the Dutch and Belgian socialist parties or the PCF, tended to be belated protractions of more robust prewar experiences. For this reason the Italian Communists can be considered to have created the last great left-wing subculture in Western Europe.

Because they were created relatively late, the institutions of this subculture had to cope from the beginning with the sorts of challenges that undermined and fragmented other subcultures, such as those posed by mass communications, commercial cultural industries, and state- and company-organized leisure activities. In several ways, they responded creatively and flexibly to these challenges, with the result that some features of the PCI's subculture — its festivals and certain recreational activities and publications, for example — proved remarkably long lasting. But continual difficulties arose that derived from the impact of consumerism, the trend toward the privatization of leisure, and the relative normalization of political life. Whatever leading Communists might have assumed or expected, no one in the postwar period could live in a world entirely or even largely shaped by left-wing rituals and institutions. Moreover, the PCI's tenacious attachment to a certain type of intellectual politics, although it brought the party kudos, locked it into an outdated view of the way social and political consensus was constructed and maintained.

Before the late 1980s, the greatest challenges the PCI faced were in the economic boom of the late 1950s and 1960s. During this period

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virtually all of Western Europe's great social democratic parties experienced decline and responded by undertaking the programmatic and organizational deradicalization symbolized by the 1959 Bad Godesburg conference of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Although workers extended their social rights and many parties entered government in the 1960s, the cultural achievements of the labor movement, including newspapers and publishing enterprises, educational circuits, and sports clubs, lost autonomy and ceased to be a factor in the collective composition of the class. In *Late Capitalism* Ernest Mandel acknowledged that "the reabsorption of cultural needs achieved by the proletariat into the capitalist process of commodity production and circulation leads to a far-reaching reprivatization of the recreational sphere of the working class." This, he said, represented "a sharp break with the tendency of [earlier] epochs . . . towards a constant extension of the spheres of collective action and solidarity of the proletariat."[2]

For many socialists who identified the progress of their movement with the consolidation and extension of the forms of class organization typical of the golden age of classical social democracy before 1914, this development was equivalent to a tragedy. As right-wing social democrats reacted by discarding many conventional presumptions and reference points, seeking instead to further the interests of the working class purely through public policy, left-wing socialists and communists conducted a desperate rearguard battle to shore up fading institutions and rituals. Even in Britain, where no articulated socialist culture had ever existed, intellectuals like Richard Hoggart expressed dismay at the new "candy floss world" and the corrupting effects it was having on a once proud and independent class.[3]

As economic development and consumerism undercut conventional hierarchies and values, social democratic parties gradually turned into what Otto Kirchheimer in 1966 called "catch-all" peoples' parties.[4] In part of their own volition, in part against their will, they accepted more of the principles of Western capitalism. Unable or unwilling to adapt, communist parties declined further almost everywhere.

At this time the PCI found that its own vision of modernity was undermined by a real process of modernization that brought prosperity and undermined the collective dimension of life. Its organization and subculture were also significantly weakened. But there was no wholesale liquidation of a collective grassroots culture that conserved considerable

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vitality. In part because of the Gramscian heritage, the PCI was able to adapt and survive. It did not cease to be a cultural force, despite the competition of the mass media and commercial culture. Rather, it found ways to respond and recast its cultural activities in order to conserve their influence and purpose.

This capacity for adaptation and survival makes the PCI's subculture a particularly interesting case. Most previous studies of the cultural activities of left-wing parties, such as Guenther Roth and Roberta Ascarelli's analyses of the SPD and Kurt Shell and Helmut Gruber's studies of Austrian socialism,[5] have concentrated on either the period before the 1930s or particular cities, or both.[6] Here the case will be investigated of a party that, in a context of full parliamentary democracy, was forced to contend not only with the cinema and the commercial press but also with television, pop music, youth counterculture, and the star system as well as mass mobility and unprecedented prosperity. Moreover, these were not separate challenges; they were elements and consequences of the adoption of an American-inspired strategy for economic growth and social integration.

The PCI did not find it easy to keep alive its struggle for hegemony in the face of these challenges. The party often failed to understand change and was disoriented by it. Moreover, it never really grasped the appeal of either mass culture or the consumer society. In the chapters that follow particular attention will be paid to the difficulties the party faced, to its problems and inadequacies. Its saving grace was not that it possessed some secret recipe for success, even though the party was widely seen abroad in the 1970s as a paradigm for socialists who believed that the social and cultural consequences of economic growth represented a challenge and not a motive for surrender. Rather, although certain biases, such as those against commercial entertainment and individualism, were rooted in Marxist-Leninism, the PCI demonstrated a great deal of flexibility in practical matters. A gradual attenuation of hostile judgments allowed for a reasonably swift move to more considered assessments of novelties. This meant that the party could maintain its struggle for hegemony and, in a context such as that of the 1970s, which was marked by economic crisis in the West and the defeat of the United States in Vietnam, advance and extend it with considerable success. However, the growing gap between the model of social and cultural relations promoted by the party and the reality of everyday life could not forever be masked.

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The aspiration to establish the cultural hegemony of the working class diminished in plausibility and eventually dissolved. By the mid-1980s it was clear that the American model of modernization had won out. The festivals, the press, and other features of the culture of the left did not disappear, but they were no longer bearers of alternative values; rather, they were consumed in much the same way as their commercial equivalents.

This book is concerned with the PCI over the whole of its postwar existence, from 1943 until the final division and dissolution of the party in 1991. It differs from all other studies of the party in two ways. First, it is primarily concerned with the cultural dimension of the PCI's strategy and activities at both the elite level and the popular level. Conventionally separated from its political dimension or ignored altogether, the PCI's cultural policies and cultural activities are here treated as full and integral parts of its being as a political force. Second, the focus is outward, not inward, looking: the overall purpose is to examine the transformations in Italian economic, cultural, and social life from the point of view of the PCI. The treatment is diachronic because in this way cultural activity can most effectively be examined in relation to political conflict. The PCI was not, in its self-perception, a ghetto party, and its institutions were not static; rather, they evolved and changed in response to the challenges of each phase of the postwar era.

The English edition of this book differs in several ways from the Italian edition, which was published in 1995 by Giunti under the title *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca: la sfida della cultura di massa, 1943–91*. This earlier version was substantially longer and contained extended treatments of Italian politics, popular culture, sexual mores, and consumption. For reasons of brevity and owing to the appearance of several volumes in English that provide detailed analyses of Communist politics and postwar Italian politics and society in general,[7] it has been decided to concentrate here on the cultural activities and policies of the PCI.

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