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# The Italian Communist Party in the 1980s and the denouement of the Italian party system

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## ABSTRACT

The role of the Italian Communist Party (P.C.I.) in the denouement of the Italian party system in the early 1990s was decisive, its dissolution helping to trigger the organizational and electoral collapse of the existing parties. If so, the question that arises is what triggered the dissolution of the P.C.I. A conventional wisdom has developed in the literature that puts the dissolution down to the collapse of the communist regimes in central and eastern Europe, effectively removing the P.C.I. as an agent of its own destiny. Yet, an analysis of the P.C.I.'s final decade reveals a different picture, one that still recognizes the role of international events but as a catalyst to an existing programme of dramatic change which began in the late 1980s in response to an existential crisis of the party. The role of the P.C.I. as an independent agency in charge of its own destiny can be reasserted in revisiting this critical period in the party's and Italy's history. In doing so, it casts new light on the causes of the denouement of the Italian party system in the early 1990s, contextualizing the role of international events in a longer-term analysis of an enveloping crisis of the P.C.I. in its final decade.

## RIASSUNTO

Il ruolo del Partito Comunista Italiano (P.C.I.) nell'crollo del sistema partitico italiano nei primi anni '90 è stato determinante, il suo scioglimento ha contribuito a innescare il collasso organizzativo ed elettorale dei partiti esistenti. Se è così, la domanda che si pone è cosa abbia innescato lo scioglimento del P.C.I. Una saggezza convenzionale sviluppata in letteratura riconduce la dissoluzione al crollo dei regimi comunisti nell'Europa centro-orientale, rimuovendo di fatto il P.C.I. come agente del proprio destino. Tuttavia, un'analisi dell'ultimo decennio del P.C.I. rivela un quadro diverso, che riconosce ancora il ruolo degli eventi internazionali ma come catalizzatore di un programma esistente di cambiamento drammatico iniziato alla fine degli anni '80 in risposta a una crisi esistenziale del partito. Il ruolo del P.C.I. come organismo indipendente incaricato del proprio destino può essere riaffermato nel rivisitare questo periodo critico nella storia del partito e dell'Italia. Così facendo, getta nuova luce sulle cause dell'epilogo del sistema partitico italiano nei primi anni '90, contestualizzando il ruolo degli eventi internazionali in un'analisi a più lungo termine di una crisi avvolgente del P.C.I. nel suo ultimo decennio.

**KEYWORDS** Italian Communist Party (P.C.I.); Italian party system; Achille Occhetto; 'new party'

**PAROLE CHIAVE** Partito Comunista Italiano (P.C.I.); sistema partitico italiano; Achille Occhetto; 'nuovo partito'

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### Introduction

The last leader of the Italian Communist Party (P.C.I.), Achille Occhetto (1994, 72–73), reflecting on his decision to dissolve the P.C.I. in 1989 and form a new non-communist party of the left, argued that he had been the architect of an ‘historical turning point’ not just in the P.C.I. but the broader political system. This reflection was in line with his declared objective in 1989 which was to ‘unblock’ the party system. And while it is true that the seismic changes to the Italian party system in the early 1990s cannot be put down to the actions of a single party (Bull and Newell 1993), the P.C.I.’s dissolution was at the heart of the two most important causal factors, the end of the cold war in the autumn of 1989, and the anti-corruption drive (known as ‘Clean Hands’) of Italian magistrates which began in February 1992.

The definitive ending of any notion of a ‘communist threat’ ended the ‘exclusion convention’ (an informal agreement of the other parties to bar the P.C.I. from office) and ‘released’ many voters from having to ‘hold their noses and vote Christian Democrat’. It also provided an environment in which magistrates could take decisive action (and businessmen could spill the beans) against the long-standing corrupt practices of the governing parties (Newell and Bull 2003, 45). Five years after the P.C.I.’s dissolution, alternation in power was achieved (under a new configuration of parties), a hallmark of liberal democracy that had eluded the Italian Republic for nearly fifty years.

If, therefore, the P.C.I.’s role in the denouement of the party system was decisive, the question arises as to why the P.C.I. dissolved itself at that particular point in time. This is the aim of this article, which will first explore what has become a conventional wisdom in the literature, which essentially puts the decision down to a knee-jerk reaction to international events (the collapse of the communist regimes in central and eastern Europe). The article will show the shortcomings of this type of explanation, before then providing a deeper explanation which is rooted in the historical context of the 1980s, an existential crisis of the P.C.I., and the attempt to respond to that crisis a year before the collapse of the Berlin Wall. That response (now largely overlooked in the literature) placed the party in a position where the decision to dissolve was a logical acceleration of an existing programme of reform, rather than a knee-jerk reaction to an unexpected international event. In short, explaining the role of the P.C.I. in the denouement of the Italian party system requires going beyond international events to analyse the P.C.I.’s crisis in the previous decade.

## Dissolution of the P.C.I.: the conventional wisdom

Occhetto made his controversial proposal to dissolve the P.C.I. a mere five days after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and in doing so he explicitly linked it to what was taking place in central and eastern Europe. He argued that the revolutions in central and eastern Europe had introduced a new phase in Italian politics and it was the P.C.I.'s role to initiate this phase rather than wait for it to begin. The party, he argued, had to make clear that it had no link to a past where 'not only did socialism fail, in some countries it was not even tried.' Promoting the P.C.I.'s originality or 'distinctiveness' was, he said, no longer sufficient since the party had to recognize that even the best of its traditions was conceived within the logic of cold war politics. The party was no longer an instrument of change: a break 'of historical value' was therefore needed to create a new non-communist party which would be a 'democratic party of progress', 'socialist and popular', and an integral member of the Socialist International and European left.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear, then, that the primary factor prompting Occhetto's controversial initiative was international. This fact has led, over time, to a form of 'reductionism' in accounts of the role of the P.C.I. in the denouement of the party system. Most general accounts of the period give short-shrift to the P.C.I., leaving the impression that the impact of the collapse of the communist regimes was almost unmediated, with the party hardly even master of its own destiny: 'The PCI was dissolved in 1991 in response to the disappearance of the Soviet Union ...' (Leonardi 2017, 8); 'The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet collapse ... precipitated the decision of the leader Achille Occhetto to change the party's name and identity' (Lazar and Giugni 2015, 182); 'the events of 1989 shook the PCI out of its immobilism' (Colarizi 2007, 175); 'under the impact of the news that came from the East the PCI's leading group seemed not able to save from its past even those things that had been considered good and heroic' (Lepre 2004, 326); 'the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the rapid collapse of the European communist regimes were the events that pushed Occhetto into a difficult but inevitable decision: that of bringing to an end the existence of the old P.C.I. (Bedeschi 2013, 316); 'The end of the PCI was ... an inevitable and necessary step to take: after the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the word communist was utterly discredited' (Cooke and Fantoni 2016, 131); 'The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet collapse ... precipitated the decision to change the party's name and identity' (Lazar and Giugni 2015, 182); 'from 1989 onwards, when the old PCI transformed itself ... into a democratic party of the left ... this additional element changed the Italian crisis into a crisis of the political system' (Lanaro 1992, 479).

One account (Crainz 2009, 176) does not even mention the P.C.I. in direct terms but refers to the collapse of the Berlin Wall as removing any reason for maintenance of the 'exclusion convention' that kept the party out of government. Some analyses, in referencing the collapse of communism internationally, overlook even mentioning the dissolution of the P.C.I. as a factor in the denouement of the party system (e.g. Romano 1998, c. IX; Fisman and Golden 2017, 215–212). Even a history of the party itself (Agosti 1999, 123–125) spends only a line or two on the dissolution and only just over a page on the protracted process that followed.

The reductionism (or *reductio ad unum*) and superficiality of these accounts is perhaps not surprising. Occhetto explicitly linked his decision to the collapse of the communist regimes, and the post-war Italian party system had been fundamentally shaped by the cold war in the first place – meaning it would have been surprising not to witness some impact from the ending of that War in 1989. Furthermore, as Cervi (2012, 220) rightly notes, the death of the P.C.I. 'would have been, in a less volcanic international context, a sensational event' – meaning it has not received the attention that it might otherwise have done.

Yet, at the same time, what is lost from view in these accounts is any notion of the P.C.I. with 'agency' to make independent decisions. The question that arises is whether the decision made by the P.C.I. to dissolve itself in response to international events was, as suggested or implied in so many of these accounts, inevitable – or were there alternative courses of action that could have been followed? A glance at the responses of other western communist parties to this 'new era' suggests that the decision was anything but inevitable (Bull 1991a). True, some parties (the British, Dutch, Finnish and Swedish) followed a path similar to that of the P.C.I. But others (the Spanish, Greek parties, and an Italian breakaway party) argued that what was happening in central and eastern Europe was the collapse of a degenerated form of communism, not communism per se, meaning new opportunities if they regenerated themselves as communist parties; and some (the Portuguese, French, Belgian and German) continued to believe in the international communist movement as traditionally understood, and saw no reason to change at all.<sup>2</sup> In short, the collapse of the communist regimes in central and eastern Europe may have ended the western communist movement as traditionally understood, but it did not mark an inevitable end of communism in the west (Bull 1995).

These divisions in western communist parties were mirrored in the internal party debate sparked off by Occhetto's proposal. The divisions partially aligned with historical divisions in the P.C.I. (the so-called *miglioristi* around Giorgio Napolitano, the *ingraini* around Pietro Ingrao and the *cossuttiani* around Armando Cossutta), but there was also a break-up of the traditional alliance system on which the leadership had depended. The *berligneriani*

(central group around the leadership) split, with some of the leading older members of this group (such as Pajetta, Tortorella and former leader Natta) coming out in opposition, while younger members supported Occhetto. The long 'constituent phase' which followed the Central Committee's approval of Occhetto's proposal saw the party arrive at its 19<sup>th</sup> Congress (in March 1989) with two other motions opposing that presented by Occhetto (Bassolino's 'modern reforming and antagonistic party' and Tortorella's 'communist refoundation') alongside one proposed alternative name ('Italian Communist Party') to Occhetto's 'Democratic Party of the Left.'

In short, real alternatives existed which made the P.C.I.'s decision far from inevitable. Indeed, three factors suggest that – other things being equal – one would not have expected Occhetto to choose the course of action he did. First, the P.C.I. had a long tradition of avoiding radical, high risk departures of this sort. A wealth of literature on the party viewed its success as partially due to a strategy based on 'continuity in change'. The party had, in Hellman's (1986, 67) 'a well-honed instinct for avoiding self-destruction' – so a proposal of dissolution somewhat bucked tradition. Second, the P.C.I., compared with, say, its French counterpart, had long been praised for its apparent 'independence' from Moscow, suggesting that events in the Soviet Union would unlikely have a severe impact on the party.<sup>3</sup> Third, the P.C.I. was gambling with high stakes in view of the P.C.I.'s standing as the largest communist party in the west and the second largest party in Italy. In other words, the P.C.I. had a lot more to lose (in terms of members, votes and political influence) from a high-risk strategy of dissolution than its smaller French and other counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

Had either of the two alternatives been approved then the subsequent history of the party, and the Italian party system, would surely have been different. Citing the international link to explain the P.C.I.'s dissolution is, therefore, a necessary, but not sufficient, explanation for this significant event. True, it is difficult to conceive of the P.C.I. making such a decision in the absence of the collapse of the communist regimes, but it does not follow that the decision it took was inevitable. We need to look more closely at the party itself, its historical context and what motivated it to take this particular decision when presented with a significant change in the international environment. To discover the roots of this decision, in fact, requires an analysis that unpicks the P.C.I.'s final decade.

## The P.C. I.'s existential crisis in the 1980s

The 1980s marked an irreversible decline in the P.C.I.'s fortunes and the emergence of a multi-dimensional crisis. The party experienced (except for the 1984 European elections) a consistent decline in its share of the vote at all levels (table 1). Between 1976 and 1987 the party lost over 2.3 million votes,

**Table 1.** P.C.I.'s declining share of the vote (%) in European, national and regional elections and number of members 1976–1989.

	European	National*	Regional	Membership
1976		34.37		
1979	29.55	30.38		1,759,295
1980			29.92	1,751,323
1983		29.89		1,635,264
1984	33.30			1,619,940
1985			28.66	1,595,668
1987		26.61		1,508,140
1989	27.60			

\*Chamber of Deputies

Source: Adapted from Bull and Daniels (1990, 23–25).

a decline particularly pronounced both in its strongholds (the working class communities in northern industrial cities and the so-called 'Red Belt' of central regions) and amongst young voters. The P.C.I.'s campaign against the Socialist government's cutting of the wage-indexation system (*scala mobile*) in 1984 did lasting damage to the P.C.I.'s relationship with the worker's movement, dividing the communist-socialist trade union (the General Confederation of Italian Labour). Regional and local elections in 1985 brought an end to almost ten years of communist control over many local and regional governments, including most major cities. There was an analogous decline in party membership, from roughly 1.8 million in the late 1970s to under 1.5 million a decade later (table 1). This also reflected an ageing party: by the late 1980s more than a third of the party membership was over 60, and less than 10 per cent of party members were under 30 years old (Bull and Daniels 1990, 24–25).

Strategically, the P.C.I. found itself in something of an impasse following the collapse of the so-called Historic Compromise strategy in 1979 (Hellman 1988, 2015). In its place, the party formulated a call for an ill-defined 'democratic alternative' (later formulated as a 'programmatic government') which lacked credibility if only because of the derision poured on it by those it was targeting as allies. But the problems were deeper than just strategic. The party was experiencing an enveloping crisis of identity in relation to its proclaimed 'distinctiveness', its claim to be 'different' to all the other parties. This traditionally had been based on four elements all of which were fundamentally compromised by the 1980s (Bull 1991b, 105–106).

First, the international alignment with the Soviet Union was fundamentally compromised by the 'irrevocable break' (*strappo*) enacted by Berlinguer over the Soviet intervention in Poland in 1981. This itself was subsequently compromised by the P.C.I.'s response to the appointment of Gorbachev as leader of the Soviet Union in 1986. In the context of *perestroika*, the P.C.I. established a much closer, 'privileged' link to the Soviet Union in the context of the 'new

internationalism'. This was putatively a relationship based on mutual respect and autonomy, with a reduced emphasis on a shared theoretical heritage – something formally confirmed at the party's 17<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1986. A little over three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall and P.C.I. leader Natta declared, in his opening address to the Congress, the United States (and not the usual 'bloc politics') as the most significant threat to world peace (Bath Urban 1988).<sup>5</sup>

Second, the P.C.I., during Natta's leadership, came under pressure to disavow its association with Gramsci and Togliatti, especially the latter because of the link to Stalin. But the party leadership was not prepared to venture down this road, evidently fearful of where it might lead.

Third, the teleological nature of the party (the goal of going 'beyond' capitalism) came under increasing challenge from the *miglioristi* in the party, who interpreted the 'break' with the Soviet Union in 1981 as the basis of changing the party's mission to 'improving' (rather than going beyond) capitalism. This was resisted not just by the *ingraini* and *cosuttiani* but by Berlinguer himself who (at the P.C.I.'s 16<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1983) confirmed his continued belief in a 'third way' (based on 'socialist values') between capitalism and 'existing' socialism.

Fourth, the very debate taking place revealed the extent to which the fourth element – democratic centralism as an organizing principle of party life – had been undermined in one of its essential roles of providing unity and holding together the party's identity. The most important aspect of the organizing principle of democratic centralism was that there should be no discussion of the party line once it had been decided, which was effectively overturned at the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress. But that simply reflected reality, for as Hellman (1986, 54) noted at the time, 'most of the activities in the P.C.I. would not be permitted' if they were to be judged by the strict limits of democratic centralism.

This is not to suggest that there was never any ambivalence in the identity of the P.C.I. prior to the 1980s. On the contrary, what was known as *doppiezza* ('duplicity'), had been a long-standing feature, where the party maintained a 'hermitically sealed' socialist vision for its membership which belied some of its actions in practice, but kept the party militants mobilized and believing in the cause (Pellicani 1983). Yet, the Historic Compromise had, in its failure, stretched the P.C.I.'s 'duplicity' close to breaking point – serving as a salutary reminder of the perils of attempting to 'cross the ford.' The consequence was a form of muddled 'retreat' by the P.C.I. leadership, which attempted to shore up the party's identity as its distinctive elements crumbled.

If there was a new element in this operation to preserve the P.C.I.'s distinctiveness it was in the launch of a campaign on what Berlinguer dubbed the 'moral question' (*questione morale*), following the exposure of the P2 secret Masonic lodge (an anti-democratic organization, which included many



of the establishment amongst its membership). For Berlinguer, the essence of the 'moral question' was the degeneration and corruption of the political parties, which derived from their unconstitutional relationship with institutions, public powers and the State – and from which the P.C.I. apparently stood apart. This provoked considerable internal debate (it was opposed by the *miglioristi*) and developed into an 'ethical-civic' crusade against the body politic which captured the public imagination. It represented a complete reversal of Berlinguer's previous use of an ethical appeal during the Historic Compromise. In the mid-1970s, the appeal to his voters had been to accept 'austerity' as a means of reaching an accord with the Christian Democrats (D.C.) and safeguarding Italian democracy. Now, his ethical position was being used to attack the D.C. and, effectively, the political system of which it was the central part (Giovagnoli 2004, 98–99).

He was no less sparing of the Socialist Party (P.S.I.) either, rejecting, in 1981, Craxi's invitation to oust the D.C. by forming a government with the P.S.I. and centrist-laical parties under Craxi's Prime Ministership. Craxi indicated that, if Berlinguer were prepared to accept the proposal, the P.S.I. would issue a 'solemn and irrevocable' public declaration that the P.C.I. was an independent, democratic party, eligible to govern. But Berlinguer was not interested in social democratization; he was, as confirmed in comments to his leadership group, more comfortable in opposition, describing the Craxi-led government that was eventually formed as 'a socialist government, of conservative type with authoritarian tendencies', and one which represented a risk to the unity of workers and the democratic nature of the Republic (Barbagallo 2004, 110–116). This, it could be said, was prescient, in view of where Italian politics ended up in the late 1980s – with the so-called 'CAF' (Craxi-Andreotti-Forlani) axis, a secret power-sharing agreement based on a long-term dividing up of the spoils of a clientelistic, politicized and corrupt party state (Bull 2015).

The P.C.I.'s self-isolation combined with its moral crusade helped to reinforce the impression in the 1980s of a deep political malaise in the Italian party system, facilitating its rapid demise in the early 1990s. There was, as a result, a deepening of the political-cultural divide between the P.C.I. and the other parties. The 'distinctiveness' of the P.C.I. in the 1980s became shaped by a convergence between pressures for a radical, ethical-civic renewal and those for maintaining a revolutionary ideal through a special relationship with the Soviet Union (Giovagnoli 2004, 99). Berlinguer's failure to draw out fully the implications of the 'break' with the Soviet Union, his refusal to contemplate social democratization, his insistence on the party's continuing distinctiveness, his campaign on the moral question, and his frontal opposition to the governing parties – all ensured the continuing isolation of a party supported by a third of the electorate, and therefore a paralysis of the broader system (see also Gualtieri 2001).

Under Alessandro Natta (who replaced Berlinguer after his premature death in 1984) these problems were not addressed, and his subsequent resignation was the first from a P.C.I. leader in response to an electoral defeat (in local elections in 1988, following a poor performance in the national elections the year before). His replacement, Achille Occhetto, recognized the dimensions of the P.C.I.'s crisis, and took immediate action to address it.

### The P.C.I. in the late 1980s: from 'New Party' to 'New Party'

Even if now largely overlooked in the literature, the reforms Occhetto proposed in 1988 and which he largely achieved at the party's 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of March 1989, were unprecedented. The very language he used in framing the initial proposals (two Togliattian phrases from 1944: 'new party' and 'new course') confirmed that, for Occhetto, the P.C.I.'s crisis was not strategic as such. It was an identity crisis, and it was time for the party to 'cross the ford' (Bull 1989). Indeed, if the strength of the P.C.I. had, until then, apparently been based on its strategic 'continuity', Occhetto made clear that what was needed was 'discontinuity' in the form of an explicit break with the past (Bull 1991b, 27).

The Congress of March 1989 marked the end of the 'third way' as an ideological foundation for resolving the problems of capitalist society.<sup>6</sup> The market economy and capital accumulation were accepted as fundamental features of the system, and the task for the P.C.I. was how to 'guide' capitalism to respond to issues such as poverty and the environment. The 'Italian road to socialism' was effectively turned on its head: while this had, until then, been predicated on the idea of democratic means to achieve socialist goals, the goal was now democracy, which could be achieved through means inspired by 'socialist ideals'. It was described as a '*via del socialismo*' (a socialist road, as opposed to a road to socialism). The party's essential reference point was the European left, and the party was declared to be 'a non-ideological organization', Occhetto even suggesting that the name of the party was not sacrosanct. References to Lenin, Gramsci and Togliatti were removed from the new party statute, and only one phrase from Marx remained ('the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all').

Democratic centralism was formally dismantled. The new party statute allowed party members publicly to criticize the party line and to use the party's facilities for 'the free expression and circulation of ideas'. The rights of minorities were protected through guaranteed representation on the party's Central Committee, and the party's leadership was to be based on a secret ballot (an issue on which the leadership was divided and had proposed an alternative compromise, which was overturned through amendment). The single remaining trace of democratic centralism, a ban on 'organized fractions', stood like a folly in a field, a dead symbol of a by-gone era.

Strategically, the Congress also marked the end of any forms of 'consocialism' (a reference to the period of the Historic Compromise) and a commitment to a 'Euro-left' 'alternative'. This was flexible: it might be centred around the P.S.I. and the 'lay' centre parties with European social democracy as its reference point, but could also be stretched to include social movements, the more radical elements of the Catholic world and 'Gorbachevism'.

For some influential observers the Congress marked the 'social democratization' of the P.C.I., with the change in name of the party now a mere formality (e.g. Scalfari 1989). From hindsight, of course, we can see that this was not the case. Had it been so, then the collapse of the communist regimes would not have had the dramatic impact on the P.C.I. that it did. Had it been so, then Occhetto's decision to dissolve the P.C.I. a mere eight months later would surely not have been necessary. The reality was that Occhetto's reforms brought the P.C.I. to the brink of social democratization, but the process was incomplete, pending further action on two remaining issues in a projected second phase of the reform programme (which was subsequently cut short by international events).

First, the P.C.I.'s international alignment remained ambivalent, since while insisting that European social democracy was its main reference point, it continued to court Gorbachev whose goal was expressly to rebuild 'existing' socialism, not accept capitalism. The leadership was evidently not yet prepared to abandon support of this effort. The P.C.I. did not table an application to join the Socialist International, seeking observer status only, Occhetto explaining that it might undermine the relations the party was trying to build. Second, for all the changes to the party statute, the party's seventy year communist heritage remained intact: its reference points, its symbols and its name. The party leadership had attempted to drop the hammer and sickle, but this had been rejected by the Congress.

The sense of an incomplete project is reinforced if one looks at the responses to the achievements of the Congress of the party's main factions. On the one hand, Occhetto had achieved his reforms while holding the party leadership, membership and electorate apparently intact. In the first election of a leader by secret ballot in the P.C.I.'s history Occhetto obtained 235 votes, with only two votes against and six abstentions. It was accompanied by a generational change in the leadership, with Occhetto's so-called 'colonels' securing most of the positions in the *direzione* (leadership body).

On the other hand, the public positions of the different factions suggested that there was, in fact, still a lot to play for. Apart from the pro-Soviet wing under Armando Cossutta, which declared the P.C.I. no longer communist before the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress even began and formed a breakaway communist party (Communist Refoundation) immediately at its end, the strongest critique came from Giorgio Amendola, leader of the *miglioristi* (who were long

committed to the social democratization of the party). Amendola, although giving qualified approval, did not think that Occhetto had gone far and fast enough, arguing that several important clarifications were still needed. The most significant declaration of support came from the Ingrao Left, the faction that had, for many years, been seeking a radicalization (or at least preventing a deradicalization) of the party line. Pietro Ingrao, while supporting the changes in principle, placed great emphasis on the 'movimentista' element of the 'alternative' and on the importance of a party with a communist identity that maintained a critique of the capitalist system.

These internal tensions were brutally exposed when the communist regimes collapsed a few months after the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress. That event changed the appearance of the P.C.I.'s programme of reform, highlighting its ambiguities. While the P.C.I. had remained wedded to supporting Gorbachev in his attempt to reform socialism, what happened in central and eastern Europe was the throwing out of socialism altogether. While the P.C.I. continued to maintain its name, symbols and heritage intact, the ruling communist parties, starting with the Hungarian, began to shed theirs overnight and seek membership of the Socialist International. Praised in the spring for his boldness, Occhetto found himself by the autumn being type-cast as the leader of a dogmatic communist party which could not embrace change. If Occhetto had brought the P.C.I. closer to the other bank of the ford than any other leader, the collapse of the communist regimes had the effect of changing the nature of the ford itself, with the party drifting backwards as a consequence. And having to decide how to respond to these international events shattered the unity that Occhetto had managed to achieve at the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress.

At the same time, the truly radical reforms achieved at the Congress made Occhetto's dramatic proposal in response to the collapse of the communist regimes both logical and possible.<sup>7</sup> Continuing with his existing reform programme in the way intended (a gradual roll out through the party sections) was hardly viable: that would effectively amount to not responding at all (or sliding backwards) in relation to the changes in the international situation. And Occhetto also then stood to lose everything he had gained. It would also not resolve the party's deep internal divisions. In the changed situation, the most viable alternative was to accelerate the programme of reform, cutting short the traditional channels of change in the party.

Ironically, in the space of a single year (in autumn 1988 and then in autumn 1989) Occhetto made the same proposal twice: that of creating a 'new party'. Yet, while the goals of both may ultimately have been the same (it remains unclear how the 1988 reform would have ended up had the international events of 1989 not occurred), their conception and means were very different. The first was conceived and processed through the conventional party processes by which reform was managed, and was,

for all its achievements, couched in language that was designed to appeal to all factions and so maintain the party's unity. The second cut short the traditional party channels through an explicit and radical proposal in order to generate momentum behind it, a method rarely used before (Berlinguer had done the same to launch the Historic Compromise). If the first made significant progress towards resolving the party's identity crisis while maintaining the unity of the party intact, the second forced a decision on that identity and fractured the party's unity. If the first was entering its second phase before being cut short, the second produced an 18 month transition whose outcome would see the end of the P.C.I.

It is tempting to see the second as more radical than the first. Yet, placed in the context of the party's crisis in the 1980s and the new international situation that arose in 1989, it could be argued that the comparison is ill-founded. The second proposal is only really comprehensible in the context of the first, as an acceleration of the same programme of reform. In 1988, no leader before Occhetto had taken the P.C.I. closer to 'crossing the ford' through a programme of reform aimed at a genuine 'refounding' of the party. At the same time, it was a process that remained incomplete. The P.C.I., for all the changes, remained a communist party. Yet, it was precisely the achievement of those changes which placed Occhetto in a position, a year later, where he could make a decision to accelerate the completion of the reform in a very different international setting.

## Conclusion

There are few who would doubt the significant role that the dissolution of the P.C.I. had on the denouement of the Italian parties and party system. In seeking to explain that decision, the conventional wisdom in the literature is that it was caused by external, international events: the collapse of the communist regimes in central and eastern Europe. From there, it is a short step to concluding that the Italian party system itself was largely victim to the collapse of those regimes. This is not to deny that international events played a significant role. However, the key question concerns not so much those events as the role played by the programme of reform of the P.C.I. launched by Occhetto in 1988 (in response to the P.C.I.'s crisis in the 1980s), and how much that influenced his decision to respond to those events in the way he did. The goals of Occhetto's reform programme of 1988 were essentially the same as the goals he set out to achieve a year later. The difference was focused on the means to achieve them. The first was gradual and was being processed through the traditional party channels, where it met, in its second phase, resistance; the second was sudden and short-

cut party channels, less to overcome the resistance than to meet it head on, using the changed international situation to do so. International events therefore acted as a catalyst, accelerating a pre-existing programme of reform.

It was precisely the rapidity and dramatic nature of the changes in the international situation which effectively obliterated memory of Occhetto's earlier reform programme. Largely overlooked and forgotten, it needs to be rescued, and the P.C.I.'s role as an independent agency of change in the late 1980s reasserted – true, the party's final act was in response to external events, but the specific choice of dissolution was made rational, logical and possible by the changes that had already happened to the P.C.I. a year earlier in response to the party's own crisis in the 1980s.

## Notes

- 1 The detail of Occhetto's report is contained in *L'Unità* 14 November 1989.
- 2 Which is not to suggest that these parties remained unchanged in the longer term (the impact was much more than about name changes, and all communist parties had to evolve in the new international situation), but this is not strictly relevant to the argument being addressed here concerning the immediate response of the parties making up the west European communist movement.
- 3 This was, of course, the argument articulated inside the party by many of those on the left who opposed Occhetto's proposal.
- 4 And it could be argued that those stakes were lost in both the short (Ignazi 1992) and longer terms (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017).
- 5 Pons (2004, 226–227) goes as far as to argue that the *strappo* was largely rhetorical on the part of Berlinguer.
- 6 For a detailed analysis of the changes carried through at the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress see Bull (1991b).
- 7 For an appraisal of Occhetto's options, see Bull (2000, 72–75).

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