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How to cite

STRAZZERI, Victor. The Interweaving: Communist Women and Feminism in 1970s Italy. In: Contemporary European history, 2023, p. 1–17. doi: 10.1017/s0960777322001011

This publication URL: https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:178980
Publication DOI: 10.1017/s0960777322001011

Contemporary European History (2023), page 1 of 17
doi:10.1017/S0960777322001011

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

The Interweaving: Communist Women and Feminism in 1970s Italy

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The Italian Communist Party's peak of popularity in the mid-1970s, during its so-called 'Eurocommunist' turn, coincided with a surge of feminist struggles in Italy. While scholarship has treated Communist Party politics and feminism as unrelated historical phenomena, this article provides evidence for their multi-layered 'interweaving'. The term was employed by PCI women themselves to conceptualise how struggles against social and gender inequalities interlock, but also to stress that overcoming women's oppression in Italian society (and beyond) presupposed a reckoning with male dominance – and the peripheral role of the 'women's question' – within their party. The ensuing intra-party debate, reconstructed through sources from the turning-point year of 1976, is a revealing instance of PCI activists' reception of 1970s feminism.

LYSISTRATA: If you had any common sense, you'd deal with everything the way we do when we handle yarn. (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, trans. Ian Johnston)

Introduction: 'Interweaving' Communism and Feminism in 1970s Italy

When Adriana Seroni (1922–84) gave the opening address to the delegates of the Sixth National Conference of Communist Women, held between 20 and 22 February 1976 in Milan, the unavoidable topic was how the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano* [PCI]), and especially its Women's Section (*Sezione Femminile*), the highest instance in charge of the 'women's question', would confront the transformation of the feminist movement into a mass phenomenon in Italy. After five protest-filled years on the streets, feminism had erupted into the country's public debate and political arena (unsettling both), leading to the formation of a vast array of collectives from Trento to Gela, Sicily, by the mid-1970s. A reckoning was due as feminist groups often defined their goals and methods in direct contrast to those of the so-called 'historical' left, especially the PCI. According to an influential feminist voice that same year, whereas communists aimed for the less far-reaching goal of women's *emancipation*, based on partial demands within the established order that were aligned with the '[sexual] roles assigned by capitalism', feminists' struggle for *liberation* was not 'absorbable by any reform of the system, capitalist or "socialist"'. By departing from the experience of 'being a woman . . . from our own sexual condition and unfurling it globally', feminism had 'much deeper roots and broader horizons'.[1]

Despite feminists' radical critique of her party, Seroni, the head of the Women's Section, painted a surprisingly positive picture of what she termed 'this new impetus of Italian women, full of

1 Michi Staderini, 'Secondo Noi [Editorial]', *Differenze*, 1 (Jun. 1976), 3–6. Pia Candinas, who was present during *Differenze*'s inception and a few of its issues thereafter, informed me in June 2021 that Michi (or Miki) Staderini (1943–94) was the author of the (anonymous) piece.

expectations, contentiousness and hopes'.[2] She called on the delegates at the Sixth Conference to therefore take adequate stock of what was transpiring in Italian society. The entry of this 'new emergent force into the scene with its ideas, aspirations, with its new desire to struggle', she remarked, 'cannot be discouraged nor disappointed, or we risk a failure, an impediment and a serious limitation within our democratic development'.[3]

Drawing on archival sources and party publications, this article aims to approach some of the little-known ramifications of the striking fact that the peak of electoral popularity and social prestige of the PCI in the mid-1970s coincided with the moment of highest intensity in feminist struggles in the Italian context. While almost always regarded as separate historical phenomena – and approached by different sets of scholars – this contribution provides evidence for what was, in fact, a case of *intreccio* or multi-layered 'interweaving': of Eurocommunism and 'second-wave' feminism, of party and movement, of the struggle against gender as well as class inequalities, of striving for change at the level of structures and institutions, and in everyday life.

The '*intreccio*' was a recurrent motif in the sources consulted for this article; female communist activists referenced it, for instance, to underline 'the limits in the way the struggle for [women's] emancipation through labour [was] conceived' in the PCI, i.e. the almost exclusive emphasis on entry into the workforce as the main lever for overcoming women's subaltern role in Italian society. According to PCI cadre Licia Perelli, the effort to 'overcome prejudices and old encrustations' regarding women within the party would fall short if *one-sided* approaches to the 'women's question' remained in place. She argued, instead, for a stance able to 'grasp the narrow links of women's liberation in economic, social and civil relations'. This 'work of [re]orientation within the party', she stressed, also meant assuring that 'proposals of women workers' were effectively 'integrated into [the PCI's] general politics'.[4]

Taking a cue from Perelli, this article aims to reconstruct two interrelated dimensions of the PCI's debate on the 'women's question', namely, its programmatic and organisational facets, during a conjuncture – the years 1974–7 – which saw the party begin in earnest to settle accounts with the feminist challenge to its politics. Perelli had called for this two-pronged effort while speaking before a convention of communist women workers (*operaie*), suggesting the broad resonance of these issues amongst members. My goal is to reflect this by examining sources featuring not only PCI leading cadre, but also voices emanating from closer to the rank-and-file. The transcripts of the Sixth Conference of 1976 and especially of its 'Women and the Party' commission provide, in this regard, an ideal conduit to the broad spectrum of female militant experiences existing within the PCI: the party counted, in 1976, over 435,000 female members (making up 24 per cent of the total).[5] My analysis indicates that the reception of feminist ideas by communist activists from the mid-1970s onwards led not only to a questioning of the PCI's postwar policies on the 'women's question', but also to a reckoning with male dominance – and the consequent subaltern role of women and their struggles – within the party itself.

As Maud Bracke recently stressed, a 'systematic overview of the ways in which the feminist agenda . . . challenged the culture, traditions and the program of the Marxist left' in 1970s and 1980s Italy remains an open task in the scholarship.[6] That challenge extended beyond the PCI; its impact ranged from 'extra-parliamentary' left formations, to trade unions and mass women's organisations, most notably the communist-led Union of Italian Women (*Unione Donne Italiane* [UDI]). While women who identified as communists were active in all these spaces, and while assessing the specific reception of feminism within them are compelling tasks, this contribution will focus on 'card-carrying'

2 Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), *VI Conferenza Nazionale Delle Donne Comuniste: Atti* (Milano, 1976), 35.

3 Ibid., 35–6.

4 Minutes, 25–6 June 1977, Fondazione Gramsci (FG), Archivio Partito Comunista Italiano (APCI), *Convegno nazionale delle operaie comuniste, Milano, 25-26 giugno 1977 (relazione della compagna Licia Perelli)*, 1311 (Sezione Femminile), b. 400, f. 360, 21–2.

5 Celso Ghini, 'Quante eravamo, quante siamo', *Donne e politica* 62 (1981), 20.

6 Maud Anne Bracke, 'Una Rivoluzione Incompiuta: la Sfida del Femminismo negli Anni Settanta e Ottanta', in Silvio Pons, ed., *Il Comunismo Italiano nella Storia del Novecento* (Rome: Viella, 2021), 517.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

female members of the PCI. Moreover, while it was possible for party women to be simultaneously active in the UDI and/or the communist-led unions, in what Eloisa Betti termed a '"double" or even "triple" political belonging',[7] I will not contemplate these organisations as they were open to non-party and otherwise non-communist activists, and had a dynamic of their own. Put differently, despite their portrayal as mere PCI 'transmission belts', the question of the UDI's or the communist union movement's relationship to 1970s feminism in Italy merits dedicated research efforts. This contribution, in turn, centres on the question of how feminism was refracted by the peculiar female communist identity *forged within and linked to the PCI*.

My analysis of the trajectory of this particular historical actor, the female Communist Party activist, a hitherto mostly overlooked subject in PCI history, suggests that the undercurrents of change within Italy's 'blocked democracy' were not restricted to civil society and the movement landscape after 1968, but infused one of the pillars of what Silvio Pons termed a 'Cold War Republic'.[8]

The PCI and the 'Women's Question': From the Postwar 'Rebirth' to the Decline of 'Emancipationist' Politics (1944–68)

Adriana Seroni joined the PCI as a twenty-two-year-old in Florence in 1944 and would steadily rise through its ranks until becoming one of the few women in the leadership, as head of the Women's Section, in 1968.[9] Like many Italian women born in the 1920s and politicised through their participation in antifascist resistance, she had chosen to join the communists.[10] As Seroni stressed in 1973, in the breadth and intensity of female wartime partisan engagement 'Togliatti recognized an impulse towards emancipation which [his political proposal] aimed to harness in full.'[11] Hence his affirmation, in a noted 1945 speech,[12] that women would play a pivotal role in Italy's democratic renewal through broad political participation. The conduit of this effort would not be 'a single party or even a single class', Togliatti stressed; hence his call for the UDI, founded in 1944, to be the main 'instrument of struggle of all women for the achievement of their rights and freedom' and cautioning against its reduction to a 'branch of the communist party'.[13] While the UDI would effectively develop into a mass organisation in the postwar years and include socialists and independents throughout its history, it would ultimately fail to evolve into a broad unifying platform due to its identification with the Communist Party and the Cold War dynamics that set in soon after its emergence.[14]

Togliatti's postwar strategy equally extended a peculiar role for female militancy within the framework of the PCI. Contrary to conventional Communist Party (CP) practice internationally, female

7 'Generations of Italian Communist Women and the Making of a Women's Rights Agenda in the Cold War (1945–68): Historiography, Memory, and New Archival Evidence', in Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik, eds., *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2020), 88.

8 Silvio Pons, 'Cold War Republic: The "External Constraint" in Italy during the 1970s', in Antonio Varsori and Benedetto Zaccaria, eds., *Italy in the International System from Détente to the End of the Cold War: The Underrated Ally* (Cham: Springer, 2018), 35–67.

9 For an illuminating profile of Adriana Seroni, see Sara Ventroni, 'Adriana Seroni: Profilo Politico e Intellettuale', in *La Modernità di Adriana Seroni. Una Comunista di Frontiera* (Rome: Camera dei Deputati, 2015), 35–66.

10 See Molly Tambor, 'Le Donne e la Politica', in Pons, ed., *Il Comunismo*, 173–4.

11 Adriana Seroni, 'La Questione Femminile nella Storia Italiana: Dal Risorgimento alla Liberazione', in Enzo Rava, ed., *La Questione Femminile* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1977), 56.

12 Palmiro Togliatti, 'L'emancipazione della Donna', in Graziella Falconi, ed., *Donne Comuniste: Antologia di Scritti e Discorsi* (Rome: C. Salemi, 1989), 45.

13 Togliatti, 'L'emancipazione', 46–7.

14 Most Catholic women converged to the Italian Women's Centre (*Centro Italiano Femminile*; CIF), also founded in 1944. For a contextualisation of the UDI's and the CIF's emergence and early trajectory, see Franca Cosmai, *L'Unione Donne Italiane e il Centro Italiano Femminile dalla Resistenza agli anni Sessanta tra centro e periferia (1943–1964)*, PhD Thesis, Padova: Università degli studi di Padova, 40–8 and Molly Tambor, 'Red Saints: Gendering the Cold War, Italy 1943–1953', *Cold War History*, 10, 3 (2010), 433–5. For the interface between the UDI and socialist states' women's organisations, see Betti, 'Generations', 87–92.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

party members were to be organised in workplace or territorial 'Women's Cells'. As Fiamma Lussana has highlighted, this organisational concept was a direct extension of the notion that 'to truly become citizens, women had to practice politics with other women', i.e. they needed instances to 'meet and discuss that were separate from those of male comrades'.[15] As a result, the PCI's 1946 statute stipulated that female activists should '*as a rule*' be organised in 'separate and fully autonomous' Women's Cells.[16] The growth of the cells from 8,877 in 1947 to 14,043 in 1956 suggests the strategy was a success.[17] That 'separatist' organisational reality would, nevertheless, be short-lived. The PCI's VIII Congress in the crisis year of 1956 marked the decisive shift; henceforth, female militancy '*could* be organized in mixed *or* separate cells'.[18] The 1962 statute, in turn, further restricted the creation of Women's Cells to 'exceptional cases'.[19] From 1957 onwards, then, policy on the 'women's question' was to be addressed preferably within mixed Women's Commissions, one of many organisms focused on 'specific' branches of politics – e.g. education policy or the 'question' of the Italian South – thus 'preventing all possibility of Apartheid', to quote one (male) cadre's justification for the move.[20]

In the space of a decade, the PCI had hence moved from treating sexual difference as an organising principle to approaching 'women's issues' as a 'sector' of its political activity. While the shift safeguarded a dedicated platform for the 'women's question', the abandoning of 'separatist' Women's Cells coincided with the beginning of a drop in the share of female members in the PCI's ranks. From its 1955 peak of 26.93 per cent, when they made up 562,868 members, numbers hit a low of 23.06 per cent (and 365,390 activists) in 1972, though other factors, like the events of 1956 in Hungary, probably contributed to this outcome. Feminist tailwinds would finally interrupt the decline in 1973, sparking a steady rise in the share of women in the party throughout that decade.[21]

Despite the decline in the PCI's female membership from the mid-1950s onwards and the failure of the UDI to fulfil the 'unitary' role Togliatti had envisioned, a whole generation of women leveraged their militancy in these organisations and in communist-led trade unions during the postwar decades to constitute what Molly Tambor has termed 'an active citizenship'. Its main components were the struggle for legal reforms and the expansion of women's rights understood as fundamental to the achievement of 'a stable and progressive democracy'.[22] Key measures regarding access to the workforce in both the private and public sectors, alongside a range of parity and welfare regulations, were passed in the period between 1950 and 1963, when the end of the Italian 'economic miracle' led to a spike in female unemployment and labour precarity, partially interrupting the process.[23]

This reform and institutionally-centred phase of women's struggles in Italy made up the so-called 'emancipationist paradigm'. The ensuing confrontation between its communist advocates and new feminist actors boasting different premises, modes of organisation and aims in the 1970s cannot be properly understood, however, if framed along a clear-cut and mutually exclusive conceptualisation of women's 'emancipation' vis-à-vis 'liberation' struggles. Molly Tambor and Eloisa Betti have underscored recently that not only were communist women active in the UDI and the PCI in the two postwar decades far from mere '"puppets" in men's hands',[24] but that the 'women's policy'

15 Fiamma Lussana, 'La "via Italiana" all'emancipazionismo', *Critica Marxista*, 1/2 (2021), 58.
16 PCI, *Statuto del Partito Comunista Italiano* (Rome, 1946), 13, emphasis added.
17 Ghini, 'Quante eravamo', 20.
18 PCI, *Statuto del Partito Comunista Italiano* (Rome, 1957), 15.
19 PCI, *Statuto del Partito Comunista Italiano* (Rome, 1962), 12.
20 Enzo Rava, in Rava, ed., *La Questione*, 44.
21 Ghini, 'Quante', 20.
22 Tambor, 'Le Donne', 172.
23 Tambor, 'Le Donne', provides an overview of the role of PCI women in this era of reform struggles in Italy.
24 For a critique of the historiographical 'erasing of communist women from any possible feminist genealogy' in the Italian case, see Betti, 'Generations', 86ff. In the last ten years a growing number of studies have sought to break with communist women's invisibilisation and recast their relationship to feminism across geographical contexts, see Soma Marik, 'Breaking through a Double Invisibility: The Communist Women of Bengal, 1939–1948', *Critical Asian Studies*, 45, 1 (2013), 79–118; Celia Donert, 'Women's Rights in Postwar Europe: Disentangling Feminist Histories', *Past and Present*, Supplement 8 (2013), 180–202; Adriana María Valobra and Mercedes Yusta Rodrigo, eds., *Queridas*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they formulated 'did not always coincide with the party line'; in fact, it already embodied the tensions between 'communist militancy' and 'female militancy' that would erupt in the 1970s.[25] Tambor, hence, traces back the tendency of 'rupture' towards a 'new perspective on the political'[26] to as far back as the '1950s and 60s' and, more specifically, to communist women's 'awareness of an increasing gap between the emancipationist viewpoint and [their] personal and private lives'.[27] These tensions would, however, only come to a head within the PCI's ranks in the mid-1970s, catalysed by two contemporary global trends with a key epicentre in Italy, i.e. the 'Eurocommunist' turn of West European CPs and feminism's irruption into a mass phenomenon.

The Party and the Movement: The Feminist Challenge to the PCI in the Aftermath of 1968

When Adriana Seroni took the helm of the PCI's national Women's Section in 1968, the feminist 'explosion' that would shake Italy starting in 1970–1 was not yet on the horizon; 1968 was, of course, a fateful year for the PCI. Both the student revolt and events in Czechoslovakia would constitute severe trials to the 'unorthodox' status of the Italian party in the international communist movement. But the PCI's relative openness to the criticism of the youth and sincere (if limited) attempts to engage with it,[28] on the one hand, and critical stance towards the Warsaw Pact's violent interruption of the Dubček-led reform programme, on the other,[29] had prevented a major downturn in popularity and international prestige. The emergence of feminism as a mass phenomenon in the 1970s would represent just as great a challenge to what was then not only the largest communist party in the Western hemisphere, but one that prided itself for its emphasis on 'women's emancipation'. Articulating a response was all the more urgent because the first feminist formations that emerged in Italy defined their understanding of women's liberation in direct contrast to the PCI's 'emancipationism'. As Paola Stelliferi has recently stressed:

> The influence of the workers' movement tradition, from which many of the 'historical [i.e. pioneering] feminists' had come, is recognizable in the fact that the collectives that emerged in the aftermath of '68 shaped their reflection on the 'women's question' on the tenets of the labour [question], deriving the concepts of sexual exploitation and sisterhood from those of 'oppression', 'equality' and class 'solidarity'.[30]

Italian feminism's strong referentiality with regard to the left is partly rooted in the fact that the young female protagonists of the '68 uprising, as Maria Luisa Boccia recounts, would 'become the numerically most relevant component of feminism in the early 1970s'. Yet, Boccia stresses, that does not mean 1968 should be considered as 'the political and cultural origin of

Camaradas: Historias Iberoamericanas de Mujeres Comunistas (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2017); Francisca de Haan, 'Conclusion: From Communism as "Male Generational History" to a More Inclusive Narrative', in Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik, eds., *Gender*, 283–8; and Brigitte Studer, *Reisende der Weltrevolution. Eine Globalgeschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020).

25 Tambor, 'Le Donne', 172. Also in this sense, Fiammetta Balestracci, 'Il PCI, il Divorzio e il Mutamento dei Valori nell'Italia degli Anni Sessanta e Settanta', *Studi Storici*, 54, 4 (2013), 998.

26 See Maud Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968–1983* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).

27 Tambor, 'Le Donne', 172.

28 See Giulia Strippoli, *Il Partito e Il Movimento: Comunisti Europei alla Prova del Sessantotto* (Rome: Carocci, 2013), 80–102.

29 See Alexander Höbel, 'El PCI en el Movimiento Comunista: El 68 Checoslovaco y la Relación con el PCUS', in Giaime Pala and Tommaso Nencioni, eds., *El Inicio del Fin del Mito Soviético: Los Comunistas Occidentales ante la Primavera de Praga* (Mataró: El Viejo Topo, 2008), 23–90 and Silvio Pons, *I Communisti Italiani e gli Altri: Visioni e Legami Internazionali nel Mondo del Novecento* (Torino: Einaudi, 2021), 201–11.

30 'I Femminismi dall'Unità ad Oggi', in Silvia Salvatici, ed., *Storia delle Donne nell'Italia Contemporanea* (Rome: Carocci, 2022), 100.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

feminism'.[31] Recent scholarship has supported this claim, namely, that 'between feminism and the New Left there arose a dynamic of collision – rather than confrontation – so prevalent as to constitute one of the peculiarities of the Italian case'.[32]

Italy's first 'neo-feminist' collective, Demau (*Demistificazione Autoritarismo*; Demystification [of] Authoritarianism), actually predates (1966) the student and workers' revolt of the late 1960s. The goal of overcoming 'emancipation' was, nonetheless, clear; Demau's manifesto rejected, namely, the goal of 'integrating women into current society', which only reaffirmed existing gender roles and imbalances; it called, instead, for a new set of societal values to be forged as part of the 'demystification' of prevailing authoritarian ones. This was not only integral for 'women's autonomy', but for '*men's* emancipation' as well. The latter would be 'deprived of vast human possibilities' if they failed to appropriate a set of values 'they had so far either belittled or envied as "feminine"'.[33] In other words, beyond a critique of emancipationism's reformist aims, Demau activists challenged the boundaries of the female 'specificity' it was predicated upon, hence bringing masculinity into the frame.

Rivolta Femminile (Women's Revolt) analogously underscored the limits of struggles for equality that left the prevailing gender order intact. As its foundational manifesto of 1970 stated: 'For a woman, liberating herself does not mean accepting the same life as men's, because it is unliveable'; moreover, while affirming that 'redistributive parity is our right', it questioned the impact of 'wage parity when we already carry the burden of hours of domestic labour'.[34] The recentring of the domestic sphere was, in turn, leveraged by the Padova-based group *Lotta femminista* (Feminist Struggle), to highlight women as engenders of a commodity 'unlike any other produced under capitalism', namely, 'human beings' – and in particular 'the worker'[35] – a status the group reframed from a source of subalternity to one of female *power*. Stressing the latter's potentiality, Mariarosa Dalla Costa stated that, while the '[women's] liberation movement forged its own autonomous mode of existence against the left and the student movement', it did so 'on a terrain proposed by them'.[36]

Dalla Costa's insight is suggestive for Italian 'neo-feminism' more broadly; whether self-identifying with left-wing politics or not, feminist activists had to somehow reckon with the legacies of the workers' movement to their own efforts. For *Lotta Femminista*, this meant a shift of perspective within the Marxist frame that raised the 'household' to the privileged terrain of social struggle and women to 'the central figure[s] of social subversion'.[37] Along those lines, the feminist student collectives at the University of Trento headlined their manifesto with the slogan 'There is no revolution without women's liberation' in 1971.[38] For *Rivolta*'s founders, in turn, the break with the left was more significant: 'Marxism had sold us out to a hypothetical revolution'.[39]

This conflictive interface between left-wing politics and 'neo-feminism' in Italy was also embodied in activist biographies. Lia Cigarini (b. 1937), one of the main figures behind Demau and Milan's *Libreria delle Donne* (Women's Bookshop), had been a leading cadre in the FGCI, the Communist Party youth, in the late-1950s.[40] Prominent members of *Rivolta*, such as artist Carla Accardi (1924–2014) and art

31 See Maria Luisa Boccia, 'Uguaglianza/Differenza, la Rottura Politica del Femminismo' (*'Il lungo Sessantotto', Convegno die Rifondazione Comunista*, Rome, 2018), available at https://centroriformastato.it/uguaglianza-differenza-la-rottura-politica-del-femminismo/ (last visited Feb. 2023).

32 Stelliferi, 'I Femminismi', 99.

33 'Manifesto Programmatico del Grupo Demau', in Rosalba Spagnoletti, ed., *I Movimenti Femministi in Italia* (Rome: Samonà e Savelli, 1971), 26–8.

34 'Manifesto di Rivolta femminile', in Spagnoletti, ed., *I Movimenti*, 90–1.

35 Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Potere Femminile e Sovversione Sociale* (Padova: Marsilio, 1972), 8. The Padova formation went on to found the Italian chapter of the 'International Wages for Housework Campaign' .

36 Dalla Costa, *Potere*, 10.

37 Ibid.

38 'Non c'è rivoluzione senza liberazione della donna', in Spagnoletti, ed., *I Movimenti*, 158.

39 'Manifesto di Rivolta', in Spagnoletti, ed., *I Movimenti*, 92

40 See Cigarini's interview in Franca Chiaromonti and Fulvia Bandoli, eds., *Al Lavoro e alla Lotta: le Parole del Pci* (Rome: Harpo, 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

critic Carla Lonzi (1931–82), had been PCI members in the mid-1950s, albeit briefly.[41] Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Leopoldina Fortunati founded *Lotta Femminista* after breaking with left-wing formation *Potere Operaio*.

The Marxist tradition was a reference point to Italian feminists even when no such previous affiliations existed, as in the case of the radical liberals behind the organisation *Movimento di Liberazione della Donna* (Women's Liberation Movement: MLD). In a foundational document from 1971, MLD activists recognise that 'the socialist movement' pioneeringly 'understood the links between the sexual and economic regimes'. Nevertheless, it considered socialists' 'concrete and effective engagement . . . towards women's liberation' to be historically lacking.[42] The causes were the subalternity of women's struggles in party programmes and of female activists vis-à-vis male leadership: 'if women continue to delegate "the fully-fledged revolution" to their [male] comrades, they risk being excluded from a more comprehensive revolutionary process and finding themselves in the historical mechanism of subservience once again'.[43]

This overview of Italian feminism's critical referentiality with regard to left-wing traditions evokes the less overt but equally consequential opposite dimension of the interface. In other words, it raises the question of the left's and, in particular, the PCI's stance on 'neo-feminism'.

The Feminist Movement as Ally in the Context of the PCI's 'Eurocommunist' Turn

Adriana Seroni was well aware of the criticism directed at her party by feminist collectives. In a 1975 article, she displays familiarity with the formations referred to above and their platforms, tracing back their initial impulse to 'experiences within the student movement and extra-parliamentary groups', most notably their 'failure with regards to the women's question';[44] a genesis, which she claims had conditioned feminists' search for autonomy and focus on the interpersonal dimensions of sexual oppression. Seroni laments the generalisation of this 'critique to the "whole" left and of "all" men',[45] but acknowledges feminists' rejection of 'a form of progress offered from above' amounting to an '"integration into the male world"' and consequent struggle for new 'values and societal models' and 'a new way of doing politics'.[46] While stressing the limits of a 'hypothesis' of liberation predicated on 'cultural, rather than political' change,[47] Seroni ultimately calls on the workers' movement to confront the issues raised by 'neo-feminists' in full 'awareness that there is nothing sectorial about them'.[48]

Seroni would reprise this stance of conditional openness at the Sixth Conference of 1976. Cautiously envisioning a possible alliance, Seroni appealed to her comrades 'not to consider ourselves custodians of the truth', while noting that others – i.e. feminist activists – should not behave as such either.[49] She struck, in fact, a tone of defiant optimism with regard to the PCI's prospects in an Italian context reshaped by the rise of feminism:

> We do not share the negativistic and inaccurate theses of those who say that women in Italy do not count for anything. They do count and have done so in the struggles. They have counted in

41 See Accardi's interview with Paolo Vagheggi in 2004, available at http://archivioaccardisanfilippo.it/site/?page_id=927 (last visited Feb. 2023). Carla Lonzi's PCI membership card for the year 1955 is held, alongside other documents of her party activities in Florence up to late 1956, in her archives at Rome's *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea* (catalogued under IT-GNAM-ST0023-000488, f. 11).

42 'Relazione del Collettivo Romano al I Congresso Nazionale del M.L.D.', in Spagnoletti, ed., *I Movimenti*, 78.

43 'Relazione', 79.

44 Adriana Seroni, 'Ragioni e Torti del Femminismo', in Falconi, ed., *Donne*, 119.

45 Ibid., 119.

46 Ibid., 121.

47 Seroni, 'Ragioni', 121.

48 Ibid., 127.

49 PCI, *VI Conferenza: Atti*, 35.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> three decades of democratic life and on both 12 May and 15 June. They count more and, if I may say so, thanks above all to the Communist Party.[50]

Seroni seemed, in other words, confident that communists would continue to play a central role in the Italian women's movement. The *combined* impact of the dates she alluded to helps explain this outlook. The first, 12 May 1974, marked the victory of the 'no' vote in the abrogative referendum on the new divorce law. The right to divorce had been approved in December 1970 after a protracted legislative battle that pitted socialists, communists, liberals and progressive Catholics against the more entrenched segments of Christian Democracy and the neofascist far-right. The referendum of 1974 marked its resounding ratification – 59.3 per cent to 40.7 per cent on an 88 per cent turnout[51] – in a watershed moment for Italian politics. The electorate – and especially its female component – had proven much less conservative than expected; moreover, the 'no' campaign saw 'neo-feminist' collectives struggle alongside 'historical' women's organisations – especially the UDI – as well as the parliamentary parties. For the PCI, in turn, it marked the final chapter of a notorious delay in facing the question of divorce.[52] From its participation in Italy's constitutional assembly (1946–8) up to its IX Congress (1965), the party had cultivated a fairly traditional image of the family and its role, steering clear of the issue of 'marriage dissolution' for fear of alienating Catholics.[53] The referendum showed PCI leadership had been too slow to revise its official position and vindicated those female party activists who had been calling for a renewed stance on matters of the family for two decades.[54]

The second date, 15 June 1975, marks the latest local and provincial elections in Italy. It saw considerable gains by all parties of the left (which went from 40.1 per cent to 45.7 per cent combined); the PCI registered a more than 5 per cent jump with regard to the previous vote, with even higher growth in many key provinces and large cities.[55] Hence the optimism of long-time party activist Seroni in early 1976; if a decisive triumph for the feminist movement could be followed by an historic rise of the left in the polls, then she could be confident that the PCI's wager on a broad social alliance for profound, if gradual, change achieved through democratic means was on the right track.

While this alliance strategy had been a hallmark of Togliatti's 'Italian road to socialism' since the postwar period and especially the crisis year of 1956,[56] new party secretary Enrico Berlinguer introduced important new wrinkles to the platform, especially in light of a transformed (geo)political context. As Maud Bracke has highlighted, by the mid-1970s, a 'moment of deep and multiple conflicts in the world communist movement' had set in, opening up space for the formation of a relatively autonomous PCI-led 'West European communist cluster'. The combination of *détente* (i.e. an easing of tensions) between the superpowers and of profound political shifts in the continent, e.g. the end of the Portuguese dictatorship and onset of transition to democracy in Spain, alongside the electoral surge of the left within Italy and France in particular, signalled the possible 'end of the domestic cold wars in these countries'.[57] As a result, 'Eurocommunism', as the Berlinguer-led PCI's strategy of peaceful

50 Ibid., 36.

51 Fiamma Lussana, *L'Italia del Divorzio: La Battaglia fra Stato, Chiesa e Gente Comune (1946–1974)* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2014), 167–8.

52 See Tambor, 'Le Donne', 184–5 and Balestracci 'Il PCI', 995–1006, 1010–19.

53 Balestracci, 'Il PCI', 1002.

54 The issue of the PCI's stance on the family and divorce is illustrative of the need to account for divergences between the stances of the (majority) male leadership and female party activists as well as between communists' public positions and 'private' attitudes. Party secretaries Togliatti and Longo notoriously ended their own marriages – culminating in the questionable marginalisation of their former partners and key PCI figures Rita Montagnana and Teresa Noce, respectively – while blocking any change to the party's stance on divorce and family law. See Tambor, 'Le Donne', 184–5.

55 See *l'Unità*, 22 June 1975, 1–2.

56 Aldo Agosti, *Palmiro Togliatti: A Biography* (London: I B Tauris, 2008), 245.

57 Maud Bracke, *Which Socialism, Whose Détente?* (Budapest: CUP Press, 2007), 324. Also in this sense, Pons, *I Communisti*, 222.

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transition to socialism would be termed once he began advocating it as a viable road to power for all major West European CPs, would forcefully enter the political agenda and media discourse by 1975–6.

A key but mostly overlooked facet of the PCI's 'Eurocommunist' turn[58] is Berlinguer's reinterpretation of Togliatti's alliance concept, enlarging it beyond the party spectrum to encompass emerging social movements in the post-1968 setting. This extended to building a greater level of convergence between the party and a broad array of movements for women's liberation, as Berlinguer made clear in his closing address to the Conference of Communist Parties of Capitalist Europe on Women's Condition, held in Rome on 17 November 1974. The decision to organise the event was itself a testament of the willingness of a portion of CPs to reassess their policies on the 'women's question' as the impact of the global rise of feminism was acutely felt in West European countries such as the host Italy (the divorce referendum had taken place six months before). Significantly, the conference was a direct ramification of what is regarded as a launching pad for the PCI-led Eurocommunist turn, i.e. the Conference of the Communist Parties of Capitalist Europe held in Brussels between 26 and 28 January 1974.[59]

In his Rome address, Berlinguer stressed that, while women's struggle against the 'condition of oppression and subalternity they were subjected to [was] as old as capitalism', the 'new fact of our times . . . is that this rebellion, this struggle is no longer restricted to vanguards' and had become 'a mass phenomenon'.[60] In the context of the global economic downturn of the 1970s, it was, therefore, the 'extreme exacerbation' of 'other major issues, foregrounded by the question of women's emancipation' alongside the 'desire of peoples and countries of the third world to liberate themselves from all forms of pillage and exploitation' that led Berlinguer to conclude that a general crisis of the capitalist system was afoot.[61] In that scenario, the working class could potentially tap into the 'potentiality of struggle' of 'all other progressive social forces' with the aim of heralding a democratic transition to socialism; alongside decolonisation struggles, the 'movement for women's emancipation' occupied 'a prominent position' in this regard, considering it created a 'very large terrain of convergence for women of the most diverse orientations and aspirations'.[62] This included the rise of 'feminist movements with new characteristics', whose ideological differences with the labour and communist movements and 'middle-class' character, as Berlinguer understood it, 'did not diminish their social importance and did not exempt us [communists] from a confrontation, and whenever possible from a dialog with movements of this nature'.[63]

In terms of Eurocommunism's genealogy, the central roles of decolonisation and the worldwide rise in women's struggles have so far been mostly overlooked in the scholarship.[64] It is illustrative to note that Berlinguer drew analogies between both phenomena: '"A people that oppresses another people cannot

58 For a systematic review of the latest research on Eurocommunism (and its gaps), see Victor Strazzeri, 'Forging Socialism through Democracy: A Critical Review Survey of Literature on Eurocommunism', *Twentieth Century Communism*, 17 (2019), 26–66.

59 See Lily Marcou, *Le mouvement communiste international depuis 1945* (Vendôme: PUF, 1980), 102–5. As Marcou details, there was a cascade of follow-up events to the Brussels conference organised by West European CPs on specific topics ranging from multinational corporations to youth rights between 1974 and 1977. Notably, the Rome conference on 'women's condition' was the very first after Brussels (see Marcou, *Le mouvement*, 103–4).

60 Enrico Berlinguer, 'La Spinta di Trasformazione del Movimento di Emancipazione della Donna nell'Occidente Capitalistico', in Antonio Tatò, ed., *La 'Questione Comunista' 1969–1975* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1975), vol. 2, 810.

61 Berlinguer, 'La Spinta', 807. On Berlinguer's attitude to decolonisation in the mid-1970s, see Pons, *I Communisti*, 229–30.

62 Berlinguer, 'La Spinta', 813.

63 Ibid., 810–11.

64 See Strazzeri, 'Forging', 40–54. The research landscape is changing. On the PCI's relationship to the Third World movement and decolonisation, besides Silvio Pons's latest effort, see Marco di Maggio and Gabriele Siracusano, 'Decolonizzazione e Terzo Mondo', in Silvio Pons, ed., *Il Comunismo*, 307–17. Though not focused on Eurocommunism, the PCI's relationship with 'neo-feminism' in the 1970s has been approached in Bracke, 'Una rivoluzione', 517–37 and in Eleonora Forenza's PhD Thesis, *Il politico è personale. Storie di Donne e Soggettività Femministe nel Partito Comunista Italiano (1970–1991)* (Università 'L'Orientale' di Napoli, 2016).

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be free", wrote Marx; a statement that could be paraphrased as: a man who oppresses a woman cannot be free', he declared in an interview.[65] The articulation of this viewpoint helps explain why Berlinguer raised the imperative of negotiating 'difference and convergence' with feminists. This meant that

> we communists must, above all, strive so that every impulse, every demand, every particular struggle of women and of their various movements and associations for emancipation converge unitarily in that general revolt impelling the transformation of society in its entirety on the pathway to socialism.[66]

This generic 'we' was addressed above all to PCI women, who took on a mediating role between feminists on one side, and their male comrades – 'more than a few' of which, as Berlinguer himself conceded, still fell prey to 'remnants of old prejudices' – on the other.[67] From the mid-1970s, this bridge-building work increasingly encompassed the practice of 'double militancy', i.e. joining feminist collectives so as to directly 'interweave' party and movement – a stance the PCI would (tacitly) allow. The resulting drive to struggle against various manifestations of sexism not only in Italian society but within the party itself suggests that the interface of the PCI (and especially its female activists) with feminism in the 1970s went beyond a matter of political strategy. It prompted many women in the party to question what it meant to be a communist and, moreover, how this partisanship should be coherently embodied in their everyday militancy. 'For the communist woman', wrote feminist and PCI activist Laura Lilli, 'true double militancy . . . is not how to reconcile party and [feminist] group, but *how to live within the party*'.[68] That meant overcoming what Agnese de Donato called 'bifurcated' lives:[69] as communists and feminists, as members of party and movement, as workers and care-givers, as women and comrades.

The Sixth National Conference of Communist Women of February 1976 was, in this regard, a watershed moment, not only in terms of female activists' attempt to break with prevailing binaries and 'bifurcations', but also regarding the question of how to organise 'interwoven' *struggles* within the framework of the party. The minutes from the event suggest a widespread dissatisfaction with the party's stance towards 'women's emancipation', including the often subaltern role of female militants within the party and its leadership. Five years after the emergence of 'neo-feminism', the women of the PCI had converged with many of its positions.

Articulating 'Convergence and Difference' with Feminism at the Sixth National Conference of Communist Women (1976)

Between 1945 and 1984, the PCI held seven National Conferences of Communist Women. While a fixture of the party's postwar history, they were convened at irregular intervals, especially when the policy on the 'women's question' needed a significant reorientation. The conference was traditionally opened by the highest-ranking member of the national Women's Section while another member of the leadership – if not the party secretary himself – made the concluding statement. In practice, this had meant that the conferences were opened by a female activist and closed by a male one; the Sixth Conference of 1976 was no different. Of the thirty-three posts in the party direction that year, only two were occupied by women;[70] the task, hence, fell to Seroni and Gerardo Chiaromonte, a member of the secretariat and expert on the 'Southern question', respectively. While this was in line with PCI women's rejection of feminists' strict 'separatism', the gender imbalance in party leadership was a growing object of criticism.

65 Berlinguer in Carla Ravaioli, *La Questione Femminile: Intervista col PCI* (Milan: Bompiani, 1976), 192–3.
66 Berlinguer, 'La Spinta', 812–13.
67 Ibid., 812.
68 Laura Lilli, 'La Doppia Militanza come Esistenza', in Chiara Valentini and Laura Lilli, eds., *Care Compagne: Il Femminismo nel PCI e nelle Organizzazioni di Massa* (Rome: Riuniti, 1979), 10, emphasis added.
69 Agnese de Donato, 'Voglio poter essere femminista comunista', in Valentini and Lilli, eds., *Care*, 116.
70 Ravaioli, *Questione*, 148.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In her opening address, Seroni framed the eruption of feminism as an occurrence with deep roots in the contradictions of Italian society and, therefore, as a key indicator of the limited reach and remaining cleavages of its postwar democracy, further beset by the onset of economic crisis in the early 1970s: 'It is these contradictions between the legal framework and reality', she stressed, 'these gaps between increased consciousness, on the one side, and the mode of being of society and the state, on the other, which have led to the new explosiveness of the women's question.'[71] Hence her conclusion that 'what is taking place now is a necessary and positive process of rupture'.[72] 'These limitations also concern us', she added in a reference to the PCI. In other words, an analogous discrepancy was present between party programme and its actual everyday realities: 'We have not done enough, and we have to do much more', she stated, 'to guarantee that women and their competencies have adequate spaces in the party, greater spaces in public life, as well as occasions and incentives to participate and struggle on a broader scale.' As for the matter of representation, while not addressing the party directly, she drew attention to the 'scarce equivalence' between 'the participation of women workers in struggles and in trade-union life' and the 'composition of union leadership organisations at every level'.[73]

The reception of Seroni's opening address at the Sixth Conference presents a litmus test in this regard. This was because, for all her willingness to draw the deeper meaning of the rise of feminism in Italy as well as her appeals to her comrades not to dismiss it, she also produced a stark critique of what she termed the 'praxis of the neo-feminist movement of recent years'. According to Seroni, this praxis consisted in restricting the 'area in which women can bring forth a revolution and [a new] culture' exclusively to 'the problems of female sexuality, of generations, of abortion'. The limit of feminists' 'hypothesis of liberation' was 'certainly not that they set out from the private [*partire dal privato*]', she stressed, quoting the central tenet of Italian neo-feminism, but that they risked 'lingering' or 'flowing back' into it, 'bypassing a broader confrontation with society and thus with the mechanisms that continuously reproduce women's subordination'.[74] Seroni concluded her critique by reaffirming communists' 'peculiarity' with regard to the 'women's question'. In doing so, she returned to the metaphor of the *intreccio*:

> What most clearly sets apart our position – and that of the working classes, if I may say so – . . . is the fact that our discourse goes deeper, farther: it grasps the essential interweaving [*intreccio*] between reforming legislation and mores and reforming society in its entirety, between individual and social spheres, between freedom and responsibility.[75]

The 'Specific' and the 'General': Locating the 'Women's Question' in Communist Party Organisation

Adriana Seroni's resolute statement as to the PCI's greater transformative scope and depth of perspective on the 'women's question' reveals its own deficits when set against the critical statements of a range of activists in the Sixth Conference's 'Women and the Party' commission. This was the instance tasked with discussing female militants' relationship to and role in party structures, hence, with how the perspective Seroni devised translated into *everyday party practice*. The minutes of these discussions revealingly never made it to the published acts of the conference. While Seroni had criticised feminists for boasting an overly 'specific' view of women's oppression (and thus of their realm of intervention as a movement), it was in fact standard PCI practice to, as many activists termed it, 'delegate' the problems and struggles understood as pertaining to the 'women's question' exclusively to the party's Women's Commissions. That organism's mixed character – in contrast to the Women's Cells they

71 PCI, *VI Conferenza: Atti*, 20.
72 Ibid., 19.
73 Ibid., 36.
74 Ibid., 21.
75 Ibid., 33.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

replaced – had done little to alter the tacit expectation that it constituted female activists' business and, to a large extent, theirs alone.

The contradictions surrounding the role of women within PCI organisation came to light in the very first intervention of its 'Women and the Party' commission. Interestingly, the topic was not raised by a leading cadre, but rather by an unnamed member of a small party section on the rural outskirts of Milan (*Sezione Garbagnano*), who began by stressing that the main issue they faced there pertained to the 'rapport of male comrades and female ones'. The delegate reported that, despite its status as a section with 'very few women comrades', the party had decided that it should have its own Women's Commission (henceforth WmC).

As the Garbagnano delegate recounted, when the local WmC began proposing initiatives, the local direction did not act upon them in any significant manner, leading some of its female activists to distance themselves from the party.[76] As a result, 'our decision – which may have been grave, but was also painful and pondered – was to dissolve the WmC.'[77] This 'experiment', which the activist did not think should necessarily be generalised, stemmed from the realisation that if the WmC lacked an 'outlet' for its decisions, that is, if it was there only for female comrades to meet and discuss without further consequence, there was no reason for its existence. It was better, in this case, to integrate women into the various other thematic work commissions and leadership organisms, which is what the women of Garbagnano convinced the local party section to do. This way they could 'advance their problems and perhaps raise awareness of them in the party'.[78] She concluded by underscoring that, while the party's 'general discourse' regarding the women's question was currently 'excellent', it was in the local sections that the party should 'make the most effort in terms of its relationship to women', otherwise it risked quickly losing those who were now entering the party in greater numbers.[79]

This surprising intervention would resonate throughout subsequent debates. It constituted, in many ways, a microcosm of the contradictions of the PCI's stance on women's emancipation; by calling into question the function of WmCs, the Garbagnano delegate had underlined the tension existing between the importance attributed to women's struggles in the party's overall discourse and the effective marginalisation of female militants and their issues in everyday party life. This had been a central point of contention for feminist groups with regard to left-wing parties; the editors of the feminist publication *Differenze*, for instance, stressed that, while the UDI and the WmCs of the PCI were female-centred spaces, neither 'represented the choice of separatism, but rather female ghettos in which men relegate women, entrusting them with the task of handling women's issues without being disturbed or implicated'.[80]

The Roman feminists behind *Differenze* and the Garbagnano delegate had, namely, converged on the same (problematic) ramifications of considering women's issues as 'specific', i.e. of framing them in opposition to the 'general' or 'overall' politics of the party. While aimed at underscoring the party's commitment to address the 'women's question', the *gendering* of certain issues, such as the fight for better social services, for parity before the law or in the labour market and for reproductive rights, had unwittingly downgraded them.

The fact that the Garbagnano delegate had touched upon a pervasive issue in the party becomes evident in the follow-up intervention, made by the Bologna federation's representative. For, if the controversy emerged based on a testimonial coming from a branch with a few dozen members of which a handful were women, in Bologna, 'of 113,000 registered party members, 48,000 are women'. The Bologna section of the PCI was, in other words, as large as entire CPs of other West European countries, and with a fairly good gender balance at that. And yet, the local delegate added, 'of 370 section

76 Minutes, 20–22 Feb. 1976, FG, APCI, *VI Conferenza Nazionale delle Donne Comuniste. Sesta Commissione: Donne e Partito*, Sezione Femminile, b. 365, 3–4.

77 Ibid., 4.

78 Ibid., 5.

79 Ibid., 5–6.

80 Staderini, 'Secondo Noi', 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

secretaries', i.e. the highest position in the local hierarchy, '24 are women'. Hence, 'female members make up 43% of registered members at the Bologna federation, whereas female section secretaries make up only 7% of the total'.[81] This was not the first time the issue of gender representation had emerged in the 'Women and the Party' commission. It had, curiously, first been broached by a male delegate from Aquila, who raised the question of why there were eight women for every man at the Sixth Conference, leading the Bari delegate, Rosa da Ponte, to retort that the real question was why 'this ratio [was] precisely inverted in the party congresses'.[82]

The existence of a communist 'glass ceiling' even in the red heartland of Emilia-Romagna hinted at deeper issues in terms of intra-party gender relations.[83] In communist-administered Bologna, the local delegate reported: 'all of the female municipal councillors are charged with social services; there's no female comrade in charge of agriculture, etc.'.[84] While she 'did not know what selection criteria' had led to such disparities, the 'problem was not of method, comrades; it is substantially political', she stressed. In other words, the issue regarded the 'delegation concept which still exists regarding women's issues within the party'. That would not change until 'the party in its entirety [took] charge of the fundamental issue that is the women's question'.[85]

There was, in other words, a tacit gendered division of labour within the PCI at this point, which led to women frequently being allotted the same kinds of political postings. The practice did not necessarily suggest these were considered second-rate tasks, but rather – and more revealingly – that party leadership uncritically identified women with the sphere of reproduction. Referring to this issue, the delegate from Turin concluded: 'At times, biology is destiny for us too.'[86] This phenomenon was also reflected in the standing of the WmCs in party hierarchy. As the delegate from Florence recounted, when a female party member moved from head of the WmC to leader of another commission, she subsequently joined the secretariat of the local federation as well; in other words, leaving the 'specifically female' work behind was akin to a promotion.[87] The Genoa delegate, in turn, referenced the attempt to include high-ranking male comrades in the WmCs to get them more involved, which also failed, as they simply would not turn up to meetings.[88] The party was practising de facto 'separatism', the delegate concluded.[89] Hence, whereas women-only spaces had emerged as a pillar of 'neo-feminist' groups in terms of safeguarding their autonomy,[90] within the organisational reality of the CP, exclusivity was often synonymous with 'ghettoisation' – a term that not only feminist critics, such as Michi Staderini, but conference delegates themselves employed.[91]

In that regard, the radical hypothesis of eliminating WmCs, as the Garbagnano section had done, was arguably an attempt to cut the Gordian knot of gender inequality in the PCI with a single blow, even if at the risk of dissolving the 'specific' into the 'general'. Other delegates, in turn, while cognisant of the 'delegation' and 'ghettoisation' of women's issues in the PCI, diverged on the 'dissolution' proposal. The Milan delegate, for instance, argued that 'it was not the WmC as such that was in crisis . . . but its traditional role'; in other words, the crystallised gender norms that had informed it were no longer tenable.

81 Minutes, *VI Conferenza: Donne e Partito*, 50.
82 Ibid., 55. According to the Sixth Conference's statistics, there were 872 delegates present, of which 781 were women (PCI, *VI Conferenza: Atti*, 247).
83 The numbers were, in fact, even worse elsewhere. As Nadia Ciani, a delegate from East Rome, would point out, of 274 sections in the capital and its periphery, only five were led by women (Minutes, *VI Conferenza: Donne e Partito*, 65).
84 Ibid., 54.
85 Ibid., 51.
86 Ibid., 102–3.
87 Ibid., 73.
88 Ibid., 91–2.
89 Ibid., 87.
90 See Staderini, 'Secondo Noi', 3.
91 For instance, in the Genoa delegate's remark that female militants were 'frustrated, because they felt ghettoised [*ghettizzate*] in a certain type of work that finds no moment of synthesis at the level of party leadership' (Minutes, *VI Conferenza: Donne e Partito*, 89).

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A strong rejoinder to the 'dissolution' option came from delegates from the Italian South, who, according to one account, had been mostly absent from the previous conference in 1970.[92] Licia Torna, from Lecce, stressed how 'in our Southern cities, WmCs have succeeded in better understanding and aggregating women where no other spaces of aggregation existed.'[93] She detailed how each member of the WmC would be assigned a certain area of party work to get more acquainted with so that when the commission met with other leadership instances, female militants could bring their own standpoint to bear on 'general' problems. Dissolving the WmC would only isolate its participants in the various work commissions (i.e. it would be harder to get women's perspective across).[94] The value attributed to WmCs as a space that coalesced female activists and amplified their voice in local party branches in the South also reflected the more lopsided gender balance of party membership there. The numbers in Napoli, in this respect, contrasted heavily with those of Bologna referred to above: of 45,000 registered members, only 6,000 were women. Moreover, despite the party's growth in previous years, the gender ratio had reportedly remained stable.[95] The problem was likely rooted in how class and gender intertwined in the Italian South; as the Napoli delegate highlighted, the party was weak precisely where the female labour force was concentrated there, i.e. in agriculture, in small and medium enterprises and in domestic industry – a crucial (yet very precarious) branch of production in Italy at the time.

Such gaps were reflected in the data on female participants at the Sixth Conference (781 in total), the majority of whom were: office workers (151); students (136); party functionaries (100); factory workers (80); teachers with full degrees (47) and basic ones (42); elected officials (42); functionaries of mass organisations (37); medical personnel (26); and self-employed professionals (25). Revealingly, unemployed women (37), homemakers (37) and agricultural workers (9) composed a small minority, even if those segments corresponded to a large swathe of Italy's female population. Participants were generally quite young as well, with an average age of thirty. Put together, the seventeen to twenty-year-old cohort (85) and the twenty-one to twenty-five-year-old one (281) outnumbered the participants aged forty-one and above (84), i.e. those old enough to have experienced the war, more than four to one.[96]

From the Reception of Feminism to the Critique of 'Sectorialism' in the PCI

While an obvious expression of the PCI's weakness in key segments of the Italian working classes, this socio-economic and especially generational profile arguably created a more fertile ground for feminist ideas in the party by the mid-1970s. The delegates at the Sixth Conference addressed this topic openly, that is, what impact they believed feminism had had in party life over the previous years. Once more, the relationship between party and movement emerges rather as an intricate overlap with unexpected consequences for both sides. The delegate from Florence, Mara Baroni, for instance, pointed out how growing interest in feminism had actually favoured party work among female university students. Until 1970, the latter saw no 'duty to fight for their own emancipation' as 'they already considered themselves emancipated', hence their lack of interest in communist militancy. In other words, emancipation was identified with the struggle for a level of gender equality they believed had already been achieved. 'Nowadays', however, 'the desire and the effort to have specific instances of women-centred work is growing amongst female communist students and university graduates.'[97] Precisely in these years, the Tuscan capital was the setting for the emergence of the magazine *Rosa*, a pioneering feminist

92 Ibid., 112.
93 Ibid., 105–6.
94 Ibid, 107.
95 Ibid, 113.
96 PCI, *VI Conferenza: Atti*, 247–8.
97 Ibid., 72.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

publication attempting to bring together PCI women and independent feminists to reflect on 'women's condition'.[98]

Padova, in the neighbouring region of Veneto, provides further evidence to the 'interweaving' hypothesis of party and movement. Whereas the gap between the two was arguably at its deepest there, feminist struggles at the Italian epicentre of the 'Wages for Housework' campaign still seem to have impacted local PCI women considerably. The Padova delegate is (perhaps not coincidentally) responsible for the most devastating critique of the party's policy towards women during the Sixth Conference. She begins by highlighting that the 'growth of the women's movement' in previous years had 'opened up contradictions not only within society, but also within our party'. In a recurring theme from the sources in this period, she stressed that, while male members of the PCI's higher echelons had indeed become more attentive to the 'women's question', 'within the rank-and-file the overarching issue of women's condition still meets with resistance, if not profound ignorance'.[99] Not only did she think this was unacceptable within the party, but it was also making work amongst women more difficult. Though critical of feminists, the delegate understood why they were gaining ground and seems to have agreed to a large extent with their platform, including in terms of the internal realities of the PCI:

> Comrades, I come from Veneto, a particularly difficult area; it has been the preeminent region for the proliferation of feminist movements. Who knows why? Perhaps because Venetian women are particularly angry. This is true, we are very angry. But also because the party left vacant spaces which have been occupied by movements that expressed in a confused – very confused – manner demands that, unfortunately, we women comrades must also take up within the party.[100]

The delegate considered that the issue went beyond something that the mere 'moral and intellectual reform' of male comrades could remedy. In their adherence to how 'the division of roles is codified' in society at large, she stressed, there was evidence of 'subalternity with regards to the ideas of the ruling classes'. As such, this 'emulating of petty bourgeois behaviour within the party' (or as soon as they stepped out of party proceedings) was also a 'political problem'.[101] The examples provided by the Padova delegate suggest, moreover, an adherence to the expanded notion of the political that the feminist movement was largely responsible for introducing into public debate in Italy.[102] She understood, namely, both the sphere of reproduction and everyday life as instances in which 'comradely' and equitable behaviour were expected. Hence, it was 'useless' that, in the festivals of the party newspaper *l'Unità*, 'the only role that women comrades can perform is washing the dishes' or that they should miss the preparatory meetings for the Sixth Conference 'because they have to prepare dinner for the party section'.[103] For this activist and many of her female comrades, 'the choice of joining the Communist Party' was based on the notion that it was 'the only party that met our demands of freedom and dignity'. Yet those expectations would only be met if 'these demands [were] respected in the everyday life of our party'.[104]

98 The publication was titled *Quaderno di studio e di movimento sulla condizione della donna* (Research and Movement Review on Women's Condition) and had two series and seven total numbers from 1974 to 1976. It is considered, alongside the earlier Roman publication *Compagna* (Comrade woman), which circulated from Jan. to May 1972, as a significant, if short-lived, publishing experiment that explicitly aimed to reach across party and movement lines, i.e. that was openly 'communist–feminist'. These publications foreshadowed the transformation of the official magazine of the PCI's women section, *Donne e Politica* (Women and Politics, 1969–1986), into *Reti* (Networks) in 1987, marking the definitive if belated blurring of the lines between publications for 'party women' and the feminist press. See Maria Luisa Boccia, 'Femministe e Comuniste', *Critica Marxista*, 1/2 (2021), 113–22.

99 Minutes, *VI Conferenza: Donne e Partito*, 108.

100 Ibid., 110.

101 Ibid., 109–10.

102 See Bracke, 'Women and the Reinvention'.

103 Minutes, *VI Conferenza: Donne e Partito*, 110.

104 Ibid., 109–10.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In light of this critique and the debate on the status of the WmCs, a hypothesis emerged in the statements of a few of the delegates who proposed to fundamentally recalibrate the usual way of conjugating 'specific' – i.e. gendered – issues and the so-called 'general' politics of the PCI. For the delegate from Florence, Mara Baroni, 'it was increasingly difficult for the WmC to work on its own on certain issues.' While this could be counterbalanced by 'increasing the presence of female militants in the other work commissions', something she and her comrades were attempting to enforce, 'overcoming the traces of sectorialism' in the party required a deeper reorientation. This again evoked the work of 'interweaving'; as Baroni put it, 'the issues related to women's emancipation, due to their own relevance and because they share a common ground with many of society's more general issues, require nowadays, so to say, an *interdisciplinarity* in our work'.[105] In a similar vein, the delegate from Turin remarked that WmCs 'should no longer enjoy that benevolent and singular, but also absurd autonomy', as if 'they were something distinct from the party, like the FGCI [the Communist youth organisation]'. What she called for, instead, was 'coordination, full co-responsibility and an end to sectorialism'.[106]

Conclusion: Welding Together Emancipation and Liberation

Although it does not figure prominently in histories of the party, the Sixth National Conference of Communist Women of February 1976 was a watershed event for the PCI. One keen contemporary observer, Carla Ravaioli, noted that, from that event onwards, 'alongside the word "emancipation", of almost secular vintage in the jargon of the workers' movement, there now appears the word "liberation", a notoriously feminist banner.' While this 'turn' had already been prefigured in the discourse of communist women before the Sixth Conference, that event saw it 'receive, to a certain extent, an official blessing'.[107] Although the relationship of communist women (and of the PCI 'at large') to feminism would continue to evolve into the 1980s, at which point the cohort of young female activists that had attended the conference effectively took over the party's policy on women, the 1976 event clearly marked the moment when the 'interweaving' began in earnest.

The sources suggest that Adriana Seroni and the rest of the female leadership were aware of this, as do various measures taken in the aftermath of the conference aiming to renew the PCI's stance on the 'women's question'. In a closed meeting held in March 1976 dedicated to evaluating the Sixth Conference, Seroni stressed that bridging the generational gap that had emerged within the party's female militancy was one of the event's key achievements: 'Essentially, a *welding together* was operated between the new trend that has emerged amongst women – more open to civil [i.e. interpersonal] issues as well as ideal struggles – and the emancipation line advocated by our party.' Yet, in a clear reference to the debate that had raged in the 'Women and the Party' commission, Seroni mentioned the 'difficulties' of a 'new generation – which entered the party more through cultural and ideological pathways than through social struggles – to insert themselves in the general framework of the party'. It was hence necessary, she argued, 'with the greatest openness possible, to find a way for these young [female] comrades to do politics in a more general sense'.[108]

If this reference to the need for a 'general' that somehow overcame the (gendered) 'specific' showed some resistance to the 'interweaving' hypothesis advanced by some of the conference delegates, Seroni seems to have got the message that a renewal in the PCI's policy towards women was in order. She mentioned, for instance, the need for an 'initiative aimed at homemakers', but also of an 'enlarged external presence, namely, in universities, cultural circles and popular centres'. This included a relaunching of the official publication of the Women's Section, *Donne e Politica*, which subsequently

105 Ibid., 70.

106 Ibid., 103.

107 Ravaioli, *Questione*, 5.

108 Minutes, 4 Mar. 1976, FG, APCI, *Nota Sulla Riunione Delle Responsabili Femminili Regionali*, Sezione Femminile, b. 365, 1, emphasis added.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011 Published online by Cambridge University Press

gained an updated visual identity and editorial line, as well as an innovative book series by the official party press, *Editori Riuniti*, entirely dedicated to the 'women's question'.[109] Besides books by historical PCI female figures such as Camilla Ravera and Teresa Noce, the series would include works by young left feminists from Italy (Maria Rosa Cutrufelli) and abroad (Sheila Rowbotham), in a clear attempt to reproduce the Sixth Conference's 'welding together' of different generations of communist women. The goal of the PCI's female leadership with such efforts was not, Seroni stressed, to hegemonise or attempt to replace the feminist movement: 'There can be no thought of absorbing everything and everyone', she remarked. Communist women should, instead, 'search for every possible element of convergence, avoiding antagonism and ruptures all the while maintaining [our] own identity'.[110] This stance is probably responsible for the fact that the rise of feminism in Italy did not lead to waves of ruptures by female militants with the PCI; on the contrary, it would make it a pole of attraction for young women, especially when the feminist movement entered into decline in the country starting in the late-1970s and into the 1980s, a little-studied phenomenon. Maud Bracke termed it the 'process of post-1968 reinstitutionalisation', whereby there was a 'transfer of political agency by social movements to the political parties and state institutions which they had previously contested, specifically the PCI'.[111]

Adriana Seroni's advocacy of an open stance towards feminists also suggested an awareness of the positive role the latter could play in the party itself. While the fight for divorce rights had been victorious, now the battle over the legalisation of abortion loomed. Once more, the ultimately victorious struggle would see communist women attempt to strike a delicate balancing act between conservative stances in their own party and the more radical propositions from the grassroots movements.[112] As Seroni stressed in the March 1976 meeting, there was much to be done: 'there is a general delay in taking heed of the new female consciousness [in the party]. It is up to women comrades to make a greater effort in the debate, both in assemblies and in our press.'[113]

109 Minutes, *Riunione*, 2.

110 Ibid., 8.

111 Bracke, *Women*, 76.

112 For an overview of the battle for abortion rights in Italy in the 1970s and an account of the PCI's shift from an initial conservative position to one more in line with movements' demands, see Maud Bracke, 'Feminism, the State, and the Centrality of Reproduction: Abortion Struggles in 1970s Italy', *Social History*, 42, 4 (2017), 524–46 and Paola Stelliferi, 'Contro l'aborto clandestino: la mobilitazione politica negli anni settanta e il contributo di Giovanni Berlinguer, tra scienza, diritto e morale', in Fabrizio Rufo, ed., *La Salute è un Diritto: Giovanni Berlinguer e le Riforme del 1978* (Rome: Ediesse/Futura, 2020), 103–6.

113 Minutes, *Riunione*, 8.

Cite this article: Strazzeri V (2023). The Interweaving: Communist Women and Feminism in 1970s Italy. *Contemporary European History* 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322001011