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Italy

A Failed Refoundation

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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This text is the first and final chapters by the book of the same name *La Rifondazione Mancata* published by Edizioni Allegre in 2009). This translation by Carmela Avella and Dave Kellaway was first published in the book "New Parties of the Left: Experiences from Europe" from Resistance Books in 2011.

What have we done to deserve all this?

2008 was the year when the Italian left disappeared from parliament. It has been reduced to an historic minimum of scattered, smashed and divided remains. This book aims to answer the question: "How could this have happened?" What did we do to try and avoid it? What have we done to keep an alternative project alive? Finally what can we do now to recover from the defeat? We have to understand that the recovery will be a long-term one without shortcuts or 'clever', immediate solutions. Furthermore it is precisely the big bang strategy –looking for new openings at all costs – that has created further weakening, leading us to the current dead end.

This writer has been a protagonist of sorts in these events. I want to state this now, not because I want to glorify a role that at the end of the day was quite modest, but rather to inform readers that this is a personal account written by somebody who has a specific point of view. Nevertheless it can be useful to have a story told by someone who has had direct experience of these key political events.

Return to the Bolognina Conference

It was already clear that a political cycle had ended during the Prodi government, when the attempted political project of the so-called radical left oscillated between ridicule and incompetence, resulting in a series of failures. The political cycle had begun at the end of the 1980s with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the so-called Bolognina Communist Party conference led by Achille Occhetto, which led to the formation of the Democratic Socialist Party (PDS) and the Communist Refoundation Party (PRC). This new phase, which spanned the 1990s, nearly came to a complete halt in 1998 with the fall of the first Prodi government. It continued however into the first years of the new century, riding the rising and falling tide of the Anti-Globalisation movement, and then ended in the formation of the Union of the Left which led to the formation of the second Prodi government. The establishment of the Democratic Party (PD) and the failure of the radical left – not only the PRC but also its split-off group the PDCI (Democratic Party of Italian Communists) and the Greens – marks the end of this political cycle. The leaders of the left have not wanted to come to terms with this political journey and have continued on their way as if the objective, subjective, social and political contexts have remained unchanged. It is as if they thought their political support, built up over the years through their electoral success and from the internal dialectic of the centre left, could not be undermined.

As we will see there were many errors and a blindness to reality. There were obvious analytical failures such as the superficial way in which they evaluated the potential impact of Berlusconi who, in 2006 after five years of real political and social disaster, only lost the general election by twenty-four thousand votes. All opinion polls had predicted a clear win for the centre left parties. Social reality and the relationship of class forces were analysed in a very shallow way. They jumped to the conclusion that a series of successful demonstrations and a general mass mobilisation between 2001 and 2003 in Italy would hold back the country's deep-rooted drift to the right. There were also errors of leadership and organisation, utter incompetence, crude judgements, overbearing arrogance and ignorance. In turn

A Failed Refoundation

this is related to the actual people involved, to a particular type of person selected over the years for their loyalty and not for their intellectual quality. What did this look like? Bureaucratic methods driven by base ambition; an inclination to compromise and to adapt to the world as it is, justifying 'theoretically' their own personal comfort zone; and small-scale personal enrichment isolated from any concrete political analysis.

Herein lays the roots of such an obvious failure, of a personal defeat and a political disaster affecting millions of people and involving tens of thousands of militants, members and leaders of the shipwrecked parties. We never envisaged this evolution of the left and we still scarcely comprehend it now – a left divided between a poor, opportunist and compromising leadership and a naive, sentimentally generous and therefore easily manipulated base. Since the electoral disaster of 13th/14th April 2008, Fausto Bertinotti has become the main person held responsible for the disaster. For twelve long years he had been the most admired leader of communist supporters. He lost the vote at the July 2008 PRC congress but he was acclaimed triumphantly – reflecting a schizophrenia which maybe needs analysing on a psychoanalytic level. So no-one is free of guilt or responsibility. The last political turn of the PRC – the one in 2005 at the Venice congress – carried through by thousands of members and leaders, brutally imposed a political line against the internal opposition. They were indifferent to the hurt inflicted and the irreversible blows made against nearly half the party.

But these errors are not just related to the Prodi government period, to the suicidal choice of governing the eighth strongest capitalist power while defending the idea of going beyond capitalism, and the cloud cuckoo hypothesis of making a turn to the left in government with people like Dini, Mastella or Padoa Schioppa (bourgeois centrist politicians/bankers/ex DCI). Although we are talking about the end of a political period, the errors were made throughout the period and are emblematic of its contradictions, its painful conflicts that just grew and grew without being seriously dealt with and were therefore never resolved. It is a question of cultural vices, a limited political strategy, and the illusion of a 'refoundation' that would supposedly mature and grow on the basis of a hypothesis validated by self-proclamation rather than concrete results. We needed a real life advance of the party within the social struggles and its affirmation as a tenacious political subject able to resist and struggle in the longer term. What we got was a slow negation of its original positive purpose and usefulness expressed in the founding congress.

In Bertinotti's PRC a 'great illusion' was built on an immense speculative/political bubble that, like the sub-prime mortgages, self-inflated. It was like a shimmering mirage, a fantasy constructed by putting opposites together and twisting concepts according to the event and the occasion. The illusion amounted to the idea that you could defeat a Stalinism stuck in a nostalgic past without settling accounts with the 'human material' who followed turn and counter-turn without any real conviction. It was claimed the government question was resolved when half the party wanted to stay in government. Later the leadership had to bring them back again when this time they did not want to go. There was an Enlightenment, even Jacobin, leadership style, leading the membership from on high through sheer charisma and unscrupulous political manoeuvres. However, PRC members were resilient and were ready for the long haul – but from split to split they had never really come to terms with their sense of loss, repressing the shock of 1989 (fall of Berlin wall). In the PRC we kept moving all the time, from emergency to emergency, from election to election, from turn to turn without ever really stopping to look at who we really were, where we came from, what we had been and what we wanted to become. A pick and mix politics – a bit like Milan in the 80s under Craxi.

In many ways, even given the variety of rich personal histories and the motivation of militants, this unforeseen collapse of Refoundation and the radical left is very much dissolution of that experience. No other party in Italy has gone so quickly from the heights to the depths, no leadership group has fallen so quickly. This even includes the PSI (Italian Socialist Party) which was the first to make tactics and manoeuvring the keystone of its politics. Over and beyond the obvious real differences – both political projects had to come to terms with a political system dominated by two big blocs. For Craxi it was the DC (Christian Democrats) and the PCI (Italian Communist Party). For Refoundation it was the Polo (Berlusconi/Fini/Bossi) and the Ulivo (Olive tree – social democratic alliance between ex-PCI, Democratic Socialists, and other left centre forces). It is as if both projects had to carefully watch over a fragile porcelain dish in a china shop selling tin plates. Such a situation was used to justify – once again leaving aside

A Failed Refoundation

the different political content of the two projects – a bold, volatile political line. Bertinotti was in charge of Refoundation in a period of Italian bi-partisanship where the strength of the two ex-mass parties had been artificially pumped up by an electoral law that had achieved a false two party system. It constrained the PRC to come to a deal with the obligatory ally – the centre left, whether in the form of the Olive Tree bloc or the Democratic Party. However this was uncomfortable and unwieldy, and above all unnatural from the point of view of its own history and its “raison d’être”. From this flowed the need for rapid, but disorientating changes in its political ‘tactical’ line, which were both artful and ill-judged: first going into alliance with Prodi and then breaking with him; the turn to the movements and then to government; anti-Stalinism and then non-violence. It was a patchwork of attempts to bring the party away from its minority position and from the orbit of the majority factions of the PCI which had set up first the DS and then the PD. So just as Craxi needed to go beyond the 10% of the De Martino PSI to at least 16 – 18% (which it never achieved), so the PRC needed to go from its historical scores of 5-6% to double-figure results. This also explains the confused, muddled Rainbow Coalition project – the electoral slate on which the whole government Left stood in the 2008 parliamentary elections. It was a way of trying to operate in the context of the imperfect two-party system which Berlusconi and the PD had opted for – of gaining a breathing space to limit the damage and trying to get a winning strategy. Deemed a vital necessity in fact it led to too much haste and improvisation, to ‘acrobatic’ politics driven at a speed never seen before.

We could perhaps end the analogy here, having emphasised that you cannot assimilate two such different political processes. Nonetheless there is something else that connects the two across time. It is the fact that the Socialist Party had helped initiate the process of decomposition of the Italian workers movement and that Communist Refoundation tried to get a grasp of that degenerative process at the end but let slip it through its fingers. Craxi and the PSI intervened quickly and greedily in a context in which defeats that had been accumulating since the 70s, from the historic compromise to the out and out betrayal of the 35 day FIAT struggle, changed the workers movement. It produced a backwards ideological step in terms of the Marxist definition of a ‘class for itself’ and an embarrassing turn to support the savage liberalism emerging under the banner of the Thatcher-Reagan duo. In the 1980s we saw economic/industrial restructuring and a reduction in the labour force concentrated in the big factories. We had a move away from the centres of class power which meant above all more division and a weakened identity leading in turn to weaker organisation. Temporary and flexible working became more prevalent. The PSI was implementing its strategy when the weakening of the organised working class permitted its leaders to effectively develop a line we could summarise as ‘sort yourself out’. A line particularly aimed at the younger generations dealing with the difficulties of universities and a rapidly changing workplace. Organisational and structural weakening and the overall ideological crisis allowed Craxi to ride the back of these forces, intervening negatively in its objective transformation. Craxi took advantage of, and further nourished the disaggregation of, the Italian workers movement to further his political project (which ultimately failed).

This crisis then led, in a much more serious and devastating way, to the crisis and the name change of the PCI. Ten years later the latter de facto followed in the footsteps of the PSI and threw itself into its own genetic mutation. The leadership group did this in a style and arrogance of people who had learnt their politics in the ‘bread and Togliatti’ period of the party. They did it with the requisite ritual, with tears shed from the stage and internecine conflicts. They did it for the good of the country and the party, they did it for democracy and they did it better than anyone else could have done. But they did it. Exactly in the same way – without the ritual and the 1989 pantomime – as Craxi had done more prosaically and pragmatically at the end of the 1970s with the famous Midas congress, or yet again in 1990 when they changed the name of the PSI to Unita Socialista (Socialist Unity) in the course of a secretariat meeting.

The PSI was the harbinger of the land-slip which became an avalanche in the 1990s and the first decade of the third millennium. The ‘working class’ continues to go backwards, to become more divided, to lose its way ideologically, to lose a sense of its own identity and mission. The end of ideology defines the space of class struggle, although for its part the bourgeoisie wages class war and continues to act in its own interests through restructuring, redundancies, pension reform, new labour laws and the ever more prevalent job insecurity. Through the 1990s the working class as a social subject, a reference point, became unrecognisable, lost, unreachable...

Communist Refoundation was forced to suffer this process of decomposition while remaining for many of these sectors the last charge, the final ship – even if a little leaky – in a sea infested by sharks and pirates as well as enemy ships. However – and here we return to our analogy – the PRC did not know how to deal with this difficulty and did not even put it on the agenda. It preferred to live on its electoral, institutional and party apparatus gains that the communist symbol allowed it to maintain. A layer of bureaucrats, elected representatives and other officials did not have their attention on that social disaster but rather on the political framework where they were trying to survive. Whereas the PSI had contributed to the demolition of the workers movement while working without any links with it, Refoundation shook up the ruins or rather began to ‘surf’ on them. It opted for the big manoeuvre rather than dedicating itself to the ‘slow impatience’ necessary for a real reconstruction. Over-tactical and eclectic choices were made in an attempt to survive the crises that its own past had presented it with. Above all it unproductively consumed its own patrimony rather than re-investing its resources in social struggles in order to develop a new force. The proof of its failure was – the progressive weakening of its social base; the constant loss of its links with society as a whole; its creeping marginalisation inside all the trade unions; the drying up of its own local groups and its own political vitality and a massive turnover that saw hundreds of thousands of men and women join Refoundation to then leave quickly afterwards. Gradually, and we saw this more clearly as the years passed and internal contradictions and antagonism exploded, Refoundation began to lose a sense of its *raison d’être* and the challenge it had posed – of refoundation. So it became the tired appendix of a story reaching its conclusion, the ‘glorious’ history of the Italian Communist Party which had left the scene, leaving behind an American style party and a few piles of rubble.

Nevertheless a political subject that fails to connect with its own roots can sail on in politics for many years and can even have partial successes, but in the end it will fold up at an unexpected and improvised speed. It could disappear from one day to the next and just leave a vague memory of itself.

A ‘surfing’ political line

A surfing political line can be identified in the permanent conflict characterising Refoundation’s leadership. The first secretary, Sergio Garavini, resigned at Refoundation’s first national congress following explosive differences with Armando Cossutta and a second congress was needed after about a month to defuse the conflict. After Bertinotti’s triumphant election as secretary it took only ten months for the next showdown with the group led by Magri and Crucianelli which produced a significant split at the parliamentary level. Three years later we saw the most important split headed by Cossutta which however was preceded a year before by a tough stand-off between the two leaders during the first crisis of the Prodi government. Once Cossutta had left, the birth of the anti-globalisation movement provoked a sort of internal war between the ex Cossutta people remaining in the PRC and Bertinotti’s majority. Then we had the roller-coaster of the Venice Congress in 2005. The party was undergoing constant erosion, a rumbling earthquake, and it never managed to find a stable equilibrium, an action plan that lasted any length of time without it being blown off course by the tremors produced by the Italian political crisis. The crisis generated by the collapse of the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), and the Italian Communist Party’s change of name, tore into and overwhelmed Communist Refoundation (PRC) with such effect because of its political, programmatic and organisational weakness.

The electoral results, the effective communication skills of its leader and the need that the centre left had for the PRC which inflated its marginal value, led to the head of the party being put on a pedestal to the detriment of its arms and legs. True, from 1991 on the PRC had always been able to claim an average of one hundred thousand members with a high point of 150,000 in the first phase declining to 110,000 in 1998 and then falling below 100,000 after the Cossutta split. However it never stopped to reflect on the scale of an estimated turnover of more than 20% of its membership. This critical mass had not found the tools or structures to act effectively, to participate with conviction and to develop a homogenous politics. Those young people who came in with the anti-globalisation movement after only a few years underwent a process of passivity and of accepting that other people would make the decisions. They had no relevant role in the leadership structures and were not brought on.

A Failed Refoundation

Internal party procedures, putting forward political positions and the organisation of the PRC's intervention were largely given over to the leadership group and the central apparatus. In the beginning there was a real impetus of renovation and democratisation requested and imposed by the base. In fact at the first three congresses the federal and national political structures were elected in such a way as to respect the positions expressed in each area. The first national secretariat, called the national operational group (Gruppo Operative Nazionale) was elected member by member and not just as part of a slate. Each elected member of the group had to get more than 50 % of the votes. This rule produced some upsets as we will see. It so happened that I represented a minority position at the 1996 congress, but I was nevertheless elected to the Federal Political Committee of my city (Milan) which contrasted with the positions of the city leadership.

Little by little decision-making became delegated upwards, the national and local leaders took on the preponderant role and were often at the same time the institutional representatives of the party. The centre of power was solidly anchored at the Via Polichinico (party headquarters) apart from partial contradictions and counter-tendencies. The terrible thing was that the central apparatus knew little or nothing about how to lead a mass political intervention. Not just because of particular individuals but because in that sharp crisis of the workers movement the type of intervention you needed was above all one based on reflection, collective energy, elaborated together and tried out and tested in practice. The centre of gravity of this sort of intervention had to be not within the institutions but rather within a perspective of completely re-making our society. Such a perspective might not give immediate results but could achieve them in the medium term. Indeed hard work was needed and often it was not even considered. Things could not be limited to the electoral arena. On the other hand another phenomenon in the PRC was individuals' expectations of a career, seeing a party position as a stepping stone to a political representative role in the institutions and thereby gaining a salary, a personal income that may then be lost if you did not buckle down and conform. It is a perfectly understandable motivation but nothing was done to develop counter-measures that might hold back that tendency. It took time for this model to become the dominant one, and the period opened by the final turn to government helped institutionalise it. Also the reaction to this led to a slow withering away of militancy so that most activists who were left were to be found in the most traditionalist sectors – one thinks of the few, courageous sellers of *Liberazione* (the party newspaper).

Therefore we have a fundamental problem of political culture and strategy. Notwithstanding the contortions, the turns, the confrontations, the hoped-for renewals, the repeated calls for overcoming obstacles through sheer will, Refoundation essentially remained a neo-togliattian type party. It was an historical offshoot of the PCI that had brought together and absorbed an attempt to build a new beginning. A grouping where the aspiration for the social compromise – in this sense in the ‘Togliatti’ line – had prevailed over those elements of liberation, of revolutionary radicalism that were indeed present even if this was often only in a virtual sense. However this aspiration was in de facto contradiction with the original formation of the group, when people spoke of a semantic break with historical continuity, and when in order to take off it enumerated a vast series of discontinuities with the past. Instead the PRC never succeeded in really going from the phase of simple ‘resistance’ to that of ‘reconstruction’ of a force capable of putting social transformation on the agenda again. In this way it went through continual sharp turns, apologetic changes of line, over-tactical manoeuvres and theoretical infatuations that lasted just for a short period. The party rank and file was tossed about, not really grasping what was going on and often incapable of developing a counter-tendency. Discontinuity with the past required critical and innovative thought but throughout its life the PRC never held a programmatic conference – it preferred simple presentations of its electoral programme. It needed to really shake up its own history to find an adequate identity, but when the taboo is finally broached, ‘communism against Stalinism’, it was immediately used to justify joining the government of the country. That is how the contrary effect was achieved – the communist identity had remained only a glue that held things together. It was not defined in the modern context or illustrated within present reality so as to recuperate its internal rationality – including the lessons of defeats. Furthermore it was not even identified with a steadfast opposition to and distinctiveness from the two main political blocs. Consequently this identity became an empty shell.

The crisis of Refoundation, the latest events, the latest splits and the departure of its most important leader in all these years, can justly be defined as being the last act of this drama and process that began with the Occhetto turn

A Failed Refoundation

of 1989. It was then that the definitive approach and symbolic commitment of the PCI to the Italian political system, its approval of the basic framework and the cancelling of its 'diversity', was decided. The journey to this end had started many decades earlier. It was characterised by so many 'compromises': Togliatti's in 1945, Berlinguer's 'historical' one in 1973, and the physiological one made by Occhetto and his successors in the 1990s. The political heart of Bertinotti's thinking can be found in the substantial degree of 'compromise', albeit more dynamic, within the agile logic of the ex-secretary of Refoundation. For many, many years the PRC tried to shield itself from the wind of political consensus blowing on its back. It tried everything, turning this way and that to find an escape from the flow of defeats and recriminations that the disappearance of the biggest European communist party had bequeathed it. In all this it kept its own vitality and truth. It looked down different paths but did not really go down them. The PRC had started speaking languages foreign to its tradition – zapatismo, anti-globalisation radicalisation, ecology; and had even started to examine the critical, heretical consciousness of communist history – but in the end it was sucked back into the fundamental framework of its own political tradition. The taste of government was to be fatal.

These limits can also be seen in the absence of any real cultural debates. Intellectuals voted for Refoundation, they loved and supported it. There were always prestigious lists of supporters at elections and many ad hoc conferences were held. However over more than fifteen years Refoundation was not able to produce a theoretical or cultural review or magazine, it never had a serious publishing company, it never managed to set up a scientific committee and did not organise anything more than occasional, conjunctural debates. Evidence of a cultural desert was constantly disguised by the gifts of a party secretary who on the contrary was rather prolific in his published writings, although this was always in the form of interviews and never as a sustained, theoretical piece of work.

Was something else possible? Could another direction have been taken? Given the decomposition of the working class as a political or social subject in the course of the last twenty or thirty years you might well answer 'no'. It will be important with an historian's methods and a more detached perspective in the future to understand really how far, given the communist history of our country, it could have made that break, a logical rupture with its own past and with its own identity. In other words how much of both the orthodox and heterodox Italian communist traditions could be led to a 'new beginning'? In his last book Fausto Bertinotti – and we will come back to this in the final chapter – links the impossibility of this process to the defeat suffered in Prague in 1968 and to the incapacity of the then communist movement and the new mass movement to move beyond Stalinism from the left (even if some people at the time, to general derision, had in fact tried to do so). As we will try to argue in the following pages we, on the other hand, believe it was possible to keep alive the refoundation line. Once a critical mass had been won to this idea it would have been possible to develop a project able to establish a critical Marxism and intervene effectively in the new class struggle. Today we see theses and essays which radically contradict this possibility and map out a way forward that not only proposes the abandonment of communist refoundation but even eliminates the very idea of a left. It is maybe a suggestive idea on the polemical level but it is abstract and not very interesting in terms of a political hypothesis.

As for myself I have both loved and hated Refoundation. I am talking about the Refoundation party I lived from 1991 to 2007 when I left. I loved its potential, the glimpse of the future it represented and its capacity of resistance. Its existence was a platform for a constant criticism of 'existing reality'. I hated its continuity, its hierarchy, the rituals, the bureaucracy, the verbal violence used on itself and its members and its notion of leadership. In writing this book I am not wearing an historian's hat – someone professionally trained. For me that would be both impossible and improbable. But I do wear the hat of a politician with a journalistic background and passion. I will be going through nearly twenty years in order to contextualise in time and space a history that even today is my longest single political experience. I am part of the in-between generation that came both too late and too early. I was too late to live the revolt of the 1970s and the protagonist role of that generation in the decade's social and civic struggles. I was too early to experience as a young person the exhilaration of the upturn in conflict and hope that involved a lot of people between 1999 and 2004. "Our time has passed and we weren't there" was the ironic remark made to me by an ex-colleague and comrade of Liberazione (PRC daily newspaper). A bitter statement that helps to understand my relationship with this party. Refoundation provided a real, concrete opportunity to give meaning and force to a subjective possibility – to create a bridge between the past and the future. It partially did this, it organised a political,

emotional and activist link between the political generation destined to live in the 21st Century and the one that grew up in the 20th Century. For somebody who was 13 in 1977 and was 40 at Genoa in 2001 Refoundation represented the space in which a willingness to rebel was played out. But the opportunity was lost and today we are in a full-scale crisis of the class struggle left – we have to work out ideas and ways forward to get back up the slope.

Perhaps today we don't need any more bridges unless we are talking on the cultural or ideal level. The way forward out of the long wave of the 20th century and the history of the failures of its left will take place exclusively in a wide open sea and will have to go beyond the intellectual and activist efforts that have gone before. We are not talking about the positive advantages of wiping the slate clean but rather the need to settle accounts, quite sharply, with the devastation caused by the bridges we have burnt behind us. We will need both time and a new language; nonetheless we still believe in maintaining some 'tender' relations with the past and its memories, if for nothing else but to take up what Benjamin called the need for a 'vengeful history'. An avenger for those who came before us, fought a battle and lost. Of those who have waited patiently so that, with the spotlight of the present, may be revived the images of a past that needs to be remembered.

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Yes We Could

In the introduction, and we hope in the chronicle of these sixteen years, we have tried to outline our thesis – which is obviously partial but rooted in the direct and indirect observation of reality. Refoundation failed because despite its best efforts the PRC had been tossed about in the tumultuous wake left by the dissolution of the PCI. When it tried to disentangle itself from that past in reality it only made a first step, hinting at an alternative but not being able to grasp it. Refoundation has the merit of giving birth to a resistance to the dominant ways of thinking – against the spirit of the time. Saying no to the turn of the Bolognina conference, to the dissolution of the PCI and the formation of the PDS was a moral and political subversion of the dominant political consensus that lasted some time as a political platform based on only two letters. Resistance has been a dominant feature of the PRC because the attempt to throw out the baby with the bath-water continued during the ideological offensive against the 'communists' and the domination of an insufferable and normalising two party system. Refoundation opposed, resisted and reacted for a long time against this constant pressure. But in the long term the pressure won out forcing this distinctive, aberrant party to conform to a political system in crisis. Resistance was broken up and swept away. Uniformity took over and was disastrous. In this way the cycle was over, the Bolognina turn has been symbolically recuperated with the move into the second Prodi government and then again with the hypothesis of the 'going beyond of communism' and its 'unspeakability' towards a new, democratic and generically alternative left. Above all it had been compensated for the failure of its refoundation hypothesis, for the vacuity of a political alternative and a coherent political line which in over fifteen years had never emerged nor been systematically explained.

In his book, 'We must be glad that the road will be long' [Devi augurati che la strada sia lunga] (Ponte alle Grazie, 2009) Fausto Bertinotti admits it is a defeat arising from the long period of crisis of the workers movement within which Refoundation has been smashed. According to Bertinotti the first defeat was in 1968 when Prague was left isolated:

"...with our attempt to keep left, to bring about a refoundation, we prolonged an experience we had inherited from the 20th century beyond the time it was historically justified within the communist and the anticapitalist left parties. We had extended an historical phase that had actually ended...the real potential for reform in the 20th century ended with the Prague Spring... From that time in Europe we saw the beginning of the crisis of a left which did not know how to take the dramatic opportunity to reposition itself by proposing a left wing exit from Stalinism. Prague was left alone not only by the PCI but also by the '68 movements... At that time they were looking too much to the east to Mao's

China and did not recognise the Prague youth as brothers in liberty... The fall of the Berlin Wall was only the expression, the epiphany of something that had already been foreshadowed with the Prague Spring. It was the conclusion of a cycle.”

Bertinotti maintains that 1968 marked the end of the potential reform of communism, “the communist movement was finished as a fusion between class struggle and Marxist Leninist theory”. Consequently was Refoundation a big illusion, ask Ritanna Armeni and Rina Galgiardi, co-authors of the book? “No,” replies Bertinotti, “but today I realise how bold and acrobatic this operation was, how we had contributed to prolonging the dramatic problems facing us at the end of the last century beyond their natural, historically defined life... As a party we did not feel we could take the extreme step that would have brought the organisation to a politics totally beyond the communist tradition, something that would have allowed us to overcome the impasse we found ourselves in.”

Bertinotti’s epitaph contains some truth. It’s true the “communist question” had links with the way Prague was abandoned by the communist left and by the new political groupings born out of 1968 who were on the march towards the glorious Chinese Cultural Revolution. This infatuation has still not led to any posthumous criticism because many of those leaders are sitting pretty in the heights of the establishment. In any case the invasion of Hungary by the Soviets and the repression of a mainly working class revolt already represented a missed opportunity. Even after Prague there was the Solidarnosc experience in Poland on the back of which Berlinguer launched his ‘break’ obviously not to refound but to declare the ‘forward movement of the October revolution to be ended’. So it is true that the 1970s and 1980s saw a slow death to the crisis of communism and a related gradual resignation to its defeat. 1989 took everyone by surprise but it was only the epiphany of a process that had already begun. It is also true that this resigned adjustment had a negative effect on a political world made up of hundreds of thousands of activists, many of whom in the new left and the varied movements were expecting a sign of vitality, a shock and a response. Instead within the decay of a communism that was not renewing or reforming itself there was a growing erosion of ideas, language and willingness to change the world which put into jeopardy any sort of future hypothesis of refoundation. Occhetto and his leadership group must have been thinking of this when they decided it was better to cut off the links with its own past and its own identity by going ‘beyond it all’.

However the holding firm of a third of the PCI and the willingness to look at the issues of refoundation was a defensive base from which to begin a new departure. The birth of the PRC was in itself an exit on the left and was an attempt to solve the problem. Choosing the word refoundation as the expression of this project meant that there was a possibility of thinking beyond an impossible reform of past history and not throwing away the still live potential of a Marxist conception of the world. Clearly at the moment of its formation within the PRC there were conflicting but collaborating forces some of whom wanted to revive its history and others which wanted to completely re-examine it; the latter were smaller and weaker. Also the comrades from Democrazia Proletaria, who came in after its congress of dissolution, did not perform very well. Instead of trying to develop an alternative political project they delivered themselves, hands tied, to the different leadership groups coming from the PCI, some with Garavini, some with Cossutta. Nevertheless the new political reality following the birth of the PRC was the start of a process whose single, positive trajectory involved putting the communist past up for discussion.

Original virtue

To use a current definition, the PCI have already become a party of a social democratic type, in the 1980s even the stones in the road knew this. In reality the PCI has been an anomaly and its very moderate reformism has developed in a different framework from the history of European social democracy. In this way the party could have chosen – and this was the fundamental line of the leaders of the ‘No’ faction from Ingrao, Tortorella, Cossutta to Magri – a solution to the crisis that ‘democratised’ the communist identity within the framework of an unreconstructed Togliatti-style reformism. In other words the PCI could have continued to function as a reformist communist party fully

A Failed Refoundation

integrated into the Italian political framework. It is not by chance that after the formation of the PDS there was a minority tendency led by Tortorella and Ingrao called 'democratic communists'.

When a movement of resistance to Occhetto's turn emerged and was pushing towards a split and the formation of a new party, and then when attempts to keep alive an umbilical cord to the PCI through the 'federalist pact' proposed by Cossutta were foiled – this was the time when the new entity had to emphasise even more its alternative role if it wanted to really thrive. Therefore it could not water down its own identity in a 'new form of reformism' similar to the one it had just split from. This was shown for example in the reaction Refoundation had to Cossutta's split which was clearly confronted only thanks to the rediscovery of conflict and the social movements, of the word revolution and the hypothesis of 'communism against Stalinism' contained in the 2002 Congress texts. We can also see this in the effectiveness and dynamism shown in Bertinotti's theory of the 'two lefts' which Cossutta unsurprisingly opposed silently right from the start. This point is further demonstrated in the way that Refoundation always reacted decisively and positively to significant rightist split-offs, for example the '95 split by the ex-PDUP and Cossutta's '98 one; whereas it retreated into its shell after the two small splits to the left – Ferrando's PCL split in 2006 and Sinistra Critica in 2007. This was not due to the effectiveness of these two small political groups but for the obvious perversion of its true nature and relationship to the working class. Communist refoundation cannot but be opposed to capitalism and its managers, including the centre left. It could only be revolutionary in terms of rediscovering the forgotten heritage of the workers movement. It could only be democratic in the sense of its members being involved and being protagonists at all levels of the party. On the other hand you could not 'refund' if you were going forward while looking back and admiring the past, trying to repeat the same practice in a new phase.

Obviously the big split was not illuminated just with a heroic halo. Refoundation was born on an emotional and dramatic upsurge expressing the determination of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Italian communists to not surrender to the Occhetto turn. If you examine that period of history it is absolutely clear how much passion and pathos coloured the political world. If you look at the initial events in the PRC journey you can understand how much that mood was decisive in the push towards the refoundation project. As Simone Bertolino in his book entitled 'The History and organisation of Communist Refoundation' [Rifondazione Comunista, storia and organizzazione] (Il Mulino, 2004) states, the PRC was formed as a 'system of solidarity' aiming to defend communist identity and its symbols. Further, at the base at least "the organisation was structured on two dimensions – slogans of the day and the communist community – and consequently on two types of combined participation. These were the social movement based on collective enthusiasm for the birth of a new subjective, transformative role...and the subculture based on the continuity of a system of closed relations defending an identity threatened by external events." This definition is interesting because it succeeds in placing the birth of Refoundation within its real human and material composition, with their expectations and the motivation that inspired over a hundred thousand people to take out membership in the Movement for Communist Refoundation in 1991. However this emotional, enthusiastic and community based support for the project over time produced a rather inert mass membership quite different from the role it played in the political process which created the PRC. For example the core of this membership played a real political role during the last phase of the PCI's life, at the 20th Congress, when the party was dissolved and the name changed. It forced the hand of hesitant leadership groups and pushed for the split option. Alessandro Valentini in his book entitled "The old mole and the Phoenician Arab" (La vecchia talpa and the Araba fenice", La Citta del Sole, 2000) is right when he notes the central role played by the Committees for Communist Refoundation in pushing Armando Cossutta's tendency to break the links which tied him to the 'old family' and to go for a split and the formation of a new political grouping. He is right because these events highlight a rank and file protagonism, a political determination that was a big part of the early life of the PRC even if it came to be quickly bottled up in the wrangles of the party leaderships and settling down process which would begin straight after its first electoral success in 1992. A very nostalgic community bound up with its own identity where, unsurprisingly pensioners had a significant influence within the membership (the biggest single category according to Bertolino's study at 30%). Although at the same time it drew on solid political resources and was able to have a real impact. During the first phase the PRC was able to be at the centre of the workers mobilisation against the negotiation policy of the CGIL, CISL and the UIL. Later after Cossutta's split and a very critical period in terms of election results and keeping

the organisation together the party was able to play a decisive role in the 2001 to 2003 period when the social movements took off.

To summarise, our thesis is that Refoundation, through the way it was formed and due to the internal ‘truths’ it held on to, was able to bring about the necessary political discontinuity and counter the slow resignation and stupor that characterised the last ten to fifteen years of the PCI.

Sailing against the wind

It could have for example taken fully on board its first slogan, that of ‘Heart of the opposition’ that very quickly, as we saw already at the end of 1993 – was sacrificed on the altar of government participation. Refoundation could have made the strategic, long term choice of being in opposition, not to carry out a crude, sectarian political line but in order to face up to the crisis in the workers movement, realising that it had been building up for years and it required a medium-term intervention. Theorising opposition as a fundamental political line meant, and still means, theorising the reconstruction of a subjective role in the heart of conflicts, by getting one’s hands dirty and not by trying to get access to the levers of institutional power. It was about, and still is, drawing up a political strategy of conquering positions and making advances in struggles outside of the dominant political framework – while obviously not theorising the neutrality of the latter. During its first experience in government the PRC had succeeded in maintaining, in theoretical terms, its ‘separateness’ from the executive and its ‘otherness’ from the Olive Tree bloc, the Italian centre left – while of course contradicting itself in reality by approving the budget, the Treu economic measures and other similar government policies. It was evidence of its difficulty in dissolving itself within the centre left and of its hypothesis of absolutely maintaining its own political and strategic autonomy – this also explains the break with Prodi in 1998.

Support for opposition would not have automatically signified a disinterest in the question of the right wing forces and their danger but this threat could have been countered by ‘technical’ electoral agreements and deals about maintaining candidates in run-offs. The PRC would have been able to gain credibility in this way. But over and beyond the electoral arena it would have been able to position the head and centre of gravity of the party in a different place to the institutions and internal party bodies. It would have been more in contact with the problem of class recomposition. The latter was a specific problem that required analysis and practical, political knowledge that Refoundation did not display except in rare flashes. It seemed to be doing that in 1995 when there was a clear conflict with the rest of the moderate left which was ‘kissing the toad’, although this credibility was lost on the altar of Prodi’s government.

Refoundation could have deepened its original actions – the political force of the ‘No’ roared at Ochetto and its establishment – by developing a long term political project that re-examined overall strategy and the communist hypothesis in today’s reality. The perspective of ‘going beyond capitalism’, the partial formulation which is still today part of the PRC statutes, was never really properly discussed. To go beyond in which direction? How? With what forces? To do what? It is a hard, difficult discussion but it is the only one that would have allowed us to draw together the fundamental differences into a plan of political perspectives. It would have permitted us to understand if the PRC was really a party that wanted to go beyond capitalism in the hoped for long term or if it wanted to make this objective a programme that would inspire the concrete choices of today, informing its political line and the positions it takes. In fact the discussion on state power was not taken up at that time but was re-introduced only within the framework of the discussion on non-violence and the break with Stalinism. But it was done in an abstract way and did not lead to a useful discussion since the debate was framed in a way that you had to opt for the new theory supported by Bertinotti or for an improbable and incoherent ‘Leninist’ position.

Here I would like to point out another limit to Refoundation which foreshadows the successive splits. The political

A Failed Refoundation

‘families’ that had formed Refoundation had never really amalgamated or recomposed on the basis of a new framework. We can largely define these families in terms of two majority sectors and two much smaller groupings. The two major groups came out of the PCI and are the Cossutta people with its own internal tendencies (as we have seen earlier in my account in this book) and a more complex grouping growing out of a synthesis between the Ingrao supporters and the followers of Berlinguer which over time took on the name of Bertinottismo. Then we have the Democrazia Proletaria tendency (Proletarian Democracy) which is also made up of various sub groups but was mainly a small group of leaders who had maintained political influence to the extent of being able to hold down the post inside the PRC secretariat with Paolo Ferrero. Finally you have the Trotskyist tradition that was unable to unite at all and at the last congress in which it was present was represented in three documents – Malabarba, Ferrando, and the Hammer and Sickle group (which is the only one still in the PRC). The failure to recompose was demonstrated in the final act. At the time of the disintegration all the above families re-established their own autonomy, both political and organisational. The Bertinotti people have given birth to Sinistra e Liberta (Left and Freedom); Ferrando has the Partito Comunista dei Lavoratori (Workers Communist Party); Malabarba, myself and others are in Sinistra Critica (Critical Left); and the Democrazia Proletaria people and left Cossutta people are in charge of what is left of the PRC.

Refoundation could have also built up a new relationship with society, not determined exclusively by electoral politics. The Fifth Congress had tried to come to grips with its anomalous nature as a political party with the 34th Congress thesis “the necessity of moving away from the state, from the institutions to the dynamism of the social forces, the movements and the mass struggle... outside of the links we have inherited, even those important ones inspired by Togliatti’s ideas”. This thesis remained a dead letter. The PRC was configured, organised and structured exclusively in relation to elections. Life revolved around elections, it dominated internal battles and its big political turns. Elections, the number of votes and the ability to play an institutional role formed the overwhelming preoccupation of its leadership groups. This is the way it shaped itself, quite naturally and in good faith. If the objective is presence in the institutions, increasing your vote, then it is quite natural that over time the local branches, the circles would become election committees, the local leaders would find career paths in the institutions, and economic survival for the party would be based on state financing. The only motivation of the leadership group would be tied up with the institutions. Alliances, given the anti-democratic electoral laws, would take on an excessive importance. Intervention in society would be seen as instrumental only in electoral terms and the party organisation would always be preferred to the self organisation of the mass movements. On this issue it was possible for the PRC to bring about a thoroughgoing change in the political culture of the Italian left where the autonomy of the mass movements, their right to organise themselves on the basis of their social reality and needs has always been sacrificed to the needs of the dominant organisations whether these are the party, the unions or other civic associations. The only two exceptions in the history of the workers movement were the workers councils of 1919-20, which Gramsci placed so much hope in as a foundation for the workers’ sovereign subjective role, and the councils of 1968-9 which opened a period of great social struggles. While there was no communist party during the ‘red two years’ of 1919-20 (it was founded in 1921) and the vacillations of the socialist party of the time provided no reference point, the councils movement that emerged through the hot autumn of 1969 was slowly absorbed by the CGIL (main communist left trade union) and as a result of Togliatti shaping the PCI as a ‘new party’, sucking up and synthesising any movement of any type thrown up by social struggles. On no account were the movements allowed to be independently organised. Here was quite a different party to the one which raised the slogan ‘All Power to the Soviets’ and led the 1917 October revolution. The Bolsheviks based their whole philosophy on another thesis – part of the First International’s manifesto drafted by Marx – according to which the ‘emancipation of the workers will be the task of the workers themselves’. This central idea was generally not integrated into the thinking of the Marxist left and its terms were bastardised as a result of Stalinist orthodoxy, which remodelled the October revolution into its own version where self organisation was completely downplayed and a ‘pure’ Leninism was exalted. Lenin’s conception of the party’s ‘guiding role’ as an instrument of struggle within the self-organised structures of the working class was transformed in the Stalinist bible into the infallibility of the great leader very similar to the role of the Pope in the Roman Catholic Church. The role of the party in the mass movements swung between arguing for a false hegemony, which vulgarised Gramsci’s conception and became totally arrogant, and merely using them for electoral ends. When it chose to get involved in the mass movements, and particularly the anti-globalisation one, Refoundation seemed to want to promote the idea of a left wing way forward but within an out of date framework corrupted by its own errors. In the social forums the

A Failed Refoundation

PRC put itself 'on equal terms' with the other movements but in doing so bent reality to its own vision – it is not the same as a movement. It operated without any culture that understood the principles of mass self-organisation. It is also not surprising that this experience did not lead to forms of direct democracy based on the principle of 'one person, one vote'. Bodies of elected representatives subject to recall were not supported and we had to make do with cartels of pre-existing organisations with their own banners.

Another feature of this communist party was how the focus on elections also had a consequence for the central role of the leader. This model is completely in line with the history of so many communist parties originating in the Third International. Togliatti was the absolute boss, just like Stalin or Mao – or even Fidel Castro. Except that in those cases there is a heroic halo attached as a result of tragic and big events like wars and revolutions. In Refoundation's case there were no great dramatic events to justify any leadership excesses. The situation was much more prosaic. Above all there was a nostalgic continuity with a long history – this idea of 're-making the PCI' that inspired a large part of its founding members and above all most of its leadership group. It meant the old reflexes tended to emerge. So we see again the red roses presented by the young woman activist to the first secretary just after he finishes his big speech, the privilege of not having to give your parliamentary salary straight to the party, and the general sacred reverence. All of this borrowed from a way of doing things that was over and produced significant damage in the way the party was built. The word of the party boss became a shield behind which paid positions grew, with all the attendant privileges. It is important not to underestimate the effect of all this ritual on the leaders receiving such attention.

Alongside this inertia there is another aspect of the crisis and resistance within which the process is experienced, in an Italy dominated by an arrogant and voracious capitalism that is trying to survive the new global competition. Refoundation had to fight on two fronts – against capitalism, its natural enemy, and against a left government which forced it into all sorts of contorted positions. Therefore we had huge pressure, a difficult context with workers being thrown out of their jobs while the unions went along with it all, negotiating with the bosses. At the same time activists became demoralised and those wanting to fight were isolated.

When you have a structural dismantling and weakening of the working class, and you are isolated ideologically, you can understand why sticking together closely behind your leader is a way of keeping the faith, keeping things together emotionally – particularly if this leader is a great, fighting communicator in the enemy camp, for example in the TV studios. It provided an antidote to the depressive feelings engendered by the daily difficulties of being a political activist. This was even recognised by people in the street and our enemies – how many times did we hear people say "we don't agree with your ideas but we must say we appreciate the coherence of your arguments". Of course these were the coherent arguments they had heard on TV from the eloquent Fausto Bertinotti. As the difficulty of political activism and the disintegration of Italian society continued, this collective identification and a sense of resistance nourished a general party euphoria which reached embarrassing levels.

In the end it is an aspect completely bound up with an excessive focus on elections. If your main representative is effective, incisive and good at scoring debating points this results in winning an electoral base around which your party shapes itself, and it is difficult for you to give this up. "You don't change a winning team". There was never any real criticism of Bertinotti or Bertinottism within Refoundation – outside of the internal opposition groupings – until the latest election results came out. Once the electoral success ended then Bertinotti also bit the dust.

Refoundation therefore could have developed another model, a party prioritising social struggles rather than the institutions, a party that did not spend all its energy on paper membership drives, that valued youth members, made women welcome and organised its intervention on the basis of the number of social struggles it was involved in and supported rather than the number of votes at stake.

Furthermore Refoundation could have really carried out a 'communist refoundation'. It could have put the question

A Failed Refoundation

of the historical failure of communism on the agenda and examined it from the point of view of its own historical project. A reconstruction of the left carried through via a loyal and honest debate without any pre-judging of the outcome.

We could have examined Stalinism without doing it in a way that was just a settling of accounts with its internal components, but rather through a study of the crucial historical turning points when Stalinism prevailed, when other roads might have been taken based on contemporary evidence. We could have put the political culture of the best of Marxism on the table – Lenin, Gramsci, Trotsky, Luxemburg but also Benjamin, Guevara and so many others – in order to really get to grips with it so that we could understand what is worth keeping from their political thought and philosophy. Surfing on the surge of the ‘No’ to the Bolognina Congress and the Occhetto turn, the PRC pretended not to understand how far the communist question was going to be examined and re-examined within Italian society. Instead it seemed that venerating the holy truths were enough to keep the faithful together and continue forward unperturbed. When Bertinotti understood the limits of this and began to look for ‘innovation’ it seemed more of an intellectual provocation that an area of research opened to the whole party, more of a timeless declaration than a serious and concrete engagement with the problem. The key issue was that the political thinking behind most of Bertinotti’s leadership group was neither internally coherent nor did it have a precise objective. It was as if it was trying to innovate and rejuvenate itself, to be free of the name ‘communist’ without defining or really examining the question. It was an eclectic and shallow attempt. Even with the introduction of the debate on non-violence the target was not really attained because it was too mixed up with the turn to government, and was too far removed from a fundamental and intelligent discussion on the history and destiny of communism.

We should try and imagine the powerful impact that a profound reflection on the history of Stalinism could have generated in 1995 within the confrontation with the Dini government, at the heart of the struggle to defend pensions and inside workers struggles generally. Was it really the case that the events of 68, the isolation of Prague and the Maoist aberrations of the Italian New Left inhibited such a disruptive initiative? What would it have meant for the membership of a party still on the launch pad to examine the definition of revolution and mobilise its activists not around the wrangles of its apparatus or the role of its leaders but rather around political and historical analysis.

We are not saying that Refoundation would have been able to become an unusual revolutionary party, but by giving a voice to its own *raison d’être* it could have certainly strengthened its own anticapitalist identity. It could have brought together within its ranks reformist and revolutionary ideas, while at the same time maintaining clear independence from moderate political forces, keeping apart from any compromising project with Italian and European capitalism, and working within a long-term perspective.

The point is this – while a potential was there, the same that carried the PRC beyond the threshold of three million votes to become a real player on the political scene, what was needed was boldness and political agility from a leadership group who had to think through their own role and history. They would have had to be imbued with a spirit of refoundation, understanding that this meant discontinuity and not restoration. In reality the PRC’s leadership group was not able to come to terms with the ‘compromising’ framework within which it had been formed, whether it came from the PCI or DP. It has been shown earlier that there was a tactical/strategic propensity which was dynamic and open to conflict, and capable of looking at these radical hypotheses; but the fundamental perspective of gradualism and social compromise was never really up for discussion. Not even, as we have seen, at the very important 2002 congress. It is no coincidence that the internal debate has almost exclusively taken place around the question of government: with the Progressisti (Progressive Bloc) in 1994, with the Ulivo (Olive tree bloc) in 1996, then a long pause from 1998 interspersed with some debate around the various local elections, and then again with the Union bloc in 2006. It cannot all be reduced to an obsession with Berlusconi, because in 1994 the perspective was clearly one of government and not confrontation with the right wing. In 1996 agreement to not stand against other left forces rapidly became a bargaining counter to get into government, with the consequent split. The same thing happened again in 2006 when ‘alternating became the remedy for the alternative’.

So the key thing is to understand the fundamental approach, the overall strategy, which determines the secondary manoeuvres, the political means to be used and the allies to be chosen. A reformist strategy was incompatible with the internal logic of the PRC, whose political line could only be to sail into the wind and to be squeezed to the edge of the political.

The Wheat and the Chaff

The potential we have described up to now existed inside the party's membership and intellectual patrimony. The party was affected by significant internal contradictions. The most important one – to remain outside the system or to accept its political framework – exploded violently with Cossutta's split in 1998. On the one side were found the pro-governmental chaff that spawned the PDCI (Democratic Party of Italian Communists), on the other side the 'refounding' wheat that remained inside the PRC. But the separation of the two elements was not salutary and not only because Refoundation finished up becoming stricken with problems again. The showdown of 1998, the split, the fall of Prodi, meant that the complex and contradictory ingredients that up to now had kept the operation alive and well were getting weaker. Supporting the government and then pushing it over, radicalising its slogans and then swelling the ranks of institutional post-holders, building up a lovey-dovey dual leadership and then stabbing each other in public – these contradictions should have been discussed in depth in order to reach a synthesis of the diverse sensibilities and perspectives in Refoundation that would have consolidated its overall project. Instead what happened was a split that was largely within the apparatus and was covered up for more than a year from the party bodies where there could have been a broad, democratic and educational debate.

So what happened was that moderate party structures stayed loyal to those who broke with the government and the recycled radicals and hard-liners went off with the split. The first phase of Refoundation finished like this – with pictures of Cossutta and Diliberto on the benches of Montecitorio (parliament) giving each other a hug and exchanging kisses while the rejected Bertinotti looked on with head bowed. It ended with two communist parties both competing for votes in the European elections. It ended in the demoralisation of a party membership which had put itself on the line to begin things again, bringing with it the strength of the 1970s experience yet would now become ever more worn out, silent, distant and absent. The 'strong impulsion' generated from the formation of Refoundation as a basis for reform, to quote Bertinotti, was burning itself out in these events and from now on the question was raised in terms of a semantic reconstruction. Here we agree with Bertinotti when he claims that "Refoundation had an historical opportunity that had raised hopes. These hopes were encapsulated in the anti-globalisation movement". We also agree when he adds: "...we did not feel able, as a party, to take the extreme step that would have brought us to intervene politically beyond and outside of the communist tradition, something that would have helped us break out of the impasse we were in." Indeed these were the two lost opportunities, Refoundation failed twice: in how it used the enthusiasm and power of its original launch and in making the leap to a new type of political formation.

There were some of us who supported this position in 2001, 2002 and 2003 as we have seen above in earlier chapters. However Refoundation did not take that step. There was an opening when the PRC had the choice of two possible ways forward: either to grasp the new upsurge of the movement and present its activists with a new type of radical, anticapitalist political activity, or to take up the offer made by Manifesto, the Association for the Renewal of the Left, perhaps also from the left of the DS (Democratic Socialist party – formed from ex PCI majority) for a broader organisation with more of a cutting edge – the famous 13% vote share that Magri talked about in his article bidding farewell to the PRC in the *Rivista del manifesto* – which would pressure the DS from the left. Refoundation chose neither one nor the other option and theorised its self-sufficiency albeit within the elastic formula of the Sinistra Europea (European Left). In the end also this chosen option had no legs because it had already been tried and had failed.

The anti-globalisation movement should not of course be mythologized. It was a political explosion that took off within the space left free by the failure of the governmental left and within the worldwide movement critical of globalisation. However its positive dynamic hinted at a refoundation of politics and of the left, if only the latter had been more courageous. Going beyond the communist tradition was necessary then because it would have taken place on the wave of a mass radicalisation and would have been distinguished by going forward towards the left rather than being a renunciation of it. It would certainly have been a complicated operation which would have further violently shaken up the PRC – it would probably have still insisted on the separation between the wheat and the chaff – but it would have been a turn with international breadth and not just resistance as usual. Instead the split was only postponed, carried out amid the ruins with an empty language with no future – defending the communist identity on one side and a vague support for ‘newness’ on the other. Politics is all about timing – a good political line that is too far in advance or behind of reality rapidly turns into bad politics. Refoundation was born at the right time, in opposition to the liquidation of the PCI, but in a few years had lost its way. It turned again to criticising globalisation but did not have a credible political project for it.

Today we find ourselves smashed by too many defeats and now deprived of the tools we had at our disposal to move into the 21st century without surrendering.

Return to the 19th Century

If we can gather together the forces and ideas we have to imagine a new beginning on a long road with a ‘slow impatience’ that will need a strong ideological strategic framework that Refoundation had basically always lacked. We can no longer accept the emotional impatience that characterised the history of the PRC, the superficial analysis made possible by the enthusiastic upsurge of the Refoundation membership. It is no longer useful either to raise the banner of continuity with a ‘little old world’ that has to be consigned to the archive of our memory. While we must look through communist eyes the project has to take on the form the present time and history gives it. We know that the substance of the objective is to guarantee a new fusion between the ideas of critical Marxism and the future path of the class struggle.

A communist party in Italy has served its time, it has done what it could and any attempt to simply replicate another one risks becoming a farce. The various parts have been acted out by everyone, also by the opposition, and the ‘audience’ now needs a new play altogether. That we need a party has to be a concept we defend and not abandon particularly given the complexity of the political situation we face. We need a party as a collective tool and not as a ‘church’, as a carrier of memory and of a collective wisdom able to ‘understand the world’ but clearly respecting the democracy of the subjects of that transformation which is an essential condition for conceiving a systematic alternative. What we call this party and the political project will be down to the subjective forces which can bring about this transformation. But if the name comes before the thing itself, to paraphrase Ochetto’s phrase at the time of the PCI turn, the project will not take off at all. If we had to define such a project freely without any type of external constraints we could only continue to call it communist. But if the term communist takes on such significance that as a signifier it confuses what it is signifying then it is of no use. It is no surprise that this sort of debate about the communist name tends to take place in socially ineffective layers.

There is a desperate need for a class struggle left, and ‘dropping the whole idea of a left’ does not seem a better programme than the work involved in its reconstruction. Building it without a thoroughgoing reflection on the errors of the historic left would also be useless. To make a step forward we need above all solid thinking, ideas, an ability to understand reality and to steer a course within it. We will need autonomy from capitalism and its mediations to develop a political subject apart from the current governments of the world, free from gimmicks and able to produce another type of political discourse. A new class struggle left party can also function with diverse political cultures having different perspectives – even a radical reformist perspective alongside a revolutionary one – but within the

framework of a shared anti-capitalism that necessarily keeps it autonomous from governments. Fundamentally that is how the workers movement in the second half of the 19th century was born, with socialist or social democratic parties formed after the development of the Leagues, co-operatives, mutual/friendly societies which existed as independent and alternative to the bourgeoisie. This is an invaluable lesson for us in the light of the way the present bourgeoisie uses more parties and political forms – including the social democratic parties who for some time have lost any sense of being an alternative to it.

We will need democracy, understood as a culture of conflict and an invitation to participate, and above all we will need a new generation, not only made up of youth, with a desire to rebuild. The old political generation is tired and defeated even if its memory and points of view, if generously offered, could become supportive in a project of reconstruction. However it will be a new political generation that will rebuild a class struggle left in this country. Even if in Italy today there is a low awareness of the need for a class struggle left there is an urgent need for one.

Appendix: Italian political timeline from end of Second World War

Post-war Italy to the 60s: Christian Democrats establish hegemony helped by PCI reformist line and the CIA

1946 - Referendum votes for republic to replace monarchy. Despite armed CP led forces controlling significant parts of Italy, particularly in the North, Togliatti leads Italian CP to accept compromise with bourgeois parties – dubbed the Salerno turn.

1948 - New constitution. Christian Democrats (DC) win elections and rules Italy alone until 1980s. Italian CP (PCI) allied with Socialists (PSI) get 31% of vote. US through CIA intervened massively to support DC. Assassination attempt on Togliatti, PCI leader.

1964 – Togliatti dies and his chosen successor Enrico Berlinguer becomes leader. At this time the PCI had about 1,350,000 members (4.2% of working population), the biggest CP in world. Post-war boom leads to massive changes in Italian society.

Years of lead – Historic compromise and red terrorism

1969 – Hot autumn following May 68 in France Italy sees a long period of strikes and social mobilisation on many fronts. Big forces to left of CP emerge. Downturn and a significant minority adopt left terrorist position of Red Brigades.

1972 - Giulio Andreotti (Christian Democrat) becomes prime minister - a post he will hold seven times in 20 years.

1976-78 - Communist election gains (34.5% in 76 general elections) lead to voice in policy making, the consequence of historic compromise line developed by Italian CP leader, Berlinguer.

1978 - Former Prime Minister Aldo Moro kidnapped and murdered by left terrorist group, the Red Brigades. Abortion legalised.

1980 - Bombing of Bologna station kills 84, linked to right-wing extremists.

The Craxi years

1983 - Bettino Craxi becomes Italy's first Socialist prime minister since war- successfully manoeuvres CP from government influence as it rules with Christian Democrats. New media empires, particularly Berlusconi's, are built up during this period.

Berlin wall falls and PCI splits

1991 - Bologna Italian CP Conference (â€˜La Bolognina') Communists rename themselves Democratic Party of the Left (PDS). Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) formed in December with a third of the membership who refused to follow the new Occhetto-led PDS. Sergio Garavini (its first national secretary) and Armando Cossutta are the main leaders.

Corruption probe and break up of main governmental political parties

1992 - Revelations of high level corruption spark several years of arrests and investigations. Right wing populist/separatist Northern League benefits from corruption scandals and develops strongly. PRC wins 5.6% of vote and 35 seats in parliamentary elections and 6.5% and 20 seats in senate.

1993 - Bribery scandal leads to Craxi's resignation as leader of Socialist Party. Christian Democrats and Socialist Party implode. Major political recomposition takes place. Garavini moves aside for his former ally Fausto Bertinotti to become new national secretary.

First short-lived Berlusconi government 1994 then Dini and technocrats to 1996

1994 March - Newly formed Freedom Alliance wins election. Berlusconi is prime minister for the first time. The coalition, which includes Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the Northern League and the neo-Fascist National Alliance, collapses by end of year following clashes with anticorruption magistrates and a battle with trade unions over pension reform.

1995-96 - Lamberto Dini heads government of technocrats. Austerity budget. PRC votes no in confidence vote on this and helps bring down government. Garavini, with Lucio Magri and others does vote confidence to Dini and leads a â€˜reformist' split off which becomes the Movement of Unity Communists (MCU).

First Prodi Centre-Left government 1996 to 2000

1996 - Centre-left Olive Tree alliance [including PDS] wins election. Romano Prodi becomes prime minister. PRC wins 8.6% of the vote and supports new government.

1998 - Prodi government loses confidence vote after PRC breaks with government. Cossutta refuses to support party line and splits forming the Party of Italian Communists.

Massimo D'Alema [of PDS, formerly CP] becomes prime minister and Cossutta's people join it. PDS becomes Democrats of the Left (DS) merging with some small reformist parties and finally removes the word socialism and the small hammer and sickle from its logo, replacing it with the red rose.

A Failed Refoundation

2000 April - D'Alema resigns as PM after poor regional election results and is replaced by Giuliano Amato who leads technocrat's government until 2001 elections.

Berlusconi comeback

Second Berlusconi-led government 2001 to 2006

2001 May/June - A centre-right coalition, led by Silvio Berlusconi of the Forza Italia party, wins the general elections. Berlusconi forms new coalition government which includes the leaders of two right-wing parties, Gianfranco Fini of the National Alliance and Umberto Bossi of the Northern League.

2002 February/March - Controversy as parliament approves bill enabling Berlusconi to keep control of his businesses.

2002 October - Lower house of parliament passes controversial criminal reform bill which critics allege is intended to help PM Berlusconi avoid trial on corruption charges.

2003 June - Berlusconi's trial halted after parliament passes law granting immunity from prosecution to five holders of key state posts, including the prime minister.

2004 January - Constitutional Court throws out law granting Berlusconi and other top state post holders' immunity from prosecution. Berlusconi's trial resumes in April.

2004 December - After a four-year trial Prime Minister Berlusconi is cleared of corruption.

2005 - Government coalition collapses after suffering a crushing defeat in regional polls. Berlusconi resigns. Days later, he forms a new government after receiving a presidential mandate.

Second Prodi government 2006 to 2008 - Prodi in, then out

2006 April - Centre-left leader Romano Prodi wins closely-fought general elections. He is sworn in as prime minister in May. PRC joins government, Bertinotti is named President (Speaker – UK) of parliament. Other leaders such as Ferrero become ministers.

2007 February - Prime Minister Prodi resigns after the government loses a Senate vote on its Afghan foreign policy. Franco Turigliatto and Salvatore Cannavo, leaders of Critical Left and of Refoundation, were the two key voters against the government and their party. The president asks Prodi to stay on and Prodi goes on to win confidence votes in both houses of parliament. Small groups from the left of the PRC such as the Marco Ferrando-led Communist Workers Party, Critical Left and the Communist Alternative Party (Francesco Ricci), split in this period.

2007 December – PRC joins the Rainbow Left coalition with, among others, Cossutta's Party of Italian Communists and the Greens. No election agreement between PRC and the DS/Centre Left.

2008 January - A no-confidence vote forces Prodi's government to resign.

Berlusconi back again

Third Berlusconi government 2008 to today

2008 April - Berlusconi wins general elections, securing a third term as premier after two years in opposition. Disaster for the Rainbow Left which only wins 3.1% of the vote compared to the 10.3 % won by same parties in previous general elections. All members of parliament were wiped out since they failed to reach the threshold. Refoundation implodes. Bertinotti withdraws from political activity. The faction led by Paulo Ferrero wins a slim majority at the July congress and inherits the name. The losing faction, Nikki Vendola, leader of ex-Bertinotti group sets up Movement for the Left (MpS)

2009 October - Constitutional court overturns law which granted Premier Berlusconi immunity while in office.

2009 December - Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is assaulted at a rally in Milan. In the European elections the anticapitalist left coalition of groups representing the PRC, Cossutta's PDCI and others got only 3.4% of the vote and no MEPs.

2010 March - Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's coalition makes strong gains from the centre-left in regional polls.

Dave Kellaway