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Italy

An extract from her memoirs: How 1968 Marked a Shift for Rossana Rossanda's Radical Politics

Tuesday 22 September 2020, by [ROSSANDA Rossana](#) (Date first published: 2005).

Sunday saw the passing of Rossana Rossanda, a lifelong communist, anti-fascist partisan, and cofounder of *il manifesto* newspaper. In this extract from her memoirs [1], she explains how the upheavals of 1968 marked a radical shift in her political engagement, as both the Prague Spring, and worker and student revolts in Italy drove an enduring split in Communist Party ranks.

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Rossana Rossanda. (il manifesto)

It was all too easy to see how fragile the younger generation's rebellion was; unlike us, they were not against "reactionary forces" but the whole architecture of the capitalist system. Our slogan [that of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), of which she was at this point still a member] was "The right to study," and the youth attacked the school system as a site where consensus was built; our slogan was "The right to work," and they wanted an end to wage labor; we wanted a fairer distribution of goods and services, and they couldn't have cared less about consumer goods. The world had suddenly appeared to them as it really was, as anyone who had even had a whiff of Marx knew it was. They were the first wave of protesters to challenge the idea of progressivism.

We should have been pleased about this. True, they knew little about past class struggles and how far they could go before the balance of power turned against them. But if we who had far too much experience of the long haul didn't tell them, who would? They would have listened if we had stood with them, alongside them, taken their side. Our presence or absence changed the scenario. I knew

this for certain; you didn't have to look very far; you only had to read Antonio Gramsci, whom the party evoked only when it suited them.

The truth that I still grappled with was that we no longer understood the issues that had once been ours; we had internalized a paralyzing knee-jerk desire for order after the fifties, when we were neither in nor out of the center-left. You began a campaign of struggle with a clear and limited objective (we were still capable of this) or not at all; you played by the rules not only so that you didn't frighten others but because the communists were the most upright citizens of all: dedicated to study, work and family. Our credo was the very opposite of the 1968 slogans denouncing the regulatory function of the present social order. ...

If the communists had looked at the parabola of the USSR, in its crudeness they would have recognized the same retreat, but either they thought it was inevitable or they had learned to look away. They had become the most honest of the socialists but the least audacious of the reformers. They were respectable. They must have retained some of this respectability if in this age of corruption they were among the rare few who were neither corrupt nor corrupting.

From a superficial reading of Gramsci, we had taken on board the idea of an ordered society, without paying much attention to what kind of society this meant, and had gradually slid into a fear of disorder. And everything that we had not predicted we saw as disorder. In any case, making a lot of noise just to feel part of a group was not our thing; we usually got together to pursue a particular objective.

Back then, who would have dreamed of talking about the primacy of relationships for their own sake, of taking to the streets simply to stop feeling alone? No one. Certainly not me, not then and not now. But, in our efforts to be reasonable, we had lost even our sense of curiosity regarding the unprecedented youthful insurgency of our own rebellious offspring. Not only had the old fools of the French Communist Party (PCF) retreated, so had we, the most intelligent communists in Western Europe.

A few days after that deadly dull Central Committee meeting the storm clouds gathering over Prague became more menacing. General secretary Luigi Longo made an unusual gesture: he sent a letter to the Soviet party (CPSU) in which he warned them that if the USSR used force against Czechoslovakia, he, Longo, would condemn it, whatever position the PCI Directorate took. He wouldn't have put this in writing if he hadn't been extremely worried and hadn't thought the Directorate was vacillating. ...

In any case, he, Longo, was sticking his neck out and he let it be known: I am a man of the International; I know you and you know me. I will condemn you in no uncertain terms. Think about it. If they thought about it at all, the CPSU must have concluded that a disagreement with the PCI, and they already suspected there would be one, would not do much harm. Maybe someone from the PCI had suggested, and some of the more obtuse members of the CPSU believed, that the Italian communists would be split between those who were loyal to the USSR and those who were not, and that the disloyal ones would come off worst.

They'd tried something like that in Spain, but it hadn't worked. In any case, Longo must have been given reassurances that nothing would happen; otherwise he wouldn't have left for Moscow as a guest on one of those health-based holidays that were a hangover of the fraternal relations between the parties. There, as far as I know, he had no contact with Leonid Brezhnev. Almost everyone in Botteghe Oscure (PCI headquarters) had gone off for the holidays, leaving behind a few comrades at every level of the hierarchy to look after things. Reichlin had remained to represent the Secretariat.

Karol and I were in Rome and we only went away for a few days to meet Ralph Miliband on Elba; he was a delightful comrade, a socialist member of the Labour Party. He reproached me for being too soft on students who supported the Chinese Cultural Revolution: “Vous tissez du mauvais coton” he repeated to me and Karol; we were interested in the Cultural Revolution not because we were unaware of how rough its cotton was but because the higher quality material of communism and social democracy hadn’t got us very far.

Towards midnight on 21 August Alfredo Reichlin rang me: Soviet tanks were rolling into Prague. The Secretariat was recalled urgently. Karol and I rushed to the Cuban Embassy; Castro had railed against the inability of the USSR to understand its brothers and allies, and the ambassador was expecting any minute to receive a declaration of condemnation from Havana. The minute lasted the whole night. Next morning, Reichlin rang me again. Your friend Castro has not condemned the invasion.

The PCI Central Committee Meets

There was a public campaign against the USSR, but nothing compared to what there had been in 1956 — it was as though governments now took for granted that everybody could do what they wanted in their own camp. A few days earlier, Luigi Longo, who was not exactly someone you went for a coffee with, had stopped me in the corridor, his face drawn and his grey eyes full of anger: “Do you know, they didn’t even let me know.”

The morning after the invasion he had found a short note from the CPSU on his breakfast tray informing him that they had entered Prague. Beneath his calm exterior he was fuming, if you can say that of a man who was so restrained.

But he must have swallowed his anger somehow, because he managed to deliver a measured report to the Central Committee. He censured what he called “the tragic mistake”. What the devil did he mean, “the mistake,” let alone calling it tragic? A misunderstanding? An unintended guilty act, like manslaughter? An oversight while following the correct procedures?

Some of us thought this was unbearably hypocritical, or maybe we had had enough of understatements that bordered on silence. And, for the first time, several people actually left the party. This had been no mistake: it was part of the logic of what the socialist camp had become — a bloc of states which only held together because they had limited sovereignty. They could have replied: But it has always been like that. And we could have responded that it hadn’t been like that up until 1949, and we shouldn’t have accepted it even then.

If there had been a mistake, it was our refusal to talk about it. And let’s not bring the Cold War into it, which the accusations of betrayal and the hangings had only exacerbated. And the fact that in 1956 we had swallowed Hungary. Keeping quiet had been and continued to be wrong. I don’t remember whether we managed to say all of this from the platform, I know that it was the first public outburst by Luigi Pintor and Aldo Natoli, and I don’t remember whether it was mine, too — we had all been feeling very het up at the time.

A few other members cautiously took a similar line. But no one from the Directorate did. I don’t know whether they had already run into each other in the Secretariat and then reached a compromise with that phrase “tragic mistake”. Maybe for the usual reason: “ne pas désespérer Billancourt” [a Sartre quote referring to the need to avoid disillusioning the French Communists’ base, as represented by Renault workers at Billancourt].

The leadership's response was that we were "anti-Soviet" — we had unforgivably gone further than the party had earlier when it distanced itself from the USSR. That was the beginning of the end for us, or rather this was the pretext for it. Thinking it over, I'd say that the most serious mistake the PCI made wasn't throwing us out but accepting the process of so-called "normalization," which it wasn't obliged to do simply out of loyalty to the USSR.

We already had Togliatti's memorandum stating the PCI's right to autonomy. In Prague, there had been a congress of communists, not of the little-loved dissidents but of comrades who belonged to the Czech Communist Party, which in the post-war elections had become the largest in Europe, with 38 percent of the votes, and on 21 August they hadn't gone away and hadn't taken up arms against Moscow — and yet the PCI disowned them. When the Czech party continued to suffer from repression and internal exile and some of its members tried to make contact, Botteghe Oscure didn't meet with a single one of them.

'68 Left

The exile of Eastern Europeans — not just Czechs but a lot of Poles and a few Hungarians — was heartbreaking. The 1968 movement didn't get involved. It had already left behind the world of communists, states and parties. It wasn't interested; it knew nothing about such things; the behavior of the PCF during that May in Paris and the defense of extremism against Lenin — which Daniel Cohn-Bendit would no longer write today — had been enough.

The news of fresh disasters that every now and then came out of Eastern Europe defined these social formations as little more than vast military barracks. The "sixty-eighters" were libertarian, anti-bourgeois, anti-system, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. They occasionally acclaimed Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg (a few Ho Chi Minh and Mao [many more]), but these were simply nice symbols. Their own task was to overthrow the existing power, or powers, of the state, and it seemed within their grasp — it would follow as a result of the consciousness-raising process and was already inscribed in that process.

They didn't ask themselves what building a different kind of society would actually involve. Their passions and their condemnations were fiery but not properly thought through, and apart from the anarchists, who attracted them, political forces were not an important part of their thinking.

In the autumn of 1968 the students were back in their universities, intent on wearing down the university system rather than taking to the streets. They were not wrong. They opened up a debate around the methods and schedules of university teaching, and the lecturers didn't know how to cope. They weren't all like Claude Levi-Strauss, who boasted that when the events of May exploded he had simply removed the carpets from his study. Most of them were hurt, offended, upset and they defended themselves badly. And being stigmatized as a hated and in any case defunct academic authority didn't exactly encourage them to at least go and take a closer look at what the students were saying.

A few lecturers cleared of the accusation of collusion with the system were allowed to hold courses, but it was hard and they were often interrupted by hecklers. Forms of self-management were widespread and muddled. The essay that had lit the fuse, "Against the University" by Guido Viale published in *Quaderni Piacentini*, still makes convincing reading, but the questions it raised as to what a different kind of transmission of knowledge might look like, what knowledge to include, why, and how, remained unanswered because the parties involved were incompetent. Later on, the demand that all students be awarded 30/30 in their exams excited the students, horrified the teachers and didn't change a thing.

In the winter of 1969 groups that called themselves extra-parliamentary began to organize. They were a response to the strongly felt need to come up with some sort of analysis, a thesis and a line of action that went beyond mere demonstrations. But as education was an integral part of the system, reforming it or revolutionizing it — depending on what language you used — became a secondary issue.

The groups were extremely political. Avanguardia Operaia was the most reflective, Potere Operaio the most cultured, and Lotta Continua the largest exponent of “rejectionism,” of demanding “everything now.” The pro-Chinese Marxist-Leninists soon split in two: there was a “red line” and a “black line.” In this seething cauldron of proposals, a lot of people moved around from one group to another and a lot of others, who didn’t feel represented or who considered any sort of organization anathema, debated among themselves in the self-run counter-courses. Counter was the common denominator of the course titles, and for very good reasons.

The extra-parliamentary groups were unable to develop a practice that was much different from that of the traditional parties, except to elect a new charismatic leader of a fluctuating grassroots. The counter-courses floundered over what bits of past culture to accept and what to refuse: this problem was never more passionately posed, or to so little avail.

Relations between one group and another, and between all the groups and the assemblies, soon became bitterly antagonistic. Nothing would ever be the same for that generation, and then suddenly it found itself outside the lecture theatres, where it nurtured the rancor of defeat rather than attempting to change course and find a better way forward.

Few people reflected with lasting effect on their once-upon-a-time desire to totally change the world; others were humanized by it and took that quality into their profession or voluntary work, becoming more attentive to others — but completely cut off from politics. The connection to the twentieth century was broken forever. The boiling lava cooled into stone, and still today the 1968 student movement is more damned than explored. ...

Under Siege

The invasion of Czechoslovakia weighed more heavily within the PCI than it did among the students. It overshadowed them, reviving our “they’re all attacking us” complex, and the massive political organism that was the party was crushed under the weight of the USSR. We were in turmoil as we approached the Twelfth Congress in 1969; the theses drafted by the Directorate were reticent about everything — the students, the situation inside the party, the invasion of Prague.

In the meeting of the Central Committee that was convened to ratify them, Natoli, Pintor, Massimo Caprara, Eliseo Milani and others among us openly rejected them. A number of comrades must have interpreted this as a warning shot, because, if my memory serves me right, the text was not put to the vote but sent in draft form to the district congresses. And the federations were split over it, some more than others.

At the previous congress, the Directorate had been able to muddy the waters by insinuating that the right to dissent requested by Pietro Ingrao was “objectively right wing,” but in the lead-up to the Twelfth Congress there was no misunderstanding — the leadership denounced what it called left extremism.

From the left, we voted against the theses and rubbed salt into two wounds: the party for the first time was cut off from an impressive social movement, losing a lot of young people, and the party had

tolerated military action by the USSR that hadn't even had the justification of the dramatic events of Hungary. In our "no" to the theses we were intent on criticizing their proposals, rather than putting forward our own, unlike Ingrao at the Eleventh Congress. We simply argued that the time had come to break with past policies, and in the federation congresses we had substantial minorities on our side and one or two majorities.

So when the time came to elect the delegates to the national congress, the organizational machinery was set in motion; the party leadership knew full well that in order to guarantee a safe list of delegates, all they needed to do was elect a safe electoral commission at the beginning of proceedings — when most comrades are not concentrating.

Natoli and Pintor were extremely popular in Rome and Cagliari, as was Caprara in Naples and Lucio Magri, Eliseo Milani and Giuseppe Chiarante in Bergamo, and Luciana Castellina among young comrades and women, but none of them was elected as delegate to the national congress. Which just went to show that if there had been elections in the countries of "real" socialism, the selection process would have worked the same way.

In Eastern Europe, the communist parties hadn't even heard of repressive tolerance. I was the only one to be elected as a delegate, by the Milan federation, not because I was particularly popular there — on the contrary, my speech was harshly rejected by Armando Cossutta — but because in high places it had been decided that one dissenting voice should go to the congress properly accredited.

[...] Before the national congress, the usual formalities were followed, and to my embarrassment and that of the others present, I was actually sent to chair a district congress in an "impartial manner." Those of us who were minority voices tried to link up with each other but were always careful not to allow ourselves to become an organized faction, a damning label — and not just because it could be used against us.

So, we arrived in the autumn of 1969 in the hall in Bologna where the congress was being held having only discussed the speeches that would definitely be allowed, Natoli's, Pintor's and mine. The congress took place in a sort of stadium; outside it was snowing heavily and it was terribly cold. In my hotel room near the station, I went through all the notes I had prepared for a speech that was not supposed to last more than twenty minutes; in it, I had to capture the attention of the delegates and the invited guests, and not forget that hundreds of journalists had come to witness our execution. We kept our distance from them, out of an ingrained habit of not talking to the enemy and out of the hope that our impeccable behavior would win over the congress participants.

And they applauded us enthusiastically. Nothing rouses a communist assembly more than listening to an expression of opposition which captures their sentiments without involving them and which is destined to fail, so that the unity of the leadership is preserved. Natoli, Pintor and I were assigned to speak, one of us each day, all of us in the morning, after the first or second speech of the day, which served as a sort of warm-up act. It was a good time to take the podium; there was a full hall and the press were obliged to be there instead of waiting as usual until midday, which was the time traditionally given over to the party leaders.

"The Left Dies at Dawn" was the wittiest newspaper headline. Those days have not stuck in my mind as being particularly nerve-racking — I had suffered more over the past few years whenever I spoke in a Central Committee meeting, uncertain whether I was doing the right thing or not. In Bologna everything had already been settled; not that I was so sure that I wasn't making a mistake, but the Secretariat certainly was. The die had been cast; this was just the public mise-en-scène.

I was the first of us to speak and I began: "We are gathered here while the army of a country that

calls itself socialist is occupying another socialist country,” and wham! the entire Soviet delegation got up and walked out, led by [Boris] Ponomarev, who had been a guest in my house in Milan several times. All of the other delegations except for the Vietnamese followed suit — we thought this was really significant until we discovered that they were having a problem with the simultaneous translation service.

The silence on the platform was glacial, but there was huge applause from the floor. The same thing happened with Natoli, who was much loved, and Pintor, who was very much loved. I had attacked our ties with the USSR, Natoli had criticized the overcautious approach towards social struggles and our lack of presence among the social movements, and Pintor had attacked the inertia and authoritarianism of the party.

We had divided up these tasks. We made no mistakes. We were used to speaking to our own people. When he bumped into me behind the platform Enrico Berlinguer dropped his guard for a moment: “You were wrong to talk like that. You don’t know what they’re like. They’re bandits.” “They” were the Soviets.

By the end of the third day, we knew that we had strong support but we also knew that if we put forward a motion attacking the theses very few would vote for it: so as not to split the party, to avoid sticking their own necks out, and because in any case we would still have been in a minority and therefore ineffective — all the usual reasons.

I was the only one who had a voice in the Political Commission; I put forward my motion there and it was rejected, but I was given permission to put it forward again in open assembly. I warned Ingrao that I would do so; in a photograph taken of us at that very moment we still look young and full of smiles — he looks unconvinced and I seem very jolly, goodness knows why. The ensuing ritual didn’t hold any surprises and I knew I would only get a few dozen votes, a derisory figure.

And then, at the end of the Congress, Berlinguer spoke, beginning his *de facto* leadership of the party. He referred in passing to several of the problems we had raised, but ignored the issue of the USSR. The congress took this to mean some sort of shift in position, though Longo — already ill and suffering — had not hinted at this in his opening report; on the contrary.

The few comrades who would have liked to vote for my motion gathered round me to express a particular worry; that is, they wanted to show faith in the new party leader. Even Lucio Magri, who also didn’t expect much and had followed the congress perched morosely among the guests, came down from the upper tiers, still hoping as always that there would be some sort of opening up towards our position, that our views would be legitimized, that something would change.

I was very unhappy about not putting my motion to the vote. It mustn’t look like a retreat, but what else was it? I presented the motion and explained why I was not putting it to the vote. It was not my best moment. My uneasiness was increased by the applause and sudden warmth of feeling that enveloped me because I was declining to open up a rift in the party. I got down from the platform, took my bag and left without voting.

Starting *il manifesto*

[...] The following two months were unbearable. Czechoslovakia was “normalized” and everyone had already stopped talking about it; a few emigres such as Jiri Pehkan tried to reconnect. Chou En-lai declared the Cultural Revolution over. The Tet offensive was winning. The universities were concluding a long slow retreat, having resolved nothing. And so far nothing seemed to be happening

in the factories, except for Marzotto in Valdagno twelve months earlier.

The last two or three years had been hard, and the struggles of the early part of the decade seemed a long way off, just a few flickerings. I had lost touch, caught up as I was in the Roman circle — I had become a proper little politician and a losing one at that. If I had returned to Milan, where there was nothing of mine left, I would not have been given any work, and I knew that I would be listened to with suspicion even by the grassroots: how could the party be completely wrong? The same was true for Luigi, Aldo, Lucio and Eliseo — all of us were fish out of water. The thousands of comrades who had looked to us with hope in the run-up to the Congress were now embarrassed by us.

What mistake had we made, where had we gone wrong? Our only mistake had been that there were too few of us and we'd spoken up when it was too late. I couldn't stop thinking about the Communist Party's retreat, which couldn't be blamed solely on the USSR — in any case, what USSR? After the death of Stalin, it had simply divided up its powers and was incapable of reforming the party or of playing a positive role in the world. ...

In 1969 you could expect nothing from the USSR unless something drastically changed in its leadership; for some time the masses had been anesthetized, more from skepticism than terror. But how could the PCI have become so moderate, precisely at a time when a changing world meant a different outcome was still possible? Because its particular obtuseness seemed only recent, so it was not inevitable that the PCI should have responded to 1968 by retreating into its shell, and in fact at the beginning it had been troubled by it.

This living body to which I had bound myself since 1943, which had accompanied me all these years, what stage of suffering or desire coupled with impotence had it reached? I had become used to moving around inside this body, playing it like a huge keyboard that responded to my touch and sent back messages in return. Now this keyboard had been taken away from me. And I wasn't very interested in the mental space I had always set aside for myself that garden of my youth had remained secret and now it was overgrown with weeds running wild.

And then I was overcome by the feeling that we were guilty, that for too long people everywhere had been calling out to us and we had never replied. And now we also carried the guilt of being punished: we had gained nothing and weakened Ingrao, to whom we were linked ex origine. He was right to reproach us: what's the point of simply bearing witness? Politics is more than that. Yes, but what kind of politics? What did the PCI demonstrate if not the inability to understand, let alone put forward and develop, the explosive need that was coming from deep inside society? Or rather from its brain, from the best part of it?

The student movement had been anything but a jacquerie. Or maybe it was already too late either to bear witness or to engage in politics, but I couldn't know this. In any case, we hadn't even been able to leave our mark on the party. It was impossible to have a clear conscience and in any case what did we care about easing our own individual consciences? It never occurred to us to act as an organized faction and to go around sounding out in secret the people who we thought were close to our positions. We would never have infiltrated our own party as if it were someone else's house — maybe out of pride, or because it would have been too much trouble, or maybe (but this only occurs to me now) because we were tired.

It's likely that we still held a little spark of hope that we had lost the battle but not the war, that the PCI wouldn't continue this way for long. The crisis in real existing socialism was plain to see. The center-left had reached an impasse. Society had sent out signals in our favor. Why not start again? Give Botteghe Oscure a flight? We had nothing to lose.

So the idea, dear to all intellectuals, of starting a journal was born, a monthly journal, explicitly partisan, which wasn't provided for in the party's rules and which it wouldn't be easy for the PCI to ban now that it cared about appearances: after all, it had allowed us to speak at the congress and even re-elected us to the Central Committee instead of throwing us out onto the street. It was mainly Lucio Magri's idea; he was the most enthusiastic and put his heart and soul into it. Not everybody was convinced at the beginning, but Pintor, Natoli, Castellina, Milani and I certainly were. ...

Our blood began to beat again. We found a small publisher in Bari, to whom we were grateful — other, bigger firms had sent us packing, either because they didn't trust us, since journals in Italy were not very popular, or because they didn't want to get on the wrong side of the PCI. We undertook to give our barese editor, free, each issue made up and ready to print, in return for five thousand subscription copies, which we would find ourselves and which would pay for rent, telephone, and the few other things we needed; he would keep any money made from sales above that number. As a matter of courtesy, we would have to let the party know. I was sent to speak to Berlinguer: "We're starting a monthly journal. I'm not here to ask you for advice because I know you would say no. I'm here just to let you know."

He didn't blow up, partly because he rarely lost his temper and partly because, or so I thought, although he was anxious about the affair he was also interested. He knew that debate within the party was being suffocated, he knew who we were and that we would get a hearing; he also knew that we would not be a threat to the leadership, and in the end, he knew he couldn't stop us. "Tell me what you intend to do." So, I did. He advised me against it somewhat half-heartedly, because he knew we had made our minds up. Before I left, I asked him: "Do you think there will be any disciplinary measures against us?" "Absolutely not."

I took my leave, promising I would let him see the first proofs. We were out in the open; our relationship was a loyal one. Ingrao vehemently advised us not to go ahead. He not only refused to be involved in the journal — as we knew he would, just as he hadn't approved of our behavior at the congress — but he had no illusions; when I said to him, "Berlinguer excludes the possibility of disciplinary action," he shook his head: "They'll kick you out." He didn't approve of us breaking the rules in order to put forward our ideas; he was listening to what was going on outside the party and he thought that it was wrong to burn our boats like this.

We put the first issue together in excellent spirits. We met every afternoon in a crumbling old apartment in which we had installed Lucio; we had lively discussions about what to write about and how, and we all read each other's pieces — except for Valentino Parlato's, which arrived just as Luca Trevisani (whose brilliant brother had designed the journal for us) was about to get on the train for Bari, to make up the first issue ready for printing.

This is the only journal I feel I have created, apart from an attempt I made years later with my feminist friends.... We spent hours discussing what to call the journal; we came up with some presumptuous ideas, such as *Reason*, or obscure ones like *The Arms of Criticism* (Marx had encouraged people to engage in "criticizing arms"), and I don't remember what else; finally, from sheer exhaustion, we settled on *il manifesto*. The 1948 one.

The reference to Marx was deliberate. Even though we knew that if a paper doesn't fail straight away, no one thinks about its name for long, it's just taken for granted. We all contributed to the first issue. Pintor's first editorial, in the spring of 1969, turned out to accurately predict the future when he wrote that what was happening between the PCI and the DC was "A dialogue without a future." There's also a piece, by me I think, criticizing the International Conference of communist parties. I sent the proofs to Berlinguer, who rang me straight away: "And you call this a journal dedicated to research and analysis? The whole thing is nothing but political opinion." "They are the

same thing.”

Again, he didn't persist or threaten. He asked me to delay publication for a couple of weeks — he was going to the international conference, which had been put off for more than six years, and he intended to attack the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the last thing he needed was for the CPSU to be waving a copy of the journal in his face.

The first issue of *il manifesto* came out at the end of June 1969; at first it sold thirty-two thousand copies, then double that and more; it reached a total, I think, of eighty thousand copies, making us deliriously happy and making a small fortune for our publisher.

We were revived like a shrub in the rain. A few days later, Karol and I met up with Gilles Martinet — under [François] Mitterrand he later became France's ambassador in Rome — who addressed me with a jovial “So. they're kicking you out of the party? Amendola told me.”

Hot Autumn

The *manifesto* affair came to a head with our September 1969 issue, which marked the anniversary of the Czech invasion with an article entitled “Prague Is Alone.” Magri had written it, though it was unsigned. And Prague was indeed alone: the new direction had proved too much for Moscow and too little for Washington. The sky fell in. A meeting of the Central Committee was again convened which formally requested that the journal be shut down, leaving it up to the federations to decide. And that's what happened.

And here we have the paradox: the Hot Autumn was kicking off, and instead of throwing itself into backing the struggles, from July to November the PCI was embroiled in the *manifesto* affair. They devoted all their energies — in public, anyway — and at least three meetings of the Central Committee to dealing with us instead of with what was happening elsewhere. The holidays were over and when the workers returned, they began to occupy the big factories one after the other. Fiat included, or more precisely with Fiat leading the way.

This occupation should have posed the PCI a completely different set of problems than the student movement had. Did they examine these things in secret? I don't know. Not even we, who were for the most part ex-northerners obsessed with industry, managed to realize straight away the enormity of what was happening. Because the workers were not only occupying the factories, they were managing them. ...

The industrial struggle of 1969 was the largest and most sophisticated working-class campaign since the war.... This was not withdrawing labor during a strike, this was going and taking over the whole of the production process. [...] These were not the brave survivors of the decades of repression: these were young workers, many of them without qualifications but acculturated in the chaotic acculturation processes of society. And what the unruly student movement had disseminated the year before, they made their own, though I don't know how conscious of this they were; later people debated whether the 1968 student movement had been the fruit of the early worker insubordinations of the sixties, or whether the Hot Autumn of 1969 was the end product of 1968's youthful hurricane. ...

What was happening in the autumn of 1969 showed that *il manifesto* was right and went even further. The PCI would not have been able to control the insurgency — it was no longer even able to reflect on what was happening in Chile and the 1974 energy crisis — without tackling the increasingly the complex mode of production and the best way to take decision-making powers away

from the bosses without driving capital abroad.

Those years explain our present. It wasn't an easy task, and no attempt was made to perform it; there was no new thinking, not even one step forward in the then Keynesian circle in which the PCI and the CGIL had also grown up and which would itself be overturned. Maybe even in the sixties Botteghe Oscure was afraid that there would be a fascist backlash, when there was less reason to fear one than there is now. But this opens up a much wider discourse, in which we, *il manifesto*, were just a tiny speck. ...

On 24 November the PCI Central Committee was convened in order to exclude us. [...] We *manifesto* comrades didn't go off into the void, as most people did who left the PCI. We found ourselves in the thick of the university crisis and the workers' struggles. We hoped to serve as a bridge between the youthful ideas that were emerging and the wisdom of the old left, which had had its hours of glory. It didn't work out that way. But that's another story.

Rossana Rossanda

P.S.

- Jacobin. 09.21.2020:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/09/rossana-rossanda-communist-party-il-manifesto-1968>

This abridged text is excerpted from Chapter 17 of Rossana Rossanda's *The Comrade from Milan*, translated by Romy Giuliani Clark (Verso, 2010). Extract courtesy of Verso.

- Rossana Rossanda is cofounder of *il manifesto*.

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/476-the-comrade-from-milan>