FROM COMMUNISM TO CENTRE-LEFT*

Analysis of an unprecedented political trajectory

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Any study of the Italian left must be anchored in the general framework of the significant change the boot-shaped peninsula has gone through—a change with very specific features, when compared with the transformations that affected many other European countries (Meyer and Hinchman, 2002; Poguntke and Webb, 2005). Almost everywhere, indeed, national politics have undergone a quadruple process of presidentialization, personalization, mediatization and intensification of marketing strategies. Such transformations, which contribute to the rise of what Bernard Manin calls ‘audience democracy’, took place in Italy with extraordinary intensity and rapidity (Manin, 1997). Moreover, they have been accompanied by a systemic and institutional upheaval and strengthened by the prodigious social changes that also altered Italians’ attitudes towards politics.

We are going to illustrate the unprecedented trajectory followed by the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Why should we concern ourselves with this organization? On the one hand, because the PCI has long embodied the Italian left, by dint of a merciless competition with the Italian Socialist Party (as during the 1970s–1980s, when the latter was led by Bettino Craxi) and with some far-left groups (which, especially during the 1960s–1970s, vehemently contested its politics and even embraced terrorist violence). On the other hand, because this party enjoyed the worthwhile reputation of an open, intelligent and creative political force, autonomous, if not totally independent, from Moscow. After the opening of the Soviet archives, historians put such originality back in its true perspective, albeit without denying it completely. Nonetheless, notably from the 1960s to the 1970s, the PCI wielded a real influence not only over the whole European left (in the West as in the East, where it attracted dissidents keen on democratic socialism), but also in American leftist intellectual coteries. Explicitly situated on the left of the political spectrum, the PCI painfully renounced both its name and its communist identity, in order to call itself the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS), then the Democratici di Sinistra (DS), before finally adopting the title of the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, or PD). Since then, Italy has been one of the few European countries where the main antagonist of the right-wing forces not only refuses the name ‘socialist’ or ‘social-democrat’, but has also rejected the word ‘left’, preferring to replace it with the expression ‘centre-left’.

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We will restrict our investigation to two essential aspects of the transition experienced by
the former Italian communists, and then carefully consider the situation of the Democratic Party.

First of all, by scrutinizing the strategies adopted by the subsequent party elites, we will explore
how the evolution of the political system, of potential allies and rivals, of public opinion and
of the electoral mechanism shaped the party in question. Then, inversely, we will investigate
how the latter tried to influence the external environment and to turn it to its own advantage.
Second, the organization, the political culture and the identity, three essential and deeply
interconnected dimensions within the old PCI, will be investigated. The party, indeed, was
characterized by a solid organizational structure and clearly recognizable identity and political
culture. Therefore, studying what has become of the organizational components will allow us
to evaluate the reality of the changes claimed by the party leadership.

By analysing these two topics, we aim to understand how a party evolves in a context of
democratic transition in which the phases of consolidation and legitimization of the new
institutions and party system still seem rather remote. The purpose is thus to identify the real
ruptures which took place within the Italian Left and to uncover eventual elements of continuity
hidden behind the claims of a complete renewal.

A strategy of interaction with the environment

PCI, PDS and DS: the main steps between 1991 and 2007

After its spectacular success in the 1970s,1 by the early 1980s the PCI had started to be obsessed
by fear of the decline which was affecting the communist parties all over Western Europe, as
is shown by its poor electoral performance in 1987 (26.6 per cent). The fall of the Berlin Wall
and the Soviet collapse heightened the internal debate and, in 1989, precipitated the decision
of the leader Achille Occhetto to change the party’s name and identity.

After two years of lively controversies, the majority of the PCI decided to scuttle itself and
to create the PDS, against the opinion of a minority, which adopted the name of Rifondazione
Comunista (PRC). This ‘Party of the Democratic Left’ was neither a ‘socialist’ nor a ‘social
democratic’ party, not only in order to differentiate itself from the PSI, which was sinking into
a corruption scandal, but also because the former communists kept their old aversion towards
social democracy.

The PDS soon had to prove itself in elections characterized by a new voting system. It ran
in the 1994 political elections within a coalition called Alleanza dei Progressisti (Alliance of the
Progressives), led by Occhetto and rather left-oriented, despite the presence of some moderate
groups which joined the left-wing forces and the Green Party. The PDS believed in its chances
of victory: the Christian Democrats and the Socialists had disappeared; the voters shared a
commitment to change, as demonstrated by the success of many leftist or left-friendly candidates
at the 1993 local elections; the manifesto of the Progressives was moderate.

The defeat was shocking. Silvio Berlusconi triumphed for different reasons. He managed to
present his candidacy as a real break with the previous system, revolutionizing political
communication by relying on his own TV channels and on the sales techniques he had perfected
after several decades as a businessman, and imposed a new type of leadership. Last but not least,
he built up a large and heterogeneous coalition, very suitable to the new electoral system (75
per cent of the seats assigned by uninominal plurality method and the remaining 25 per cent
by proportional representation) and able to attract most of the conservative and moderate voters,
who were anti-leftists but also willing to enter a new political era.2
The PDS drew some lessons from such humiliating failure, whose price was paid by Occhetto, who was immediately obliged to resign. As the new leader Massimo D’Alema (symbol of a new generation of party cadres, as well as his younger rival Walter Veltroni) suggested, the PDS considered the left unable to win the elections. Because of many contingent factors, such as the voting system or the unwieldy communist past, Berlusconi had successfully revitalized the anti-communist feelings which were deeply entrenched in Italian society.3

At the same time, there were some structural reasons related to the country’s history, its social stratigraphy and its cultural features, particularly the role played by the Catholic Church.

The purpose was thus to deepen the decommunization of the party (through a complete reconversion to reformism and thanks to concepts such as modernization, Europeanization or welfare reform) and to try to attract some of the centrists. Divided during the 1994 elections, these latter collected above 15 per cent of the votes and were experiencing a troublesome crisis. Hence, the idea of forming a centre-left coalition rather than a mere leftist alliance, guided by a leader free from a communist past but weak and easily controllable according to the communist tradition. The choice fell on Romano Prodi, a Catholic economist who had served as a minister without being too closely linked to the Christian Democrats, and had proven managerial skills without being a party man.

This ingenious operation transformed the Italian political system, which organized itself around two main poles, the centre-left and the centre-right. Admittedly, in the endless confrontation between the two fields, the centre-right often defined its rivals as ‘leftists’, in its view synonymous with ‘communists’, whereas the centre-left referred to its adversaries as ‘rightists’, which was clearly intended to mean ‘fascists’. Nevertheless, the two blocs shared a common interest in building two main polar coalitions in order to reduce competition. Moreover, on the one hand they attempted not to leave any space on their respective flanks, and on the other hand competed to win over moderate voters and snatch them away from the centrists. Such strategy backed up the PRC’s criticisms, while a leftist tendency arose within the PDS itself, as a consequence of the leadership’s moderate policies. However, the PDS proved itself able to adapt to the current electoral system: it turned the tables and put Berlusconi on the defensive, especially after the defection of the Northern League at the end of 1994. The Olive Tree, the name of the centre-left coalition, won by a few votes in 1996, when Prodi successfully played the card of professional expertise, rather than challenging Berlusconi’s showman skills.

Two years later, in February 1998, the PDS changed its name again. By transforming itself into the DS (Democratici di Sinistra), it aimed to emphasize its break with the past. Apart from the PDS, the new party collected various left-wing forces—socialist, republican, secular and Catholic. It aspired to cover the space of the reformist left, in contrast to the extreme-leftists, and to strengthen its alliance with the centre. A few months later, after the PRC had caused the collapse of the Prodi administration, the DS got rid of such an unreliable ally: Massimo D’Alema became the first Italian prime minister from the communist experience (despite his attempt to remove his heavy past). His premiership was brief and in 2000 he resigned, after a humiliating debacle in the regional elections. The following year, the centre-left, led by Francesco Rutelli (a former Radical and Green who focused on mediatization and personalization but did not manage to hide the coalition’s internal divisions), was heavily defeated by Berlusconi.

Traumatized by this new failure, vehemently criticized by some civil society members for their incapacity to oppose Berlusconi (the so-called girotondi movement), the DS were split between a tiny minority supporting further centrist realignment and a more powerful social democratic tendency wanting to anchor the party to the left. With their new secretary, Piero Fassino, the DS opened itself up to the creation of a new large centre-left coalition, which
In October 2005, primary elections were organized to choose the leader of the Unione, the new centre-left coalition. Back from his experience as president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi won a ballot which involved more than 4,300,000 voters. In the spring of 2006, he won a knife-edge political election characterized by a new voting mechanism (proportional method with a majority premium for the winning party or coalition). However, his majority was too fragile and heterogeneous to resist the attacks of the centre-right. In 2008 he resigned and new elections were then called.

The Democratic Party, 2007–13

In the meantime, the tables were turned again. Piero Fassino promoted a rapprochement with the Daisy (Margherita), an aggregation of several centrist and Catholic forces. The purpose, already clarified by Prodi and his followers, but also by Veltroni, was to put an end to the heterogeneity of electoral alliances and to assure governability thanks to a dominant party able to appeal to moderate voters. With this in mind, despite the opposition of tiny minorities in both organizations, in the spring of 2007 the DS merged with the Daisy to form a new party, the PD. The latter considered the left/right distinction as outdated in Italian politics. Therefore, it repudiated the left tout court in order to present itself as a majoritarian centre-left party, supposed to compete against a centre-right organization. Also, it wanted to open itself up to civil society and in the autumn of 2007 organized primary elections to select its National Assembly and leader, in the person of Walter Veltroni (former communist and eternal rival of D’Alema, vice prime minister in the first Prodi administration and secretary of the DS between 1998 and 2001, more recently mayor of Rome). For his part, Berlusconi did the same, by announcing out of the blue in November 2007 the creation of the People of Liberty (PDL), born from the fusion of Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale and formalized in 2009.

The 2008 elections were marked by the struggle between the two main organizations, the PD and the PDL (at that moment a mere electoral coalition). Veltroni ran an ‘Americanized’ electoral campaign and tried to forge a majoritarian centre-left party, free from any electoral deal. Nonetheless, Silvio Berlusconi achieved his third victory. Moreover, although the ballot had initially led to a certain simplification of the parliamentary representation by erasing the communists and the extreme right from the two Chambers, the two-party system defended by Veltroni appeared stillborn. An imperfect bipolar quadrille was established, where the two main parties, the PD and the PDL, were partnered by two allies, respectively the Italy of Values (IDV) and the Northern League, whereas the centrists of the UDC attempted to survive the siege. The PD strategic paradox thus became evident. On the one hand, its birth contributed to modifying the electoral competition and obliged the centre-right to go in the same direction, as Veltroni had hoped by claiming for an ‘appeased democracy’. However, on the other hand, the PD did not manage to impose itself as the majoritarian party (as this was almost impossible because of the voting mechanism) and suffered from a troublesome institutional fragility shown by the succession of three leaders in less than three years.

The electoral defeat saw the beginning of a period of destabilization. In February 2009, Veltroni, who had been strongly criticized, resigned and soon worsened by the debacles in the following local and European consultations. After a temporary mandate of the deputy leader Dario Franceschini, Pierluigi Bersani won the October 2009 primaries, which were characterized by a real confrontation between the former, the latter and their challenger Ignazio Marino and by a significant participation (more than 3,100,000 voters, compared with 3,500,000 in 2007). The new secretary, who intended to incarnate a new type of leadership, adopted a ‘D’Aleman’ rather than ‘Veltronian’ programme: to set up a reformist party, close to European social
democracy but respectful of other sensibilities. In spite of his tactfulness, he could not prevent the defection of the moderates, starting with Rutelli and his followers in November 2009 and the Catholic Paola Binetti in 2010.

Despite its success in the 2011 and 2012 local elections, the PD struggled to organize its opposition against Berlusconi and to take full advantage of his decline, provoked by sexual scandals, his loss of international credibility and by the deterioration of the economic and social context. Above all, it hesitated in matters of alliances, to be stipulated with the centrists of the UDC or with the left embodied by the IDV of Antonio Di Pietro and by Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà of Nichi Vendola: the centre-left strategic dilemma was anything but solved.

In November 2011, the PD accepted the suggestion of President Napolitano to appoint Mario Monti as prime minister rather than dissolving the chambers and calling early elections. During the following months, the party backed the new government, but insisted on differentiating itself and protecting its core voters from policies such as the labour market flexibilization. What is more, it appeared profoundly divided over the austerity measures adopted by the executive as well as over the party management and leadership. Bersani was criticized not only by Veltroni but also by some young party officers, such as Giuseppe Civati and above all by Matteo Renzi, mayor of Florence.

In autumn 2012, Renzi officially presented his candidacy in the primaries supposed to select the centre-left candidate for the 2013 general election by spectacularly placing the battle for generational renewal at the centre of the party debate. A part of the old dominant coalition closed ranks behind Bersani, considered as the most trustworthy guarantor of internal unity, despite his attempt to exploit Renzi’s challenge in order to get rid of the older elite guardianship. As for the young generations, they were rather divided over Renzi’s liberal democratic vision and Bersani’s social democratic programme. Political economy remained, indeed, a very controversial matter, besides generational change. After trying to reconcile different histories and sensibilities, the party witnessed a struggle for the definition of its own political culture.

Nevertheless, Bersani’s clear victory and Renzi’s fairly honourable performance, as well as the openness of the internal debate, seemed to temporarily strengthen the leadership and reassure the party over its state of health. Therefore, the bitter surprise of the 2013 general election (see Table 15.1), which saw the triumph of the movement led by the comedian Beppe Grillo and the partial recovery of Berlusconi, proved even more painful. The centre-left, unable to win a majority in the two chambers, struggled to form a new government. The Democrats appeared divided over the strategies to adopt, the government to form and the candidate to present for the Presidency of the Republic, which led to the resignation of Bersani and of the whole executive.

In a nutshell, the PCI, the PDS and then the DS and the PD made some strategic breaks, most spectacularly when they renounced a leftist name in favour of the term centre-left, seen as more suitable to the political circumstances, the electoral system and the voters’ expectations. The former communists have often trailed behind other political actors, particularly in understanding the voting mechanism and in adapting to the processes of presidentialization, personalization, mediatization and adoption of political marketing techniques. At the same time, they have been able to take the initiative by forming unprecedented coalitions in order to attract moderate voters, or by committing themselves to the cause of a short-lived bipolar polity. The other important innovation, which inspired the centre-right as well as other European organizations, has been the usage of primaries.

Lastly, although Enrico Letta assumed the leadership of a national unity government, after the 2013 elections the PD seems to be at a crossroads and about to implode. Shaken by the electoral result and by several corruption scandals, lacking a clear identity, without an attractive
project, it is more than ever on the defensive. It is suffering as a result of the so-called anti-political protest and of the context of general deconstruction of the whole political system, which sees all Italian parties equally under deconstruction.

Its only (relative) reason for satisfaction is the awareness that the PDL and the centre-right are experiencing an even more troublesome crisis.

Organizations, cultures and identities

From the PCI to the PDS

The organizational doctrine of the PCI relied on democratic centralism. This was achieved through the considerable power of the leading bodies and more specifically of the party secretary, the social entrenchment of the membership, the imposition of an iron discipline and, above all, the numerous bureaucrats forming the apparatus. The same centralizing logic ruled the relations between the party and the collateral organizations (trade unions, diverse associations, youth and women’s movements, etc.). The sacralization of the party was an essential feature of the communist culture.

Nevertheless, by the 1960s and most evidently at the end of the following decade, this system became more flexible. The new 1979 statute defined democratic centralism as a ‘method’ rather than a doctrinal principle. Several political and ideological sensibilities were then able to express themselves within the party and the right to dissent (but not to give rise to organized tendencies) was formalized in 1986. In the meanwhile, various collateral ‘mass organizations’ obtained an increasing autonomy. The last two years of the PCI, shaped by the debate over its future, meant the end of democratic centralism and the creation of organized factions (Accornero and Ilardi, 1979; Accornero et al., 1983; Ignazi, 1992; Lazar, 1992; Bosco, 2000).

The PDS had to break from the communist organizational model, and consequently to develop its own institutional culture and invent a way to penetrate society. However, the communist legacy, evident in terms of the vertical distance between leadership and base, size and importance of the membership (see Table 15.2), values and references, could not disappear overnight and jeopardized the new party’s first initiatives (Baccetti, 1997; Bellucci et al., 2000; Morlino and Tarchi, 2006).

The 1991 statute was characterized by ambiguity. On the one hand, this document erased any leftovers of democratic centralism and set up a democratic and pluralist organization, ensuring the proportional representation of all factions within the party conference, respectful of civil society autonomy and aware of its own limits. On the other hand, the structure remained rather centralized, thanks to the primacy of the central and regional bodies over the local ones. Once the Central Committee had disappeared and the Direction had been so massively enlarged as to become ineffective, the role of the party leader was strengthened and some new executive organs were created (the Political Coordination Office, the only real executive committee, with 27 members, and the Operational Coordination Office, with three members representing the different internal positions).

The apparatus and the membership also experienced significant renewal. For example, new professional experts, often more emancipated than the traditional apparatchiks, rose to join the bureaucrats, especially in the communication, surveys and political marketing field. As for the members, the new organizational philosophy appeared less demanding than the communist one: the new party considered itself a centre of expression and participation rather than indoctrination, encouraged individual contributions and critique. Nonetheless, the persistent importance of apparatus and membership, despite their resizing, represented an element of continuity between
the PCI and PDS. What is more, youth movements, trade unions and leftist cultural associations (such as ARCI) became almost completely independent. Similarly, the party’s parliamentary component was also selected and organized according to softer criteria.7

The DS

During its nine-year life, the DS constituted an additional step in the organizational transition, although it also reflected the former communists’ hesitation about renewal.

The DS intended to complete the transformation of the old, formidable communist organization into a ‘weak institution’ and to enlarge the leading elite, albeit (as we are going to see) without renewing it at all (Mulé, 2007). The 1998 statute officially formalized the party factions and created the post of president (specifically conceived for Massimo D’Alema, forced to resign as party secretary after having been appointed Prime Minister).

In 2000 and 2005, two further constitutional amendments deepened the decommunization. The first achieved a certain degree of decentralization, by strengthening local bodies at the expense of central ones and by introducing some autonomous organs, the so-called Thematic Autonomies, Councils and Forums.8 The second enacted a new deliberative committee (the National Council), with the purpose of ensuring a permanent linkage between the Direction and the Congress (convened every three years).9 Relative structural flexibility was provided, even if at the expense of a certain organizational power dispersion.
In a nutshell, the DS contributed to removing any organizational leftovers of the pre-existing communist system. The new force shared common features with most of the European parties (‘light’ structure, opening up to non-members, shrinkage in the proselytizing activities traditionally pursued by the militants), though it kept a hybrid nature. The debate nourished by the incertitude affecting both the party and civil society played an important role in the future foundation of the Democratic Party.

**The PD**

**Organizational renewal**

The PD, as the last product of the long transition process accomplished by the former communists, rose from the ‘*in vitro* fusion’ of these with the Daisy. This explains the contradictions in its organizational system, born from the marriage of totally different cultures, both aspiring to adapt to the external environment.

Nevertheless, the 2008 statute reveals a conception of the party, of Italian society and of the democratic system which is very different from those defended by the PCI, the PDS and the DS. Thus, the whole organizational philosophy of the PD relies on the principles of internal and participative democracy. It hopes to stress the break with the communist tradition and, at the same time, to ‘heat up a cold fusion’ (according to Michele Salvati, to get civil society involved in the shaping of the party).

The constitution defines the party as ‘federal’ and recognizes the political, programmatic and financial independence of regional and local bodies. It also regulates the party’s local branches (the clubs), constituted online or on a territorial basis, and creates some ‘instruments of political participation, elaboration and training’, such as the Thematic Forums, the internal referendums or the Annual Programmatic Conference. Even though these guidelines aim to decentralize and diversify the decision-making process, their implementation is still ambiguous and incomplete, whereas the party organization as a whole appears rather complex and confused.

Officially, the national secretary represents the party and expresses its political positions. Moreover, he or she will be presented by the party as candidate for the premiership, as a proof of the majoritarian and pro-presidentialism commitment of the PD. The role is supported by some vice secretaries, whose enactments facilitate the power-sharing between the two original founding organizations, which essentially share between them all the existing leading positions. The executive bodies are the Secretariat and the National Coordination Office (120 members). In addition, there is a supreme deliberative organ, the National Assembly.

The 2008 statute includes only very general and vague references to official relations with possible collateral organizations. Rather than stipulating institutional links with trade unions and associations, the PD prefers to invent a new relationship with civil society, above all thanks to the organization of primary elections. These constitute its main innovation and an essential feature of its identity.

**The primaries**

The primaries were adopted by the PD, as we have said, in order to stimulate public participation in its project and to attract those in civil society who had become more and more sceptical towards parties and politicians. They enabled the personalization process and inaugurated a direct relationship between leaders and voters. Thus, at least initially, they were conceived by the leadership as an instrument of legitimization for its authority thanks to a form of plebiscitary
approbation. Consequentially, the continuous claims for a participative democracy are paradoxically accompanied by a rather elitist conception of democracy itself.

The primaries are open to PD members as well as to non-members, either Italian or EU citizens over 16 years of age, who share party values and accept being registered on a voters’ list. Those who are mere voters enjoy essentially the same rights as members (with the exception of the chance to present their candidacy for party executive positions), which greatly modifies the concept of militancy and of the party itself, by affecting one of its traditional functions, the selection of future candidates. This choice focuses public attention on the electoral procedure, but weakens the link between the party and the electorate.

Two types of primaries need to be distinguished. The first aims to elect the national secretary and adopts a top-down mechanism. The 2007 ballot took place during the foundational phase of the party and set out to select the Constituent Assembly and the leader. Walter Veltroni easily won against his main adversaries, Rosi Bindi and Enrico Letta (Lazar, 2009b). The 2009 primaries, whose rules were slightly modified, were preceded by a preliminary consultation open to club members only (theoretically in order to choose candidates able to get over the threshold of 15 per cent) and designated the leader and the National Assembly. They were more open and significant and led to the victory of Pierluigi Bersani against his main challengers, Dario Franceschini and Ignazio Marino (Hanretty and Wilson, 2010). In both cases, as we have noticed, the turnout was considerable.

The primaries held to appoint candidates for upcoming local elections enact a totally different process. Even though the party constitution imposes organizing them for the post of mayor, president of province and region, in practice they have been used ‘à la carte’. Such elections can involve only the PD or rather turn into coalition primaries and become even more competitive. These witnessed the success of the front runners Piero Fassino in Turin and Virgilio Merola in Bologna in 2011, but also promoted outsiders such as Matteo Renzi in Florence in 2009, Nichi Vendola in Puglia in 2010, Giuliano Pisapia in Milan in 2010 and Marco Doria in Genoa in 2012, who all challenged the party elite and demonstrated a robust commitment towards leadership renewal (Massari, 2004; Pasquino, 2009; Seddoni and Valbruzzi, 2009; Pasquino and Venturino, 2010; Pasquino and Venturino, 2011; Bobba et al., 2012).

The autumn 2012 primaries, organized to select the centre-left candidate for the 2013 general elections, constitute a very specific case. Constitutionally, the party secretary was not obliged to call for a ballot, but the formidable challenge embodied by Renzi’s candidacy did not leave him any choice. The rules were soon clarified, although not universally endorsed. Candidates other than the party leader were admitted only if supported by ten per cent of the National Assembly or by three per cent of party members. The voting modalities seemed even more restrictive: exclusion of young voters between 16 and 18 years of age; a second ballot if no candidate reached the majority of 50 per cent; registration on a voters’ list and necessity for preregistration (also possible online, thanks to Renzi’s insistence). Nevertheless, several candidates ran in the leadership race. After a bitter campaign, the secretary was confirmed at the second ballot. Once again, public attention for the pre-election debate and voter turnout were significant. In December 2012, the PD organized its first primaries to choose parliamentary candidates.

However, it is worth noticing that the massive participation which marked the primaries of 2007 and 2012 in neither of the two cases ensured victory at the following general election, which certainly gives food for thought to the party leadership. Overall, we can conclude that such consultations, perceived as a key element of the PD organizational identity, helped to reinforce the party’s cohesion and image, but also turned into an unsettling indicator of its unsolved problems and into a multiplier of its internal conflicts. It is no wonder that in 2013
several elite members suggested another constitutional amendment in order to prevent Renzi from conquering power. The proposal, still under discussion, consists in differentiating the primaries which designate the leader (limited to members) from those electing the party candidate for the general election (open to all supporters of the centre-left).

Leadership, membership and values

The contrast embodied by the physiognomy of the PD is striking. On the one hand, the party membership had greatly changed, notably in terms of generational belonging. On the other hand, its apparatus and leading group, despite some undeniable transformations, form an oligarchy which prevents the circulation of the elites. These essentially rose, indeed, from the fusion of the former DS and Daisy leadership, with an evident imbalance in favour of the former communists. This nourishes the malaise of the Catholics, of the new members who joined the PD directly, and of the young cadres who are clamouring for further responsibilities. And this also backs the critics of the adversaries who accuse the PD of reframing itself in the old political system.

Thus, the percentage of the DS members who already belonged to the PCI was 78 per cent in 2006, against 94.7 per cent in 1991, and 93.04 per cent in 1993 within the PDS. One could argue that the proportion of former PCI members (as well as former PDS and DS) within the PD is decreasing, although there are no specific data available. In the party apparatus, the changes are contradictory. In 2000, 54.4 per cent of DS Congress delegates were former communists. In 2007, of PD Constituent Assembly delegates, 45.8 per cent came from the PCI-PDS-DS, 27 per cent from the Daisy and 27 per cent did not previously belong to any of the founding parties, whereas in the 2009 Congress the percentages were respectively 44.8, 33.4 and 21.8. In addition, in 2009, 11 out of 16 in the PD Secretariat were former PCI-PDS-DS members (although, in 2006, 16 out of 18 members of the DS Secretariat were from the PCI-PDS).

As for values and identity, confusion is extreme. A sort of hybridization, carefully planned in theory but resulting in a fragile compromise in practice, has been set in motion. Reformism, democracy, and commitment to ecology, feminism and pacifism are widely shared values within both the founding parties. The Catholic tradition has imposed references such as attention to the individual, freedom, Europe and the West, while the old communist left has suggested equality, social policies, labour and solidarity with the trade unions. Since the very beginning, two different souls, a social democratic and a liberal democratic one, have (not always pacifically) coexisted. However, at the 2007 PD Assembly, 57 per cent of the delegates called themselves Catholic and 54 per cent of them considered religion an important matter (Fasano, 2008).

The Catholic sensibility of the Daisy is thus clearly evident. This explains the embarrassment of the PD over issues such as the rights of homosexual couples, bioethics questions, and more generally secularism, the role of the State, the functions of the party or the concepts of left and centre-left. The controversies about the way to address fellow members of the PD (the terms compagni and compagne, seen as a communist legacy, being rejected by a minority and by the youngest members) are certainly very telling.

Similarly, the problem of the European collocation of the party shows that the Italian centre-left is divided not only over its political culture but also over its essential aims, strategies and policies. The PD is a member of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, created in 2009 to integrate the Italian organization into a group able to merge socialists with other progressives and to avoid the previous ambiguity (in 2004–9 the DS was a part of the European Socialist Party and the Olive Tree deputies of the Alliance of the
Liberals and Democrats for Europe). Nonetheless, nowadays the PD does not belong to the ESP. This low (and confused) profile exacerbates the controversies and weakens the PD political project.

The transition process accomplished by the former communists has been long and troublesome and the physiognomy of the PD is nowadays very different from that of the old PCI. However, the renewed party is not a new party yet. It has got rid of most of the organizational, ideological and identity leftovers inherited by its communist ancestor, but it is still unable to adopt a strategy, forge a political culture and design an innovative organizational structure. Likewise, it struggles to secure a strong leadership (considering the election of Guglielmo Epifani as temporary secretary in May 2013, for different leaders guided the PD between 2007 and 2013). Its genetic phase, to quote Angelo Panebianco, has been particularly weak and its institutionalization process is still fragile: such uncertainties play without a doubt a central role in the difficulties the party is currently facing (Panebianco, 1988).

Furthermore, the elements of continuity have not completely disappeared. Thus, the territorial entrenchment of the PD is almost a mirror of that of the old PCI: the core voters are mainly located in central Italy, despite a slight resizing and the adoption of different membership recruitment modalities (Agnew, 2002; Ramella, 2005; Almagisti, 2006; Diamanti, 2007 and 2009; Schin and Agnew, 2008; Lazar, 2009a; De Sio, 2011). As for the leading group, it is dominated by former members of the PCI-PDS-DS, although these do not completely dominate the party and have profoundly changed their references.

Despite its attempts at renewal and dialogue through the invention of the primaries, the PD is nowadays affected, as are other parties, by the extreme distrust of Italian voters towards theirs institutions, party system and politicians, and it struggles to understand the transformations in society. It is weakened by the traditional disagreements among the former communists, divided over strategic guidelines and personal rivalries, and by the malaise of the moderates, the Catholics and the young cadres. It calls itself reformist and so it is, but it is not able to develop a mobilizing project. It has not yet cut the Gordian knot of the alliances and, despite its awareness of the current importance of leadership, its six secretaries in eleven years demonstrate its chronic inability to find a strong, uncontested and charismatic leader. Needless to say, such incapacity has been dramatically underlined by the low-profile campaign run by Bersani during the 2013 elections.

The PD experiences, thus, a strong strategic tension: by moving to the left of the political spectrum it is scared to condemn itself to a minority position, but to develop a common centre-left culture and identity seems an exhausting and complex enterprise—an enterprise still very peculiar, if not unique, in the whole of Western Europe, which brings us to formulate an urgent question: is the PD a mere exception or does it represent a preview of future transformations the European left will undergo? That is the point.

Notes

* This chapter was written in February 2013.
1 The second Italian party after the Christian Democrats, the PCI performed particularly well in 1976 (34.37%) and 1979 (30.38%). At the 1984 European elections, shortly after the death of their charismatic leader Berlinguer and just before entering a very unfortunate phase, the communists even managed to surpass the Christian Democrats.
2 See the chapters by Bull and by Verzichelli in this volume for a more detailed analysis of the electoral systems and of the political context.
3 For the impact of anticommunism, see, for example, Corbetta (2002).
4 See, for example, Fassino (2007) and Ricolfi (2002).
5 The disagreements within the PD over the government’s political economy tend to complicate its choices in matters of foreign policy. On the one hand, indeed, support for Mario Monti represents the heart of the centrists’ political project. On the other hand, the extreme left has continually criticized the new administration’s policies (Vendola and Di Pietro have also promoted a referendum in order to abolish certain measures on the right to sack employees, approved instead by the PD).

6 It is worth noting that, apart from the rights and duties of the membership, the 1991 statute also sets the obligations of the party towards its members, particularly in terms of participation and internal democracy.

7 The nominations to the main elective functions had to respect a specific procedure adopted by the Direction, which could consist in any of the following modalities: regulated selection, ‘open’ or ‘closed’ primary elections.

8 The Thematic Autonomies include members and simple sympathizers, at both local and national level, in order to contribute to programme development by reflecting upon specific issues. The Councils and the Forums are platforms for debate, the former commissioned to discuss urgent questions, the latter to ‘unify the competences of institutions, trade unions and associations’.

9 According to the 1998 statute, the National Council’s task is to ‘define the party’s political orientations and programme on the basis of the guidelines established by the Congress’ and to summon the National Congress and elect the Direction.

10 The 2008 statute, structured rather differently from the constitutions of the old PCI, PDS and DS, begins with the party’s commitment to promote pluralism, gender equality and co-operative elaboration of programmes. Moreover, it creates an additional warranty body: the Committee for the Actuation of the Ethics Code.

11 The text simply states the willingness of the PD to establish cooperation with foundations and political or cultural associations, whose independence it commits itself to respect

12 Data reported in Baccetti (1997) and Mulé (2007).

13 Data reported in Bellucci et al. (2000).

14 Data reported in Fasano (2011).

15 Data reported in Pasquino and Venturino (2009). For the DS, data are available online at www.dsonline.it (accessed 26 October 2014).

16 See, for example, the study on Tuscany by Recchi et al. (2011).

Bibliography


