

106 | red girls' revolutionary tales: antifascist women's autobiographies in Italy

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abstract

This essay focuses on recent autobiographies written by Italian women born in the 1920s who engaged in revolutionary politics during and after the Second World War: Luciana Castellina (*La scoperta del mondo*, 2011), Bianca Guidetti Serra (*Bianca la rossa*, 2009), Marisa Ombra (*La bella politica*, 2010), Marisa Rodano (*Del mutare dei tempi*, 2008) and Rossana Rossanda (*La ragazza del secolo scorso*, 2005). In these autobiographies, personal narratives of passionate engagement are entangled with the urgency of antifascist resistance, and with the social and political conflicts that traversed Cold War Italy. Women's multiple forms of political engagement within the Italian Communist Party are analysed, as well as the contradictory, ambivalent connection between Western European communist activists and Eastern European socialist regimes. The intersections between antifascist, communist and women's rights politics are also explored, since some of the authors were leaders of the nation-wide left-wing Union of Italian Women. The autobiographies tell the story of an antifascist, left-wing 'middle wave' that fought pioneering battles for women's political and social rights, and narrate its complex, conflictual encounter with second-wave feminism in the 1970s. These writings, therefore, allow us to reflect on changes in gendered subjectivities and revolutionary politics across time and generations.

keywords

gender; autobiography; Italy; Cold War; antifascism; communism

introduction

The history of women's left-wing political leadership, particularly in Western Europe, has been an under-researched phenomenon. The life experiences of Italian communist women in particular have rarely been studied in a systematic way. Since the end of the Cold War, the disappearance of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), and the hegemony of right-wing political discourse led to a silencing and marginalisation of Italian communists' life experiences (Foa, Mafai and Reichlin, 2002). The memory of women's revolutionary activism in the Union of Italian Women (Unione Donne Italiane, UDI), an organisation linked to the PCI, which affiliated left-wing women of different political and social backgrounds from 1945, was also silenced as a result of these transformations.

This essay examines five autobiographies written by Italian women born in the 1920s who were engaged in antifascist, communist and women's rights politics in the second half of the twentieth century, and who occupied different leadership positions in the PCI and the UDI between the post-war period and the late 1960s. I will focus in particular on Rossana Rossanda's *La ragazza del secolo scorso* (The Girl of The Last Century, 2005), Marisa Rodano's *Del mutare dei tempi* (About The Changing of Times, 2008), Bianca Guidetti Serra's *Bianca la rossa* (Red Bianca, 2009), Marisa Ombra's *La bella politica* (Beautiful Politics, 2010) and Luciana Castellina's *La scoperta del mondo* (The Discovery of The World, 2011). So far only Rossanda's autobiography has been translated into English, with the title *The Comrade From Milan* (2010).¹

1 In this essay I am quoting the 2010 English translation of Rossanda's autobiography. The other books I am referring to are the original Italian editions, and all translation into English is mine.

In these autobiographies, written in post-Cold War, post-socialist times, the narrators interrogate the meaning of revolutionary engagement through the narration of their lived experience as revolutionary activists. Revisiting the past through writing is a way for former communist women to make themselves heard once again, and to come to terms with the present. What these autobiographies do, in my view—and what I will attempt to do through them in this essay—closely relates to what Hemmings (2011: 181) defines as *recitation*. Recitation is not the telling of a new story, but rather, 'a renarration of the same story from a different perspective', which 'operates as a breaking open of the presumed relation between the past and the present, rather than as an instantiation of a new, fixed relation between the two'. The autobiographies renarrate political history from a specific *generational* perspective, but also from a specific *gendered* perspective: on the one hand, they reactivate the memory of revolutionary struggles waged by the antifascist generation in the Italian political context; on the other, they reinscribe antifascist women's struggles within the genealogy of Italian women's and feminist movements.

The autobiographical genre represents an invaluable source for the study of political and historical subjectivities across generations. This genre is characterised by

the interrelation between individual and collective history, and allows for an assessment not only of changes in historical paradigms, but also, more importantly, of transformations in subjectivity over time and place.² As a way of countering the stereotypical representation of communist activism that prevailed in liberal Western discourse during and after the Cold War, a recent historical project on communism in Great Britain established a large biographical database (Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, 2005; Barrett, 2008: 396). According to these scholars, the study of communism through party members' individual biographies 'places human agency and complexity at the center of the history, while the details of life stories firmly root communism in the regional and national contexts in which the party operated' (Cross and Flinn, 2006: 12).

As I will demonstrate in this essay, the regional and national context in which Italian communist women were positioned had a fundamental importance for their subjective, gendered and generational experiences. Drawing on Italian communist women's autobiographies, this essay aims to show the non-homogeneity, complexity and plurality of women's revolutionary activism in Cold War Italy. Against the image of communist women as manipulated and deprived of agency that has been popularised by Italian mainstream media, I highlight the different personal paths that led each protagonist to engage in revolutionary politics, as well as the strong link between antifascist and communist engagements. The multiple interrelations between women's national and international activism are underlined in the essay, as well as the significance of national identities in shaping international engagement, contributing to ongoing debates about the complexity and richness of women's Cold War internationalism in the twentieth century (Laville, 2002; De Haan, 2010).³

The gendered dimensions of the autobiographies will also be analysed. As observed by scholars of American Cold War history, autobiographies written by communist women, compared with men, have tended to elaborate more on personal life, blurring the line between public and private, and providing important insights not only on political history but also on women's gendered subjectivities (Trimberger, 1979; Barrett, 2008: 403). Autobiographies, moreover, make clear how understandings of revolutionary politics changed across time and generations. In 1979, Trimberger (1979: 433) observed that the writings of women belonging to the Old Left presented a 'distinct sensibility' when compared with the writings of women involved in the New Left and in feminist movements in the United States.⁴

This 'distinct sensibility' of women belonging to the antifascist generation is also apparent in the autobiographies analysed in this essay. The autobiographies point to changing understandings of revolutionary politics, and of revolutionary subjects, over time. Having entered politics during the antifascist Resistance, and having joined the Italian Communist Party in the post-war era, the authors' political subjectivities were formed through their involvement in antifascist and communist

2 In her pioneering work on oral history, activism and subjectivity, Passerini (1998: 54) defines *subjectivity* as a term that includes 'both the aspects of spontaneous subjective being (*soggettività irriflessa*) contained and represented by attitude, behavior and language, as well as other forms of awareness (*consapevolezza*) such as the sense of identity, consciousness of oneself, and more considered forms of intellectual activity'. The term, she argues, 'embraces not only the epistemological dimension but also that concerned with the nature and significance of the political'.

3 De Haan (2012) 'The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF): history, main agenda, and contributions, 1945–1991', in *Women and Social Movements (WASI) Online Archive*, edited by Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar. http://wasi.alexanderstreet.com/help/view/the_womens_international_democratic_federation_widf_history_main_agenda_and_contributions_19451991, last accessed 22 November 2013.

4 In this article, I am also adopting this distinction between Old Left and New Left. By Old Left I mean the Italian communist and socialist parties, as well as other organisations affiliated to

them, such as the UDI. By New Left, I indicate the social movements and organisations created in the 1960s and 1970s, which adopted a critique of the Old Left for its political moderatism and its hierarchical structures. These include student movements, anti-imperialist movements, far-left parties and feminist movements. The term 'New Left', coined in the United States, has also been in use in the Italian context (*nuova sinistra*), as well as the term Old Left (*vecchia sinistra*, also called *sinistra storica*, Historical Left).

politics, in contact with the working-class masses and the peasantry. Meanwhile, some of them had been involved in post-war women's movements for equal rights within the UDI, and had developed an awareness of women's specific position and interests. The themes of patriarchy and of sexual difference, however, did not become legitimate political issues until the 1970s, when feminist movements questioned existing understandings of radical politics, and the very concept of the political. 'The personal is the political' became the new revolutionary feminist motto (Hellman, 1984; Chiavola Birnbaum, 1986; Bertilotti and Scattigno, 2005).

As I will show in this article, in the 1970s the women who belonged to the antifascist generation found themselves at the intersection of different revolutionary paradigms: the paradigm of women's emancipation developed by the Old Left and the paradigm of autonomy and sexual difference developed by feminist movements. The conflictual encounter between the communist politics of 'women's emancipation' and the feminist politics of 'women's liberation' is addressed in most of the writings, and particularly in the sources written by UDI leaders, which provide a first-hand account of the struggles for women's political and social rights in the post-war and early Cold War era. As I will argue, these narratives point to multiple forms of gender revolution in the course of the twentieth century, and to transformations in gendered subjectivities across political generations.

My argument will be presented in three parts. The first part of the essay situates these writings within Italy's left-wing autobiographical tradition. In the second part, women's different forms of political engagement will be discussed, in relation to different moments of revolution and counter-revolution at home and abroad. The common elements contained in the autobiographies will be outlined, particularly women's participation in the antifascist resistance, and the subsequent engagement in communist politics in the post-war and Cold War era. In the third part of the essay, I will analyse how gender revolutions are narrated in the autobiographies, looking at the ways in which narrators describe their personal emancipation through revolutionary politics, as well as their conflictual encounters with the feminist generation in the 1970s. By way of conclusion, I consider the affective function of autobiography for the narrators. Despite some feelings of loss and disillusionment, the writers—now in their eighties and nineties—continue to be engaged in the public sphere. As founding figures of the left and as foremothers of women's rights in Italy, writing their life stories becomes a way to intervene in present-day politics.

autobiography and revolution in Italy

In her pioneering study of biography and autobiography, feminist scholar Heilbrun (1997: 17) argued that power and control are perceived as 'unwomanly', and therefore that women generally 'have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts,

plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over—take control of—their own lives'. There have been, however, notable exceptions when it comes to left-wing women leaders and intellectuals, starting with Alexandra Kollontai and Emma Goldman, and ranging to Simone De Beauvoir and Angela Davis. These authors have challenged gendered conventions, stressing women's power and ability to take control of their own lives by engaging in revolutionary movements and practices (Curthoys, 2000; Hemmings, 2012).

A tradition of left-wing women's autobiographical writings emerged in Italy after the Second World War. While male leaders were predominant in post-war narratives of the antifascist resistance (Gerosa, 1979), there were also a few autobiographies written by women. *Fronti e frontiere* (Fronts and Borders) by antifascist partisan Joyce Lussu (1912–1998) came out in 1945, while the *Diario partigiano* (The Partisan Diary) by socialist Ada Gobetti (1902–1968) was published in 1956. The early 1970s saw the publication of autobiographies by two founding figures of the PCI: Camilla Ravera (1889–1988) published her *Diario di trent'anni, 1913–1943* (Thirty Years Diary) in 1973, while *Rivoluzionaria professionale* (Professional Revolutionary) by Teresa Noce (1900–1980) came out in 1974. PCI dissident Felicita Ferrero (1899–1984) published her autobiography in 1974 (*Un nocciolo di verità*, A Gist of Truth). The appearance of most of these autobiographies in the early 1970s is worth noting. Thanks to the emergence of feminist movements in this period, Italy saw a veritable boom of historical publications related to women's wartime experiences. Important contributions to the autobiographical genre came from oral history. Several publications were aimed at recovering the life stories of female partisans, workers and political prisoners (Bruzzone and Farina, 1976; Guidetti Serra, 1977; Bruzzone and Beccaria Rolfi, 1978; Pieroni Bortolotti, 1978), as well as the voices of both PCI leaders and ordinary members (Lilli and Valentini, 1979; Scropo, 1979). These contributions challenged the traditional representation of women's participation in the resistance as secondary to men's and motivated only by family connections, an image that had also prevailed in left-wing historiography.⁵

The publication of antifascist women's autobiographical writings and essays continued sporadically during the 1990s (Viviani, 1994; Musu, 1997; Capponi, 2000). Then, from the mid-2000s onwards, a new range of autobiographies, encompassing the fascist era and the antifascist resistance, as well as the Cold War and its end in 1989, were published in Italy. These works—which I analyse in this essay—were written by women born between 1919 and 1929, who grew up under Fascism, and whose political consciousness emerged with the onset of the Second World War. Two of them, Bianca Guidetti Serra (born in 1919 in Turin) and Marisa Ombra (born in 1925 in Asti), grew up in working-class families in the region of Piedmont. Three other women, Marisa Rodano (born in 1921 in Rome), Rossana Rossanda (born in 1924 in Pula) and Luciana Castellina (born in 1929 in Rome), grew up in upper-class, well-to-do families. The authors took part in Italian political history

⁵ As historian Pieroni Bortolotti (1978: 9–10) famously noted, until then 'the women of the Resistance' were always 'mothers and spouses of the house, performing a double work, a double duty, and if nobody spoke of a double death, it was only because in the world one dies—even women—only once'.

first as antifascist activists and then as PCI cadres. Later, Marisa Rodano and Marisa Ombra became leaders of the UDI, while Bianca Guidetti Serra, Rossana Rossanda and Luciana Castellina gained a prominent role as communist dissidents and New Left activists.

All five autobiographies are constructed as coming-of-age stories, describing the growing political awareness and engagement of their protagonists, from youth to adulthood. These works, however, are far from reproducing a 'generational master narrative' (Maslen, 2013: 24), in which the protagonist is seamlessly placed in a linear, progressive time. Instead, the narratives underline the complex and manifold ways in which women's subjectivities have been interpellated by history over the course of the twentieth century. These are varied narratives, encompassing a range of descriptive modes. The everyday experience of revolutionary political struggles is described, often turning the texts into direct accounts of social, cultural and political history; at other times, more personal landmarks make their way into the pages: childhood memories and family histories, love and relationships, personal losses, motherhood and ageing.

Bearing the mark of the authors' longstanding experience as writers, journalists and public intellectuals, all these autobiographies have a strong literary quality. The most experimental among the five is Luciana Castellina's, which consists of a retrospective commentary of a teenage diary kept from 1943 to 1947, interspersed with some of the most relevant diary entries. In some instances, notably in Rossanda's and Rodano's texts, the accounts of childhood memories, antifascist resistance activities and travels in different parts of the world resemble Simone de Beauvoir's autobiographical style. Particularly, these narratives recall what Curthoys (2000) defines as de Beauvoir's 'self-fashioning' through writing in her four-volume memoir. The strong individuality of the authors as engaged political subjects infuses the narratives with a sense of passion, epic and adventure, plunging the reader into the immediacy and urgency of twentieth-century political history.

taking sides: revolutions and counter-revolutions

While women's participation in the antifascist resistance in Italy has been researched extensively (Slaughter, 1997), women's activism in the Cold War period has rarely been addressed. As noted by feminist historians, women's twentieth-century political history had generally been neglected (Passerini, 1991; Rossi-Doria, 2010). Yet, as these life narratives show, a strong biographical continuity existed between wartime and peacetime politics: participating in the antifascist resistance often led women to further political engagement, and sometimes to positions of political leadership (Alano, 2003).

The antifascist resistance is represented as a first, fundamental revolutionary step for the 1920s generation, that each author came to in a different way. Because of her Jewish friends, who included Primo Levi, Bianca Guidetti Serra indirectly experienced the injustice of the Racial Laws promulgated in 1938. After her father's premature death in 1937, she interrupted her studies and found employment as a social worker in Turin's factories. After Italy's unconditional surrender on 8 September 1943, Guidetti Serra joined the resistance, writing clandestine papers and transmitting information through the mountains of Piedmont. Marisa Ombra, together with her father and sister, took part in antifascist networks from the beginning of the war. After 1943 Ombra became a courier (*staffetta*) in the region of Asti, carrying information and weapons. Marisa Rodano, half-Jewish by birth and Catholic by faith, the daughter of a fascist *podestà* and landowner, discovered the injustice of Fascism by volunteering with Catholic youth charities in the peripheries of Rome from the mid-1930s onwards. She later joined the resistance student group the Christian Left (*Sinistra Cristiana*) in Nazi-occupied Rome. In contrast, Rossana Rossanda, whose cosmopolitan family deliberately refrained from politics, spent most of the war as what she called a 'grey girl', until the bombing of Milan and the shortages caused by the war in the winter of 1942–1943. These events pushed her to become involved in antifascist politics through university networks. Finally, Luciana Castellina, having grown up in a half-Jewish cosmopolitan family, encountered politics as a 14-year-old girl in Riccione in the summer of 1943, when her tennis match with the youngest daughter of Benito Mussolini was interrupted by the news of the arrest of the *Duce*. Between 1943 and 1945, this privileged teenager was confronted with the violence of war, notably because of the persecution of Jewish relatives, and she eventually joined the PCI after the war.

For women from working-class backgrounds such as Ombra, then, their involvement in the resistance came about through family networks. For upper- and middle-class women such as Rodano and Rossanda, conversely, the choice to get involved in politics implied a conscious rebellion against their family. In all the autobiographies, however, the sudden engagement in politics during the resistance is described in the form of a 'conversion narrative' (Barrett, 2008: 399), a first, fundamental step towards critical awareness. Rossanda (2010: 64) describes this insight as 'a recognition of something that could not be put off anymore. I made connections, I reconnected things, words, silences, events I had brushed up against but had been wilfully blind to'. The decision to take part in clandestine resistance activities entailed considerable risk for the women involved. At the same time, being part of such a collective enterprise generated feelings of responsibility and hope for radical change: as Ombra (2009: 32) comments, 'we had to reinvent everything'. For women, moreover, the resistance represented a moment of extraordinary mobility and openness, a break with traditional gender structures and norms. Ombra (2009: 46) recalls the feelings she experienced as a partisan in the beautiful mountains of the Piedmont: 'an unbounded freedom was before us, and

our enthusiasm, our naiveté, led us towards fantasies in which other worlds, other relationships, other meanings given to life, appeared to us as certainties’.

During the resistance, the most successful clandestine networks had been the ones created by the PCI. Immediately after the war the party became, as Ombra (2009: 50) writes, ‘the most natural place to be’. Within the party, antifascist women could make use of the political and organisational skills they had gained during wartime. Many of them were hired as political functionaries, earning a modest salary while putting a great deal of time and effort into the organisation. After the war, the PCI was rapidly transforming from a small clandestine network into a mass organisation of more than two million members. In the eyes of many former partisans, the PCI embodied the radical ideals of the resistance. Staying with Ombra (2009: 50) for the moment, she notes that ‘there was an absolute coincidence between our lives and the great ambition to realise a just world. The party made it possible to feel part of this history’.

In all five autobiographies, the feeling of being ‘on the right side’ of history—the revolutionary side—during and after the war is a recurring feature. This conviction was further strengthened in the early Cold War years, when the struggle against Fascism turned into a struggle against anti-communism. While the PCI was included in the national unity governments immediately after the war, from 1947 onwards—and particularly after the electoral defeat of 1948—communist and socialist forces became increasingly marginalised. In late 1940s and early 1950s Italy, workers’ and peasants’ movements were violently repressed by Christian-Democratic governments (Ginsborg, 2003). The strategy of communist leaders, therefore, was to create a grassroots mass organisation that could ‘adhere to the folds of society’ (Hellman, 1988: 16), in order to increase its consensus not only among the working class and the peasantry, but also among the middle classes and intellectuals. In the working-class neighbourhoods of Milan, as Rossanda (2010:104) writes, ‘the comrades down in the basement, who went from shop floor to shop floor or from house to house, after work, to collect party dues, were shaping a different society inside the existing one’.

Party militancy required everyday dedication and self-sacrifice. At the same time, many antifascist women found political participation intrinsically emancipatory. Against those who see communist engagement as sheer dogmatism, Rossanda (2010: 188) responds:

How to make them understand that for us being in the party was like having an extra gear? It gave us the key to unlimited relationships, the kind that you never manage to establish on your own, links to different worlds, links to people who were trying to achieve equality, to be more than just a number, to never be dependent, commoditized, merely utilitarian.

All five authors describe the party as the physical and symbolic place into which they stepped out of their comfort zone, and encountered others, often from radically different backgrounds. Through her everyday activism in the peripheries of

Rome, for example, Castellina (2011: 259) came across 'a plurality of human beings I would not have had the occasion to meet otherwise, an extraordinary life experience'. The discovery of different worlds happened not only across Italy, but also through internationalist networks. In July 1947, Castellina travelled to Prague for the World Youth Festival. After having celebrated her eighteenth birthday with comrades of different nationalities, she decided to join a volunteers' work brigade in Zenica, Bosnia, to build the Šamac–Sarajevo railway together with other local and international volunteers. Of this formative experience, she writes the following:

The evenings in Zenica were wonderful. There I discovered almost everything that constituted the basis of my cognitive heritage. An avalanche of information fills the gap in which I had been living during the war. The world all of a sudden appears immense, and my street, via Vallisteri in Parioli, microscopic. (2011: 238)

Internationalism was an important component of communist engagement in the post-war era. The 'real socialisms' of Eastern Europe represented an imaginary 'dreamworld' for Western communists in the late 1940s and 1950s (Urban, 1986; Buck-Morss, 2000). The socialist bloc stood in opposition to the 'other side', which, as Rodano (2008a: 104) notes, was characterised by McCarthyism, colonial wars and Fascist regimes in Portugal and Spain. Cold War borders were decisive in shaping connections between Italian communist militants and the rest of the world. In her capacity as a human rights lawyer, too, Guidetti Serra travelled both to Franco's Spain in the 1950s and to Latin America in the 1970s. Retrospectively, she recalls that when it came to the denunciation of human rights abuses, 'those who were on the left scrutinised the West, those who were on the right looked East. The Cold War curtain was passing through us as well ...' (2009: 113).

To this day, one of the strongest arguments used to discredit former communists in Italy has been PCI leaders' subservience to Moscow, and their failure to condemn mass repression in the USSR. It is not surprising, therefore, that these narratives attempt to counter this argument by emphasising the specificity of the Italian context, in which the communist party was an oppositional force, and in which ordinary members had limited information about living conditions in the USSR (Guidetti Serra and Moriglia, 2009: 73–74). Rossanda travelled to Moscow with an official delegation in November 1949, but she admits with regret that she only became aware of the vastness of political repression much later. At that time, she explains, Italian communists were dismayed by the 1948 defeat of the PCI in the national elections, and by the violent anti-communist repression that followed: 'the struggle of the party at home stopped me from seeing what was happening in Eastern Europe (...) And I don't know what I would have done about it if I had really known' (2010: 117).

Yet, there is a moment in which the Italian communists' alliance with the Soviet Union appears as particularly problematic: in all accounts, 1956 is remembered as the year in which the contradictions between local and international politics

suddenly came to the fore. Khrushchev's 'secret speech' caused bewilderment and confusion among PCI members, since it shattered the idealised image of the Soviet Union. The real turning point, however, was PCI leaders' failure to condemn the Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising in November 1956. The PCI lost around 400,000 members after 1956, many intellectuals among them (Ginsborg, 2003: 207). The revolutionary character of the Soviet leadership and, by extension, of the PCI leadership became increasingly contested. Italian communists' belief of siding with the revolution was suddenly called into question, strongly affecting the personal identities of the narrators. Rodano (2008b: 171) describes 1956 as 'a break, a watershed. Before 1956, years of naïve hopes and of certainties. After 1956, years of questioning, perplexities, doubts, disquiet'. The geopolitical changes of 1956 caused very strong affective reactions. At that point, as Rossanda (2010: 132) writes, 'the vagaries of the Cold War and our internal ups and downs coincided, ticking away on the same clock face'. Since the personal identification with the party conferred a sense of belonging to the 'right side', many PCI members were dismayed when their party supported the repression of the workers' insurrection in Hungary. Rossanda (2010: 155–156) recalls that she was deeply shocked when she saw the photograph of a communist guard lynched by the crowds in Budapest:

The poor and the oppressed are not always right. But communists who make the people hate them are always wrong. And that hatred was massive, deeply embedded: people don't do these terrible things unless they have suffered a wrong for a long time. My hair turned grey then—it's true, it really does happen. I was thirty-two years old.

Similarly, Guidetti Serra recalls the trauma of having to leave the PCI because of her dissenting position. She recalls her break with the party as follows:

I lived it as a deep trauma, with an enormous suffering, also due to the break up in personal relationships it entailed. It was as if a whole world, past and present, of sharing and sociality, crumbled upon me, almost like a sentimental failure, which translated itself into a burning pain. I spent entire afternoons at the movies because I did not want to be seen crying at home. I lost my appetite, something very unusual for me, and I became visibly thinner. (2009: 82)

While Guidetti Serra left, Rossanda decided to stay. She was later expelled from the PCI in 1969, when she launched a new left-wing newspaper, *Il Manifesto*, together with other intellectuals who dissented from the party line, notably in relation to the Soviet intervention against the Prague Spring.

gender revolutions: encountering the feminist generation

Another revolutionary moment described in the autobiographies is related to post-war women's activism. Contrary to the idea that women's liberation only started

with second-wave feminism in the 1970s, these writings retell the story of a post-war 'middle wave' that fought pioneering battles for women's political and social rights. For women who grew up under Fascism, the antifascist resistance and the post-war battles for women's equality represented subjective breaks with the traditional patriarchal order. Thousands of women took part in the resistance through the Groups for the Defence of Women and Assistance to Freedom Fighters (*Gruppi di difesa della donna e per l'assistenza ai combattenti per la libertà*), and their battles were crucial to establishing women's right to vote and to be elected after 1946 (Alano, 2003). In the post-war period, the nation-wide UDI pursued the struggle for women's equality. It promoted women's access to education and labour, equal pay for equal work and welfare measures for working mothers. Guidetti Serra writes:

I am convinced that the deepest and most lasting revolution of the twentieth century has been the one which concerns women ... It is only from 1919, when I was born, that women were allowed into the law, which is my profession. When I voted for the first time, in 1946, it was the first time for all Italian women ... With women, as a woman, I have worked for a long time on the path toward the achievement of full political and social citizenship; this was my first engagement since the resistance years with the Groups for the Defense and then later in the post-war period with female workers within the trade union. This was the first founding moment of women's 'inclusion' in the Italian public sphere ... (2009: 227)

Between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, as documented by Guidetti Serra, left-wing women were involved in a series of battles to advance women's equality. These mobilisations occurred mainly through political organisations and trade unions in order to obtain political and social rights from the state, in line with the PCI's strategy of 'progressive democracy' (Urban, 1986: 207). The creation of a unitary, women-only organisation like the UDI, closely connected to the PCI, has to be situated within this broader project (Beckwith, 1985: 21–22).

A new revolutionary paradigm, however, emerged from the early 1970s onwards, when feminist groups in Italy developed a critical position towards the way in which the 'woman question' had been formulated by organisations of the Old Left such as the PCI and UDI. The PCI's reluctance to tackle women's oppression in the private sphere and its moderate strategies in relation to campaigns for divorce and abortion rights were highly contested (Hellman, 1984). The UDI, too, was criticised because of its primary focus on women's equality in the public sphere, and for its lack of organisational and financial autonomy from the PCI (Beckwith, 1985: 28–30). Feminist movements in Italy, in fact, put strong emphasis on women's political autonomy from political parties and from the state, and organised themselves primarily through single-sex consciousness-raising groups (Chiavola Birnbaum, 1986; Bertilotti and Scattigno, 2005). This generational and political divide led, in time, to a marginalisation of the UDI's history within Italian feminist historiography (Bonfiglioli, 2012).

6 I am using here the concept of *generation* not in the sense of a determined age group but in the sense of a political generation; namely, a generation sharing a common significant political experience, as suggested by Passerini (2006: 15).

It is not by chance, therefore, that in most of the autobiographies the encounter between the antifascist generation and the feminist generation⁶ is not only narrated as a revolutionary moment, but also as a moment of profound conflict. Guidetti Serra writes that feminists accused older antifascist women of being 'emancipationists', of having a poor sensibility towards the theme of women's 'difference'. Serra, in turn, perceived feminists as 'slightly elitist', and divorced from the needs of 'women who belonged to the popular classes' (Guidetti Serra and Mobiglia, 2009: 233). What UDI women also resented was the fact that feminist groups did not recognise that the organisation had developed a relatively autonomous stance from left-wing political parties since the mid-1950s. Thus, Ombra (2009: 90) writes:

Within the UDI the feelings towards feminism at the beginning were quite doubtful. We were a bit offended. And angry. Because from the feminists came an unjust critique. They considered us assimilated to what was male (for male, read the party, the comrade, the male as such, male politics, male culture and so on) and for us this was unacceptable, since for almost twenty years the UDI had been focused primarily on autonomy At the beginning, therefore, the feminists considered us more or less as enemies, traitors of women. And we were suspicious and skeptical of them.

These accounts emphasise the discordant encounter between different generations of women activists, and the affective reactions provoked by this conflict. The situation, however, gradually changed during the 1970s. During the course of the nation-wide mobilisations for divorce and abortion bills, as well as for the reform of Italy's family law, UDI members joined forces with feminist groups. Women of different generations took part in these struggles, and heated debates transformed the UDI from within (Beckwith, 1985). At a certain point, as Ombra (2009: 90) recalls, some women affiliated to the UDI and some feminists became friends: 'There were empathies, sniffings, gazes. The discovery of similar cultural interests, the birth of feelings of admiration and respect. Even some love affairs ... Some women met some other women. A boundary was crossed'.

The new feminist paradigm—political and theoretical—had an important impact on women affiliated to the UDI and the PCI. UDI leader Ombra herself joined a women-only feminist group, in which intimate issues were discussed collectively. In this group of feminist analysis, as she calls it, she found a renewed sense of inner awareness: 'An expansion of personhood, a richness in relations and horizons, this is what feminism meant for me. Most of all, a great feeling of freedom. And the courage to take intellectual risks. And a confidence never known before' (2009: 92). The discussions that took place in the feminist movement led women such as Ombra to question their own role as UDI leaders. Indeed, she recalls her surprise when younger feminist historian Annarita Buttafuoco (1951–1999) asked her, 'But the women with whom you worked [in the post-war UDI], how did they see you?' Ombra recalls that this question had never crossed her mind, and neither had the

question 'How do I see myself?' Instead, she notes, 'my generation took for granted that they possessed the key to explaining the world, that is, truth—and that truth only had to be communicated to others' (2009: 88). Not only Ombra (2009: 77–80) but a number of UDI leaders ended up embracing the new feminist paradigm based on political autonomy. During the UDI Congress of 1982, they decided to dismantle the national structure of the organisation and its decision-making committees, which had existed since 1945, opting instead for local women's associations based on self-organisation. Other UDI leaders and ordinary members, however, perceived these changes as destructive, and saw them as a denial of the UDI's past (Beckwith, 1985: 32). Rodano (2010: 226), former UDI president, states that she experienced the end of the nation-wide UDI as the 'killing of a creature that was also my own'.

The prolonged wave of feminism also affected former PCI leaders such as Rossanda, who had not been involved in UDI activities, and for whom gender difference had never been a primary arena of identification. Opening up an imaginary, retrospective dialogue with feminist ideas and critiques of gender and femininity, Rossanda writes that in 1945 'being a woman wasn't what mattered most'. She goes on to explain that party activities were emancipatory because they freed her from her gendered role: 'for many women since the beginning of the century, that's what emancipation meant' (2010: 90).

In describing her generational and gendered path towards personal emancipation, Rossanda (2010: 196) rejects the assumption that communist women had sacrificed their individuality—and their femininity—to the party:

Sacrificed myself? Nonsense. I never felt the lack of a room of my own, because I had the world, and could, if I wanted to, withdraw from it. You never realize yourself as fully alone as you do together with others, people whom you naturally teach how to do things. It must be the dreaded maternal instinct, to create other beings, to nourish them, to wean them with reluctance, then teach them to walk.

While Rossanda confirms the legitimacy of her choice, and her primary identification with communist politics, one can perceive the impact of feminist discourse on her writing ('a room of my own', 'the dreaded maternal instinct'). A new language to name gender difference was provided by second-wave feminist theory, and this language makes its way into the autobiographies, whatever the arguments they make about feminism. Rodano (2008a: 82–83), for example, often refers to women's exclusion from history, and to the need to rewrite history from a gendered perspective, since 'in the life of a woman, public and private constitute a continuum, a tangled hank that is impossible to untie (...) as if the events of daily life, the smaller details, had the same importance as great events'. The language of feminism also allows the narrators to openly criticise the sexist morals that existed within the PCI. Ombra, for instance, recounts how she was reprimanded for wearing high heels, which were seen as 'bourgeois'. She also

describes an episode of sexist discrimination that led her to leave the PCI. In 1956, Ombra started a relationship with a journalist of the communist daily *L'Unità*, who had recently separated from his wife, at a time when divorce was not yet authorised. Much to her dismay, Ombra was then fired from her post of party officer in Milan, because she was seen as causing 'scandal' for the party. She later moved to Rome with her companion and managed to find employment as editor of the UDI weekly, *Noi Donne*. While criticising the PCI's sexist double standards, Ombra notes that some women within the party were also responsible for her dismissal. In the 1970s, she recalls, she was wary of the 'splendid utopia' of 'feminine sisterhood' because of this prior experience (2005: 62). Throughout these autobiographies, men are usually represented as companions, comrades or political adversaries, rather than as historical oppressors. Women's political engagement is treated as a complex phenomenon, dependent on generational and individual differences, rather than on gender identity.

Through their narratives on the multiple forms of gendered revolutions that occurred throughout the twentieth century, antifascist women's autobiographies critically reflect upon the encounter between different political generations, providing valuable source material for an investigation of changing gendered subjectivities across time (Scott, 2010: 10). These autobiographies, in my view, invite further research into the multiple crossings among antifascist, left-wing and feminist cultures in 1970s Italy. They notably challenge teleological narratives of the history of Italian feminism, which exclude antifascist, communist women's movements from feminist genealogies.

conclusions: remembering the revolution in post-socialist times

The complexity and plurality of the Italian communist experience came to an end in 1989, when the crumbling of state socialism in Eastern Europe caused the gradual disappearance of major Western European CPs. Former communists' identities and biographies were deeply challenged by these geopolitical and historical transformations. As noted by Kertzer (1996: 160), communist identity was not an identity among others, but provided 'a fundamental personal identity'. Communist women, in particular, were affected by these changes. Revolutionary activism, in fact, had provided them not only with a collective political mission, but also with paths of personal emancipation from traditional gender roles.

The autobiographies analysed in this essay constitute a sustained commentary on these epistemological and geopolitical transformations, and on the subjective effects they entailed. Rodano writes, for instance, that 'the person who believed in the revolution is placed today in a diasporic situation', because of the 'broken historical continuity', which ends up obscuring 'the reasons for one's acts, for what

one has been' (2008a: 105). Similarly, Rossanda (2005: 1) writes about people interrogating her reasons for being a communist, and about the elusiveness of this word once 'you have no party, no position, when you have lost the newspaper that you helped found'. She objects to those who hail her as 'a legend' by insisting, 'I am not a name on a memorial plaque to be honoured ... I am still struggling with the world and with time. But the question of what it means to be a communist nags away at me' (2005: 1).

Today, the protagonists of revolutionary struggles are left to wonder what remains of that heritage, and how to reactivate its legacy for the future. In the current neo-liberal, post-Cold War context, their writings open up fundamental questions about revolutionary movements, changes in gender relations and gendered subjectivities. These autobiographies recount the revolutionary hopes raised by the antifascist resistance, and the break with tradition it represented for a generation of young women who turned from 'grey girls' into 'red girls': partisans, intellectuals and political leaders. The PCI became for them a site of belonging, a space for personal engagement in a collective emancipation project. Women's struggles for equality, through the UDI and through trade union activism, were an intrinsic component of this endeavour. Despite the specificity of the Italian context, in which the PCI was permanently excluded from government due to Cold War divides, Italian communists were connected to the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe in both literal and imaginary ways. The events of 1956 and 1968 led some women to pursue these engagements outside the party, as in the case of Guidetti Serra, or to join the New Left, as Rossanda and Castellina did. Some women felt more 'at home' within the PCI, while others, such as Rodano and Ombra, were mainly engaged as UDI leaders.

Former communists in post-socialist times, the women engaged with in this essay remain important figures in the Italian political landscape today. In their eighties and nineties, they continue to intervene critically in present-day politics, denouncing the damaging effects of neo-liberalism on people's lives and advocating a renewal of left-wing politics in Italy.⁷ They also mobilise their authority as foremothers of women's rights in order to combat sexism and gendered violence. Rodano (2010) recently wrote a history of the UDI, reclaiming its historical significance, while Ombra (2013) has just published *Libere sempre* (Always Free), a letter from 'a girl from the Resistance to a girl of today', in which she proposes an engaged model of femininity, against the neo-liberal, patriarchal image of women represented in mainstream Italian media. Third-wave feminists' interest in this post-war 'middle wave' has increased in recent years, manifested in the form of scholarly research, in exhibitions on the history of the UDI, and through a series of historical documentaries on antifascist women's lives.⁸ It is time, in my view, to 'invite back' (Hemmings, 2011: 180) the stories of the antifascist generation into Italian and European feminist genealogies. As I hope to have proven here, the red girls from the last century still have revolutionary tales to tell.

⁷ See, for instance, Rossana Rossanda's recent interview in *La Repubblica*, 7 June 2013, http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/06/07/news/rossana_rossanda-60545426/, last accessed 22 November 2013.

⁸ I had the privilege of interviewing UDI leaders Marisa Rodano and Luciana Viviani (1917–2011) for my doctoral

dissertation, and I heard from them that they had been interviewed by many young scholars. On the UDI, see the volume edited by Liotti *et al.* (2002). On women in the resistance, see the recent documentary 'Bandite', by Alessia Proietti (<http://www.bandite.org/>), last accessed 22 November 2013), which includes an interview with Bianca Guidetti Serra. On Italian feminisms, generations and temporalities, see Di Cori (2012).

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