



Achille Occhetto was elected general secretary of the PCI two years ago. He is 53 years old

Splitting Image

In response to the extraordinary events of 1989, the Italian Communist Party has moved with remarkable speed and courage. It wants to reconstitute itself and change its name. **Eric Hobsbawm** interviews the man at the centre of the drama, **Achille Occhetto**, the leader of the PCI

A few days after the opening of the Berlin Wall last November, Achille Occhetto, the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, proposed that the party should reconstruct itself and change its name. Next month, a special congress to be held in Bologna will discuss the proposal. It has wide support within the PCI, but there are powerful voices ranged against, including Alessandro Natta, the previous general secretary, and Pietro Ingrao. The PCI, the dominant party of the Italian Left with 27% of the vote and one of the great parties of the European Left, is at a historic turning point.

We are talking at a more-or-less historical moment, an historical turning point: the Eastern European systems have collapsed, there is a dangerous situation in the USSR, we have become aware that a whole tradition, to which we dedicated part of our lives, has come to an end: the tradition dominated by the October Revolution. Do you agree that we are today at a profound historical turning point?

Yes, I feel that we are at one of those turning points which demand total change, not only in practice but also in theory. I would say that at such a time it is no longer enough to find new answers - we need to ask new questions. I believe that 'really existing communism', by which I mean not the set of ideals which clearly maintain their value, but that communist movement which was born with a specific vision of the party, the state, of organisation and of society, faces a historical crisis of enormous dimensions. This has brought about the collapse of the state system it gave life to and which had wrongly created the belief - and internationally the whole of the Left has paid for this - that the struggle between Right and Left, between socialism and capitalism, could be concentrated into the struggle between the two blocs. Identifying first with 'socialism in one country' then with defending the bloc forged after the second world war around the Soviet Union, created the belief that this contained socialism's future. This brought about an historical tragedy, at least in large areas of the world, from which it is going to be difficult to recover.

Well, in spite of this the Italian Communist Party (PCI) has remained the largest mass communist party in the industrial world, in fact the only one with a majority of the Left in its country. Why?

Although it was born out of the October Revolution, the Italian Communist Party in the course of its history has been recast a number of times. It is a mistake to think that the PCI is today the party founded at Livorno. If we had stayed that way, we would probably have met the same fate as other communist parties. The PCI was reconstructed in 1926. The Lyon Theses, and Gramsci, brought the party to recognise a national reality which went far outside the 21 points of the Communist International. And certainly Togliatti's new party departed completely from the tradition of the parties of the Comintern. Of course, for a long period there was ambivalence. We both enjoyed the prestige that came from our links with a Soviet Union which had emerged victorious from the second world war and at the same time we were experimenting with something altogether different which allowed the best of Italian reformist traditions to filter into our experience. Eventually, this ambivalence became more and more contradictory. In my view, the strength of the PCI derives very much from the fact that it has been the party that moved furthest away from the basic principles on which the Comintern

parties were founded.

So why does the PCI seem to us abroad so much on the defensive? Why does it feel responsible for things for which it has no responsibility?

True. For the PCI the need for change does not arise from the fact of a joint responsibility for what has happened in the East. However, let us be accurate. We have had basically three stages: first, we were the most critical component of the international communist movement; second, we were in open disagreement and third, we left the movement and declared ourselves an integral part of the European Left.

I think the real problem today is contained in your first question. The world of 1945 has changed radically. In a certain phase we acted as critics within a world divided into two blocs. Today the Left in Italy, Europe and internationally, faces restructuring.

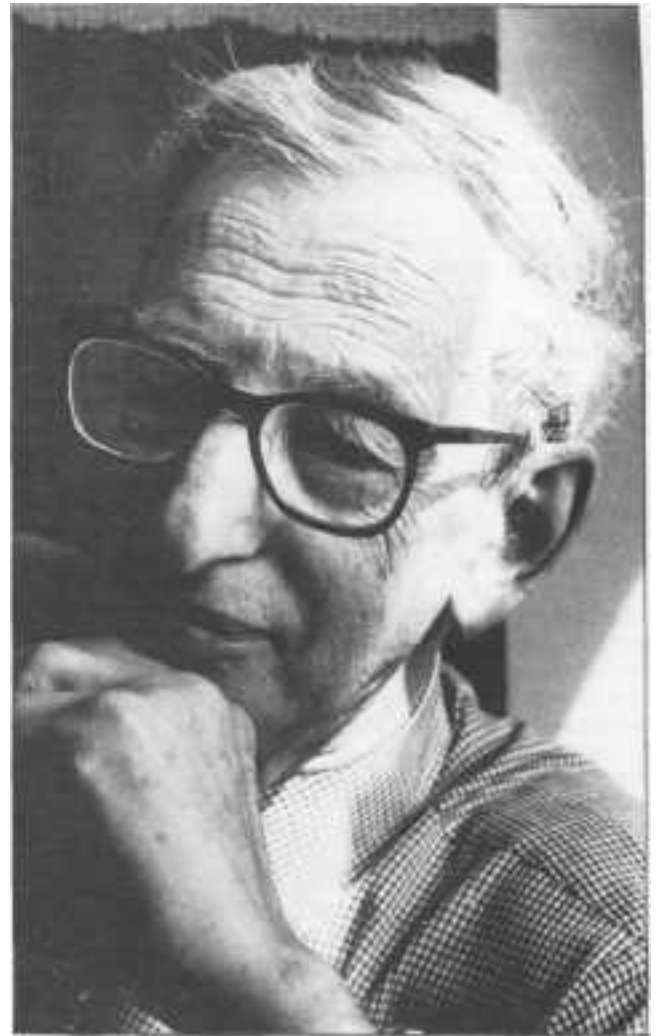
That means going back beyond 1945. What is in question is the entire perspective of the movements which were stamped with the experience and outlook of the October Revolution. What's left are perhaps the traditions - there are several - of the pre-1917 socialist movements, but also the tradition and experience of communist movements, like the Italian, which have never been identified with the construction of a totalitarian state. What do you think?

First, even the social-democratic tradition has changed over time. The Socialist International under Brandt is no longer the International stained with the guilt of voting the 1914 war credits nor the Socialist International reborn after the war and very much tied to bloc alignments. In the 50s it often even looked like an instrument of American policy. There has been a major shift in two significant areas: Ostpolitik and North-South relations. This was linked to two men: Brandt and Olaf Palme. One can say that the whole theoretical perspective of international socialism is moving. The issue for us is not one of passing from one tradition to another. What we propose is taking part in an international movement for rethinking the function of the Left. We can do this because we are the communist party which embodies a great reforming and reformist tradition.

It is no accident that we are strongest in the two regions of the country with the richest tradition of reform, but we have brought to this something new and original, namely, the communist vision, not of a subaltern reformism, but of the working classes as autonomous and of their capacity to become the state.

But hasn't the PCI for some time been changing in a reformist direction? What remains is more a formal acknowledgment of changes already taking place, not completely, because we still see some of the old traditions in the party, but which have for some time now been dominant.

In our party, elements of innovation and of double thinking have lived together,



Eric Hobsbawm: Historic turning point

which is why we have not been able to exploit fully the potential of a policy capable of presenting our party as the fulcrum of an alternative to the present ruling class. And I don't mean because of the turning point of 1989/90. Unfortunately, for 10 years or so our vote has been in continual decline. Our situation among young people is particularly worrying. This is not due to reduced militancy, as some maintain. I believe our problem is not so much a communist problem but one of the function of left-wing parties. Our troubles began at the same time as those of the Labour Party in Britain, the SPD in Germany and of all those parties who did not just want to manage neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies. There are socialist parties which made the other choice. So left culture and the very manner of being a party needs redefining. We need to find a new form for a party so it is capable of drawing into action and struggle the subjects of *today's* contradictions, those of the year 2000 and not of the 19th century. For instance, our traditional idea of the social alliance of workers and peasants is meaningless today, even if it is still represented by the emblem of the hammer and sickle. Today the decisive problem is the relation between the world of work as a whole and cross-class contradictions such as those of ecology,

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women's liberation, etc.

We feel we need to reconsider the way of being political, the political party as an entity, the programmes of the Left. And not as Italians alone but in an international context making our own contribution to a reorganisation of the Left, starting with the Euro-Left.

Agreed, the problem of the PCI is a national aspect of a wider problem, the crisis in the socialist and labour movements during the last 20 years. But is there not also a crisis in the concept of the party?

The party as a means for people's free political association is a basic fact of democracy. But there's no doubt that in Italy too the parties have degenerated. There's an attempt to make all decisions through the secretariats of governing parties. So even in a multi-party system like ours, there's an element of party supremacy which stifles real ability, even true entrepreneurial activity. Italian democracy, unlike other parts of Europe, has its specific problem. Since 1945 our democracy has been blocked by permanent Demo-Christian domination, with other parties as satellites, and a major communist party excluded from power as such. Now a political party cannot go on for centuries, just preaching ideals. We are not the Catholic church. We are a political party and as such, the Italian constitution imposes on us a duty to compete for the leadership of the country. So the great political problem is how to create conditions for an alternative in our country. We have started a big shake-up in Italian political life, so as to draw out all those left forces which are not with Craxi, not with the Christian Democrats, do not want to be on their side, are not communists, but who favour opening up this question of an alternative.

But the centre of an alternative would have to be the relation between the communist supporters and those who support the socialists. Without the socialists you cannot have a left alternative.

Of course there is no alternative without the socialists, but as long as we remain constant the socialists say they do not want an alternative with us.

Why?

For them we are unacceptable unless the socialists have become the party which wins more votes than the communists, as everywhere else in Europe. This is the negative position of Craxi, and unfortunately it is blocking the political life of the country.

In that case there is no alternative. The only other alternative seems to me to be a broad coalition with the Christian Democrats.

Actually, we tried that... But I think there can be a broad coalition, including the Demo-Christians, in a government committed to constitutional change. Such a government might be required because in Italy we face the need to redefine the rules of the political game electoral reform, the relation between

public administration and politics, of the public right to know, crime in the South; all the various questions of power and law. I can't go into this at length - but just one example: a whole area of our country is dominated by organised crime. If there is such a new 'constituent phase', a grand coalition might be envisaged, and might help to open up the alternatives. But none of this will happen until the Communist Party acquires sufficient dynamism, because the present power system in Italy can easily live with a communist party which cultivates its own ideas and stays around 25 or 26%, leaving the Christian Democrats and Socialists to dominate for who knows how many more years.

In your congress resolution you propose a new political formation, if in fact an agreement now with the socialists is ruled out, who will make up the new grouping?

An agreement with the socialists is not ruled out. We say that the new formation challenges the socialists to take the alternative seriously and in fact the very moment we announced this option a discussion opened up within the Socialist Party for the first time in years. Although for the time being that discussion has been discontinued because the socialists are awaiting the outcome of our congress.

Why has the PCI remained isolated for so long? Through its own fault, or that of others?

I think the basic fault has not been ours. The PCI, one of the founders of Italian democracy, has from the time of the constitution in 1947 been committed to the democratic ground. I think that our exclusion was in the interest of the ruling classes in order to consolidate a power system without alternative government. The line was: the communists are good chaps and democratic, they make an excellent opposition, but with them in power everything would change. America is against it and we might find ourselves in trouble. This has been decisive in maintaining us at such a level that we have not been able to form an adequate coalition. There was no suggestion that we had to have 51% of the vote; not even the Christian Democrats have that.

Let us suppose that the party has come in out of the cold, and suppose you are now within the span of possible government. The people, public opinion, ask you to represent the alternative. But has the PCI or other socialist parties - for this is not a problem specific to the PCI - have we a concrete perspective, something beyond which all men and women of goodwill share, opinions on the environment, on feminism, the South, down with the Mafia...?

Sorry to interrupt you. Everyone agrees, so long as you don't connect the problems. By that I mean that everyone wants to defend the environment so long as you don't question modes of production and consumption. Everyone agrees on women's liberation as long as you

don't question their particular domination at work and in the organisation of society. There's much social hypocrisy today. In fact all the world supports many of the same ideals; even those which are considered communist values are quietly approved by any democrat. The problem is to find a political project and at the same time a party format which can join those different needs in a credible alternative plan on a government level.

But we must never forget one basic fact. In recent years the Communist Party has been in clear decline. Not so much in the percentage vote, which at 27% is still large. It is the fact that the percentage of young votes keeps declining that worries me. From 1945 the young voted for us disproportionately. Now they vote well below our average. How do we speak to these young people?

'It is an act of political initiative, something to break the deadlock in Italian politics'



This is a great problem. But we have a similar problem in Britain with the Labour Party. What positive reasons are there for choosing this great party? Why vote for the communists? You can see why people vote for Craxi's Socialists, because he and his followers have a whole patronage system and are the managers of a new capitalism. It's not very moral, but it is a reason.

Yes, but the positive reason is also very closely correlated with the changing situation. In the course of time a sort of political stabilisation has occurred. Consumption and job security have improved for a majority of the population. The minority is large but remains a minority. In terms of votes they are not immediately available for an alternative, and can in fact be influenced by patronage politics. As long as its internal contradictions do not erupt more visibly, it is a system which has its own inertial force. Even more lively, dynamic, more open political initiatives will not necessarily make any immediate mark on this state of affairs or break it. Nevertheless, it is an effective strategy to bring forward certain positive ideas which in our opinion open perspectives on another way of life in our country.

Thus we want not more markets, but a better state for a better market. More certain rules are needed in society for all who operate in it - public, private and voluntary entities alike. That means that state and public entities should manage less, and should provide everyone with the chance to express their own possibilities. This new framework of social relations is linked to the question of public morality and crime which is one of our central problems.

I think that many people would favour a positive project, which is not statist but wants to give greater decision-making opportunities to the public, for it is they who must put in motion what is already alive and creative in Italian society, but suffocated by the party system. Even this type of language that I am using, which is not traditional, can open up a consensus which previously we did not have. So we open the gates to wider support, opening up contradic-

tions in the Socialist Party, but also new processes of unity with the Socialist Party. Open up contradictions in the Catholic world and facilitate unity with very important elements in it. In short, we want to get the Italian political situation moving. Of course, this is not something to be done in a day.

A question on statism. In Italy it seems to me that the problem of statism arises in a particular way. The problem is to make the state work because it does not work at all or it works as a patronage system.

There is no need to increase the state in Italy, we already have plenty of it, and it is not a question of privatisation. We have always been against privatising what is state-owned. It is a question of finding a new relation between public and private. The central problem, as I said, is regulation. In my view state does not mean direct management. The state should mean providing public projects and managements separated from political administration. In Italy we have something similar to 'really existing socialism': politicians manage directly and because of this nothing works. Politicians should provide the rules, indicate the projects and then it is up to technicians, to civil society to manage things in ways which are sensitively in touch with society. What is central and important is the change in the concept of 'the public'. Remember Gramsci's conception of the state in Western society: civil society as much stronger and political society as much weaker, a much more regulative and liberal view of society's development than in the East. Gramsci himself demonstrates that revolutionary gradualism is possible as opposed to both the qualitative rupture on the one hand and, on the other, the reformism which confines itself to managing modernity in capitalist society.

The question of the state brings me to another aspect of your project: the transnational European perspective. The Italians have always understood very clearly the perspective of European supranationality and I'm glad that the PCI has recognised that progressive politics cannot be pursued on a national scale. How do you see European development?

Yes, national Keynesianism has come to an end, which means the end of those policies of redistribution on a national level in which the labour movement took part, and which at the same time also helped to reinforce it. The national dimension has failed and we must find an overall European alternative. I think when we talk of relations with the European Left, with the European socialist grouping, our problem is not ideological. It is a practical problem. A European nation is being founded and we don't understand why progressive European forces should not find political expression at this level as they did nationally when nations were built. Hence all of us should bring not only the patrimony of our own national traditions, but we also

have to unify the language and methodology of our programmes, otherwise clearly the Right will always win.

Especially bearing in mind that capitalism is transnational and now operates without frontiers, while the movements have been built to function within national boundaries.

Certainly it is very important too, for economic democracy. Democracy's clothes need to be enlarged to accommodate transnational development. This raises the problems of controlling information, of participation in economic democracy at a European level. These have to be studied.

If we can really succeed in pulling the various socialist parties, social democrats, communists, call them what you will, away from their ancient history, and if we can pose the great problem of how to confront, say, the reduction of working hours on a European scale, then we can shake Europe. That could really capture the imagination of the young.

There are also concrete political projects, a common bank, common currency, political integration and an executive which must effectively respond to a European parliament, of European laws which must be more democratically conducted and more binding on a national scale and so on.

What problems do you foresee?

The stakes are high. In general I think that what happened in the East makes Gorbachev's idea of a Common European Home, and also Mitterrand's New Year's Day idea of a European confederation, easier; and in a certain sense this is a very positive fact, because little Europe opposed to the other Europe had its own internal sterility. To address problems from the point of view of Europe as a whole means giving Europe a wider window to the world than it had before because the real Europe is linked through its Eastern countries to the wider world and to the South. At the same time I also see that, after many years, 'really existing socialism' has broken down, the layer of ice is broken and we are returning even to pre-1914 situations: nationalism, ethnic conflict, cultural backwardness. The reality of the Eastern countries - and this is a great historical crime of Stalinism - is that in these countries problems have not been solved but only congealed. They are now erupting all at once into the European scene.

How enormously dangerous this is! Say German unity is realised in a certain manner, what happens to Gorbachev and his liberalisation? And what if in the USSR there is a reactionary military coup? I see the potential but I also see the risks. And I see as very negative the way in which the USA is responding to the events in the East. The newspapers in America nowadays are making great play out of the collapse of the enemy, of communism. This leads them not to general disarmament but to a conversion from nuclear to conven-

tional arms in order to deal - they are very blunt as usual - with wars in the Third World. They believe that until now every local war was potentially risky because it could turn into a global war. With the crisis in the East this is no longer so. So they see it as the duty of the USA to intervene in local wars and we have seen this in Panama, and now with the fleet off Colombia and so on.

This leads me to the prospects after the collapse of the East European systems, including the very worrying situation in the USSR itself. What's your opinion of this?

In part I have already said that the situation is so dynamic that it is very difficult to make forecasts. It is very important how one intervenes in this situation. I think the European Left has a strong responsibility to control the democratic processes in the East in agreement with Gorbachev.

So far as possible.

Yes, but up to what point is it possible? I don't know. I was in Poland recently, and I spoke to everyone: Solidarity, Prime Minister Mazowiecki, Geremek, Cardinal Glemp, Jaruzelski, and the thing which struck me was that everyone had the same will to control the process. Everyone agreed, the prime minister, communists, Solidarity etc, on the fact that even German unification must be seen in the framework of wider European integration. This is the way of controlling the situation. But they tell me that, for example, territorial claims towards Poland are at this moment stronger in East Germany than in West Germany because the Nazis are more important there. Nazism had not been eliminated there but merely frozen.

Still, it is a positive fact that for so many decades the nationalities haven't massacred each other.

On the one hand they imposed control, but on the other they have left the problems unresolved.

Yes, that is the biggest problem. However, let me come to the third part of the triptych of international problems, that is the Third World, about which you have already said something. The contrast between the Third World and certain parts of our world is becoming more obvious every day. What should our policy be on the relationship between the developed industrial world and the Third World?

There is only one policy, a policy which changes the mode of production and consumption in the richer part of the world. Don't you agree? I don't think that we can bring this about quickly.

However, in the long term or in the medium term, what prospects do you see?

In the medium term I see tension getting worse, but until the wealthy areas are in danger it will be difficult to achieve the necessary changes. It is good that international organisations are beginning to face up to this problem. Effectively it would require a real and

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proper world government, ie, making the existing global institutions effective by giving them a supranational function, but that is still a long way off. We have had, for example, in the ecological field the work of the Bruntland Commission, which demonstrated very clearly the relationship between North and South. But it was just a commission and there has been no real commitment by national states to work in this direction. Very materialistically I believe that until the situation of populations in the North is directly at issue, it will be difficult to arrive at anything concrete. Naturally the task of an opposition that looks well ahead must be to keep the problem open in order to deal with it at the right moment.

But there is one concrete problem, that of Third-World immigration. That xenophobia which seems to be the great emotional wave of the end of this century, is precisely hostility to the pressure of poor people who want to emigrate to better their situation. Well, until now, the only country which really has accepted the phenomenon *de facto* if not *de jure* has been the United States. For me this is a very positive side of that civilisation, which in spite of everything really is multicultural: what is your opinion on this politically explosive issue? We have fought for a multiracial Europe and we have supported full integration. But we must also say that this is one of the contradictions which illustrates the need for development in the South. The problems of the South cannot be solved by mass emigrations as in the Bible. The whole of the South cannot come here: that would indicate an enormous historical catastrophe. I think therefore that this problem must be seen under two headings: an anti-racist education and a welcome with all solidarity for those who come, but at the same time a sensitive approach to the problem of development in the Third World. Not with a fixed upper-limit approach, as some have suggested, but with a policy of co-operation with developing countries through which the process of emigration can also be controlled. There can be a policy which says to country x that our relationship is one of co-operation, providing both for a certain quantity of immigration and - above all - aid and the possibility of development through technological exchanges.

I have two further questions. The first is the big question of a change in the party name. What is the justification for this? Really, we didn't start with the idea of changing the party's name, even if this is how it got to the media. We are not ashamed of our name. The proposal was for a constituent assembly for a broader political formation and therefore for a formation with the participation of other forces with whom we would deal on all matters: the programme and, if necessary, the name. This is not the first time in our history that we have suggested a different formation. Togliatti did so before the cold war set in, Longo

himself spoke of a working people's party which should unite the whole Italian Left. Later Longo and Amendola raised the question again, although of course it was different to the present day. Now it is seen rather emotionally, particularly by those who oppose the political proposals. Certainly, from an emotional point of view, I too am moved. I started as a communist and have done nothing else in my life. I've said many times that I approach a new political formation as an Italian communist. I haven't suddenly become something else. The problem is to assess the validity of this broadening-out and of this different form of politics. You can consider, for example, a democratic, popular union which represents different forces, in which the Communist Party remains a determining force even if representation at the level of electoral participation - local, national or European - is of the union itself. Or there may be other ways, which can be discussed with the other participants. It is an act of political initiative, something to break the deadlock in Italian politics.

The question is one of estimating the dynamism of the political proposal, which is about how many people it is likely to move. In fact we have made a definite choice, which is that the forthcoming PCI congress must give a mandate to open a constituent phase of politics. Let us see what happens in the course of this, what forces we gather, the dynamic elements we introduce into national politics, what unity of forces all this brings and then it will be up to the whole party to decide whether the time for the idea is ripe or not. Unfortunately if this political initiative, which has brought us to the centre of attention and has opened discussion not only among communists but in all Italian families, if it is considered as a disaster, a sell-out, a betrayal, then certainly it won't work.

The problem is not that of the name change in itself. Would one pay that price in certain circumstances? Certainly. If you can form this great progressive alignment, fine. But to me it seems that reaction outside the party has not been completely positive. Within the party your congress seems to be concentrating on this, instead of on the new perspective. I am worried by the impression of defensiveness. So many will say: 'Oh, they've finally recognised that Craxi and the others were right. There is no communism, they've admitted their error.' But the PCI has a wonderful tradition as the PCI. What one judges is the contents of the bottle, not the bottle itself. In short, what happens if the congress does not accept your majority report, because of this - in my opinion, peripheral - element?

First, we must start from the assumption that there was already cause for concern. We were already in a defensive and dangerous situation. In some of the recent administrative elections we lost between 10 and 20% of the votes. That is difficult enough, not to mention what I said about the youth vote. What does this mean? We keep an electorate that knows

all these things, and we don't win any new voters. Among the young the party vote in some areas is 12%.

It is very worrying.

It has been of great concern for many years. We have lost millions of votes over the years. So the situation is this. The choice is intended to improve it. We'll have to see. A choice for a renewal doesn't mean immediate improvement. One must have the courage to opt for renewal and accept a period of difficulty for later advance. I think the communists and our supporters are much more intelligent than is believed. If there's no excessive drama at the top, then the political idea of winning, of not feeling isolated, of opening a new phase, is an idea that will be accepted.

Anyway, I say and will continue to say that our proposal is not a retreat. During the European election the question of the name came up and I said we were not ashamed and we would not change the name unless we decided that political events made this useful. If some counter-proposal defeats mine it won't be the end of the world, but I think we shall gain little. There's a whole dynamic part of Italian society that could abandon us, or follow us only with difficulty. Our proposal is dynamic in a situation which was already difficult. We must carry it through. To do otherwise would be easier because without doubt it is one of the difficult moments in our political life. But I think it can help to bring together forces which are not together now, including within the party itself. Instead of unravelling the Left I think we should choose the road of combining in the widest framework the best of our energies and to see if they can stay together in a pluralist party, but one which moves things to the left.

One last word. How do you view the prospects of socialists in the widest sense, all those who identify with that great secular movement in the last decade of the century, not in terms of organisation but as a whole?

I think that in reality all socialists must reconstruct their outlook. Not just the communists. I am very firm on this, we are issuing a challenge. Craxi is not right. On the contrary, he is wrong. Once again we are in the vanguard. Doing this we demonstrate that we are again in the avant garde. It is the socialists who remain in the 19th century, who talk of Proudhon while they manage Italian capitalism at a truly modest level. As for socialism in general we must re-open the debate.

As I said before, we must start with new questions and no longer look only for replies to old questions. In the end I think the collapse in Eastern Europe can even bring back on the agenda a stronger European Left, even give life to an American Left which has been ruined by the division of world. And this can be a new experience for the Left.

Italian transcription by Pino Cimino and translation by Ian Twigg.

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