

# Peter Ciaccio

# *Two Parallel Histories in Europe*

*The end of Communism in 1989 made way for the dream of one Europe, from the Arctic to the Mediterranean, from the Atlantic to the Urals, described by Nobel Peace Prize Mikhail Gorbachev as the “Common European House.” Fourteen years later, the construction of a united Europe remains a difficult process. One of the great obstacles to the building of this common house is in the ideologically divided history of Europe. It is worth reflecting on this crucial aspect. This essay will give a glimpse of what happened on the Western side of the Iron Curtain.*

COLD WAR, SPACE RACE AND POP PROPAGANDA

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The Cold War began when CHURCHILL, ROOSEVELT and STALIN, having defeated HITLER, divided Europe in two spheres of influence in Yalta (4-11 February 1945). With the decline of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century empires, the USA and USSR emerged as the main political, economic and military powers. The Cold War was a duel between them where the chosen weapon was terror. The equilibrium of terror, based on the enormous production of nuclear weapons by USA and USSR, ruled the world, more or less, for forty years.

The USA and USSR strove to influence not only European countries, but also others. The Berlin Crisis (1948-49), the Korean War (1950-51), the First Vietnam War (1955-63), the invasion of Hungary (1956), the Berlin Wall (1961-89), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the Second Vietnam War (1964-75), the invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968), the Afghanistan War (1978-88): they were part of this *Risk* game.

From *Sputnik*, the first satellite and missile vector (1957), to REAGAN's bluff of the *Space Shield* (1985-88), US and Soviet militaries and secret services played a bloody *space race* (many astronauts died), as a great means for propaganda. The meeting point of propaganda and space race was in mass media.

Just as Mussolini used radio and cinema during his rule as a way to gain public support, this elaborate propaganda was less naïve and more subtle. In television series and in B-movies, the good terrestrials were similar to Americans and the bad extraterrestrials to Soviets. The first words of every episode of the TV-series *Star Trek*

(started in 1966) were “Space: the final frontier.”

Another good TV example was *V-Visitors* (1983), where humanlike aliens land on Earth. They are dressed in a red uniform (a “red army”); their president says, “we want peace!” (just like the Soviet leaders) and people believing in their good intentions say, “look! They are not dangerous, they are just like us!” (as Western dissidents used to say). Instead, the Visitors were outer-space monstrous reptiles who wanted to conquer the Earth in order to put all human beings in enormous refrigerators in order to feed their species for the next generations.

A clear message: you cannot believe the enemy; you have to believe the government. This kind of dualistic pop propaganda presented our Western side as a sort of romantic heaven-on-earth and the Eastern side as the Evil One.

## **LEFT AND RIGHT ON THE BORDER OF THE IRON CURTAIN**

What are left and right in Italy? MUSSOLINI polluted the word “right” when, at the beginning of the twenties, having been asked where his new party wanted to be seated in Parliament, his answer was “on the right, to better face my enemies.” So, after two decades of a rightist dictatorship (including three wars), for many people, left, as the antonym of right, became a synonym of freedom, peace, justice and democracy.

In fact, the leftist parties were indeed promoting these values. On the other hand, the conservatives consider themselves in the “centre.” Authoritarian regimes usually change the semantics of many potentially good words: in fact, in some former Eastern block countries the words “politics” and “revolution” became bad words.

In Italy, USA and USSR, the *Risk* game was played without scruples: many people died, many people suffered and, at least twice (in 1964 and 1974), democracy risked to be replaced by a dictatorship, as it happened in Greece, Chile and Argentina. There were secret paramilitary structures ready to destabilise the democratic life of the nation in case the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI) would have government responsibilities. After every parliamentary election, the US ambassador would pay a visit to the President of the Republic, intimidating him on the composition of the new government.



The PCI was a great democratic party. PCI together with *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) were the main forces in the *Resistenza* against the Nazi-fascist occupation of Northern Italy (1943-45). The PCI actively participated in building the newly born *Repubblica Italiana* and in writing its Constitution (1946-48), which is usually considered a social-liberal document, since it contains the most positive concerns of PCI and DC (freedom of the individual in a strong state).

The long process of independence from Moscow's interests brought the PCI to condemn the invasion of Czechoslovakia, to accept NATO, to propose a Euro-Communism (an anti-Soviet and anti-Chinese socialist experience). During the revolts (1968-1979), the ultra-leftist and Maoist students considered the PCI as a right-wing party. Those times were called *Anni di Piombo* (years of bullets), because ultra-left and ultra-right groups threatened the country's everyday life.

The PCI never tried to subvert the democratic *status quo*; instead it allied with DC against the terrorist threat. DC president Aldo Moro, who was working for a DC-PCI government, was kidnapped and executed by the *Brigate Rosse* (1978). I am not afraid to say that if in Italy we are more or less free and if my generation was brought up in a democratic culture, it is also thanks to the PCI.

#### ITALIAN COMMUNIST IDENTITY

Since comedies are meant to be funny movies, they are more or less free from propaganda and can be good historical documentation, regarding the everyday life of a nation. The first two movies of the Italian comedian Carlo VERDONE have two interesting characters that describe the typical Italian PCI supporter.

In "Un sacco bello" (1979), Ruggiero is a young hippie. His father is obsessed with him and wants him back home. Mario tells Ruggiero that he just bought a new apartment for him if he comes back; he calls a Roman Catholic priest to convince him on family values. After a series of vain attempts, Ruggiero's girlfriend asks, "is your father a fascist?" Ruggiero answers, "at least he would believe in something." Mario lifts up both fists saying, "me? A fascist?! I am ultra Communist!"

In "Bianco Rosso e Verdone" (1981), an old woman travels with her grandson 500 km in order to vote in her constituency in Rome. She is very ill (in fact, she will soon die), but she is so proud to vote PCI, because Communists are honest and fight power privileges. During the trip, they meet a group of Russians and she tells them that she is Communist, while her grandson says to them, "excuse her! She is quite old!" and to her, "Granny, it is not the same thing!"

Italian communists were quite different from the general stereotype. They were bourgeois, with properties, with great respect for the religious institutions and with strong ethics.

#### SCMS IN THE SEVENTIES: FAITH AND POLITICS

The *Federazione Giovanile Evangelica Italiana* (FGEI) was born in 1969 as a fusion of Baptist, Methodist and Waldensian youth associations. Since its foundation, the link between faith and politics was the main concern of FGEI. As many Student Christian Movements in Western Europe, there was a need to have a clear political position. FGEI was leftist, not as an *a priori* decision, but as the conclusion of profound theological reflections.

Being leftist in Italy meant the application of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): standing alongside the poor

ones, seeking justice and peace, refusing the present unjust world by constructing a better one, opposing the "official church" if its main concerns are "easy sacrifices" and not true repentance.

This clear programmatic choice revitalised our SCMs and challenged churches and society. Of course, this challenge was risky and some of our predecessors made some mistakes. The biggest mistake was the indulgence towards the Communist regimes of the Soviet block. The historical reason is that Latin American revolutionaries took inspiration by Karl MARX and liberation theologians compared the Christian message with Communist ideology. Unfortunately, there was nothing revolutionary or liberating in Communist regimes. A consequence of these mistakes was the exclusion of people who had a different vision.

#### CAN WE BE RECONCILED WITH OUR PREDECESSORS' HISTORY?

When we read most literature produced in the seventies by FGEI members and friends, we see that it is light years far away from our current understanding and approach. Also other Western SCMs were used to write on materialistic approaches to the Bible, Christ as the first Marxist, the Gospel and class struggle, Christians for Socialism, the alliance of proletarians and "Third World people" as the foretaste of the Kingdom of God and so on.

Today, these titles seem a bit weird. Nowadays we would be embarrassed to write something like this. Today some of this sounds ridiculous and it is source of laughter. My question is: do we have the right to laugh at what happened in our Western SCMs in the seventies? Do we have the right to look down on what our predecessors wrote or reflected upon? My answer is a clear "No."

Western SCMs in the seventies were ready to take all risks, even the risk that the coming generations may not understand them. Western society was living a dark time with the worst part of the Vietnam War, *coup d'état* in Greece, Chile, Argentina, repression of civil rights in some countries, bloody attacks from terrorist organisations. Western SCMs wished to build a better church in a better society.

Most of us today may not believe this is possible, but our predecessors took the risk. For this reason I am proud to be in a SCM with these people as my predecessors. On the other hand, we should analyse their history and their mistakes, in order not to repeat them and to take the best from their experience, which is their longing for freedom and justice.

This is why one of the main working fields of WSCF Europe is "Gender and Education", as a means to overcome oppressive power structures in church and society. This is why another working field is "Solidarity," because we should care for society and for people in need. WSCF Europe should be a means to build a "Common European House." Nevertheless, in order to do this, we should share our experiences and we should listen to the history of people who live on the other side of what used to be the Iron Curtain. We are called to be reconciled and, with God's help, we shall.

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