

# Introduction

To this very day, the Italian Communist Left (*sinistra italiana*) is still unknown — and is even misrepresented — in the very countries where it emerged and to which it spread through the immigration of its militants.

It emerged in Italy during the years preceding the first world war, around Amadeo Bordiga, who was its main inspiration, and from 1921 to 1925 it was to be found at the head of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). In this period Gramsci's current played no more than a secondary role within the party, as its right wing. In fact, in spite of pressure from the Comintern, the latter had great difficulty getting rid of the left leadership, which was supported by the majority of the PCI. But in 1926, following the Lyon Congress, the old 'Bordigist' majority were gradually excluded from the party. Soon after, its most prominent militant, Bordiga, was imprisoned. Once freed again, he retired from all militant activity, and devoted himself to his profession as an engineer and architect. He didn't break his silence until 1944.

It was therefore without Bordiga and outside Italy — where 'fascistic' laws impeded any organised political activity — that the Italian Communist Left was to perpetuate itself. It became the Left Fraction of the PCI in April 1928, then the Fraction of the Communist Left in 1935, and from its founding at Pantin right up to its dissolution in 1945, it worked to reclaim the heritage of the party which had been under the leadership of Bordiga.

Following its exile in 1926, the Italian Communist Left gradually lost what was specifically 'Italian' in its origins and development. It was a group of Italian immigrant workers in France and Belgium who went back to the original traditions of the PCd'Italia. As immigrant workers forced to leave their native land, strongly committed to the tradition of the Communist International, they had "no nation or national boundaries"; as such the 'Italian' Fraction was truly internationalist. It was to exist not only in France and Belgium, but also in the USA. It would have militants in Russia for a few years and contacts as far afield as Mexico. It managed to escape the inwardness that was so strong among political groups of immigrants, and constantly sought a confrontation of ideas with all the groups that left or were expelled from the Comintern; from the Trotskyists to the left communists who had broken with Trotsky. In spite of a series of ruptures with these groups, this perseverance with international discussion bore fruit. A Belgian Fraction (which came out of the League of Internationalist Communists of Hennaut — LCI) was formed in 1937, followed by a French Fraction in 1944. This showed an undeniable extension of its influence, which was however more ideological than numerical. From now on, the Italian Communist Left ceased to be specifically 'Italian'; in 1938 it became the International Communist Left, and an International Bureau of Fractions was set up.

The Italian Left was internationalist to the core both in its political positions and in its activity. For this small group of workers, internationalism meant not betraying the cause of the world proletariat. In an historic period which was particularly terrible for the small revolutionary groups which became more and more isolated from the proletariat, it was one of the very rare organisations which chose to swim against the current. It refused to support democracy against fascism; it rejected the defence of the

USSR and the struggles for 'national liberation'. In a period which was completely dominated by the war, it tirelessly called for revolutionary defeatism, as Lenin did in 1914, against all military camps. It tirelessly defended the need for a world proletarian revolution as the only solution to crises, wars and mass terror.

In spite of the hostility it encountered amongst the workers, the vast majority of whom followed the directives of the Popular Front and 'anti-fascism', it put forward its own directive: not to betray the working class. And so, although already isolated, it made the difficult decision to isolate itself still further in order to staunchly defend an internationalist position against the war. During the war in Spain, it was the only group in France which refused to support — even critically — the Republican government, and called for the "transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war". It was supported in this only by a minority of the LCI in Belgium and a small Mexican group. So its isolation became total; as it did with the Union Communiste in France, the LCI in Belgium and the Revolutionary Workers League (RWL) in the USA. The price it paid for the intransigent defence of its positions was an internal split which led to a significant minority leaving. Although weakened numerically in this way, the Left Fraction nevertheless came out of it strengthened ideologically. When the war broke out, a war that it believed to have been postponed to a more distant time, it, together with the Dutch internationalists, the German RKD and the French Revolutionary Communists, was one of the few groups to denounce the imperialist war, and the resistance fronts. Against the war, it put forward the need for a proletarian revolution that would sweep away all blocs and military fronts. Against the massacre of workers in the war, it called for their fraternisation across national boundaries.

In characterising their positions, some historians and/or political adversaries have labelled them both ultra-left and Bordigist. In fact, the Italian Communist Left was neither ultra-left nor Bordigist. And from the very beginning it always defended itself against the charge. It did not try to be 'original' in its positions; although attacked by Lenin — with the German Communist Workers' Party (KAPD) — in *Left-wing communism, an infantile disorder*, it was above all an expression of the left of the Comintern. What it wanted was to continue the revolutionary tradition of the latter's first two Congresses. This is why, although it was one of the first left currents to arise within the Comintern, it was also one of the last to leave, and even then it did not leave of its own volition but because it was expelled. Although accused of "ultra-leftism" by Trotsky, it still worked and discussed for several years with the Trotskyist current, which finally excluded it. It arose as an intransigent Marxist current before the first world war and remained ever faithful to the original "intransigence" of the Comintern, although the Comintern itself later went off in the opposite direction, when it adapted the 'tactic' of the united Front and 'workers' states'.

The Italian Communist Left kept going as a current, not because it tried to be 'extremist', but because its political experience forced it to evolve and to question past schemes that seemed outdated to it. It believed that the experience in Russia shouldn't be turned into something hallowed, but should rather be passed through the sieve of vigorous criticism. As far as it was concerned, Marxism was neither a bible nor a list of recipes; it was there to be enriched in the light of the proletariat's experience. It refused to reduce Lenin and Bordiga to eternal religious dogmas. Because it believed that the Russian revolution and the whole period that followed, should give rise to a precise 'bilan' (balance sheet), to be made without prejudice and without ostracising anyone, it criticised certain positions of Lenin and of

Bordiga, which were still nevertheless part of its own history. Whether it was on the union question, on 'national liberation struggles', or else on the state in the period of transition, it did not hesitate to make innovations, when it considered it necessary. It cannot therefore be pigeon-holed either as Leninist or Bordigist in the period from 1926 to 1945. It is certainly this critical 'bilan' of the past which enabled it to survive the second world war and to continue as a current up to today.

The longevity of the Italian Left, wrongly called 'Bordigist', cannot be explained in terms of individuals like Ottorino Perrone (Vercesi), who was one of the main originators and inspirations of the Left Fraction. However brilliant he might have been, what Perrone had above all was the crystallisation of a theoretical and political activity which flowed from every militant. His political hesitations, for example his surprising participation in an anti-fascist coalition in Belgium in 1944-45, showed that the ideological continuity of the 'sinistra italiana' depended more on the organisation as a whole than on simple individuals. To use an expression dear to the Italian Fraction itself, each militant reaffirmed himself within the organisation, just as the organisation reaffirmed itself in each one of its militants. If it extolled 'proletarian leaders' such as Lenin, it was in order to show that these 'leaders' synthesised the organic life of their party. For this reason, it tried as much as possible to give an anonymous form to those militants who were most in view. In doing so it was responding to a preoccupation of Bordiga in the 20s, who had always tried to ensure that the life of the party was based not on a passive following of its leaders, but on its political programme.

It is certainly amazing that the groups today that claim descent from the tradition of the Italian Left pass over their own history in silence, although some of their militants belonged to the Italian Fraction.

When they are obliged to speak of *Bilan*, they represent this review as a small review produced by Italian immigrants and remain silent about the positions they defended. This is true of the both 'Parti Communiste International', for example, represented in France by *Programme Communiste* and in Italy by *Programma Comunista* and *Comunismo*. Although claiming complete continuity with the Italian Left since 1921, invariance in its positions and absolute faithfulness to all the positions of Bordiga and Lenin in the 20s, it nevertheless takes great care to maintain a political silence about the Italian Fraction abroad between 1926 and 1945.

In fact the history of the Italian Communist Left reveals an important split between 1943 and 1945, when the 'Partito Comunista Internazionale' (PCIInt) of Italy was formed. This led to the dissolution of the Italian Fraction in France and in Belgium, as most of their militants were integrated as individuals into the new party, without even knowing what its programme was. In the excitement of joining the PCIInt of Italy, which had thousands of militants and was crowned with leaders as prestigious as Bordiga (who was, however, no member of the Party), Onorato Damen, Bruno Maffi and Ottorino Perrone (this one in Belgium), many of the old divergences were forgotten momentarily; many militants joined in the hope of seeing the party of Bordiga resurrected intact. Its concern with numeric strength led the PCIInt to defend a sectarian policy which was very different from the Fraction of the International Communist Left in France and in Belgium. It refused all discussion and confrontation of ideas with groups like the RKD-CR in France and the Councils' Communists (Mattick group in the United States, Communistenbond Spartacus in Nederland), which had nevertheless refused to support the war and had maintained internationalist positions. In fact it excluded some militants of the French Fraction which wanted to maintain the tradition of *Bilan* and which had been

responsible for awaking the fractions in France and Belgium from their inactivity during the war.

A few years later, the new party in Italy experienced a profound crisis, with a proliferation of splits and resignations. The 'party' saw its resources reduced and it became a small organisation of militants who still went on declaring that they were the party, although they had neither the form nor the means in a period — like the 30s — in which they were profoundly isolated. In 1952, the Damen tendency which had formed the PCInt, separated itself from the pure 'Bordigist' tendency, as a result of several years of divergences with Bordiga, who wasn't even a member of the party. This pure 'Bordigist' tendency would return to the theses of Bordiga and of Lenin in the 20s and, consequently, rejected all the theoretical developments made by *Bilan*, *Octobre* and *Communisme* throughout the 30s. In the 90s, of all the groups of the existing Italian Left, only the PCInt (*Battaglia Comunista*) (with the British group *Revolutionary Perspectives*), who is the successor of the PC Internationalist founded by Damen in 1952, laid claim to *Bilan*. At the time of the 1952 split, most of the members of the ex-Fraction of the Italian left joined the Damen tendency.

Although it did not develop from the Italian Communist Left during the two wars, the International Communist Current (ICC) laid explicit claim to *Bilan* and the Gauche communiste de France (GCF) which, after 1945, tried to develop its positions around the review *Internationalisme*. This current has published texts of *Bilan* in several languages. Some groups in Great Britain and in USA have published texts concerning Bordiga and the Italian communist Left, particularly the both International communist Party (*Programma comunista* and *Comunismo* in Italy) and the group *Revolutionary Perspectives*, in relationship with the Italian group "*Battaglia comunista*", a former split in the 50s of the official bordigist

group.

The Italian Left had a political influence and importance far greater than its numerical size. Today - the nineties - when the whole ruling class is crowing about the 'death of communism', *id est* the "death of the world revolution", when the lie that Leninism, Trotskyism and Stalinism equal "communism" has reached a point of ideological paroxysm, it is necessary to show that these Italian militants were authentic revolutionaries who resisted all forms of counter-revolution from the beginning, and who both maintained and critically developed the real acquisitions of the revolutionary wave in Europe (1917-1921), against all the distortions and defamations of the Leninist-Stalinist counter-revolution.

The existence today of numerous groups coming or claiming from a more or less mythical Italian left, the history of which they artificially reconstruct when they simply hide it, demands a work of research into the less well-known period of its existence in the emigration from 1926-1945, in France and in Belgium (but also in the USA) and in Italy, from the Lyon Congress (1926) to 1943-1945, which saw the adherence of the Italian Fraction to the new party.

We won't hide the enormous difficulties involved in this work. Practically no study has been written on this key period, neither in Italy, France, nor Britain. In Italy, the Bordigist current is clearly better known than in France; but its study is often limited to the period before 1926. The texts of Bordiga, written when he was at the head of the Italian Communist Party, have been republished bit by bit. Numerous studies have been devoted to this party, its origins, more and more insisting on the importance of Bordiga and putting Gramsci and Togliatti back in their right place. But such studies

often limit themselves to the personality of Bordiga rather than the current that he helped to form. Alongside some honest works (in particular that of De Clementi) there are many books written by members of the PCI or leftist groups, whose avowed goal is to show the ‘sectarianism’ even ‘infantilism’, of ‘Bordigism’, in order to contrast it with “realistic” ‘gramscism’.

In France, it would be difficult to find a study on the ‘Bordigist’ current before 1926. The political fashion of the day, of Stalinist or leftist leaders or intellectuals looking for an historic affiliation less compromised than of Stalin, had given birth to ‘gramscism’ in the 70s.

There doesn’t exist any study of the Italian Fraction, for the period 1926-1945, outside of a short note published several years ago in the *International Review* of the ICC (cf. bibliography), and outside of a text of Lucien Laugier, a former militant of the International Communist Party (ICP) in France. Some collections of texts of *Bilan* that the Italian Fraction published in French, dedicated to the war in Spain (published in Paris ed. 10/18, Barcelona, etcetera) showed a still growing interest for the ‘Bordigist’ current in the emigration in France and in Belgium.

In Britain, with its tradition of pragmatic insularity, the Italian Communist Left is even less known. Nevertheless some texts has been published in English by groups (ICC, ICP and *Revolutionary Perspectives*).

To carry out our project, we relied essentially on the texts, and papers published by the Italian and Belgian Communist Left from 1928 to 1939, by the French and Italian fractions from 1942, by the

PCInt from 1943 to 1945. Published in Italian and in French, they show the continual evolution of this current in the thread of events. We haven't neglected the 'internal Bulletins' which were published after 1931, in the discussions with Trotsky, in 1937-38 (*Il Seme Comunista*, in 1943-44 international bulletins of the Italian fraction) when it was possible for us to obtain or consult them.

If, fortunately, newspapers like *Prometeo*, *Bilan*, *Octobre*, and *Communisme* are to be found in different libraries in Europe (Milan, Paris-Nanterre, Amsterdam, Brussels), this is not the case for the archives of militants of the left fraction. This gap has been partly filled - little by little - by the depot of the so-called Perrone Archives (in fact the Ambrogi Archives) at the BDIC of Nanterre, and of Piero Corradi at the library of Folonica. The true Perrone archives can be consulted at the Free University of Brussels (ULB).

One can only hope that such an example will be followed and supplemented to make the Italian Communist Left better known.

We haven't neglected the reports of the Italian police which can be found in the Perrone Archives and in the Italian Archives (Archivio Centrale di Stato, Roma). After 1944-45 for a short period, the militants hounded by fascism after 1922 could see the reports and documents concerning them. Needless to say the archives of the French and Belgian police will certainly not be open for quite a while.

The testimony of Piero Corradi concerning the *Réveil Communiste* and the minority of *Bilan* at the time

of the war in Spain has been extremely fruitful, as has been that of the former militants of the Italian Fraction Marc Chirik, Bruno Proserpio.

If in the course of this study we have sometimes given the names and pseudonyms of dead militants, it's not only through the concern of a historian to be as scrupulous and as exact as possible. We know that the Italian Communist Left tried to act as an organisation and not as a sum of personalities and individuals. It manifested itself more by its publications, in an anonymous way, than by putting forward illustrious names. But all organisations, the Italian left being no exception, find themselves at one moment or another confronted by divergences which crystallise around tendencies and thus the people who were their most visible and resolute spokesmen. The Italian Fraction moreover, more than any other revolutionary organisation, always refused to hide its divergences behind a façade of monolithic unity. It always tried hard to facilitate the expression of political disagreements, even if they were only held by a few militants.

We hope above all, in taking the Italian Communist Left out of total anonymity, to encourage militants who are still alive, or their families, to rectify certain historic errors, to enrich the history of a current which should be known, and to break the silence enforced on it.

We thank Mme Annie Morelli, daughter of a sympathiser of the Italian Left to have had the kindness to send us the notes that she made on the 'Bordigists' in her thesis on the Italian immigration in Belgium. In particular those devoted to *Italia di Domani* and to the role of Perrone in the Anti-fascist Coalition, have been very useful.

We are grateful to Arturo Peregalli, Sandro Saggiolo, Fausto Bucci and Agustin Guillamon for their relevant works on the Italian Communist Left.

We have considered it necessary to separate this very succinct history of the left fraction into chronological sections. We have also made a resume of its origins and development in the PCd'Italia before 1926.

We have made the deliberate choice to insist particularly on the political positions of the Bordigist current, in showing their progressive evolution, determined by the historic context. Without neglecting the social history of the Italian Fraction, or the organisational history, it seems to us particularly important and necessary to make its positions stand out. They reflect a whole historic period, rich in debates in the wake of the Russian Revolution; debates which are far from concluded given the importance of the questions raised.

A history of the Italian Communist Left can only be political because, as well as the problems raised, the replies given have been and still are political. The history of the Italian Communist Left is not a dead letter, but embraces the future through the richness of the responses given by it in the 30s.

Nevertheless this history should find all its significance inside whole the international communist left. Without studying the theoretical lessons of the German and Dutch Lefts, it would be impossible to understand and “up-to-date” (and thus to criticize) the political lessons of the Italian Communist Left.

P. Bourrinet, September 1998.