

Transnational Women’s Activism in Eurocommunist Politics: the Entangled Cases of Italy and Spain (1974-1982)

El activismo transnacional de mujeres en la política eurocomunista: los casos entrelazados de Italia y España (1974-1982)

Victor Strazzeri

Universidade Federal de São Paulo

victor.strazzeri@unifesp.br

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7525-3932>

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of “Eurocommunism” through the lens of the transnational dialogue between Italian and Spanish communist women activists as Spain transitioned from dictatorship to rebuilding democracy (1974-1982). Eurocommunism emerged in the mid-1970s as a trend of West European communist parties aiming to leverage democratic politics as a strategy of transition to socialism. The paper sheds light on the little-known female protagonists of the phenomenon by reconstructing the exchanges and collaborations between Italian and Spanish communist women on various fronts: from solidarity initiatives in the twilight of the Franco dictatorship to the exchange of political strategies to advance women’s rights in their respective contexts. As such, it provides evidence to the key role of women’s cross-border activism in propelling Eurocommunism in the 1970s. Finally, it highlights that female militants saw the renewal of their parties’ policies on the ‘women’s question’ as integral to the Eurocommunist platform.

Keywords

Eurocommunism, communist women activists, Italian Communist Party, Spanish Communist Party, transnational solidarity

Resumen

Este artículo examina el fenómeno del “eurocomunismo” a través del diálogo transnacional entre activistas comunistas italianas y españolas durante los años de transición y el inicio de la reconstrucción democrática en España (1974-1982). El eurocomunismo surgió en los años 1970 como una tendencia de partidos comunistas de Europa occidental que buscaban utilizar la política democrática como estrategia de transición al socialismo. El artículo aborda las poco estudiadas protagonistas femeninas del fenómeno, reconstruyendo los intercambios y colaboraciones entre mujeres comunistas italianas y españolas en diversos frentes: desde iniciativas de solidaridad durante el ocaso de la dictadura franquista hasta el intercambio de estrategias políticas para avanzar los derechos de las mujeres en sus respectivos contextos. El artículo subraya el papel clave del activismo femenino transfronterizo para el desarrollo del eurocomunismo en la década de 1970, destacando como para muchas militantes comunistas la renovación de las políticas de sus partidos sobre la “cuestión de la mujer” formaba parte integral de la plataforma eurocomunista.

Palabras clave

Eurocomunismo, mujeres comunistas, Partido Comunista Italiano, Partido Comunista Español, solidaridad transnacional

For most of the postwar period, the relationship between activists from the Italian Communist Party (PCI – *Partito Comunista Italiano*) and its Spanish equivalent, the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE), was marked by a distance rooted in their divergent political orientation and relationship to Moscow. From the mid-1970s, however, an intense collaboration arose between the two parties. If the Italians' 'unorthodox' status in the international communist movement had long 'made it suspicious of deviationism with respect to the historically pro-Soviet stance espoused by the Spanish'¹, the intervention of Warsaw Pact forces in Czechoslovakia in 1968 started a period of increasing alignment between the PCI and PCE: on the need for greater autonomy from the Soviet Union as well as the search for an alternative model of socialism. This cross-border convergence occurred under the aegis of 'Eurocommunism', namely, the PCI-led attempt to propagate the 'democratic road to socialism' as a model for communist parties in advanced capitalist countries (and beyond). A product of capitalist Europe's multiple crises in the 1970s², 'Eurocommunism' aimed, according to one recent observer, to give 'a socialist direction to the development of Western democracies and define a Europeanist socialism qualitatively different from the Soviet or Chinese models, but also from what remained of social democracies' aspirations'.³

According to Silvio Pons⁴, the Eurocommunist 'third way' attempted to exploit the 'new international environment' fostered by détente between the superpowers, becoming both 'a factor for change and a source of conflict in European politics'. As a result, Eurocommunism 'collected more enemies than friends' and did not survive beyond the 1970s. In the debate on the reasons for its downfall, scholars have emphasized that Eurocommunists' aim to 'operate beyond the bipolar logic'⁵ worked to draw the respective

1. Giaime Pala, "La Recepción Del Pensamiento de Gramsci En España (1956-1980)", *Mientras Tanto*, no. 118, (2012): 39–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43491796>, 40

2. Andrea Donofrio, "El eurocomunismo, ¿producto de la crisis económica y política de los setenta?", *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, no. 163, (2014): 13–39. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/4663422.pdf>

3. Michelangela Di Giacomo, "Prospettive 'eurocomuniste'. La strategia del Pci e i rapporti col Pce negli anni Settanta". *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, no. 2 (2011): 173-203. 10.7376/70362, 174.

4. Silvio Pons, "The rise and fall of Eurocommunism", ed. por Melvyn P. Leffler & Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, v. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 46.

5. Emanuele Treglia, "Las vías eurocomunistas: Introducción", *Historia del presente*, no. 18 (2011): 6. <https://historiadelpresente.com/revistas/numero-18-2011-2-eurocomunismo/>

opposition of both the USSR and United States.⁶ Beyond these geopolitical constraints, researchers have highlighted the tension between the phenomenon's national and transnational components. Thus, according to Silvio Pons⁷, while Italian communists 'under Enrico Berlinguer's leadership [...] constantly appealed to their own national tradition – especially to Antonio Gramsci's ideas about the complexity of revolution in the West and to the tradition of a mass party [...] established by Togliatti after World War II', their hopes to export the 'Italian road to socialism' were predicated on the legitimacy garnered by the 'international alliance with their French and Spanish partners'. However, due to 'crucial disagreements between the two main partners, Italian and French communists', the 'ambition [of the former] to generate a new political culture failed', relegating it to a 'national peculiarity'. Emanuele Treglia reached a similar conclusion: 'Eurocommunism never managed to develop into a true "common strategy" [...] beyond generic declarations'.⁸

This paper's central aim is to amend those assessments through an analysis of the exchanges between the little-known female protagonists of the Eurocommunist convergence between the PCI and the PCE. From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, Italian and Spanish communist women activists collaborated consistently on various fronts, from solidarity initiatives in the context of the Franco dictatorship's final years to the exchange of political strategies to advance a women's rights' agenda in their respective contexts. Eurocommunism, crucially, acted as a platform for this transnational coordination, which I reconstruct based on sources from both Spanish and Italian archives.

In this regard, the article sheds light on a little-studied dimension of Eurocommunism. As Emanuele Treglia has highlighted – echoing the words of PCE activist Pilar Brabo – 'the "key to Eurocommunist politics"' was 'the creation of a [...] "sociopolitical bloc for progress" constituted by all forces aiming to build "socialism in freedom"'.⁹ This renewed alliance policy was not limited to a convergence with progressive Catholics or to the 'reunification between communists and socialists or social-democrats'. It extended, namely, to 'exponents from the most dynamic sectors [of society]', such as students and intellectuals, as well as to 'the new movements (ecologist, feminist, pacifist etc.)'.¹⁰

In an overview of the recent literature on the topic, I drew attention to how Eurocommunism was not a mere 'contemporary' of the rekindling of feminism and the women's movement in Europe (and beyond), but that these phenomena had important overlaps which the research had ignored so far.¹¹ This paper cannot hope to fill this

6. Frédéric Heurtebize, "Eurocommunism and the Contradictions of Superpower Détente", *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 4, (April 2017): 747–71. <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhx036>.

7. Silvio Pons, "The rise and fall...", *op. cit.*, 45-46.

8. Emanuele Treglia, "Las vías eurocomunistas...", *op. cit.*, 6.

9. Emanuele Treglia, "Un partido en busca de identidad. La difícil trayectoria del eurocomunismo español", *Historia del presente*, no. 18, (2011), 28. <https://historiadelpresente.com/revistas/numero-18-2011-2-eurocomunismo/>

10. *Ibidem*, 28-29.

11. See Victor Strazzeri, "Forging socialism through democracy: a critical review survey of literature on Euro-communism", *Twentieth Century Communism*, no. 17, (2019), 26-66. <https://doi.org/10.3898/175864319827751330>

gap; precisely because of its significance, the relationship between the Eurocommunist parties and an upsurging women's liberation movement in their respective contexts demands a concerted research effort. This contribution provides, rather, an initial exploration of that phenomenon in the entangled cases of the PCI and PCE with two goals: 1) provide evidence to the role of women's activism across borders in propelling Eurocommunism in the 1970s; 2) underline how most female activists involved (and some male allies) simultaneously strove to renew their parties' policies on the 'women's question' – not least by demanding an expanded role for female militants –, in line with the feminist winds blowing through Europe during that decade.

Along these lines, the paper examines the collaboration and exchanges between (mainly female) activists from the PCI and PCE across two distinct phases of these parties' Eurocommunist convergence: 1) the period between Franco's death in November 1975 and the elections for Spain's constitutional parliament in June 1977, during which interaction was centered on solidarity initiatives; 2) the period going from the aftermath of the 1977 elections to the crisis of the PCE in 1982, when Spanish communist women focused on institutionalizing women's rights and looked to their Italian comrades for orientation. It begins, however, with the analysis of a PCI-organized event in 1974 that is revealing not only of the interface between West European communist parties and the rising feminist tide in Europe, but also of the PCE's emergence as an enthusiast interlocutor of the Italian hosts, launching the transnational dialogue this article aims to reconstruct.

The Eurocommunist conference on the 'women's question' of November 1974

The *Conference of Communist Parties of Capitalist Europe on Women's Condition* held in Rome on 17 November 1974 and gathering eighteen West European CPs is a little-known milestone of the then emerging 'Eurocommunist' tendency in the international communist movement. The *Conference* was the result of a summit of West European communists held in Brussels in January 1974 which had marked 'a new phase' in the efforts at collaboration between the region's CPs¹² in a scenario of political instability and economic crisis on a global scale. It led to a series of follow-up events on burning issues for the European context of the time – from the crisis of the auto industry to agrarian policy and youth rights; the conference on 'women's condition' was, however, the first to take place.¹³ This priority was likely due to the recent rise of women's struggles to a global issue and, more specifically, to the upcoming UN-promoted "International Women's Year" of 1975, which Italian organizers directly referred to in a document describing the conference's aims.¹⁴ In light of that conjuncture, the event raised the question of a possible reorientation of European

12. Lily Marcou, *Le mouvement communiste international depuis 1945* (Vendôme: PUF, 1980), 100.

13. *Ibidem*, 100-105. On the tensions between the CPs present at the Brussels conference and its repercussions for Eurocommunism, see Andrea Donofrio, "El eurocomunismo...", *op. cit.*, 23-25.

14. *Una Conferenza a Roma dei PC dei Paesi capitalistici dell'Europa sui problemi della donna*, 1974, Fondazione Gramsci (FG), Archivio Partito Comunista Italiano (APCI), Estero, b. 256.

communists' policies on the so-called 'women's question' as part of the broader 'Eurocommunist' trend under discussion amongst the region's CPs.

On a first glance, however, transcripts from the conference suggest most participating CPs were unwilling to change their policies regarding women. In fact, the documentation highlights not a general shift in the region's communist movement in terms of the promotion of gender equality, but rather a considerable gap between the few CPs attempting to reframe their policies and perspectives – besides the Italian hosts, the Spanish, Norwegian and British delegations – and those that maintained a more 'traditional' communist view of women's emancipation. In other words, one mostly centered on fostering women's access to the workforce and organization in the workplace as well as on remedying their greater precarity and risk of unemployment compared to male workers. The reform-oriented CPs, in turn, expanded their view of the 'women's question' to a critique of gender-based asymmetries not only in society but within party life itself, demonstrating some interface with contemporary feminist discourses. A clear mismatch emerged, therefore, during the proceedings, which tended to reproduce the broader 'Eurocommunist' vs. 'orthodox' divide within the CPs present.

The reformist camp was naturally best exemplified by the host and main driver of Eurocommunism, the PCI. Adriana Seroni, head of its national 'Women's Section', stressed in her opening remarks¹⁵ that the 'idea of [gender] parity had largely penetrated the consciousness of the female masses in our [European] national societies', not least due to communists' consistent advocacy of that goal. Yet, she drew attention to 'new ferments bubbling up' amongst European women, with the fundamental question for communists being 'how to give them political expression'. Beyond an organizational deficit, Seroni 'insisted on [the existence of] new issues' and, above all, on the emergence of 'women freer in their habits, less tolerant of discrimination and dissatisfied with their current standing in society' – especially amongst those living in cities and from younger generations. The 'reemergence of feminist ideas, the formation of feminist groups' was, in her view, a consequence of this new conjuncture and rebellious subject. Crucially, Seroni acknowledged the limitations of communists' current response to their demands:

this reemergence of neo-feminist tendencies is also possibly due to shortcomings of our own and of the worker's movement [...] we must especially reflect on one fact, namely, whether our effort to value the customs dimension [*aspetti di costume*] of women's emancipation, interweaving it with its economic and social dimensions, was sufficient.

With her reference to communists' lackluster contemplation of the 'customs' dimension of women's emancipation, Seroni meant issues pertaining to the sphere of gender relations proper, i.e., of gender identities and roles, especially at the level of everyday and inter-personal relations. These naturally extended to party life. Hence, while affirming that the PCI was the Italian 'party in which women find the greatest space of

15. *Intervento dell'On. Adriana Seroni della Direzione del PCI*, FG, APCI, Estero, b. 256, 1-10.

participation, the greatest impact', Seroni also drew attention to the need for 'the whole party to become more involved [with the women's question] *not only women comrades*'. Pondering why the 'growing female presence' in the party had not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in their 'influence', Seroni 'warned that there were still conservative impediments to overcome regarding both the active participation and greater promotion of women to positions of responsibility'.

Such references to intra-party gender relations were one of the distinct aspects of the reform-oriented parties' discourse at the Rome event. They were in stark contrast to generic statements, such as those of Margot Mrozinski, representing the West German Socialist Unity Party (SEW): 'All political, economic and social questions interest both men and women. [...] An ever-growing number of women are becoming conscious that their everyday battles are an integral part of class struggle and can only find a successful outcome in the common struggle of the working class'.¹⁶ While the SEW played a diminutive role in the West German context, the discourse from representatives of a major political force such as the French Communist Party (PCF) were strikingly not all that different. The declarations of the PCF's highest representative for policy on women are illustrative in this regard.¹⁷ Madeleine Vincent, a former resistance fighter and member of the Political Bureau of the PCF, stated that 'women's emancipation is essentially conditioned by economic and social policy'. While conceding that 'this also requires transformations in the democratic life of the country' and that 'communists do not deny that backward mentalities nurtured by the high bourgeoisie exist', Vincent made no reference to specific party policies to advance gender equality and women's rights. On the contrary, she left France's feminist movement – and its challenge to the PCF¹⁸ – unaddressed.

Two interventions by smaller parties indicate Italians were not alone in regarding the feminist movement as not only challengers of but also possible allies to the communist movement. Judith Hunt, representing the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), was the first to directly reference the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement since the 1960s, alongside the recent increase in the number of women in unions, in the Labour Party and the CPGB.¹⁹ Kari Kromann²⁰, representing the Norwegian CP, highlighted

16. *Riassunto dell'intervento di Margot Mrozinski*, FG, APCI, Estero, b. 256.

17. *Riassunto dell'intervento di Medeleine [sic] Vincent, membro dell'Ufficio Politico del PCF*, FG, APCI, Estero, b. 256, 1-2.

18. When a group of PCF women called *Elles voient rouge* [They (f.) see red] rebelled against the party's orthodox line on feminism in 1978, calling for a greater convergence with the movement, they referenced Vincent's and the PCF leadership's refusal to recognize tensions on questions of gender within the party: 'But for us the issue is that we must be feminist *and* communist wherever we are. We aren't, as [party secretary] George Marchais and Madeleine Vincent claim, happy in the party. [...] To say that there is no problem in the party as far as women are concerned is to silence us, to bury us in the name of a theoretical "equality" without even examining what is really happening'. *Elles Voient Rouge* collective, "Feminist and Communist", ed. by Claire Duchon, *French Connections: Voices from the Women's Movement in France* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 119.

19. *Riassunto dell'intervento di Judith Hunt, Partito comunista di gran bretagna*, FG, APCI, Estero, b. 256, 1.

20. *Riassunto dell'intervento di Kari Kromann, Partito comunista di norvegia*, FG, APCI, Estero, b. 256, 1.

how her party 'sought to collaborate with several feminist organizations', especially in the struggles 'for abortion and against entry into the [European] Common Market'.

The most vocal advocates for a reorientation of the communist movement regarding the 'women's question' were, without a doubt, the PCE's delegates. María Ramírez emphasized the role of women in ongoing labor struggles and strike activities that were challenging the Franco dictatorship²¹. Manuel Azcárate²², the PCE cadre responsible for international relations, also praised Spanish women's grassroots anti-dictatorship mobilization, highlighting that from 'more immediate demands' they were moving towards the struggle to 'end all forms of discrimination'. This meant a struggle for equality not only in 'social and political life', but also 'in the relations between the sexes, in culture and in art'. The PCE's ranks had grown as a result, with 'not a small number' of female activists joining the party due to its positions on the 'women's question'. Azcárate made no secret of the PCE's remaining limitations in this regard, however, calling for the 'insertion of a much greater number of women in its committees and leadership positions'. Amongst the internal barriers to this process, Azcárate mentioned the case of communist couples, in which the 'communist husband was an obstacle' to his partner's ascension to or maintenance of a leadership role. Finally, while reaffirming that 'women's liberation from the double exploitation [...] at work and at home was intrinsically tied to the cause of the working class', Azcárate warned against using 'schematic examples' and 'rose-colored images to define much more complex realities', in a clear expression of his frustration with the more 'orthodox' interventions at the *Conference*.

The Rome event, hence, did not contribute to the constitution of a specifically West European set of policies on the 'women's question' within the international communist movement. It signaled, rather, a clear divergence in the fundamental stances of the region's CPs on the matter. In other words, the *Conference* demonstrated that the predominant views of West European communists were far from converging with those of 'Eurocommunists'. Besides the Italian hosts, only the CPGB²³ and especially the PCE showed a clear adherence to the PCI's new international line. The *Conference* did highlight, however, that these CPs' renewed stance regarding women's struggles and, notably, their willingness to engage with the feminist movement constituted key dividing lines amongst the attending organizations.

21. *Riassunto dell'intervento di Maria Ramirez, Partito comunista spagnolo*, FG, APCI, Estero, b. 256, 1. Mónica Moreno Seco has suggested this is Dulcinea Bellido, a leading figure of the grassroots organization *Movimiento Democrático de Mujeres* (Women's Democratic Movement). Bellido joined the CC of the PCE in 1975.

22. *Spagna: Manuel Azcárate*, FG, APCI, Estero, b. 256, 1-4. The speech is also printed in full in Spanish in *Nuestra Bandera* 77, 1974, 45-48.

23. While not a mass organization like the PCI and PCE, the CPGB made a clear adherence to the 'Eurocommunist' line during its November 1977 congress and in its suggestively titled program *The British road to socialism*. Judith Hunt was one of three cadre responsible for drafting it. See Smith, Evan, *British Communism and the Politics of Race* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 165.

Dialogue and convergence between women activists from the PCI and the PCE during the Spanish transition to democracy (1975-77)

The alignment between the stances of PCI and PCE representatives at the Rome conference had key ramifications. It was, namely, the prelude to a consistent dialogue and collaboration between women activists of both organizations which this item reconstructs. The setting was the beginning of Spain's protracted transition to democracy in 1975. For Spanish communist activists emerging from the underground and preparing to run in their first elections in forty years, the question of the relationship between social movements, on one side, and their representatives in the institutions, on the other, was a priority. This issue evoked the first mention of the Italian context I found in PCE women's documents during the *transición*; more specifically, during an April 1976 conference of the PCE's Valencian Country branch dedicated to the 'Study of the women's question'.²⁴ When the fact that 'women's liberation had not been fulfilled in socialist countries' was raised, i.e., that 'it had been in terms of cultural and labor achievements, but not political ones', this deficit was attributed to 'CPs not giving it the necessary attention'. 'That is why', an unnamed voice in the transcript added, 'the vitality and the weight of the Women's Liberation Movement [WLM] is of the utmost importance: see the Italian example in the case of the abortion law'.²⁵ In other words, Italy emerges as a reference point regarding a question raised later in the transcript: 'How to combine the interests of the party and those of the WLM?'.²⁶

The issue was a burning one in the Italian context: on 3 April 1976, activists from the mass organization *Unione Donne Italiane* (Union of Italian Women – UDI), which integrated socialist and independent women, but mainly militants close to or from the PCI, had decided to formally adhere to a large-scale demonstration organized by Italian feminist collectives. Its aim was to protest a major setback in the legislative effort to legalize abortion in the country.²⁷ This was a landmark moment in the history of the UDI – in terms of cementing its autonomy from the PCI – and a key step in pushing the party closer to movement positions on abortion legislation (an issue I will return to below). A final remark in the transcript from Valencia accurately reflects those realities: 'On the abortion law: the actions of Italian women were not in contradiction with their party; it was a question of unitary tactics'.²⁸ In other words, of the convergence between the female militancy of the PCI and the feminist movement, putting the former (momentarily) at odds with the more cautious line of their party leadership at that juncture.

Until that decisive April 1976, PCI leadership had, namely, been fearful of alienating the Catholic electorate and of facing a backlash from the more conservative sectors of Christian Democracy (DC – *Democrazia Cristiana*) if they took an overly liberal stance

24. Conferencia PCPV [Partit Comunista del País Valencià] para el estudio de la problemática de la mujer, April 1976, Archivo Histórico del Partido Comunista de España (AHPCE), Fondo Rosalía Sender, Caja 6-6.

25. Intervenciones sobre las 3 Ponencias y Conclusiones, Apr. 1976, AHPCE, Fondo Rosalía Sender, Caja 6-6, 1.

26. *Ibidem*.

27. See Alessandra Gissi and Paola Stelliferi, *L'aborto: Una storia* (Roma: Carocci, 2023), 136-141.

28. *Intervenciones...*, *op. cit.*, 2.

on abortion. Instead, it was Christian Democrats that took the initiative through a very restrictive legislative proposal on abortion. This gesture effectively undermined the Aldo Moro government – in which the DC held the majority –, leading to fresh elections in June 1976. The vote resulted in the left and especially the PCI (34.4%) rising significantly in the polls.²⁹ An emboldened progressive bloc of communists, socialists and liberals – despite their own internal disagreements – succeeded in gathering a parliamentary majority to approve a more far-reaching law on abortion in April 1978, especially in terms of guaranteeing women's right to choose.

A further mention of the Italian context refers to female electoral behavior in those June 1976 elections. The setting was the *First Conference of the PCE on the Women's Question* from October 1976. Italy was referenced during Manuel Azcárate's enthusiastic endorsement of the event and pledging of support for women activists to 'propel the struggle within the party so that it comprehensively takes up women's liberation'. Referring to the need to fulfill the PCE's bold claim in this regard in their manifesto-program of the previous year, he stated:

If we are not the party of women's liberation, we are not a vanguard party. We are at a moment of deep transformation, of cultural revolution, with the conservative female vote a thing of the past. We have the example of Italy, with the female vote no longer for the right but for the left, which has recently been confirmed.³⁰

Women's electoral behavior was a key issue as the PCE recovered its legal status and prepared to run in the landmark elections of June 1977. Italian communists were aware of that decisive conjuncture; their solidarity activities and media coverage with regards to Spain peaked precisely around the time of the vote. The 10 July 1977 issue of *Noi Donne* (ND – We Women), the weekly publication of the UDI, and the July-August 1977 issue of *Donne e politica* (DeP – Women and Politics), the bimonthly magazine of the PCI's Women's Section, both had in-depth coverage of the Spanish elections from the standpoint of local women activists, women's movements and the female electorate. While both publications regularly featured coverage of women's struggles beyond Italy, the focus given to Spain in the context of the elections was unprecedented. According to DeP's editorial 'Women for a new Spain', this was the first number 'centered on a foreign country' since the publication's launch in 1969.

As the author of the editorial, high-ranking PCI activist Bianca Bracci-Torsi, highlighted, the special issue had not only been motivated by the Italians' external interest regarding the situation in Spain, but from 'conversations with Spanish comrades passing through Italy' and 'from the news that a new form of protest involving women in the neighborhoods' had emerged. This subsequently led to the 'first organic contacts in Madrid in April of last year'. In other words, it was no coincidence that PCE activists had been

29. See Ginsborg, Paul, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (London: Penguin, 1990), 375-76.

30. *Intervenciones de la 1ª Conferencia [del PCE sobre la Cuestión Femenina]*, Oct. 1976, AHPCE, Fondo Rosalía Sender, Caja 7-1, 8.

so well-informed about events in Italy during their meeting in Valencia that same April 1976; they likely obtained information directly from PCI women activists visiting Spain.

But the interest was clearly mutual. Bracci-Torsi considered the Spanish women's movement unique, because it was currently defined by the 'encounter between the glorious elder antifascist militants of the Civil War, and the very recent wave of female students, which identify in their own condition as women another reason to oppose the dictatorship'. The Spanish movement stood out, furthermore, because of 'the growing politicization of associations which experienced a difficult legal status under Franco (the *Amas de casa*, university women)' and due to the struggles of 'the parties and the *Movimiento Democrático de Mujeres* [MDM – Women's Democratic Movement] on issues pertaining to women's condition in its economic, legal, social and cultural dimensions'. It was, Bracci-Torsi concluded, 'no accident, that the PCE will declare itself, in a widely diffused document in Spain and abroad, *a feminist party*'. In other words, it was the combination of historical significance and actuality of Spanish women's struggles that drew the Italians' interest, alongside the fact that they managed to mobilize subjects within civil society as well as the party spectrum.

With the goal of avoiding a 'detached and inevitably external *reportage*' of events in Spain, DeP editors opted instead to send 'a questionnaire that would enable the leaders of various left-wing parties and women's movements to produce their own evaluation of the situation of women in Spain and of the perspectives opened up by the election for the Italian audience'. As Bracci-Torsi details, the questionnaires encompassed:

the general ideas of every party on the women's question and their concrete policy, the role of women within them, the question of double militancy – a matter posed to the feminist movements as well, in terms of their links to political forces and the possibility and desire to have an impact on political power. Other questions regarded the social composition of the group... [,] its sphere of influence [...] and main demands; the value attributed to extra-domestic labor in the process of women's emancipation and liberation; the relationship between the feminist movement and the struggle for democracy.

The filled-out questionnaires arrived five months later – around September 1976 – and, while some groups dissolved and others 'completely refused any dialog with women from political parties', they led to three main insights. First, that it was important to politicize women in the countryside, small villages and urban peripheries, where there was a lack of feminist and left-wing 'vanguards'; second, the need to 'forge a positive relationship to the new institutions'; third, the imperative of maintaining the unity of women in the struggle while respecting the autonomy and ideological differences of the parties and movements they belonged to. Bracci-Torsi concluded that 'the process of Spanish women's emancipation and liberation and, more broadly, their role as protagonists in the democratic life of the country' depended on 'their capacity to confront these three issues with an original political platform', but also on taking 'the experiences of other countries into account, without becoming subordinated to them'.

In that regard, Italians' concern to prevent their solidarity and support from turning into partisan meddling becomes evident from the effort of both publications to set



Figure 1 and 2: both the UDI's weekly *Noi Donne* (n. 28, 10 July 1977) and the PCI Women's Section bimonthly magazine *Donne e politica* (n. 4, Jul.-Aug. 1977) featured extensive coverage of the June 1977 elections in Spain.

the situation in Spain in its historical context and to engage a wide spectrum of party and movement representatives. DeP has in-depth reports on the Spanish labor movement (by Margarita Sáez) and the *amas de casa* (by Merche Comabella), as well as pieces on the history of the country's feminist movements (by Rosa Pardo) and of women under the Franco dictatorship (by Italian historian Giuliana Di Febo³¹). The responses to the publication's questionnaires, in turn, encompass the PCE (Dulcinea Bellido) and PSUC (*Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* – Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia; Maria Dolores Calvet), but also the socialist PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* – Spanish Socialist Workers' Party); the movements are represented by anonymous pieces from the MDM and the *Women's Liberation Front* [*Frente de Liberación de la Mujer*]. There is also a 'map of the [Spanish women's] movements' prepared by Di Febo, with a short description of several organizations.

31. While not a communist activist, Di Febo played a key part in the transnational dialogue between Italian and Spanish militant women during the *transición*. See her landmark monograph on women's activism and resistance under the Franco dictatorship published in Spain (*Resistencia y movimiento de mujeres en España: 1936-1976* [Barcelona: Icaria, 1979]) and Italy (*L'altra metà della Spagna: Dalla lotta antifranquista al movimento femminista, 1940-1977* [Napoli: Liguori, 1980]).

Noi Donne's coverage, in turn, pays more attention to the election itself – it was published in its immediate aftermath – and the behavior of the female electorate, but also features in-depth interviews, including with feminist activists both in favor of and opposed to collaborating with the left-wing parties (Carmen Mestre and Lidia Falcón, respectively). In a sign of the stance which the Italians were most curious to learn more about, Maria Dolores Calvet is featured in both the ND and DeP special numbers. The activist was a leading female voice in the PSUC, equivalent to the Catalanian communist party, and a participant of Catalonia's 'Women's Coordination', i.e., a coalition of grassroots women's movements and groups in the region. In other words, Italians paid special attention to 'double militants', i.e., women active simultaneously in party and movement contexts. In that regard, Calvet made no secret of the struggle inherent in bringing feminism to bear *within* her political party:

We female candidates of the PSUC refused, for instance, to only speak about the women's question at rallies. According to our male comrades that should be our specific and limited scope. Because we are women. They, in turn, reserve themselves the more qualified spheres of politics. One day, myself and another woman comrade ... held a rally by ourselves. Obviously speaking about everything, from the women's question to more general political problems. They told us at the end that they really would not have expected it from us.³²

That communist women in Spain faced difficulties to not only promote their agenda in society at large, but within their own party is reflected in the results of the 15 June 1977 vote. The constituent parliament gathered 329 men and only 21 women (6%)³³, which marked a lower proportion than the already lopsided number of female candidates that parties had presented (13.21%).³⁴ Against that backdrop, the PCE had the highest proportion of women in its parliamentary group – 3 women out of 20 elected representatives (15%)³⁵ – and had placed the most women in first or second place on their electoral lists (7)³⁶. Yet, their outperformance was only a function of other parties' abysmal numbers. The PCE reached 9.4% of the vote overall, with the PSUC scoring a surprising 19.7% in Catalonia (which enabled the election of Calvet, who was in seventh place on the party's list).

Before turning to the exchanges between women activists of the PCI and PCE regarding the institutional question, the growing tensions within the Spanish party after the elections regarding the role of women activists and policies on the 'women's question' merit attention. Italian communists again emerged as a reference point as these topics came under scrutiny. The setting was a meeting in October 1977 gathering rep-

32. "La coordinadora scende in piazza" in *Noi Donne*, n. 28, 10 July 1977, 35.

33. Julia Sevilla Merino et al. (coord.), *Las mujeres parlamentarias en la legislatura constituyente* (Madrid: Cortes Generales/Ministerio de la Presidencia, 2006), 60.

34. *Ibidem*, 57.

35. *Ibidem*, 85.

36. *Ibidem*, 52. The lack of women at the top of electoral lists helps explain why the proportion of elected women was lower than that of female candidates overall.

representatives of the PCE's Secretariat – the highest organ in party hierarchy – as well as members of the party's Commission for Women's Liberation [henceforth: 'Women's Commission'] from across Spain.³⁷ The goal of the meeting, as Secretariat member Jaime Ballesteros announced, was to 'analyze the party's work regarding women's movements, the objectives of the feminist movement, the forms [the party] should adopt as well as the whole range of problems that comes to bear on this activity front'.³⁸ Many participants, such as Rosalía Sender (Valencia), highlighted organizational issues, such as the lack of authority of the Women's Commission to enforce its stances to the party Spain-wide (for which it also lacked sufficient regional and local branches).³⁹ Others, such as Natalia Calamai (Madrid), focused on the PCE's 'lack of a theory on the women's question' which explained why its 'practice had been so poor'. This was reflected in the contrast between the party's success in 'integrating women into the citizenship movement' through its grassroots activities and its difficulties 'in mobilizing women on their specific demands'. In this regard, PCI women emerged as a possible model: 'We have, therefore, to take superstructural problems into account as the Italians, the PCI, have begun to do, with truly innovative positions that are very interesting and which we should study in-depth', she argued, drawing on the distinction between 'structural' (i.e., directly economic) and 'superstructural' (i.e., ideological and cultural) issues. Margarita Cerdón (Madrid) followed Calamai in arguing that a 'Marxist analysis a little in the Italian way [*a la italiana*]' was necessary to understand the contemporary feminist movement, stressing how Italian communists 'were the pioneers of a new strategy, a new project of transformation of the state and society'.⁴⁰ This project took into account the 'irruption of politics into the private life of individuals', in the sense that the 'mutilating separation between private and public, individual and collectivity, tended to disappear'. Cerdón mentions having followed with great interest Italian communists' debates on these matters over the previous two years in the PCI publication *Rinascita* [Rebirth]. She also related the rise of feminism in Europe to May '68, 'the first revolt, the first explosion of cultural movements against the cultural values of the bourgeoisie'.⁴¹ In this regard, Cerdón saw an 'objective convergence between the Women's Liberation Movement and the democratic road to socialism', enabling the 'attraction of broad sectors of women to our revolutionary project'. Quoting the PCI's main theoretical reference, Antonio Gramsci, she called on the PCE to become 'a reference point for the female masses', through a 'working-class hegemony [...] which – according to the Gramscian description – takes the interests and tendencies' of 'other social groups' it is allied with into account. In other words, to Cerdón, the Women's Liberation Movement emerges as a key component of the Eurocommunist expanded alliance policy.⁴²

37. See *Intervenciones en la Reunión con el Comité Ejecutivo de la Comisión del CC del PCE para la cuestión de la mujer, ampliada con delegados de varios puntos de España*, Oct. 1977, AHPCE, Fondo Rosalía Sender, Caja 7-2.

38. *Ibidem*, 1.

39. *Ibidem*, 11-12.

40. *Ibidem*, 35.

41. *Ibidem*, 38.

42. *Ibidem*, 40.

In her intervention, Merche Comabella contrasted the PCE's policies on women with those not only of Italian but also of French communist women. According to Comabella, the communist-aligned *Union of French Women* [*Union des femmes françaises*], with over a hundred thousand members, focused on achieving 'small improvements for the large mass of women, without concerning itself with having a greater impact in the social and political transformations of the country'.⁴³ While this strategy should not be underestimated, Comabella still considered that it 'fell short'. The contrasting example was precisely Italy's, in which the UDI, 'according to comrades themselves, focused its efforts excessively on civil rights', by which she meant the struggles for divorce and abortion legislations. As a result, they left 'questions related to the right to employment, social infrastructure in the neighborhoods etc. [...] to the trade-union confederations and political parties'.⁴⁴ Hence, it was no surprise, Comabella stressed, that the '[Italian] comrades showed great interest in our experience with the homemakers' movement'. Organizing this sector of women is 'something [Italians] have not managed to do'. The answer, according to her, was to combine the strengths of the French and Italian models: to have a 'mass movement that improves women's livelihoods and, at the same time, does ideological and cultural work while also mobilizing for social rights'.

Along the same lines, Pilar Brabo (Alicante) concluded that the work of the 'women's front [of the PCE] will have to be much more diversified than before'.⁴⁵ Brabo, who had recently been one of the candidates elected to the *Cortes Generales* (i.e., the Spanish parliament), stressed the importance of the party's legislative intervention.⁴⁶ 'Despite all its shortcomings, but above all compared to other political parties, [the PCE] has been the only one which has highlighted, or which has attempted to approach the women's question; the only one to have raised it at the *Cortes*'. Brabo's words would anticipate the PCE's shift towards the institutional arena as a central space of intervention, including for its women activists, over the next years. 'It was obvious', Brabo stressed, 'that the feminist movements will pressure all political parties [...], but it is also very important that the Communist Parliamentary Group emerges as the main standard bearer of women's issues'.⁴⁷ Brabo framed the PCE's effort to represent movement demands within the institutions as a key element of the party's new political line; its components ranged 'from the alliance between the forces of labor and of culture' to 'all our current views on the democratic transformation of society and the state apparatus, which taken together are termed "Eurocommunism"'.⁴⁸ This reference to Italy anticipated the shift of focus in the transnational dialogue between Italian and Spanish communist women in

43. *Ibidem*, 49.

44. *Ibidem*, 50.

45. *Ibidem*, 149.

46. On that topic, see Mónica Moreno Seco "A la sombra de Pasionaria. Mujeres y militancia comunista (1960-1982)", ed. M^a Dolores Ramos, *Tejedoras de ciudadanía. Culturas políticas, feminismos y luchas democráticas en España* (Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 2014), 275-277.

47. *Intervenciones en la Reunión*, cit., 149.

48. *Ibidem*, 147. For an enlightening profile of Pilar Brabo's trajectory see Mónica Moreno Seco, "Entre la disciplina y la transgresión. Pilar Brabo, dirigente y diputada comunista en la Transición", *Spagna Contemporanea*, 55, (2019): 83-102.

the subsequent years, i.e., towards promoting a women's rights agenda in Spain's newly instated democratic institutional arena.

Institutionalizing women's rights in a budding democracy (1978-1982)

After the June 1977 elections in Spain, the most pressing political task for the major political forces that had made up the anti-Franco coalition was building the country's democratic institutional framework. The exchange of experiences and good practices on that front also took center stage in the dialogue between PCE activists and their Italian comrades. Indeed, PCI women's experience in the institutional realm drew interest in Spain even beyond communist circles. A case in point, the document collection of the Alicante-based feminist group 'Feminario' holds a Spanish typescript translation of the essay 'Women, Institutions and Organizational Forms in Civil Society', authored by PCI Parliamentarian Luciana di Mauro.⁴⁹ While it is unclear how this document made it to the collection of a feminist group with no connections to communist politics, the effort to translate it is, nevertheless, suggestive: the text examines the historically 'ambivalent relationship' between feminism and institutional politics in Italy. In di Mauro's words, this ambivalence was visible in the 'refusal' of the latest generation of Italian feminists 'to express their experience within existing political forms'. But also, in the fact that the very 'presence' and 'even the radical nature' of 'social and cultural movements' *outside* the institutions 'repeatedly broke' the parliamentary deadlock in Italy during the 1970s.⁵⁰

Understanding this dynamic was key for communist women activists in Spain struggling to assure that the country's budding democracy would not fall short of its promises with regards to gender equality and women's rights. The documentation from three exchanges between PCI and PCE militants between 1979 and 1982 provides evidence for the centrality of this concern. In February 1979, Begoña San José, an activist with the grassroots trade-union organization *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO – Workers' Commissions) and PCE member, wrote to parliamentarian and CC member of the PCI Giovanni Berlinguer. The CCOO was about to organize a conference on labor law and protections; the goal was to develop a distinct platform 'on the topics of nighttime labor, banning arduous and unhealthy work for women, [as well as] pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and early childcare'. Berlinguer, a physician, had just led the legislative effort to institutionalize a unified public health system in Italy (through Law 833 of December 1978). In her letter, San José highlights all the work still to be done now that the Spanish Constitution had been approved: 'After the Constitution, we must elaborate all of democracy's new labor legislation: the labor rights code, the trade-union action law'.⁵¹ The Spanish activist then invites Berlinguer to come to the conference or to otherwise

49. *Mujeres, instituciones y formas de organización en la sociedad civil en Italia*, 1978, Archivo de la Democracia, Colección Asociación Feminario de Alicante, AD 105-26, 20pp.

50. *Ibidem*, 5-6.

51. Letter from Begoña San José to Giovanni Berlinguer, 21 February 1979, APCI, Archivo delle donne Camilla Ravera [Ravera], Donne di altri paesi - Spagna, 1974-1985, b. 11.

send documents – ‘we have some material from Italy, but very little’. San José’s priority was to incorporate women’s interests and a gender dimension into the new legislation *from the start*. ‘So that’, as she suggestively phrased it, ‘we do not have to put on feminist repairs [*remiendos feministas*] later on’. A letter from Adriana Seroni from 15 March 1979 confirms that the requested material was sent.⁵²

In January 1981, it is Pilar Pérez Fuentes, then the head of the PCE’s Commission for Women’s Liberation, who writes Seroni asking for reference material.⁵³ Her request regards how to assure the application of the *Programme of Action for the Second Half of the United Nations Decade for Women*, which had resulted from the Second World Conference on Women held in Copenhagen between 14–30 July 1980.⁵⁴ ‘It would be very useful for us’, Pérez Fuentes writes, ‘to know the forms of control and monitoring of the Italian government’s commitments that the NGOs established with it’. In line with the UN conference’s priority to narrow the ‘disparity between women’s guaranteed rights and their capacity to exercise them’⁵⁵, PCI women emerge in this exchange as a source of insight on how to translate institutional change into actual improvements in women’s lives. Pérez Fuentes ends the letter stressing the value of the PCE’s relationship to their Italian comrades: ‘We hope to maintain a close relationship with you which enables an exchange of experiences and information and might also facilitate a meeting this year [1981] between Italian and Spanish communist women’. The uniqueness of this rapport is confirmed by the absence of records of similar interactions with other CPs in the PCE’s archives. Adriana Seroni’s reply⁵⁶ came two months later:

We are also sending you the *Proceedings of the Conference of Communist Women Elected Representatives* and an issue of *Donne e Politica* dedicated to the relationship between women and local administration. Other instances of deeper analysis, including at the local level, concerned more specific aspects such as maternity, health, contraception [...] tell us what interests you most. As you know, we are very busy with the referendum against the law on abortion, but we will be happy to hold the meeting we discussed with you this summer in Rome.⁵⁷

The abrogative referendum against Italy’s law on abortion (Law 194 of 1978) was held on 17-18 May 1981 and was soundly defeated. With a participation of 79.4% of the

52. See the letter from Adriana Seroni, 15.03.1973, APCI, Ravera, Donne di altri paesi - Spagna, 1974-1985, b. 11.

53. Letter from Pilar Perez Fuentes to Adriana Seroni, 19 January 1981, APCI, Ravera, Donne di altri paesi - Spagna, 1974-1985, b. 11.

54. The final report of the Copenhagen conference is accessible at <https://undocs.org/en/A/CONF.94/35> (Access on 1 November 2023).

55. See <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/copenhagen1980> (Access on 1 November 2023).

56. Letter of Adriana Seroni to Pilar Pérez Fuentes, 19 March 1981, APCI, Ravera, Donne di altri paesi - Spagna, 1974-1985, b. 11.

57. As Pilar Pérez Fuentes confirmed in an interview in Bilbao on 19 November 2021, that meeting did take place after she and a few comrades drove from Madrid to Rome in 1981. The highlight of the trip – on which I have yet to find more detailed records in either PCI or PCE archives – was a meeting with Enrico Berlinguer.

electorate, the Catholic challenge to the law was rejected by 68% of the voters in a landmark victory for the Italian women's movement and their allies.⁵⁸ As previously discussed, PCE activists had been paying close attention to the debates on the legalization of abortion in Italy since at least 1976. Once the struggle to legalize abortion in Spain gained strength at the turn of the decade, Spanish communists again turned to the PCI. When the PCE-affiliated *Marxist Research Foundation* (*Fundación de Investigaciones Marxistas* – FIM) began to plan a conference on the topic, inviting an Italian communist to contribute was a priority. In a letter to the PCI from January 1982⁵⁹, PCE Central Committee member Nicolás Sartorius wrote:

Given that Italian and Spanish societies are similar in many aspects, we believe it would be interesting to have the presence of an Italian comrade, who was an 'expert' on abortion, to explain to us the fundamental problems that have arisen in your country, what resistance you have encountered and what steps you have taken to overcome it at different levels.

While it is likely that Giovanni Berlinguer, who had co-written the Italian law on abortion, was the guest the PCE envisioned, Grazia Labate, an expert on health policy and CC member was sent instead. The congress took place on 20–21 February 1982 and, apart from the guest from the PCI, included no other speakers from a foreign CP. In her presentation, Labate provided an account of the social and legislative struggle to legalize abortion in Italy during the 1970s and the difficulties and advances in the aftermath of its approval. She emphasized that the matter had generated controversy within the PCI itself and that the party eventually 'updated' its initial legislative proposal: 'in the old one [1976], women's right to self-determination was not recognized, whereas in the final one [1978] it is'.⁶⁰ In other words, instead of a commission of physicians, it was women themselves who bore the final decision on holding the procedure. The pressure from the feminist movement had been decisive in this regard, especially through its impact on PCI women, who subsequently drove their party to change its initial stance on the matter.⁶¹ Yet, Labate also referenced the divergences between the PCI and the feminists. 'The law does not regulate the right to abortion per se, but rather the struggle on three fronts: prevention, pregnancy termination and the tutelage of motherhood as a social good', she stressed, referring to the legislation's actual title ('Norms on the social protection of motherhood and voluntary termination of pregnancy').⁶² Labate concluded by highlighting the importance of civil-society pressure on institutional actors:

58. See Alessandra Gissi and Paola Stelliferi, *L'aborto: Una storia* (Roma: Carocci, 2013), 174-78.

59. Letter from Nicolás Sartorius, 20 January 1982, APCI, Ravera, Donne di altri paesi - Spagna, 1974-1985, b. 11.

60. Grazia Labate, "La experiencia italiana y las normas para la tutela de la maternidad y la interrupción del embarazo", VV. AA., *El aborto. Un tema para debate* (Madrid: Ayuso, 1982), 157.

61. See the excellent reconstruction in Alessandra Gissi and Paola Stelliferi, *L'aborto...*, *op. cit.*, 137-141.

62. Grazia Labate, "La experiencia italiana ...", *op. cit.*, 157

It seems that here [in Spain] the feminist movements are not strong; but the women of the Communist Party have a stance and it would be good if they entered into dialogue with other sectors of women [...]; which does not mean that they have to delay the parliamentary struggle as a result. Keeping it all on a purely parliamentary plane (this also happened in Italy) transmits, however, a certain insecurity in the present circumstances: if the masses do not take up the issue, the danger arises that, first, the law is not achieved; second, that a law is obtained that only contemplates infrequent situations, as is the case of abortion for therapeutical reasons.⁶³

Labate's closing words would prove to anticipate developments in Spain, where Law n. 9 of 5 July 1985 only decriminalized abortion in the cases of rape, endangerment of the mother's health or malformation of the fetus. To what extent this could be attributed to a lack of dynamism in the relationship between party, social movements and citizenry in Spain, as Labate had suggested, cannot be examined here. Yet, by 1982, i.e., even before the approval of the abortion law, the PCE's own internal contradictions – in a context of diminishing electoral results, economic crisis and rising geopolitical tensions – had put the party into a major crisis.⁶⁴

Conclusion: the convergence of Eurocommunism and feminism on the eve of the PCE's collapse

On 28 and 29 March 1981, the PCE's *Marxist Research Foundation* (FIM) hosted a conference on 'Feminism and Politics' in Madrid. While the event was open, it was directed mainly at activists working on women-centered policy 'in the party [PCE], the union movement and other organizations, feminist or otherwise' and aimed to 'analyze the theoretical and, hence, political and organizational barriers which have hampered the party when it comes to incorporating women's liberation into its political tasks'.⁶⁵ In the centrality of the question of the communist party's relationship to the feminist movement and call for more emphasis on women's liberation in its program, the event constituted one of the final expressions of that – now forgotten – dimension of the PCE's 'Eurocommunist' reorientation dating from the mid-1970s; hence, also of its adoption of the Italian communist tradition as its main external reference point.

The event had three main interventions – on women's liberation in the history of the socialist movement, on women and domestic labor and on women and politics. The latter, held by Pilar Pérez Fuentes, consisted in a synthesis of the political line developed by the Spanish party through its dialogue with Italian communists. The title, 'Women and Politics.– Towards an interrelationship theory: capitalist patriarchy; feminist movement; autonomy and double militancy', evoked many keywords of the Italian debate but also the greater interface of Spanish communist women with feminist discourse:

63. *Ibidem*, 161-162.

64. For a reconstruction of the PCE's terminal crisis see Carme Molinero y Pere Ysàs, *De la hegemonía a la autodestrucción: el Partido Comunista de España (1956-1982)*. (Barcelona: Crítica, 2017), Ch. 8.

65. Fundación de Investigaciones Marxistas/Comisión por la Liberación de la Mujer – PCE, *Encuentros sobre feminismo y política*, Mar. 1981 (Madrid: Fundación de Investigaciones Marxistas, 1981), 5.

‘The interrelationship between the capitalist and patriarchal systems, i.e., CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY, must configure itself as the axis of our struggle’.⁶⁶ If this statement culminated in the ‘need to combine the struggle against oppression based upon class and sex’⁶⁷, it also raised the political imperative of forging an alliance between the worker’s movement and the feminist movement. PCE women activists were not alone in considering this a logical ramification of Eurocommunist politics. In their brief address to event participants⁶⁸, Jordi Petit and Juan López, representing the gay movement in Spain, also stressed that the ‘Eurocommunist conception’ called for ‘the expansion of the social subjects which, alongside the working class, will lead the construction of socialism’. In that regard, they underlined the need to ‘open a debate on the conjunction of various movements, inadequately termed “marginal”, and their role in social change’. This convergence, Petit and López concluded, ‘did not imply as much a sum but rather the configuration of a new sexual morality (a term we dislike), which is emerging amongst certain social sectors, and which must find in communists a source of support’.⁶⁹

Pérez Fuentes also emphasized the inherent tensions of the party-movement convergence. ‘Double militancy’ implied a ‘contradiction’, namely, ‘that on occasion the collective interests of the feminist movement will not necessarily coincide with the interests and stances of our party regarding a given issue (the draft legislation on abortion...)’. This ‘duality which communist feminist militants are subject to’ had not been accepted by the PCE, she stressed.

Hence, while the event testified to the greater sophistication and depth of the PCE’s discourse on gender and women’s struggles compared to when it first called itself ‘the party of women’s liberation’ in the mid-1970s, the gap between that slogan and the lived realities of the party remained wide. A case in point, Manuel Azcárate’s critical remarks at the event largely echoed those of his intervention at the Rome conference of West European CPs in 1974. Hence, after almost seven years, the marginal role of policy on women and the prevalence of sexist views amongst party militants were still issues that the PCE had failed to properly address. With that in mind, and in a polemical reference to the overall lack of internal democracy in the party, Azcárate stated that, while organized tendencies were forbidden in the statutes of the PCE, he believed that there was ‘a feminist current’ within it. It was constituted by ‘several communists that defend feminist positions within the party against the reactionary and sexist [*reaccionarias y machistas*] tendencies and positions which are still very strong in it’. In that regard, he saw it as the right of ‘double militants’ to struggle against the official party line, whenever their movement experiences suggested it had taken the wrong course of action.⁷⁰

This call for more space for controversy within the PCE mirrored Azcárate’s own increasingly tenuous position; he was one of the loudest voices calling for the party’s democratic renewal under the guise of ‘Eurocommunism’ to also apply to its internal

66. *Ibidem*, 37.

67. *Ibidem*, 36.

68. *Ibidem*, 39.

69. *Ibidem*, 56-7.

70. *Ibidem*, 44.

affairs. Azcárate would be expelled from the PCE in November 1981 as part of a major – and ultimately self-damaging – purge in many of its regional branches led by the Central Committee majority and party secretary Santiago Carrillo. Promising young feminist voices, such as Pilar Pérez Fuentes, would also leave the party in this conjuncture. Indeed, it was precisely the inability of the PCE to deal with internal ‘debates and contradictions’, not only on gender, but also on nationality (especially the Basque question), on the relationship to the Soviet Union (which would cause a split in the Catalan branch of the party), and not least on what it meant to have a ‘Eurocommunist’ line, that would cause the party to effectively implode in 1982. Not surprisingly, the intense exchange between Italian and Spanish communist women that his article has partially reconstructed also seems to cease around that time, as evidenced by the lack of documentation from 1983 onwards.

In the mid-1970s, the PCE had emerged from the underground as the most enthusiastic adopter of the ‘democratic road to socialism’ advanced by the PCI and known under the label of ‘Eurocommunism’. By the early 1980s, in turn, it became a symbol of the communist movement’s difficulty to adapt to the transformed political realities in the aftermath of 1968. The PCE’s sudden terminal crisis does not, however, render any less significant the efforts of its activists to integrate vectors of renewal coming from the international communist movement, notably from Italy. While the PCI equally entered a period of relative decline in the 1980s, it remained a major force in Italian politics. Its Women’s Section not only retained, but expanded its dynamic role during that decade, in line with the increased role of PCI women in party life more generally. What the transnational dialogue between the PCI and the PCE reveals, in this regard, is that the feature of ‘Eurocommunism’ least contemplated in the scholarship, i.e., the efforts at building an alliance between communist party and ‘new’ social subjects, was perhaps amongst the most fertile aspects of the platform. The PCE’s demise should not overshadow the fact that it was not only a recipient of that formula ‘from outside’, but a source of inspiration for its development beyond its borders, especially due to its own achievements in grassroots organizing as part of the resistance to the Spanish dictatorial state.

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