

Italy's Communism and television. PCI: from demonisation to reform

Abstract

This work aims to shed light on the ideological and cultural roots that diverted the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano – PCI*) from imposing itself as a driving force in Italy's TV development.

I undertook to focus on the first twenty years of the activity carried out by *RAI* (*Radio Televisione Italiana*) as Italy's unique broadcasting company.

The period analysed began in 1954 (when *RAI* started to broadcast its first programmes) and ended in 1975 (when a well-known reform was approved, resulting in new internal equilibrium due to *RAI*'s division and parceling out phenomenon).

Indeed 1975 was a crucial year: *RAI* stopped holding TV monopoly in Italy and all complex dynamics then started and developed, gradually leading to *RAI-Mediaset* substantial duopoly, as still to date.

That year marked the end of an era throughout which *RAI* had promoted, despite countless contradictions, unitary national conscience and had claimed a sort of right-duty to educate Italians to modernity.

I decided to focus on this phase – and notably on some specific aspects of Italian TV, such as its social impact and political influences – as I have strong interest, *inter alia*, in such a crucial period for Italian republic history.

More specifically I deem the contradictory relationship the *PCI* established with *RAI* over those two decades represents a very involving issue, to date poorly investigated.

Chapter I of my work aims to outline an historical-political overview of *RAI*, with special focus on the political and cultural forces that first attempted to take control of the newly-born television. Thus, I firstly illustrated the historical-political framework of Italy's television birth and early years, aiming to underline the radical social changes of which television was at the same time both cause and effect.

I also deemed it advisable to highlight US strong – heavy – influence on *RAI* over its very first years of life. The US conditioning effect was notably exerted by Mike Bongiorno, an important figure of Italy's TV. The Italo-American presenter indeed played a key role in the creation of a new cultural model, founded on a transnational identity and embodying a proper instrument of US cultural diplomacy.

Eventually I dealt about the two subjects that best understood, from the very beginning, TV huge communication potential and thus held its control for at least twenty years – i.e. Italy's Christian Democracy Party (*Democrazia Cristiana*) and Catholic Church.

In this regard, I found it interesting to analyse how and why Italy's Christian Democracy, which held majority in Italy until the 1990s, had deemed it essential to hold control over *RAI*.

RAI was the object of a political design implemented by Amintore Fanfani, leader of Italy's Christian Democracy left wing.

By controlling *RAI*, Fanfani intended, through a strongly pedagogical approach, to educate Italians. His political approach, characterised by a hardly liberal vision of the State, aimed to establish a *guided democracy*. It is through such an approach that government elites (i.e. sort of oligarchy) impose to their country, by manipulating information channels, an array of ideas and policies which in fact are not always democratic.

Fanfani's fiduciary within *RAI* was Ettore Bernabei, who strictly controlled the broadcasting company over approximately fifteen years. *RAI's* Director General constantly implemented *ad-hoc* policies to ensure information control by Christian Democrats and overly bloated the company's structure according to nepotistic logics.

Chapter II lays out the core of my analysis and argument, as it specifically deals about Italys' Communist Party starting from its political-cultural overview so as to identify those ideological and cultural elements that most strongly opposed full acceptance of television. That cultural attitude was marked by a few decisive dates: in 1953 Stalin died and the Communist Army was strongly struck by the

loss of such a charismatic – nearly religious – Soviet leader; in 1957 the Red Army violent repression of Hungary outraged numerous Communist intellectuals and pushed them away from the *PCI*, which had fully supported the Soviet intervention.

Furthermore, a crucial role in Communist politics was played by the 1968 youth movement towards which the *PCI* assumed rather contradictory positions.

I also highlighted, by quoting relevant actors' own words, the demonising attitude that characterised *PCI* representatives and intellectuals, as well as the press of the communist universe.

The last two paragraphs then deal about two notably significant cases for the lengthy and troubled process of TV cultural legitimisation by the *PCI* – i.e. the launch of *Tribuna Politica* broadcasting and May 1969 strike.

The former marks the beginning of democratic opening towards dignified political pluralism within *RAI*, which enabled Italian Communism to fully exploit television in order to deliver its own political messages to Italy's population. It is at that stage that the *PCI*'s demonising attitude started to change, turning into a long and complex process of acceptance of television.

The latter paragraph, on the contrary, reports the first instance of general strike within *RAI* headquarters in Rome (*Via Mazzini*). The event highlighted how urgent it was for Italy's public opinion to witness a radical reform of the national broadcasting company.

In this regard I examined Italy's Communist positions within such heated debate revolving around the reform, as Communist representatives presented a draft bill based on users' direct access to broadcast programming through production units composed of both experts and viewers.

Eventually I expressed my personal reading of the dogmatic problems that influenced Communists' opinion on mass media in Italy.

Control, or at least, influence on Italian television represented for the *PCI* a remarkable *missed* opportunity to affirm its own hegemony on the country.

In mid-XX century Europe, TV channels – with their great capacity to raise consensus and, overall, to spread and steer fatally attractive social models for

people – represented the decisive instrument through which majority parties managed to obtain and maintain their supremacy over other political forces.

As theorised in *PCI* political design, this hegemony was to be notably cultural so as to cause the then dominant bourgeois culture to collapse, along with its features and redundancies. However, such a fundamental objective was in fact never fully achieved.

As often highlighted in my work, over the first thirty post-war years the *PCI* exerted unquestionable monopoly on Italy's *high* culture but definitely not on the so-called *low* culture, namely *mass culture*.

This distinction operated by left-leaning *intelligentsia* also underlies preconceived ideas on mass culture which, against left parties' perception and conviction, played a more incisive role within fundamental socio-economic transitions towards Italy's modernity.

As a matter of fact, besides their cultural guidance role, intellectuals had little impact on Italian customs.

I thus endeavoured to identify and illustrate the cultural roots that did not enable the *PCI* to support openness and to perform a correct analysis of mass media.

In fact such a precise analysis has always been missing within left-wing parties, obfuscated by their refusal for television own characteristics.

Americanism, bourgeois values, and entertainment predominance legitimated Communists to criticise Italy's television model but definitely not to ignore it and abstract themselves, over at least fifteen years, from a productive and constructive approach to it.

Clinging and sticking onto an apocalyptic vision of massification, Communists lost time and ground versus newly-born post-war societies.

The catastrophist forecasts made by Adorno and the Frankfurt School Neo-Marxist representatives, widely underlying the *PCI* attitude towards mass media, never became reality, and massification – rather than flattening individual differences – definitely increased them.

The few investigations performed merely focused on TV structural aspects (e.g., economic and political variables) but never took into serious consideration the huge social mutations triggered by television, which willy nilly catalyses innovative thrusts. Therefore no sociological analysis of mass media was ever performed by the Communist universe.

What remains to be understood is whether such deficit attitude stemmed from intentional choice or from the absence, within Marxist theory, of proper theoretical foundations that enabled effectively *inferring* (i.e. *reasoning* philosophically) in the field.

I personally believe Communist culture did not possess effective instruments, as traditional marxism never elaborated a theory on mass media, conversely addressed by Frankfurt Neo-Marxists, who developed a critical theory based on data and notions from other perspectives. This approach, as described by Giuseppe Vacca, famous political historian and main expert of Gramsci's thought, strongly impacted on the promotion and preservation of closure attitudes by a large part of left-leaning intellectuals towards the media.

The theories issued by the Frankfurt School reached Italy only in the very early 1970s and were absorbed during a particular phase of both *PCI* and mass media history.

As explained by Vacca, within media culture left-wing parties opened up to the penetrating influences exerted by Frankfurt School criticism exactly while their Christian Democrat adversaries were accomplishing their hegemony design at both cultural and media level.

Furthermore, elaborations stated the only way to escape media violence (controlled by Italy's bourgeoisie) consisted in taking control of such instruments and reorienting them towards revolution. Evidently this solution was neither realistic nor advisable in Italy's historical and political context of the 1970s, as the *PCI* strongly refrained from focusing on a wide and well-defined political project aimed at taking control of mass media.

Enrico Berlinguer, one of the best appreciated and esteemed political leaders of Italy's *PCI* history, had no choice but to voice self-criticism. Indeed in 1979 he assessed the *PCI* propaganda action as *inadequate* and *untimely*, and focused his self-criticism on the mistakes made by communist cultural policy towards *RAI*. He had to bitterly acknowledge his party had belatedly perceived the importance of TV and radio broadcasting, thus leaving to other political forces the burden to regulate the sector.

At least until the 1980s, amongst Italian political parties, the *PCI* structure was most strongly rooted in the society and capable of mobilising people. The *PCI* was the most important communist party throughout the western world, both in terms of number of supporters and influence within international socialism – i.e. an organisation exceeding a third of Italian electors (34.37%) at 1976 elections, although all the other Italian political and cultural forces did anything possible to isolate and curb it.

The particular international conditions froze Italy within the western block (thus preventing any modification of such a delicate balance) and the ensuing *conventio ad excludendum* prevented the *PCI* from aspiring to govern Italy. Nevertheless, giving up any path to cultural and political hegemony by means of television – as the party based its own political design on that very concept – undoubtedly proved to be a mistake that will always leave the *PCI* regretful for not exploring all possible ways to change Italy's history towards a socialist direction.