

**Stephen Gundle.** *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943-1991.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000. 280 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-2563-5; \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2530-7.



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A significant force in Italian politics and society from the fall of Fascism to its dissolution in 1991, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) struggled throughout this period against countervailing pressures that increasingly threatened its influence and, indeed, its very existence. In this work, originally published in Italy in a somewhat different form as *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca: la sfida della cultura di massa* (Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, 1995), Stephen Gundle traces the PCI's attempts to build its strength and influence via cultural policy throughout the almost five decades of its postwar existence. In so doing Gundle, Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Italian at Royal Holloway, the University of London, provides a useful overview of the richness of the party's culture, both high and low, and of the sometimes ingenious but all too often inadequate strategies whereby the PCI's leaders attempted to use cultural projects to increase the party's membership and its strength at the ballot box.

As Gundle demonstrates, cultural policy was of paramount importance to the PCI. Via linkages with the cultural elite and the use of initiatives to reach a mass audience, the party could exert an influence on Italian society that the bar against its full participation predicated in the political realm. Thus the PCI's leaders consistently sought to draw intellectuals and artists into the

fold, while simultaneously developing popular entertainments, ranging from its rich press output to the Miss Vie Nuove beauty contests to the ever-larger and more elaborate Feste dell'Unità, to fill the leisure time of the working class. From the PCI's efforts was born what Gundle calls "the last great left-wing subculture in Western Europe" (p. 7).

But particularly in the realm of popular culture, Gundle argues, the PCI was swimming against the tide throughout the period he considers. Increasingly, those elements generally grouped together and labeled "Americanization"—mass communication, commercial entertainment, consumerism, and the atomization of private life and leisure time—came to characterize Italian society. The PCI generally favored adherence to ideology over a flexible adaptation to new circumstances. The party distrusted economic development and failed to appreciate its potential positive effects. Similarly, mass entertainments—television, pop music, comics, and photoromances—were viewed with condescension and mistrust.

The party's resistance to new cultural forms and distance from mass popular entertainments dates from the outset of the post-Fascist period. Upon his return from wartime exile in Moscow, party leader Palmiro Togliatti immediately began a drive to draw intellectuals and

artists to the party. Perhaps the key goal of propaganda in this period was to create the image of a Communist party intimately linked to Italian cultural traditions, not to the U.S.S.R. The association of the Italian cultural elite with the party was an important step in the creation of this image. But Togliatti's focus on the elite led to a neglect of the crucial area of mass culture.

In contrast, Gundle explains, the Christian Democrats (DC) were far more agile at exploiting new cultural forms to garner political strength. Further, in the late 1940s and early 1950s the DC "acted as midwife at the birth of ... [a] lowbrow set of myths and pastimes" (p. 46), including the Miss Italia beauty contest, the San Remo song festival, the Totocalcio sports betting franchise, and spectator sports, all elements, Gundle argues, of an Americanized culture that encouraged political passivity.

The book traces the PCI's disconnect with popular culture through the student and worker protests of the late 1960s when, Gundle shows, the party consistently failed to connect with youth movements or to contend with the development of left-wing cultural activity outside the party. The later chapters of the book provide a look at the less familiar terrain of the 1970s and 1980s, a period of resurgence for the PCI followed by crisis and, ultimately, dissolution.

If the PCI's ideological rigidity kept it from ever truly engaging with mass culture, Gundle also shows that it would be far too simplistic to label the party's cultural

initiatives a failure. Throughout the period a range of projects served to build the party's base and increase its influence on culture and society. To draw a few of the most significant examples from the many to be found in the book: the Italian Cultural and Recreational Association (ARCI), founded in 1957, provided an alternative to the state-run recreational organization and to company-sponsored groups. In 1978, RAI-TV was finally reformed with the founding of the Communist-run channel RAI-3. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, inspired by the success of a cultural initiative in Rome, local parties staged cultural festivals in cities throughout Italy that had a far more open, popular feel and attracted new attention to the party.

The consideration of the PCI's cultural policy in isolation at times leaves the reader hungering for more context. The author explains that the English version of his book is substantially shorter than the Italian one because of previously existing works in English on the general history of the period and of the party. Without this wider context, however, it is at times difficult to understand the linkages between cultural policy and the larger context, both within the party and without. The countervailing force of the DC, for example, is mentioned so rarely as to seem a phantom-like presence.

The book includes eight pages of (unfortunately undated) photos from the archives of the Istituto milanese per la storia della Resistenza e del movimento operaio, which provide a rich visual accompaniment to the text.

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