Political Biographies of Communist leaders. France-Italy-Portugal


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The idea of this research was born from a study of the Italian, French and communist parties during the sixties. This investigation involved the study of biographies and autobiographies of leaders of communist parties and following a start of a new project about the construction of party identity and the consolidation of their political cultures. The biographies of communist militants and leaders can offer a good perspective for this aim.

In this paper, I present the first ideas resulting from the study of autobiographies/biographies of three Communist leaders: the Frenchman Maurice Thorez, the Italian Palmiro Togliatti and the Portuguese Joaquim Pires Jorge. These works are very different, as different as these leaders were. These differences concern many factors that we can link to the history of the party, the interaction with other leaders, the structural conditions in their respective countries, the political regimes within which they have acted, the economic and social backgrounds, etc. The books have different dates of publication and the ways of recollecting are different. So, faced with this complexity and the lack of analogies, the challenge is to try to trace some coordinates within these narratives. We are not trying to research similarities and differences, but the aim of this paper is to propose frames of understanding of the political experiences of these three communist leaders.

Maurice Thorez’s autobiography entitled “Son of the people” was first published in 1937, and again in 1949, 1954 and 1960. I’ve considered the last edition. The one by Pires Jorge, entitled “With an immense joy”, was published in 1984. Togliatti’s biography came out in 1953. It was written by Marcella and Maurizio Ferrara and reviewed by Togliatti himself. I am going to explain later how we can consider this book, which is formally a biography, alongside two autobiographies.
The focus on these three cases, with different years of publication, national and international contexts, roles in the Communist Party isn’t in line with a comparative methodology based on analogies. However, I’ll try to demonstrate that from this apparent disorder we can trace interpretative lines useful to the understanding of the militancy and the leadership role of Communist Parties members. I’ve chosen three elements; the first is how and why these biographies have been written. The second is the relationship between public and private spheres, or the dimension of interaction between the will of representation of a leadership role inside the Party and the individual and emotional spheres. The third one is an integral part of the history of western communism during the 20th century: repression, exile and clandestine structures.

Let’s start with reasons and motivations and the structure of these books. The Thorez autobiography focuses on the years between WWI and 1960. It’s a book on the history of the PCF and international communism. From the beginning, the aim is clear: it is not a reflection of a man about his experience as militant and as a leader, but is like an official work on the history of communism written in the first person. There are no explanations given in support of the idea of the autobiography, the book is self-explanatory, there are no justifications. Many quoted speeches delivered and published by Thorez during his political activity reinforce this impression of a formal work. In the case of Togliatti, two other members of the leadership of the PCI - Marcella and Maurizio Ferrara - wrote the biography of the Communist Secretary as I’ve said. The book starts with a letter from Togliatti to the Ferraras telling them he wasn’t initially enthusiastic about the idea of a biography. He says he agreed for two reasons: to tell the truth and to give useful elements to correctly judge the history of the party. He admits having revised and reworked the text written by the Ferraras and in some places, it’s very clear, for example where authors speak from a perspective that only he could have, as in the case of the operation after the attempted assassination (1948). So I don’t consider the expression “Togliatti talks about…” - that I might use – to be wrong. The year of publication is 1953 and the title is “Conversing with Togliatti”.

Pires Jorge’s autobiography is written in the first person. However, the interviewer asked him some questions and then removed them from the final version to make the study more fluid. It concerns the years before his birth, in 1907 and 1984. The interviewer states that Pires Jorge refused to answer only two questions: firstly, if he recognized himself among communist militants described in Até Amanhã Camaradas, a fiction written by Álvaro
Cunhal under the pseudonym of Manuel Tiago. The second answer refused by Pires Jorge was about his family.

So, let’s take a look at the family and the relationship between the public and private spheres. None of the three leaders discusses family life, their partner, the type of relationship of love and friendship. Thorez, at a certain point, *ex abrupto*, writes that he visits the site of a mining tragedy “with Jeannette”, in 1948. We know he’s talking about his wife, Jeannette Vermeersch. After that, she disappears to reappear later when Thorez is talking about the years spent in the Soviet Union for medical treatment. Although she appears, she doesn’t have any importance in the story, neither as a wife nor as a Communist leader. She’s only a presence, without behaviour, wills, thoughts.

Togliatti only mentions his partner Nilde Jotti once, and this is during the assassination attempt, when authors say that he was leaving the Parliament with his partner Jotti. He doesn’t talk about his wife. Like Thorez, at a certain point and *ex abrupto*, authors say: “the year before he got married and had a son, Aldo”. They don’t even mention the name of the wife, who as we know was Rita Montagnana.

The same happens in Pires Jorge’s biography. The interviewer declares in the preface the refusal of Pires Jorge to talk about his family. Here, personal life doesn’t exist, there is no mention of the family.

In all these biographies, the family dimension is lacking. The love for partners, wives or children is missing. However, this silence concerns only the family created by them, not their birth families, because all three mention parents, grandparents, and the type of upbringing received. This is due to the fact that for all of them it is important to explain where they came from, to outline a significance between the “before” – understood as before being Communist and before becoming a militant of the Communist Party – and the after, namely life within the Party. Where they discuss their birth family, they all mention the poverty and hard life full of economic obstacles. Thorez and Pires Jorge describe miserable situations, because they were forced to work when they were children, whereas Togliatti was able to study, even at university, thanks to a grant.

Because all three of them want to tell the history of the Communist Party and the International Communism, it’s not surprising to see the sacrifice of the private dimension. From their perspective, there is a real and clear distinction between public and private, only the public level of leaders is considered functional to the story-telling. This is true not only for what concerns love relationships and filial love, but also for friendship. We don’t find mentions of individual or special friendships, other leaders and militants are
not really characterized. The most frequently used expression is “good comrade”. Even in the case of the friendship between Togliatti and Gramsci, the type and the depth of friendship are not qualified. The authors say that Togliatti and Gramsci met for the first time at Turin University and at a certain point they were linked by friendship and fraternity, without elaborating on it. There is nothing more about how the friendship continues, or about the relevance of this friendship in Togliatti’s life. Furthermore, on Gramsci’s death, the authors only say “two months before he knew the tragic news about Gramsci’s death” and that Togliatti, before going to Spain, wrote the first of his studies about the political personality of his mentor. Privacy doesn’t have a significant weight due to the fact that all three leaders were born at the beginning of the century, with an idea of intimacy which is very different from a contemporary one. Furthermore, we have to underline that the main aim, in all these cases, is to tell the history of the communist parties and to represent the leader’s function inside the political structure. Not only is the Party more important than individuals, but the characterization of people within the party is not important and, if it is mentioned, it is fleeting. This type of biography isn’t essentially a good source of investigation of qualities and weaknesses of Communist militants and leaders and of the type of people who made up the communist parties. Beyond some general qualities, such as dedication and courage and general defects (such as arrogance and opportunism when they talk about political enemies), comrades are not qualified.

Let’s turn to the question of repression, prison, exile and clandestine militancy. Thorez was arrested for the first time in 1929 and he describes having had an exemplary behaviour record during his time in prison, without yielding to provocations. He doesn’t speak about violence or torture, the prevalent aspect is the pride in having asserted his condition of communist worker facing the investigating judge and the guards. He talks mostly about having claimed the position of political prisoner and about the school organisation in the prison with other comrades. He taught political economy. He explains that prison gave him the opportunity to re-read Marx and Engels and this part about the imprisonment is a chance to quote the classics: Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. In prison, he also studied German; he quotes Goethe and some French authors. After prison, he becomes general secretary of the Party in July 1930. After September 26 1939, the party was outlawed and Thorez says that the Party took the right decision to move him into clandestine activity, despite the rule “not to desert”. He describes heroic deaths of many comrades between 1940 and 1942, including his brother Louis, who escaped from the
Royallieu camp on 22 June, the anniversary of the Nazi aggression towards the Soviet Union, and who was killed with 18 other communists. Thorez spends 1943 in Moscow and he participates in the dissolution of the Communist International. He assists at the foundation of Liberation national Committees and to efforts of reaction forces to bar the communist actions. He comes back to France in November 1944. Prison and clandestine life are not crucial points in Thorez’s discourse. The heroic dimension of all communists is predominant. Prison and exile do not have a special role and during the exile years, displacements and travel are not so clear. Furthermore, it’s not clear who directed the Party during his absence. In fact, Thorez’s exile and desertion influenced by USSR are problematic questions in his autobiography and this explains why narration is unclear for these years.

Questions of imprisonment and clandestine life have much more weight and space in Pires Jorge’s autobiography. We have to remember here that the PCP remained clandestine until 1974 and from the first imprisonment of Pires Jorge in 1933, there is a period of more than forty years. He spent more than 13 years in prison. This is a particular feature of all Portuguese communists, and clandestine life is a predominant characteristic in the identity of the PCP. Pires Jorge integrates the Party’s executive organization at the beginning of 1930, when the organization could only count on three to four executive members. He was arrested during a trip to Spain helping Manuel Guedes to escape. He spent more than one year in the Caceres prison, with a real and permanent fear of imminent execution by firing squad. However, he was extradited to Portugal, to the Aljube prison, where he also finds Cunhal and they start to develop organizational work for the party. During a search, guards find a note Pires Jorge had hidden in his trousers and because of that he was moved to another prison, Angra do Heroismo, for three years. In these pages about Angra we learn about the conditions of prison life: torture, and resistance through learning (sometimes heroically, for example when Pires Jorge copies an entire Portuguese dictionary), and the secret codes for prisoners to communicate with each other. He leaves prison in 1940 thanks to an amnesty and this is the moment the Party reorganizes. Pires Jorge offers here a detailed report about the condition of the clandestine Party: houses, printing works, means to escape from Pides (political police). He talks about the information, links with legal life, about strong rules and tricks employed to keep the Party safe from police, about imprisonments of other executive members. He discusses two famous escapes from Caxias and Peniche. After the Peniche escape (1969) another era for the Party life starts, in terms of credibility, money and
acceptance of the PCP watchwords. Members started reorganize the Party: part of the Secretariat goes into exile and Pires Jorge is proud of this moment, and he outlines that this operation runs until 1974. But Pires Jorge is imprisoned again - for 11 years - and in these pages he mostly describes that Communists during and after the imprisonments were not defeated but became more pugnacious and prepared, also thanks to their cultural improvement during the prison years. He speaks a lot about party’s organisation and resistance in prison, about the unity of political prisoners, fights for better conditions, for example obtaining some books. He insists on the fact that members of the PCP in prison remained a real political organization. He speaks about his release and the trip to the Soviet Union, which he describes as marvellous, and he states simply that on 25 April, day of the end of dictatorship, he was in Paris with Cunhal and Vilarigues.

Togliatti experienced fascist violence, prison and exile. The biography says the first the time he faced the death because of fascism was the second day of the Rome march, October ’22, when fascist *squadracce* burst into the printing works of the newspaper “Il Comunista”. From this moment, the clandestine life begins, in Turin, Milan and Rome. He is arrested in Rome, in April 1925 and released from prison in July, but in Turin, from where he returns to Rome. The biography continues to say that after few days Gramsci called him to Milan, when he communicates to Togliatti that he should go to Moscow. Togliatti declares that he wasn’t happy with this solution, but that he had to accept the decision. However, there is a clear reference to the fact that wasn’t true that Togliatti spent all of his time of exile – from ’26 to ’44 - in Moscow. As with Thorez, there is a kind of embarrassment when talking about years spent far from their own countries. In the case of Togliatti, the will to fight the “inane vulgarities” about orders received by Moscow is declared. The fact Togliatti spent a lot of time in France and Switzerland is outlined. Sections about periods spent in the Soviet Union are the occasion to speak about the activity of Togliatti in the communist international organisms, directed in particular against Trotskyism. Another part about the exile is participation in the Spanish war as an executive in the International Brigades. Here, there is an important part where he reminisces about Spanish comrades. Then we read about another arrest, in Paris, resolved by Togliatti’s “ingenious idea”, when he made the spontaneous declaration of having a fake passport.

Hoping that these brief reflections have been interesting, I’d like to conclude by remembering the titles of these three works. Thorez’s autobiography, from the title “Son of the People” and from the first line “son and grandson of miners, I only remember the
hard life of worker”, asserts that Communist leaders are an expression of people and in particular of poor, weak and exploited ones. It’s a leitmotif throughout and especially when he talks about the repression in prison where Thorez insists on the assertion of his condition of being a communist worker. The title chosen for Togliatti’s biography is rather neutral, “Conversing with Togliatti”. The title introduces into the dimension that characterized the book, or a very moveable border between the authentic remembrance and the truth told by others. The researched objectivity is guaranteed by the presence of the two authors, but during the narration is more than apparent that the point of view comes from Togliatti himself. This suggests a series of questions about relations inside the leadership of the Party, about the role of “the chief” Togliatti in the PCI, about how Communists have withheld truth surrounding the leaders’ and the party’s lives. In conclusion, the title of Pires Jorge’s autobiography, “With an immense joy” is another leitmotif in the communist narratives: the dedication to the Party without suffering. When he speaks about moments of hard sacrifices, efforts and resistance, he also expresses a great happiness. This is another important dimension in militant life: the total consecration of one’s entire life to the Party, with a great happiness, which is more or less genuine.