

The Italian Communist Party and the Denouement of the Party System in the Early 1990s

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Abstract

If, in the common perception, the denouement of the Italian party system was principally a product of two factors - the end of the Cold War and the exposure of systemic corruption - then the role of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in this event could not have been clearer, for, in 1990, the party embarked on a process of 'social democratisation' that would end the so-called questione comunista that had, from the late 1940s, constituted a pillar of the old party system. Ending the 'communist question' not only changed the political nature of the second largest political party in Italy, but at the same time released many voters from having to 'hold their noses' and vote Christian Democrat to keep the communists out. However, this dramatic and significant move by the PCI under the leadership of Achille Occhetto is, in the conventional wisdom, largely misunderstood as a direct and sole response to the collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe. In fact, a closer analysis reveals that the party embarked on a radical process of change before the revolutions in central and eastern Europe occurred and this was a consequence of a veritable crisis – if not end of the road – for the party during the 1980s, following the collapse of the so-called Historic Compromise in 1979. This chapter will, therefore, analyse the deeper origins of the changes that came about in Italian Communism in the late 1980s, the nature of those changes and how the revolutions in central and eastern Europe acted as an unexpected catalyst, reinforcing and expanding the scale of change in the party, this making the impact on the party system both seismic and enduring.

Author information

Martin Bull is Professor of Politics at the University of Salford and former Director of the European Consortium of Political Research. He is a specialist of Italian and comparative politics and is author, with James Newell, of *Italian Politics: Adjustment under Duress* (Polity, 2005). His recent publications include *In the Eye of the Storm: the Italian Economy and the Eurozone Crisis*, «South European Society and Politics», Vol. 23, No. 1, 2018 and *The Radical Left since 1989: Decline, Transformation and Revival*, in Eleni Braat and Pepijn Corduwener (eds), 1989 and *the West: Western Europe since the End of the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2020).

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Friday, 18 June - Session 6 - **9,00-10,30 CET (Webex)** - Panel – *Delegitimizing party democracy: Italy as exception or harbinger of change in European democracies (1978-1994)?*

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