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**A Genealogy of the Autobiography in Contemporary Society and Social Sciences.
Autobiographical Discourse, Communism and Feminism.**

Introduction

Autobiography constitutes an integral part of the contemporary culture of the self and gained increasing popularity over the course of the 20th century (Podniesks 2009). My paper aims to examine the political use of autobiography in Italy, beginning with its exploitation by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) (Boarelli 2007), before considering its use by feminist groups in Italy, during the seventies (Rossi Doria 2007). My work will compare these autobiographical strategies, considering them as different technologies of the political self (Foucault 1988). More specifically, I will show that both feminist and communist autobiographical apparatuses are based on paradoxical injunctions (Watzlawick et al. 1967) identical in their nature, but different in their effects.

The research - POLITICALLIFEWITING, PN SEP-210203708 - is funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie scheme. I have carried out archival research at the Fondazione Gramsci Emilia Romagna in Bologna, which houses a wide collection of autobiographies of party members - around 1200. These archival documents are still waiting to be catalogued. Therefore, I am not able to provide their box and folder number, but only the name of the collection to

which the documents belong - *Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI)*, *Federazione provinciale di Bologna (1943-1991)*, *Commissione quadri*. In order to protect sensitive information, personal data in autobiographies are not disclosed. I will only report the year of birth of the party member and the year in which the autobiography was submitted. Hence, all the names in my paper are pseudonyms.

Archival research on feminist self-narration in Italy has been carried out at the Fondazione Badaracco in Milan. I have specifically focussed on the personal notebooks written by Lea Melandri, one of the most important figures in Italian feminism. She used to report her daily life experiences and write down her dreams regularly in order to analyse them. Her notebooks are of utmost importance, as they are a unique autobiographical experiment in the history of Italian feminism (Wood 2000, 278).

The political use of the autobiographical form by communist parties after the October Revolution started in the twenties. The Komintern - that coordinated the international communist movement from Moscow - directed Western parties to adopt the Bolshevik cadre party model, which relied on the absolute self-discipline of members. To this end, the communist International made it mandatory for members both to write their political autobiographies and to subject themselves to public sessions of criticism and self-criticism, to ensure their absolute transparency and adherence to the party (Studer 2015). This practice mirrored the general requirement to engage in self-narration that characterised Russian society in the wake of the October Revolution (Fitzpatrick 2005). Here, the population was required to produce narrative curriculum vitae and to answer personal questionnaires, both for surveillance reasons and also as a means of controlling their induction as Soviet Citizens (Kotkin 1997).

Before the Second World War, the biographical surveillance was adopted by the French Communist Party (Pennetier, Pudal 2002) and by the Italian one (Marijnen 2002) in 1944, when the latter re-emerged as an official mass-based party, after having survived as a tiny clandestine organisation during Fascism. When joining the party, new PCI [Italian Communist Party] members were

required to fill out a biographical questionnaire – *Biografia del militante* – and attach an autobiography. If activists later became cadre leaders, the biographical burden increased: in this case they were called upon to write their autobiography again. From that moment onwards, one's career in the party was punctuated by mandatory periodic autobiographical rewritings. They were subject to examination by the Cadres Department and other party members as part of collective self-criticism sessions, during party school courses. In these sessions, the subjects' self-presentation usually drew harsh criticism from the political collective. In this way, the self-criticism performance served as a process of mortification of the self, aimed at reshaping the individuals' personal identity in preparation for their rebirth as a Communist subject.

This autobiographical machine was in full force in Italy at least until the crisis of 1956 and the destalinization of the PCI, at which point it started its gradual decline. The political use of self-narration was later revived by feminist consciousness raising groups established in the seventies. In this new context, the autobiographical “presa di parola” [speaking-out] was identified as the route to emancipation from male domination. The political use of self-narration by feminism gradually dissipated at the beginning of eighties. The focus of consciousness raising began to shift towards the personal exploration of the self, and the practice was ultimately incorporated into modern therapeutic culture (Furedi 2003).

Italian Communist Autobiography and Its Limits

The Bolshevik autobiographical injunction is based on two elements that are essential to understand the Italian experience. First, as mentioned before, the autobiographical practice is coupled with the duty of criticism and self-criticism by party members. In short, the purpose of self criticism is “to disclose and eliminate our errors” – according to Stalin's *Against Vulgarising the Slogan of Self-Criticism* (1928). Self criticism is thus essentially a confessional posture, pushing individuals to acknowledge their faults and weaknesses so that they could become better communist militants and cadres. Therefore, the Bolshevik autobiography has essentially a self critical deflection.

Second, the focus of the biographical verification of the identity of party members shifted from a “formal genealogy” of social origins to a “revelation by deeds” (Kharkhordin 2002), during the thirties and the party purges that culminated in the Great Terror (1935-1938). In other terms, the control on party membership revolved not on their political and personal past, but on their present activity. As a result, militants were checked for their political zeal and could be expelled for “passivity”.

The categories of self criticism and “activity” (as a virtue opposed to the Stalinist mortal sin of “passivity”) make it possible to identify the boundaries of the space of the Communist self-enunciation, starting from a sort of autobiography degree zero – paraphrasing Roland Barthes.

C. Carlo, born on *** 1914 in, living in ***. My dad and mom were born farmworkers and members of the Socialist Party when Fascism waged war against Italian workers. My dad was beaten up by fascists and then joined the Fascist trade-union at the end of 1925. Since then, I have learned to hate Fascism that I have never joined. In 1940 I was called to arms and sent as a soldier to Yugoslavia. On the 8th of September I was taken prisoner by Germans and stayed in Germany till the 2nd of May, the day Soviet army freed us. When I got back to Italy on the 25th of August I immediately joined the Italian Communist Party, in the section of ***, and I was cell and section secretary for a very short period. In may 1946 I became a member of the Camera del Lavoro [the local centre for labour unions] and supervised the Lega Trasporti [Transport League]. Then, in 1947 I also started organising the local fraction of the Lega Braccianti [Farmworkers League].¹

The party member writes a track record of his political experience: from the political attitude of his parents to his career within the party and its flanking organisations. The self of the subject is not a real narrative voice. It is rather the textual collection of historical data and personal details. The autobiography degree zero I have just mentioned.

Party members can introduce variations in the degree zero, without violating its form.

I am born on *** 1931 in ***. When I was five years old we moved to ***. I attended the school in *** until the second grade, then the third and fourth in Marconi School in ***. I finished my primary school in ***. In November 1941 we went to live in *** square, as keepers in the German Academy. In 1943 I

¹ Carlo C. Autobiography (n.d.).

fled with my brother and we took shelter at my uncle and aunt's. We got back to the city in October of the same year, not to *** square, but in a villa where the Academy moved in. In August [illegible] I joined the Italian Communist Party and the FGCI [Federation of Young Communists] attending the section in *** street. Since 1945, my father worked as the manager of the car park in *** square, on behalf of the restaurant ***².

In this case, the writer adds a scrupulous report of all her relocations to the accurate description of the timeline of her life. Temporal data redouble spatial details, forming a document that is again closer to a mere collection of personal data rather than to a proper autobiography (in which narrator and characters are not identified through a set of spatiotemporal coordinates, but have a fully textual existence).

Other autobiographies are far more developed and articulate the identities of narrator and character in much stronger way.

Making my autobiography about how I have become a communist, I think the essential elements that contributed to that are three: social origin, historical events and personal instinct³.

The first person narrator begins the narrative not with a reference to his parents or his birthdate and birthplace, but to what writing an autobiography means. He starts the autobiography by turning the self-narration into a narration of the self engaged in its own self-narration. In this autobiography, the self is thus more than a mere collection of spatiotemporal data. It is rather a self-reflexive agent that not only writes an autobiography, but tries to understand what the autobiographical communist writing relies on.

In the same text, the self-reflexive narrator is coupled with a vivid and well defined character.

And the war that went on and on, and our close friendship and the weariness of military life brought us to talk about the events: I learned the struggles endured by socialists, we talked about the rural question [...] and the bravery of many socialists struggling earlier against owners and later against fascists [...] and we talked for whole nights, and I accepted his programme for improving our society, but not [for reshaping] religion.

² Giovanna C. Autobiography (1949).

³ Candido C. Born in 1920. Autobiography (n.d.).

The protagonist of the autobiography spends his war nights discussing the meaning of Italian history and working-class struggles with a socialist comrade. The character engaged in making sense of the world as a young soldier perfectly corresponds to the narrator involved in deciphering the meaning of the communist choice in his autobiography.

Despite the complexity of this text, the fulfilment of the autobiographical form requires an additional element not present here. The self-reflexive stance must turn into an explicit self-critical attitude, in accordance with the central position of criticism and self-criticism in communist tradition.

I will start by saying that my political work has always been based only on experience and, having a low degree of political maturity, I restricted myself just to pass messages to push the workers in my factory and area to the political and economic struggle. Only now, I realize that it was possible to work out some problems more easily and with better results. Thanks to the teachings of the school of the working class, I was allowed to know the theory of the working-class movement and the importance of the party guidance in the struggle of the working class⁴.

The elements of self-criticism is introduced as a difference between past and present. Or, more precisely, as a difference between the past as an age of errors and the present as a time of truth – gained through the recognition of past errors. Thus, from a low level of “political maturity” to the present “better results”, thanks to the “teachings of the working class”. In short, self-criticism is the discursive mechanism enabling party members to get out of their condition of “passivity” – using the Bolshevik jargon – to achieve a higher level of “activity”.

The Communist *Bildungsroman* mirrors one of the most relevant organisational imperatives defining the Stalinist party model adopted by the PCI: the injunction for party members to activate themselves against sluggishness and bureaucratisation. From this point of view, we can identify the discursive machinery at work in communist autobiographies. In short, the latter have their basis in a pragmatic paradox (Watzlawick et al. 1967, 195) that combines a complementary relationship between superior and subordinate (the party as a guidance and the membership that has to be politically guided) and

⁴ Osvaldo C. Born in 1928. Autobiography (1954).

an injunction that must be disobeyed to be obeyed. In our case, the paradoxical injunction that produces the autobiography is “be active!”. If the party member is active, he does not comply with the injunction – it is not possible to be active by following a command. Otherwise, if the party member complies with the injunction, he is not really active: following a command means not being autonomous, but being passive.

The autobiographies previously quoted are all effects of this paradoxical injunction and convey the difficulty to give the right interpretation to the prescription they are subjected to. The degree zero autobiography grasps the form of the injunction (its imperative nature) but not its matter (the act of being active). On the contrary, the autobiographies characterised by self-critical inflection incorporate the matter (the activation of the self) but are at risk to break the form of the injunction (one can be active only by disobeying the command that prescribes to be active). Once the subject is actively making sense of their autobiography, even in a self-critical manner, the meaning produced might potentially exceed what the party expects by the cadre, jeopardising his/her position within the organisation.

To sum up, writing a good communist autobiography is impossible. This impossibility stems from the paradoxical injunction under which this act of writing takes place. Either the communist institutional self-narration says too little (just personal details scattered in space and time) or it risks to say too much (about the personal and political life of the cadre). In any case, it is always exposed to the possible allegations of *bureaucratism*, when party members write their autobiography as administrative documents, or *petit-bourgeois attitude*, if their self emerges too strongly in the narrative, through the narrator and protagonist voice.

So, the subject of autobiography, as a consequence of the paradoxical injunction in which he/she is trapped, is not in control of the meaning of the narrative, whose sense and rightness only depends on the act of reading by the party. Thus, the writing of the self in the Italian communist organisational environment is fundamentally an attempt to take distance from the danger of challenging accidentally the discursive sovereignty of the party, which defines the limits of cadres’ autobiographical writing . An attempt, however, potentially

doomed to failure, whatever the party members write, because the political sense of their life is alienated by the party.

Italian Feminist Autobiography and Its limits

Self Narration is a key element of the Italian feminist movement in the seventies – along with the interest in the body – (Bracke 2015). It emerges in the form of consciousness raising groups scattered across Italian cities, which inherited this practice from US radical feminism and some Italian catholic collectives belonging to Azione Cattolica [Catholic Action]. In feminist groups, usually consisting only of few women, the desire for self-narration and storytelling become a powerful vehicle for gender emancipation (Caravero 2002).

From this point of view, we will not be able to find the equivalent of communist autobiographies in Italian feminism, essentially because there is no institution that manages the production of self-narrations in this polycentric movement (Hellman 1987). Rather, we are confronted with a large body of ego-documents, in which the first-person enunciation spreads across literary genres and different typologies of textual materials.

The best way to approach this wide textual field is to take into consideration one of the most relevant feminist journals of the time, *Sottosopra* [Upside Down]. The feminist collective of Via Cherubini, located in Milan, promotes its publication in the attempt to give a shared political space to the several feminist groups operating in Italy, which often had no connection with one another. The journal's subtitle specifically conveys this political will: *Esperienze dei gruppi femministi italiani* [Experiences of Italian feminist groups]. The publication has five issues between 1973 and 1976 and, after seven years, comes back to life, not anymore as an expression of the whole Italian feminism, but only as an outcome of the political work carried on by the *Libreria delle donne* [Women's Bookshop] in Milan.

Sottosopra collects contributions not only from all over the country, but also uses all the possible literary forms. Women's voices speak through poems, songs, political manifestos, open letters, translations, theoretical essays, transcripts of consciousness raising meetings, personal accounts of their condition as women in Italian society. Aside from documents setting the

political and theoretical agenda of Italian feminism, the other texts have a distinct autobiographical inflection. More specifically, the issue of *Sottosopra* appeared in 1973 hosts a collection of accounts of women office workers, oppressed by their bosses and male colleagues. One of them is particularly sorrowful. A young woman tells her story of moving from one job to another, all equally unsatisfying.

Another office (you can't find anything else!), even worst than the first one, but the pay is decent at least. All the people I have to deal with (the three owners: husband, wife and their son) are more than sixty years old, the usual filth, the usual bare desk, the usual old typewriter. And I spend all my days correcting the mistakes made by the three old blokes. (Anonymous 1974b, 35)

Her narration ends up with a question without an answer: "When will all that stop?" Another woman working in an office of a large company experiences the same sense of alienation and existential malaise.

My job is very simple: I number the pages of documents, I sort paperwork going from my office to other branches [...] I write down information on a notebook, I type letters and turn the pages of the calendar in my office and in the office of my boss... "otherwise, I'm not taking care of him..." For three years now, this has been my life. Each day more and more uniform, more and more alienating. (Anonymous 1974a, 32)

In these cases, there are no institutional requirements of personal details and self-criticism. The narrator voice is more focussed on the accurate depiction of the personal sense of oppression than on providing verifiable information to a higher political authority. The diversity in tone and orientation of these autobiographical accounts stems from the specific discursive mechanism at the basis of the feminist self-narration. While communist autobiographies originate from a discursive field dominated by the problem of law and order, feminist autobiographies rely on the question of the authenticity of the act of testifying.

The communist self-narration must provide evidence that the life of party members complies with party standards, both in acts and attitudes. Its more profound orientation is towards the production of an *exemplary narrative of the self*, in which the personal story vanishes behind the (communist) rule – by this expression, I refer to the combination of moral, political and organisational standards the party expected its members to conform with. *In short, the model for*

communist autobiographies is a sort of communist impersonal life that all militants must personify.

On the contrary, the feminist self-narration is not factual testimony, *but testimony of the sense of the self and of the world in which the self lives*. It is an absolute and contingent act that does not hinge on any rule (Ricoeur 1994, 107) and does not have to express any set of values in an exemplary manner. So, the relationship between audience and the self-narrator as a witness is reversed with regard to the communist experience. The epistemic privilege is on the side of feminist testimony: the witness can tell the truth in front of the audience, because she was present in the event and grasped its inner sense. In reverse, the communist autobiography does not have that privilege: the audience is the only authority allowed to judge the truth of party member's self-narration. From this point of view, *if the communist autobiographical act is behind the rule, the feminist one is beyond it*.

More specifically, the feminist enunciation of the self can be considered as an attempt to speak what resists any discursive expression and break the accepted boundaries of self-narration. In other terms, feminist autobiographical acts revolve on the hidden trauma (Gilmore 2001) that is at the heart of female subjectivity: male power, oppression and violence. The variety of literary forms adopted in *Sottosopra* is nothing but the different ways to overcome the resistance of the historical silence surrounding the women and their oppression. A strategy of self-enunciation that can be even further radicalized.

I. Fairy tale scenery. A forest, a castle, two girls [illegible] bring a fox to the stage. They are surprised by a couple (the woodsman, maybe, and his wife) and immediately afterwards by all the court. The figure of the king is particularly relevant. When the court appears all lights turn on and the wood turns into the interior of a castle. I identify with the fox and the girls. My impression is that there has been a crime and we are waiting for a verdict⁵.

This quote comes from one of the notebooks of Lea Melandri, in which she used to write down her dreams. Its date is the 25th/26th of December 1969. Lea Melandri was not the only Italian feminist devoted to record her own dreams.

⁵ Lea Melandri, 25-26 December 1969, Quaderni di appunti "Sogni", Box 1.1, Folder 3, Lea (Maddalena) Melandri Archive, Fondazione Badaracco, Milano.

Other feminist did the same (Martinelli 1975; Lonzi 1978). Yet, Lea Melandri starts her work on dreams in the middle of the sixties, far before other Italian feminists, and the commitment to dreams as a way to fathom female subjectivity is one of the key elements of her intellectual path.

The radicalization of the autobiographical experience stems from the very material on which Lea Melandri works: her oneiric material. In accordance with the well-known feminist slogan “the personal is political”, choosing dreams to explore the condition of the woman means opting for what is the most personal in the personal and, therefore, the most political in the political. This decision produces a strong shift from the self-narrations of the women office workers previously quoted to Lea Melandri’s autobiographical posture. The former *attempt to speak the unspoken*: the historical violence to which women are subjected. On the contrary, the latter *tries to speak the unspeakable*: the ontological condition of woman’s *womennes* that can only be found in the deep of female dreams. The *ontological turn* thus radicalizes the feminist strategy of self-narration in Italy, but it also shows its proximity to the communist autobiographical injunction and raises similar problems in self-enunciation.

Despite the surface differences between feminist and communist autobiographical act – the former oriented to witness the absolute evil of the male oppression, the latter directed to portray the communist exemplary life – their interior mechanism is the same: the paradoxical injunction I have mentioned earlier. While the communist injunction is “be active”, the feminist variant is “speak the unspeakable”. And, in this case as well as in the communist experience, one has to disobey the rule in order to obey it. If one speaks the unspeakable, the latter is spoken and no longer unspeakable. Consequently, one does not comply with the injunction. If one does not speak the unspeakable, the unspeakable is still unspeakable, but one is not speaking it. Again, one does not comply with the prescription. In short, the subject speaks either too much or too little at all times.

This paradoxical game has real discursive effects. One page in Melandri’s notebooks is dated the 7st of September 1969. The page is blank and we can only read the date. Obviously, Melandri may have written nothing for a lot of different reasons: she forgot it, she had unexpected commitments or not enough

time to transcribe her dreams. Yet, it is also possible to decipher that blank space (Ginzburg 2000, 109-126) differently. It is a clue that it is not possible to overcome the problem of speaking the unspeakable of the female self by means of discourse. It is as if Melandri were suddenly aware that she was speaking too much and the only appropriate expression of the unspeakable was silence, that is the end of any self-narration.

On the contrary, Carla Lonzi, the Italian feminist who “spit” on Hegel (Lonzi 1970), writes her diary *Speak not, no, speak*, in 1978. The book is well over one thousand pages and it is hard to read it from cover to cover. Lonzi’s strategy is opposite to Melandri’s. Lonzi goes on to write since what she writes is never enough to make the unspeakable speak. Even if she writes thousands pages, they are too few in order to express the inexpressible. Lonzi attempts to attain the unspeakable by exhausting all the words that are at her disposal: once all has been told, nothing more can be told. And the unspeakable finally turns into the speakable.

Lonzi’s infinite speech is the upside-down image of Melandri’s silence. They both are the final outcome of the Italian experiment in feminist self-narration. Its greatest intellectual achievement and its ultimate failure.

Conclusions

Both communist and feminist experiences are sources of our contemporary culture of autobiography. The latter is widely known by scholars, the former is studied by a relatively small number of historians committed to the social history of international communism and the use of autobiography within the ranks of communist parties. My primary interest is not in the history of these phenomena in order to piece together their internal transformations and reciprocal interactions. Therefore, I consider Italian communism and feminism and their use of autobiography just as a case study that makes it possible to examine a wider topic, namely the technology of the self and the ways in which the self constitutes itself as a political subject.

From this point of view, why are communist autobiography and feminist self-narration significant? In short, I think that they represent the opposite boundaries of the modern space of self-enunciation. On the one hand,

communist autobiography is not just an element of the contemporary society of control. Rather it is its paradoxical core. One has to give his/her personal details and secrets and recognise that this is necessary in order to have them back as elements of his/her subjectivity. The other – the state, the party and any authorised institution – constitutes the self by making it accountable for what it is. This relation of subjection cannot be broken as the subject can be what it is only through this series of authorised others. Thus, the subject is doomed to an endless childhood (Dal Lago 1982). The communist autobiographical injunction openly asks to recognise self-reflectively the bond of subjection – that is the duty of self-criticism. It is the magnifying mirror that enables us to observe the discursive mechanism at work in the production of documents of the self in and through institutions.

The feminist self-narration challenges the communist autobiographical strategy. It does not allow the other to be in control of the paradoxical injunction. The subject tells its own truth against any institution and especially against the institution of all institutions, that is (male) history. It is as if the self attempted to incorporate the other in order to be completely free. In so doing, however, the subject becomes other to itself and is no longer able to find its truth and the freedom relying on that truth. And its only possibility is to confess either too much or too little.

In conclusion, the feeling underlying communist autobiography (and all institutional documents of the self) is fear – fear of the institutional judgement. On the contrary, the tone of feminist self-narration is both a feeling of defiance towards that continuously receding truth of the self, and a pervasive sense of exhaustion, because of that hopeless search for truth. The borders of the contemporary enunciation of the self are thus, on the one hand, rejection or acceptance of the power of subjection. On the other, fear, defiance and exhaustion. They seem to me good starting points in the attempt to analyse the autobiographical technologies of the self in our present age.

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