

REVIEW ARTICLE

Rewriting the PCI from below: echoes, lives and the making of a communist community

Comunisti a Fidenza. Storia e militanza in un comune dell'Emilia Occidentale (1945–1991)

by Maria Chiara Conti and Marco Minardi, Parma, Monte Università Parma Editore, 2024, xv + 211 pp., €16 (paperback), ISBN 9788878476226

Essere comunisti nel Miranese. Un'autobiografia collettiva (1968–1991)

edited by Alfiero Boschiero, Caselle di Sommacampagna, Cierre Edizioni, 2023, 598 pp., €19 (paperback), ISBN 9788855202275

Biografia politica di un 'intermedio'. Floriano Ventura, comunista bolognese

by Calogero Laneri, Rome, Viella, 2024, 151 pp., €18 (paperback), ISBN 9791254697573

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(Received 6 June 2026 UTC; revised 6 June 2026 UTC; accepted 17 June 2026 UTC)

In the preface to the re-edition of a seminal book by Mauro Boarelli, *La fabbrica del passato. Autobiografie dei militanti comunisti (1945–1956)* (2021), Carlo Ginzburg raised an essential question, which remains relevant today: 'What is a historical source?' He asked this question against the backdrop of the disheartening realisation that too little has been done by Italian political historiography – particularly that which has focused on communism – to move beyond the top-down perspective that Paolo Spriano promoted in a monumental book published more than 50 years ago: *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano* (1973). Indeed, there are only a few exceptions to this dominant trend, and they almost always come from scholars primarily active in the international historiographical debate – particularly the British one. This is the case, for example, of a recent transnational study on the European left by Matt Myers, *The Halted March of the European Left* (2025). In the Italian context, the most influential publication in recent years has undoubtedly been *Il comunismo italiano nella storia del Novecento*, edited by Silvio Pons (2021). It has allowed a new generation of historians

to present innovative ideas and approaches, finally enabling the country's political history to engage with transnational, social, gender and intellectual histories. Nevertheless, there seems to be a general tendency in Italy to rely on conceptual analytical tools and sources that focus – excessively and almost exclusively – on the structural dimensions of the historical narrative of the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI).

In light of these observations, it may be possible and necessary to reformulate Ginzburg's question, asking not just what a historical source is, but also which sources should be considered essential today for advancing the study of communism. A great deal has been said – often brilliantly – about the communist leadership, its role in the history of the Republic and its relationship to the international sphere, partially on the basis of a wide range of memoirs, many of which were written by people in the upper echelons. While these are key perspectives, they are not the only ones. Furthermore, they have often tended to overlook the possibility of reconstructing the party's history as a 'molecular settlement': or, as Mario Isnenghi writes in the preface to Alfiero Boschiero's book, as a 'relational fabric of lives on the move' (p. 9). This shortcoming seems to contradict the very roots of widespread political participation, from which the history of communism in the republican era unfolds. The absence of this perspective necessitates a 'descent' to the horizontal plane, especially at a time when authoritarian tendencies seek to reduce spaces for grassroots democratic participation. This highlights the value of individual stories that contributed to building a sense of community through their work in factories, trade unions and party branches in towns and cities of various sizes, which is now increasingly viewed with nostalgia and regret.

If we were to accept this preliminary analysis, it would become even more necessary and urgent for Italian historiography on the PCI not so much to simply overcome the top-down approach denounced by Boarelli and Ginzburg, but rather to make room for both vertical and horizontal histories – that is, for the stories of both leaders and the rank-and-file members. Moreover, the latter never passively and unquestioningly accepted the full range of ideas developed by the party leadership and disseminated extensively across the peninsula by middle-ranking officials. On the contrary, they often reshaped their implications and meanings through encounters with diverse individuals and communities. Hence, what came from Botteghe Oscure – contrary to a supposed monolithic nature denounced by a politically hostile historiography – was constantly remediated through the education received, the character and the lived experience of the various subjectivities that had always been part of the history of Italian Marxism.

The publications by Maria Chiara Conti and Marco Minardi, Alfiero Boschiero and Calogero Laneri can be considered precisely as an attempt to find a possible and necessary point of convergence between the vertical and horizontal axes of the PCI's history in post-war Italy. Although they draw primarily on local histories, they reveal the diversity of the lived experiences of communist women and men. Hence, a comprehensive analysis of these three works is required to examine the ecosystem of political and personal experiences that characterise communist militancy in greater detail and to gain a broader understanding of the diversity of communist histories. Furthermore, it will enable us to comprehend the variety of sources that can be used to describe them. Unlike Boarelli, who relied on a single large body of sources (militant autobiographies), the four authors and editors under consideration here draw on a wide range of archival sources – and not only such sources – to write a popular history of communism.

In *Comunisti a Fidenza. Storia e militanza in un comune dell'Emilia Occidentale (1945–1991)*, Maria Chiara Conti and Marco Minardi reconstruct the history of the PCI in Fidenza, a town in the western part of the Emilia-Romagna region. It contains four chapters, each of which has its own chronological framework, which essentially corresponds to that commonly used

to describe the PCI's national history. The first section, entitled 'Gli anni della democrazia' (The years of democracy), outlines the development of Togliatti's new party in Fidenza. Party membership figures show that this development was by no means linear. Between 1951 and 1957, the number of members fell from 1,500 to just over 900. It is worth noting that the wealth of archival sources, particularly those concerning the local branches, is used to reconstruct political alliances and administrative activities at the municipal level. However, the authors do not closely examine how international dynamics (for example, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution) may or may not have influenced the fluctuations in these figures, as they do in the subsequent chapters.

In this regard, an effort could have been made to expand the in-depth analysis of purely local dynamics to include broader national and international events and phenomena. A good example of this shortcoming is the description of the changing meaning of the Feste dell'Unità. From the early 1960s onwards, these festivals began to lose their ideological character, as they were attended by a wider group of citizens, thus acquiring a popular appeal capable of transcending political boundaries (p. 33). This transformation was part of a broader national dynamic, as Anna Tonelli has demonstrated in *Falce e Tortello. Storia politica e sociale delle Feste dell'Unità (1945–2011)* (2012), but no reference is made to her publication. This is a significant omission for the potential for dialogue between local and general histories of the same phenomenon across the peninsula.

In the second chapter, the connection between local, national and international history is explored in greater depth, starting with the protests by the local PCI branch against the Vietnam War. The authors effectively demonstrate the impact of international events on local dynamics: for example, in terms of the alliances within the town council and, in particular, its relations with the Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian Socialist Party, PSI) during the period of large-scale mobilisations in the 1960s and 1970s. The authors observe that 'it was no longer a question of affirming the "Italian road to socialism" but of a genuine shift in perspective, triggered by the events in Prague' (p. 54). Based on an analysis of local events that occurred at an early stage, Conti and Minardi's historical reconstruction is therefore useful for understanding more general changes – such as the relationship with Moscow – that would later be adopted by the national executive, when Enrico Berlinguer was general secretary.

The third chapter focuses on the transition between the 1970s and 1980s. It describes decisive changes that took place within the local PCI branch, beginning with the 1976 general election. The PCI's rapprochement with Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy, DC) in those elections seemed to call into question the *conventio ad excludendum*, paving the way for Berlinguer's proposal for a 'historic compromise'. It also had a strong impact on the situation in Fidenza:

[T]he opening up to Catholics and the desire to engage with the younger generations who had perceived the protests ... as an opportunity for change ... altered the nature of activism within the Party, which was now more closely linked to administrative activities. (p. 80)

At the local level, this development reveals one of the factors that would accompany the party on a national scale, until its demise in 1991: the impossibility of resolving the tension between governance and radical change. From that moment onwards, the idea of governing became inevitable at both the local level and – potentially – the national level. In fact, it was later interpreted as the turning point that marked the end of the PCI's historical trajectory, which was influenced by the collapse of real socialism following the events of November 1989.

The authors demonstrate this paradigm shift by quoting key figures such as Ermanno Ghiozzi, who said the following in a meeting in 1978: ‘Decisions within the Party were taken by the “usual experts”, excluding the majority of activists’ (p. 88). Although the book lacks a theoretical approach that could have provided a broader understanding of these trends, the authors repeatedly emphasise elements such as the pursuit of unity ‘at all costs’. According to the sources, this strategy led the PCI to underestimate serious problems such as employment, the gradual disengagement of many from party activism, and the inability to reconcile administrative action with promises of radical social change (p. 95).

The fourth chapter, which precedes an interesting appendix containing quantitative data on the communist experience in Fidenza, outlines how this diversity of positions ultimately spilled over into the transformative transition phase from communism to post-communism. For many, the period spanning from 1989 to 1991 was traumatic and seemed to mark the end of the ‘emotional rupture between the party and the people’ (p. 131), which had already been noted in previous years. The authors have made excellent use of oral sources to reconstruct this transitional phase, which is particularly noteworthy given the scarcity of archival documentation. However, the absence of an oral history theory has exposed the authors to potential memory biases, which tend to arise in oral testimonies precisely because of the existentially destabilising impact of these events. Nevertheless, thanks also to these sources, the authors have managed to bring to light the crux of the matter for the PCI’s local as well as national history: the loss of a sense of community, which had so deeply interwoven personal life and political participation as to become a loss that was difficult to come to terms with.

This last aspect is undoubtedly one of the red threads that connect Conti and Minardi’s book to that edited by Alfiero Boschiero, *Essere comunisti nel Miranese. Un’autobiografia collettiva (1968–1991)*. Adopting a ‘generational’ timeline spanning from 1968 to 1991, it brings together a series of oral testimonies from former communist activists in the Veneto region who held various positions within the PCI. In doing so, it presents what seems to be a genuine communist ethnography of a multifaceted region. The productive and industrial fabric of the Miranese area had given rise to significant participation in the communist cause, thus marking a divergence – albeit a small one – from the DC’s hegemony, which was typical of the region. The evocative introductions by Mario Isnenghi and Boschiero himself, which give a ‘sentimental’ tone to the community’s political engagement even before it achieved any results, are followed by 24 semi-structured interviews, conducted through constant dialogue with the interviewers – often former comrades – that occasionally evoke the format of a ‘life story’.

This choice highlights one of the book’s greatest strengths, vividly conveying its identity and intentions: the indissoluble bond between individuals and the community in an experience that was as much political as it was existential – namely, activism. The author interviewed a wide group of women and men, who present their pre-political motivations for militancy as the starting point for what Giorgio Amendola would have called a ‘life choice’ (Amendola 1976). For these 68ers, adherence to Italian communism was often a response to the need to find an alternative to the two hallmarks of the Veneto region: Catholic activism and Christian solidarity. Indeed, several interviewees had spent part of their lives – usually during their teens – in a Catholic seminary before embracing the socialist cause, including Alfiero Boschiero himself. In his own interview, he recalls – partly through discussions with friends who followed a similar path – how he became aware that ‘the Christian commandment “love thy neighbour” has a political translation: socialism’ (p. 131).

A Catholic upbringing also influenced the ethical dimension that can be traced in communist activism, as well as the way certain political projects were received, such as Berlinguer's proposal to engage with the Catholic masses. The PCI activists in the Mirano area did not see the historic compromise as a betrayal, as did their counterparts in other regions, such as Emilia-Romagna. On the contrary, the proposal – made in the wake of the 1973 coup in Chile – was welcomed as an indispensable opportunity for dialogue with the majority force in the Venetian political landscape. In other words, it was viewed as a unique opportunity to secure a more significant role in the public activities and policies of their region. It is no coincidence that Aldo Moro's assassination constantly emerges in the interviews, alongside Berlinguer's tragic death in 1984, which many interviewees describe as a point of no return in the possibility of pursuing a political project (p. 262). In fact, the interviewers place great emphasis on the consequences of the DC leader's assassination for the communist political body, very often eliciting responses similar to that of Maria Vittoria Perazzo:

It was a terrible thing. I will always remember it ... He was an overbearing presence. Not for us, [but] for them [the DC]. After all, he was the one who talked about 'parallel convergences'. An oxymoron, but he was right. We had already met in the Resistance, (p. 392)

Although this rich collection of testimonies succeeds in bringing to light often divided memories of complex and multifaceted events, there is a potential shortcoming in the way the interviews have been structured: the lack of a systematic attempt to link memories to historical fact. The flow of testimonies is allowed to run its course, especially when it comes to certain events and moments, such as the end of the PCI. The interviewees are never faced with the evidence, even where their memories seem to contradict reality. In this sense, the interviewers seem almost to adopt a passive stance regarding certain parts of these accounts – a problem that could have been addressed by restructuring the interviews or inserting a few intermediate chapters to link these historical memories to historical findings on the topics addressed. However, this passivity vanishes when it comes to questions on the most divisive issues, which also trigger the interviewers' own memories: for example, the insistence on reconstructing the trauma that arose within the PCI in 1989 and the decision to entrust the party's transformation to Occhetto.

Returning to the book's strengths, it is important to highlight its attention to the gender dimension of political activism, with ten women being among the interviewees asked to recount their experiences. The historical reconstruction of their political activism only partially aligns with that of their male counterparts. Although they had very different social backgrounds, almost all of them belonged to the 1968 generation, which meant that they were the first female members of their family to emancipate themselves – especially if they came from patriarchal families tied to the values of conservative Catholicism. Emancipation often took on spontaneous forms, such as participation in student protests during their school years, as in the case of Nicoletta Bellin (pp. 75–76). However, the element that stands out most clearly in the accounts of female communists is linked to the roles they held within the party. In fact, for most of them, it had been difficult – if not impossible – to undertake and successfully complete the *cursus honorum* necessary to advance through the ranks of party officials.

Yet this difficulty was compensated by a greater ease in playing an active role through participation in the local public sphere. The interviews thus highlight how the communist

activism of these women was, essentially, carried out by converting the ethical commitment inherent in their party militancy into their jobs, working environments and positions of political and administrative responsibility, albeit in contexts often far removed from those of the party's internal leadership. Although not uniformly or explicitly, the book also reveals how women behaved differently when dealing with events concerning the PCI's crisis and transformation. Contrary to some of the male testimonies, which tend to emphasise a loss of meaning that, in some cases, paved the way for political disengagement, accounts such as that of Isabella Peretti reveal that many women, even without the party, managed to keep alive the ethical and civic commitment that community had instilled in them. 'After an experience like ours, it is impossible not to continue,' the Venetian activist recalled. Despite the fact that she could no longer simply join new political groups, she was able to continue through other avenues: from the trade union to feminist movements and their activities, such as the Casa internazionale delle donne (p. 415).

Boschiero's book must also be praised for its detailed reconstruction of the upheaval during the final stages of the communist experience: from the internal divisions, both between local branches and between local and provincial sections, to the diverse paths of subsequent activism. Indeed, it provides a vivid picture of the post-communist diaspora. In this sense, it would have been interesting to clarify – through a small number of more specific questions – how those who had been part of that history and tradition regarded not only the decisions to break with the communist past, but also the subsequent convergence towards social-liberal values adopted by those who continued the PCI's legacy from the 1990s onwards. Furthermore, we must emphasise the book's most important feature, which also brings us back to the opening question about the right sources for a popular history of the PCI: its value not only as a piece of research, but also as a source of extraordinary importance in itself. It allows all historians studying the period in question to engage with a heterogeneous body of memories, testimonies and narratives that is not externally focused – but it is precisely this that provides an authentic portrayal of what it meant to be part of the 'body politic' of Italian communism.

In order to faithfully and methodologically reconstruct what militancy service within the PCI meant, it would perhaps be advisable, as I have previously highlighted, not only to bring into dialogue the various stories of the different individuals who served in its ranks, but also, and above all, to connect different types of sources. Similar to Conti and Minardi's attempt to integrate local historical archives with oral testimonies, Calogero Laneri's book takes this a step further: he incorporates personal archives, specifically those of the mid-level party cadre at the centre of the story he recounts. *Biografia politica di un 'intermedio'*. Floriano Ventura, *comunista bolognese* describes the career of Ventura, a communist official whose intense party activities reveal how he came to embrace his militancy as a true mission. This type of activity led many cadres to dedicate themselves entirely to their party, even moving away from home to take on sensitive roles in other regions and political contexts.

The book seems to set itself an objective that is essential to contemporary historiography on communism: to give a voice to that intermediate group of officials who, across the country, carried out the delicate task of acting as a link, or a transmission belt, between the national party leadership and the local rank and file. Hence, what seems to emerge from this book, thanks also to the choice of archival sources, is a sort of micro-history of what it meant to be a communist official. While this is certainly a commendable and innovative project, some doubts remain regarding the choice of subject under examination. Floriano Ventura is indeed a significant figure when viewed within the specific – and, in a sense, unique – context of the province of Bologna, and his voice was undoubtedly important, but it does not seem to resonate strongly or convey a broad universe of

relationships and connections between general and specific historical events – the primary objective of micro-history. In other words, despite its originality, this case study does not seem sufficiently suitable to be included in a recent list of successful experiments in this genre of studies, as was Sergio Luzzatto's *Giù in mezzo agli uomini. Vita e morte di Guido Rossa* (2021).

The very structure and rhythm of Laneri's text reflect some of these shortcomings. The first two chapters, which focus on Ventura's encounter with politics and his experience as a communist political commissar in Reggio Calabria during the uprisings of 1970, are highly interesting. Drawing on personal experience, they reveal the party's national ability to recruit officials who could fulfil roles of responsibility with great competence and insight, even in local and crisis contexts that differed greatly from those in which they had been trained. Laneri's writing style in these opening sections has a rhythm that immerses the reader in the historical narrative, making us aware of the significance of Ventura's work. This is clearly also possible thanks to the scale of the historical events that engulfed the Calabrian city, which were of extreme importance even for the national political context, allowing Laneri to brilliantly highlight the relationship between the grand historical narrative of the republican era and the micro-histories of some of its protagonists, who have all too often been forgotten.

However, this ability seems to wane precisely when the book shifts its attention to Ventura's return to Casalecchio di Reno. In the third and fourth chapters, the civil servant's story ends up intertwining with a local context and activity that lack the intensity of the major events that occurred in Calabria. The chapters often seem to become bogged down in the overly technical accounts of the urban and public administration of the town of which Ventura became mayor. This is not to say that the historical reconstruction lacks originality and importance, particularly where it deals with the process of urban modernisation, which happened precisely when Ventura was mayor. However, the almost 'heroic' tone of his biography – as described thus far – seems to disappear, causing the pace of reading to slow down. I cannot say whether this was a deliberate choice on the part of the author, perhaps determined by the sources at his disposal, or whether it simply reflects a snapshot of a transitional period, between the era of mass mobilisations and the 'developmentalist' phase of the 1980s. Indeed, Ventura's choices as an administrator can be interpreted in this light, as they partly reflect the tensions of a broader debate within the party regarding the meaning modernity was to hold for the PCI at that point in history. This thread also seems to run through the recollection of his reformist stance by Sergio Sabattini in 1994, to commemorate his passing: 'For Floriano, socialism was composed of the sum of "stones", co-operators, artisans and workers' (p. 101).

The final chapter is devoted to the delicate transition from the PCI to the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democratic Party of the Left, PDS), a period that also coincided with the last years of Ventura's life. This section offers important food for thought on how the transition from communism to post-communism in Italy – and particularly in a region such as Emilia-Romagna – also entailed the restructuring of a fabric of co-operation and assistance, especially in the areas that had been administered by 'red councils' for decades. Ventura played a key role in this project through his involvement in Coop Costruzioni. The latter did not simply deal with buildings, but with places that were part of a sentimental geography to which communist militants had always referred when trying to find their place in the world. Laneri writes the following about this last, important assignment: 'Floriano's work thus touches "the heart of the community". "You had to go and touch the very core of the comrades. There were still people in the world who had built these places"' (p. 124). This chapter, which is followed by a wonderful photographic appendix documenting Ventura's work, among other things, also lays excellent foundations for possible future

research. Building on the findings presented here, it would be interesting to further explore the extent to which the demise of the party and the communist tradition affected the whole network of local structures. These structures were, in fact, forced to rethink their activities, often in line with market demands, no longer needing to navigate the constraints of a symbolic heritage that, until then, had guaranteed their activities both support and basic legitimacy.

On Ventura's death, the mayor who succeeded him, Collina, spoke of the passing of a 'pioneering figure' (p. 127), an image that perhaps reflects the most important aspect of this book: that the lives defined by communist militancy were always liminal lives, capable of moving – as Ventura did – through spaces of crisis and creativity, whose dialectic imbues history itself with meaning. Like the other two books discussed in this review article, Laneri's book also fulfils the important task of giving a voice to those experiences of communist militancy. They do so not merely by examining their origins, but also their end. In other words, what remains when everything that gave personal and communal lives meaning for decades seems to vanish with the end of those 'horizons of expectation' – to use Reinhart Koselleck's words (2002, 2004) – that were at the heart of this community's political identity.

In conclusion, these three books seem to reflect an increasing tendency to expand not only the scope of research into the history of Italian communism, but also the methodology and sources employed in such research. Much remains to be done to ensure that Italian political historiography – not only in relation to the PCI – permanently overcomes any reluctance to engage with other disciplines and approaches. In this sense, the books by Conti and Minardi, Boschiero and Laneri can serve as a source of inspiration. Although they focus on specific local contexts, they provide a solid basis for a broader examination of the history of Italian communists. Those who study the political trajectory of Italian communism in the twentieth century from a universal perspective should no longer view the use of local and personal archives and oral sources with suspicion, as has all too often been the case in the past. In fact, this would mean focusing on structural aspects that are certainly important but that no longer seem sufficient to answer questions about the social and cultural, as well as political and party-related, experiences of those who lived in and with the PCI – questions that our own era imposes on us. The question of what has been lost through the passive replacement of community solidarity with individual hedonism – a consequence of the now contested neoliberal hegemony – is of primary importance, also because it was embraced by certain heirs to the Italian communist tradition. At the end of Conti and Minardi's book, the Fidenza-based communist Vittorio Saccani makes the following observation about this shift:

If I had to find a word to describe what my activism left me ... I would say a sense of community ... I had to get to a comrade's house just outside Fidenza, and I had to cross a *snow-covered* country lane. The comrade knew I would bring the early morning edition of *L'Unità* with me and got up very early to clear the snow. When I arrived, a coffee and a grappa were waiting for me on the kitchen table. You see, that's all gone now, and perhaps all of us lost something. (p. 133)

Historians are now urgently called upon to preserve at least the history of what has been lost – namely, a way of being a party and a community. They must also feel committed to reconstructing a true macro-history of micro-histories, such as those offered by these three books. If this does not happen, any top-down historical reconstruction of political structures and institutions will remain hollow, echoing the silent voices of those who

inhabited them with their humanity, until the moment they chose, or were allowed, to speak out.

Translated by Andrea Hajek

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Cite this article: Martino, M. 2026. 'Rewriting the PCI from below: echoes, lives and the making of a communist community.' *Modern Italy*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2026.10150>