

expected—to create their own identities. Because class boundaries are less rigid than caste ones, individuals are expected to move across them as if they were no boundaries at all. The more society assumes the appearance of a *continuum* rather than a *discrete*, the greater is the gap between social mobility as a norm; and its availability in practice. This contradiction harps upon individual consciousness and is anxiously overcompensated in cultural practices—from language to furniture, from music to the uses of urban space and the spatial metaphors of social structure.

For each boundary that is blurred or ironed out, new ones arise or old ones are revived; for each new boundary across an old continuum, a distinction is abolished elsewhere. But the rules regulating the new boundaries which divide the world are more elusive than the old ones. They are made and re-made elsewhere, and they change too fast for people to keep up with them. Social mobility and cultural change, then, are not to be seen as a transitional process from one identity to another, but as a permanent condition. Working-class people race to adaptation and assimilation much as Achilles raced the mythical turtle: no matter how fast they run, they never catch up. As that ubiquitous blues line puts it, they keep stumbling, but have no place to fall.

Uchronic Dreams: Working-Class Memory and Possible Worlds*

There are always several contradictory trains of events happening. There are always several contradictory histories of what has happened. And one of them is only more real than the others because more people, or animals, or plants, or rocks, or machines, believe that it is the real one. All same things suppress the memory and recognition of all the trains-of-events except one. But not all persons or things remember and recognize the same train-of-events. That's the difficulty. Most of the persons and things accept the same events and conditions most of the time, but all do not accept them all the time.

Raphael Aloysius LaFerty
The Three Armageddons of Emryscothy Sweeney

If it had been me, if I'd been the father, I wouldn't have allowed him to die, up there hanging on that cross.

Maddalena, textile worker
Terri, Italy

THE MEANINGS OF UCHRONIA

This essay is about a type of imaginary tales which I propose to call "uchronic." Uchronia has been defined in science-fiction criticism as "that amazing theme in which the author imagines what would

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have happened if a certain historical event had not taken place', or as the representation of 'an alternative present, a sort of parallel universe in which the different unfolding of a historical event had radically altered the universe as we know it.' The word itself is coined after "utopia," replacing the Greek *topos* (place) with *chronos* (time): utopia is a nowhere place, *uchronia* a "nowhen" event.¹

While both definitions refer to science-fiction novels, I will try to show how similar tales are found in oral historical narratives. I will discuss mostly oral testimonies collected in the 1970s from old-time Communist activists in Terni, an industrial town in Umbria, central Italy. These stories often emphasize, not how history went, but how it *could*, or *should* have gone, focusing on possibility rather than actuality. They offer glimpses of favored alternatives which their narrators believe might have resulted if appropriate leadership had caused specific events between 1919 and 1925, and again between 1943 and 1953, to occur differently. They contrast the existing world against a desirable world, and claim that, only by accident, their hopes and dreams were detailed.

My first encounter with—and discovery of—*uchronia* in oral history occurred in a 1973 interview with Alfredo Filippini, a former factory worker, tramway driver, coal merchant, and local secretary of the Communist party during fascism and military commander of the partisan brigade "Antonio Gramsci" in 1943–44.² I had asked him the usual question: "During the Resistance, did you have in mind only national liberation, or were you also hoping for something more?" This was his reply:

Well, we thought of national liberation from fascism, and, after that, there was the hope of achieving socialism, which we haven't achieved yet. At that time, with the partisan struggle, we should almost have made it. After the partisan war was over—Terni was liberated eleven months earlier than the rest of the country—Comrade Togliatti spoke to us. He called a meeting of all the partisan commanders and party leaders from every province and region of Italy. He made a speech. He said there was going to be an election. "You have prestige, Omega," (that was my party name. Gramsci himself had named me that way. My partisan name, instead, was "Pasquale"). "The reason I asked you to come is, you must get to work for us to win the election." Four or five others spoke, and they agreed. I raised my hand: "Comrade Togliatti, I disagree." "Why, Omega?" "I disagree because, as Lenin said,

'when the thrush flies by, then it's the time to shoot it. If you don't shoot when it flies by, you may never get another chance.' Today the thrush is flying by: all the Fascist chiefs are in hiding and running away, in Terni as well as everywhere else." All the others said it was the same in their parts, too. "So, this is the moment. Weapons . . . no need to talk about it, we know where they are" (we had hidden them). "This is the time: we strike, and make socialism." He put his motion and mine up for a vote, and his got four votes more than mine and was passed. But they got the warning; they had to admit I was right, later. [Umberto] Terracini and [Luigi] Longo [two national leaders] were there when I was speaking—I stood here talking, and they were sitting there in front of me, ten feet from me. When I spoke, they got up and said they agreed. Togliatti disagreed, but he learned his lesson, because he had seventy-six votes and I had seventy-two.

This confrontation between Filippini and Palmiro Togliatti, postwar Communist party secretary, never took place. Filippini was giving here his imaginary version of a crucial event in the history of the Italian Communist movement: the so-called *svolta di Salerno* the political "U-turn" in which Togliatti (just returned from his exile in Russia) announced to the party cadre at a meeting in Salerno that socialism was not on the immediate agenda, and that the party should cooperate with anti-Fascist forces toward the creation of a Western-style democratic (and "progressive") republic. Reactions to this announcement ranged from opposition to incredulity, and old-time activists still debate whether Togliatti's line was correct.

In this story, Filippini suggested that history might have been different if another road had been taken. The shape of the tale depends on personal and collective factors. Filippini was old and ill when he was interviewed, and died shortly thereafter; he had long been removed from active party leadership, against his will and following a dramatic confrontation. As the conversation went on, the epic and detailed (though factually inaccurate) style he had used in the beginning to describe his partisan experience gradually broke down, and he slid deeper and deeper into fantasy and fabrication. First, he claimed a central role in the founding convention of the Communist party at Livorno in 1921, which he actually did not even attend. Then, he told a detailed story of how he escaped from prison with the party's founder, Antonio Gramsci, and hid with him

for months in the mountains—which also never happened. Finally, he ended his story with the imaginary confrontation with Togliatti.*

It was as though, as the weariness of age and illness and the fatigue of the long interview eroded his conscious controls, the censorship of rationality gave way to dreams and desires long buried into the subconscious in a process much reminiscent of an open-eyed dream. This dream gave vent to the personal desires and frustrations of the narrator. Although he had devoted most of his life to the party, Filippini felt he had never been properly rewarded and recognized. Thus, he placed himself in imagination at the very center of the party's history and at the side of its "founding father," from whom he claimed to have received, in a sort of baptismal investiture, his party name and his political identity.⁴

But there is more than a personal frustration to this story. Filippini also voiced a collective sense of disappointment in the shape which history took after the great hopes aroused by liberation from fascism.

A 1947 report of the Terni Communist federation says: "Among the rank-and-file, there is a widespread disappointment

"Filippini was expelled from the party in 1949. According to some witnesses, his ambition played a role in his conflict with the new party leadership; also, his fighting partisan mentality was considered unfit for the postwar political climate. When he was expelled, according to Mario Filippini (no relation) "there was a sense of loss, like at the death of an important person." Communardo Tobia remembers him on the barricades in the 1953 strike: "he was beside me and I didn't look him in the face." Filippini was later quietly readmitted, but never given any responsibility.

The name "Omega" was used in the 1920s not by Filippini, but by the party's regional secretary, Filippo Innamorati; by appropriating the name, Filippini also appropriates Innamorati's historical leadership role.

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), one of the major Western Marxist thinkers, is usually referred to as the founder of the Communist party. Although he was one of movers of the Communist separation from the Socialist party (Livorno, 1921), Gramsci did not become party secretary until 1924. He was arrested by Fascist authorities in 1927; released on parole because of his health conditions in 1937; he died shortly afterward. During the Resistance, many brigades, including the one active in the Terni area, were named after him.

Palmiro Togliatti (1893-1964) became secretary of the Communist party while in exile in Moscow in the 1930s (his compromises with Stalinism have been the object of much controversy in Italy recently). In the postwar years, he shaped the Italian Communist party and formulated the theory of "national roads" to socialism.

for the way in which democracy has evolved so far. It must be recognized that we have relied too much on institutional and legal action, waiting for solutions from above, and have not given the workers enough responsibility in solving their own problems."³ Stories of disappointed expectations caused by the restoration of class relationships in the factories and in the state are common in the generation of the 1940s. As the desire and hope for revolution and socialism were removed from the party's agenda and eliminated from open discussion, they were gradually buried deeper and deeper into the activists' memories and imaginations, to re-emerge in fantasy, dream, and folklore. Filippini's "wrong" tale was less the result of imperfect recollection than, ironically, of a creative imagination. It was the narrative shape of the dream of a different personal life and a different collective history.

Such stories do crop up occasionally in different parts of the country. A construction worker from Subiaco in Latium used to tell a story about himself that is very much like Filippini's. An artisan from the San Lorenzo neighbourhood in Rome also described a confrontation between himself and Togliatti (or Togliatti's "representative," as he put it sometimes). Diname Colesanti, niece of the Terni anti-Fascist exile Giovanni Mattioli, also talks about a "quarrel" between him and Togliatti about the Salerno line: "Had Togliatti followed Giovanni's advice, things would have been different." Sometimes, such conflicts did not happen only in memory and imagination: in Calabria, local party cadre refused to believe the party documents describing the new line, and thought they must have been forged by "provocateurs."⁴

Two other aspects enhance the meaning of Filippini's story. One is the structural relationship of the episodes about Togliatti and Gramsci. Stories about Gramsci are even more common than stories about Togliatti, which is understandable given the former's "founder" status. Most stories about Gramsci mythically associate the speaker and the place where the story is told with the founding hero's presence; as such, they have much in common with stories about the other national founding hero, Garibaldi. Most stories about Togliatti, on the other hand, tend to differentiate the speaker from him. As founder, Gramsci represents the ideal reasons at the roots of the party's identity; Togliatti is remembered most as a shrewd, "realistic" political tactician. Therefore, Gramsci's role in folk versions of history is to reinforce identification with the party's origins; Togliatti's, sometimes, is to express disappointment with its historical action. Filippini's testimony is a thorough example of this process.

The second aspect of his tale is the presence of a material correlative to the post-liberation stories: the practice (mentioned by Filippini and widespread in the 1940s) of hiding away the weapons used in the Resistance, expecting to take them out again sooner or later for the revolution (or, as some speakers say, to defend democracy against expected attacks of reaction). Arms were found hidden in the factories of Terni as late as 1949; and one informant told me he had kept his until the 1970s. The preservation of arms meant that the job begun with the anti-Fascist Resistance had been left unfinished and would have to be completed someday. In a way, the revolutionary desire buried in the subconscious of activists like Filippini is another hidden weapon, left to rust unused.

This feeling was bound, on the other hand, to come to terms with the personal and collective need to survive, to rebuild, and to defend and expand the limited but concrete gains of the postwar years, within the existing framework. Revolution or not, life has to go on. As the party leadership declared that revolution and socialism were out of the question and increasingly identified itself and the class it represented with the values and the machinery of Italian democracy, it became increasingly difficult to express—or even to entertain—the frustrated hopes and desires. The result was a deep-seated conflict between the rationality of the world as given and the dream of another possible world.

Filippini managed to voice this conflict in a more recognizable form because his personal disappointment coincided with his view of history, and, most of all, because in many ways he embodied the relationship between the political vanguard consciousness and the folk roots of working-class culture. Born in Valnerina, the mountainous backyard of Terni's steelworks, he was always more at ease with dialect than with the standard Italian of political parlance (although his sixth-grade education made him one of the best-schooled Communist activists in the underground generation). He was a tolerable player of the *organetto*, the small accordion which dominates folk music and folk dancing in his region. Filippini's description of how he was fired from his tramway job is patterned after a folk tale.* The advice to "seize the time" in the post-

* "After I had been working [at the tramways] for several years, Mussolini wrote a letter to the manager and told him: 'Within five days you must fire the famous Communist chief Filippini Alfredo and send word to me about it.' The manager sent for me, read the letter, and said: 'I don't have the

liberation period was couched in a proverb about hunting, a very popular sport in Umbria: "When the thrush flies by, then it's the time to shoot it." Like other working-class activists who justify their politics with proverbs and folk songs, Filippini attributes his proverb to Lenin, in an attempt to reconcile his class-conscious folk wisdom with the theoretical prestige of the founding heroes of the Communist movement.⁵

WHEN HISTORY WENT WRONG

The cluster of stories about the missing revolution of the 1940s are not an isolated instance. The motif of "history could have gone differently" is found in narratives dealing with all the major crises of working-class history, both local and national. Many stories concern the period between the end of World War I and the advent of fascism. Describing the cost-of-living strikes of 1919, Arnaldo Lippi says "The leaders of those struggles had no authority on the working class; we didn't have the true class that the Communist party created later, in spite of all its shortcomings. If there had been a Communist party then, there would have been a revolution."

The 1920 sit-ins in the factories are one of most commonly cited unseized opportunities. According to Remo Righetti, "We should have gone on to the insurrection, I mean, because this is what we had in mind—we're going to make a revolution, we used to say then. But the union leaders had other ideas in mind, they weren't going to make any revolution." Gildo Bartoletti reiterates: "The Socialist party had 157 members of Parliament; power should have been in hands of the Socialists. But [Socialist Secretary Filippo] Turati wouldn't take the responsibility. He should have taken power, but wasn't man enough."⁹

When Giacomo Matteotti, a Socialist member of Parliament, was murdered by Fascist killers in 1924, the regime suffered its first (and last) serious crisis. "The Fascists," says Arnaldo Lippi, "were

heart to fire you.' After ten days or less, there comes another letter from Mussolini: 'I have heard that Filippini is still employed. If you don't fire him within three days, I'll fire him myself, and you'll be fired too.' He sent for me, and said, 'What must I do?' 'What can you do,' said I. 'Go ahead and fire me.' " The archetype is the story of Snow White, with Mussolini as the evil Stepmother Queen, and the manager as the hunter who is supposed to kill the princess but is reluctant to do it.

scared. But we had no leaders. The Communist party was still weak, and the leaders who had a following among the people—[Claudio] Treves, Turati—were all in exile abroad; ours were all in jail. If we had had the right leaders then, maybe fascism wouldn't have lasted twenty years." Lippi's facts are wrong: during the Matteotti crisis, Socialist leaders Turati and Treves were still in Italy, and Gramsci had not yet been arrested. But the political analysis is serious: at that all-important moment, the working class had no leadership.

Stories about the 1920s explain the missing revolution by citing lack of leadership, thus blaming the Socialists from whom the Communist party split in 1921. But the history of the 1940s cannot be "justified" by the lack of a legitimate Communist leadership. Therefore, uchronic tales focus on specific events and individual decisions, reiterating one motif—"they told us to keep calm"—to describe the implicit contrast between the "political," tactical approach of the leadership and the state of mind of the rank-and-file. But the meaning is the same: at one point (which varies with each narrator), history went needlessly wrong.

In a typical uchronic statement, Settimio Piemonti associates two major crises of the decade—the day of Italy's separate peace with the Allies in 1943, and the attempted murder of Palmiro Togliatti in 1949: "I still can't believe 8 September [1943]: that day, we could have picked hairs from the Germans' asses one by one; there was nothing we couldn't have done. Instead—be calm, be calm, be calm . . . Just the same as when Togliatti was shot: calm, calm, calm . . . And the cops at the arms depot had already handed their guns over to us . . ."

The construction-worker and folk-singer Amerigo Matteucci (mayor of a hill village near Terni) improvised *stornelli* on the national reconciliation and amnesty to the Fascists as promoted by Togliatti which, thirty years later, he still saw as a mistake, which prevented the revolution:

Caro compagno te lo voglio dire
l'errore fu la gente perdonare
l'errore fu la gente perdonare
E condannato sia il traditore
se bene vòl ave' all' umanitàne
se bene vòl ave' all' umanitàne
Scusate amici mia se sto a sbagliare
io sono sempre alla rivoluzione
io sono sempre alla rivoluzione.

[Dear comrade, I want to tell you that it was a mistake to forgive those people: traitors must be condemned, for the good of mankind. Forgive me friends, if I'm wrong; but I am still for the revolution]

"The next day [after Togliatti was shot], Matteucci muses "he began to speak, to say a few words, and he always recommended the same thing—calm down, calm down, calm down . . . But I think it was a moment when . . . I may be wrong, but at the moment I think all our problems could have been solved." The wounding of Palmiro Togliatti is only one of the many stories about the unsized chance which could have generated an alternative history. Other episodes include the police killing of the Terni steelworker Luigi Trastulli in 1949 and the firing of three thousand Terni steel workers in 1953. Califero Canali recalls that, after Trastulli's death, "the people, the workers, were ready to do something, but were held back by—by our leaders, because . . . it was like after Togliatti was shot. If it had been for the rank-and-file, it looked like revolution would break out any moment." According to Antonio Antonelli, "On the third night of street fighting [after the 1953 layoffs] all the people were ready, with gasoline tanks and other stuff, to wipe the cops out. But they promised they would hire two hundred men back, and things calmed down after these promises. But the workers weren't ready to give up the fight. What the workers said was, 'All our jobs back or let's fight, our jobs back or let's fight.' After things ended that way, the working class lost faith, and never gained it back, because they were disappointed."

Another narrator, recorded in 1973 (whose name I withheld to protect his identity), told a dramatic uchronic story, which was later substantially confirmed by other narrators:

The night after the layoffs were announced, we took a stand. "Tomorrow morning, we said, 'we're going to do an action in the factory. We're going to kill fifty of the bosses.' We were all set, all our minds made up and everything. We had filed iron bars to a point, real sharp. But the unions called us in. "Look," they said, "things are looking good. The struggle is won. You're ruining everything. Don't do anything rash . . ." So we had to give it up. I mean, fifteen of us might still be in jail today, but I still believe that if that morning we had cut down . . . I mean, we wouldn't have had to stop at fifty, we'd make it a hundred, once we got going, it wouldn't make any difference. And once you had a hundred dead bosses in

there—I guess things would have been different. Perhaps after they'd buried those fifty, sixty bosses, they would have gone on and fired the workers anyway. But at least there would have been fifty vacant jobs. I admit it might have been the wrong thing to do; but I am still convinced that they would have re-opened the gates to all the two thousand.

These stories show the role of uchronia as one possible narrative expression of the refusal of the existing order of reality. The uchronic form allows the narrator to "transcend" reality as given and to refuse to be identified and satisfied with the existing order. Through uchronia, these speakers said that the most desirable of possible worlds (which to them was still identified with communism) could be created someday, if the right chances are seized. And the old textile worker with the appropriate name of Madalena carried uchronia to a further and more radical point when she said that, had she been God (had God been a woman . . .), the most crucial event in our history might also have gone differently. And who knows what the world would be.

POSSIBILITY AND DESIRE

We could dismiss these stories saying that there are at least ten times as many stories that go in the opposite direction: stories that deny that history ever went wrong and claim that not only did it go the only possible way it could have gone, but that this outcome was also a just and satisfactory one. But the relevance of an imaginary motif cannot be measured on statistical grounds alone.

For one thing, we must consider the quality of the narrators. Among the sources of the stories discussed here are a high proportion of activists who held places of responsibility and prestige in the party, unions, and local governments. These stories are not the mumbblings of isolated and disgruntled old men, but a rationalization of their past by individuals who were the backbone of the working-class and Communist movement in Terni for three generations.

Also, we must consider the place of the motif within each individual life story. In almost every case, the uchronic turn is placed so as to coincide with the peak of the narrator's personal life, with the moment where each of them played the most important role or was, at least, most actively involved as a participant. Paradoxically,

the "inaccurate" motif tends to be linked with the best-remembered historical episode as though the "wrongness" of history became most evident when seen at the closest range.

Finally, we may take a hint from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. "I have been frequently asked, when a slave," he says, "if I had a kind master, and do not remember ever to have given a negative answer; nor did I, in pursuing this course, consider myself as uttering what was absolutely false; for I always measured the kindness of my master by the standard of kindness set up among slaveholders around us."⁷ A negative judgment on the slave's condition was not only dangerous to utter, but also difficult to conceive: the slave would have had to evaluate the master on a scale other than that of the existing order, a scale which not all were strong or imaginative enough to envision. Also in less dramatic situations, the voicing of a critical view of one's own experience against the prevailing interpretations of history runs against outer and inner sanctions. It takes a much higher emotional investment to admit to oneself that things are wrong, than it takes to consent to conventional truths. Doubt and dissent can only surface when they possess a high degree of intensity; and then, those who express them are often also partly speaking for the majority who dare not admit their doubts even to themselves.

Yet, the common sense of history does say that this is the only possible and the only desirable world. Against hypothetical, conflictive stories like Filippini's, stands the running argument: there could have been no revolution in Italy in the 1940s, because the Allies would not have allowed it—look what happened to Greece. "They would have blown us like bagpipes," says Califero Canali. As we have seen, in another context, Canali also tells a uchronic story of his own: the same speakers who say that history went wrong at the crucial moment of *their* lives, accept the common sense of the inevitability (and justness) of history in other respects. The conflict, in fact, is not between irreducible rebels and passive conformists, but runs within each individual in ever-changing shapes and terms.

The inner, personal nature of the conflict is paralleled by the frequent narrative contrast between the party—bearer of reason and knowledge—and the instinctive, angry rebelliousness of the masses. Arnaldo Lippi says, "We were nothing but fighters. We were not armed with the politics of knowledge; we wanted a fight, which the party knew we couldn't sustain, being too few." Lippi makes a spontaneous distinction between *us* and *the party*: and *the party*, not "us," is right. Though the speaker meant to under-

line his allegiance to the party, somehow the subjectivity of desire smoulders under the objectivity of reason and clamors for recognition. How do we reconcile the fact that we know that the party was right, with the fact that we irrefragably feel that history has been wrong?

THE MYTH OF INEVITABLE PROGRESS

In order to deal with this contradiction, rank-and-file narrators must deal with the image of history which they have absorbed in school and which the party itself has reinforced—a linear process of growth and progress toward some desirable end. "History, don't you see, marches toward liberty," says a song by Silvano Spinetti, a Communist farm worker from Genzano. This vision was articulated by the elites in order to legitimize their role and strategy; it was subscribed to by the Socialist and then the Communist leaderships in order to raise hope in the rank-and-file, and again to legitimize their own leadership. If history is directed either by providential guidance or by the lights of reason and objective socio-economic forces, then the existing state of things is only a necessary stage in a process both inevitable and desirable. While uchronia claims that history has gone wrong (has been *made* to go wrong), the common-sense view of history amounts to claiming that history *cannot* go wrong—and implies that what is *real* is also *good*. History tailors the desirable to the given: as Russell Kirk once said (*approxos* the conservative mind . . .), "the test of a statesman is his cognizance of the real tendency of Providential social forces."⁸

Togliatti's *storia di Salerno* is a case in point. Though it may very well have been, in itself, quite wise, this choice retains legendary overtones because it is described as *both* a free choice and an enforced one—the result, at the same time, of Togliatti's subjective wisdom (his concept of the "mass party" and the intuition of the "Italian road to Socialism") and of objective circumstances (the Allies) which allowed no other course. The historian Claudio Pavone has noted that "Togliatti often presented as successful initiatives actions that which were, in fact, only defensive moves," and "his was to be among his more lasting contributions to the party's mentality."⁹ The practice of representing setbacks and defeats as vic-tories was often used in the 1970s, especially during the "historical compromise" and "national unity" phase of the 1970s, when the Communist party seemed to be approaching state power in partner-

ship with the conservative Christian Democrat party. When workers' rights that had been hailed as historical conquests a few years earlier were jeopardized, Luciano Lama, secretary of the left-wing unions, described them as undesirable "barrels of ashes" to be left behind on the road of power and modernization. Enrico Berlinguer, Communist party secretary, masterfully tailored the "desirable" to the "possible" when he said that "a Leftist government would not be a good solution for Italian democracy at this time" because it might tempt conservative forces to a *coup*. Both Lama and Berlinguer would, clearly, have preferred to preserve the union rights and to achieve a Leftist government; but, rather than admit that they lacked the power to make these things possible, they chose to claim that they were *undesirable*: pretending that factory councils were destroyed and the Left kept out of power, not because the party and the union could not help it, but because they chose not to.

In the 1970s, as the Communist party increasingly tried to identify itself as a "responsible," "acceptable" political force, it began to take responsibility not only for the future but also for the past. All the historical events preceding (and, implicitly, leading up to) the imminent accession to power were now to be seen as positively good even if the Communist party had originally opposed them. Thus, Berlinguer described NATO—once fiercely opposed by the party—no longer as a vehicle of imperialistic hegemony but as a "guarantee" of Italian national independence.¹⁰ (Incidentally, the Communist party was never allowed access to state power; but the ideological price paid in the attempt remained.)

This approach was reproduced at the local level. While all Terni workers describe the 1953 layoffs as a major and lasting defeat, the local historian and Communist party Senator Raffaele Rossi described them in the 1970s as an almost unadulterated good:

The great layoffs of 1952-53, and the struggles that followed (in various forms, including grave street fights, a state of siege, the use of firearms, barricades, many wounded and hurt) preserved and increased the unity of social and political forces (the all-parties Terri Committee), promoted research and ideas on the relationship of state-owned industries to regional economy, and hastened a deep reorganization of the factory which prevented its closure and changed it, for the first time, from war to peace production.¹¹

This description (which literally puts what happened to the workers in parenthesis, and credits the layoffs with a sequence of positive verbs—"preserved," "increased," "hastened," and "prevented" . . .) has hardly more factual credibility than Filippini's utchronic dream.¹² But it squares with the need to imagine a progressive history leading up to the cooperative "historical compromise" (anticipated by instances of cooperation between what used to be described as antagonistic forces: the "all-parties" committee).

This version of history is so far from the direct experience of the majority of the population that it takes no hold on rank-and-file imagination; but the process functions more effectively when it deals with distant events on a national scale, which individual narrators have little opportunity to verify against their own first-hand experiences. The encounter between the imagination of the historical compromise and the folk imagination of the rank-and-file creates utopian visions of a triumphant present. "All our struggles did serve a purpose," said Alfeo Paganelli, a factory worker, "because the working class has prevailed, and they [the ruling class] have been forced to give in. They may rule in the House or in the Senate, up there; but down here, inside Italy, they don't. If they want to rule, they must apologize to Berlinguer and place him on the chair, the first one, where the crown used to be once. Now it's gone. There's a hammer-and-sickle in its place now, and nothing else."

This vision has much in common with Filippini's stories about Gramsci. The speaker establishes a relationship between himself and the political hero by pointing out that "our" struggles helped enthrone him; he thus manages to give meaning not only to party history but to his personal history as well. If the past is to justify the present, a life of struggle can found self-esteem and personal identity only if these struggles are described as a success. The need to claim something for oneself, to defend one's own dignity and historical presence, is often at the root of a "consensus" version of history: by saying that history was "good," we claim that we have made something of ourselves.

On the other hand, however, each time I asked old activists whether their present lives correspond to what they struggled for, the answers were reluctant and dubious. "No, it doesn't because all of our leaders own their own houses, and I'm still renting," says Agamante Androsiani. "We might still lose everything we have," said Arnaldo Lippi, who was living very scantily after holding important offices in the city government for twenty years: "Today, I have a small pension, just enough to buy me and my old woman a

piece of bread, so we don't have to beg. But it could happen yet," because the ruling classes, he says, will always try to take back what they were forced to give.

Personal experience, then, both reinforces and limits the affirmative view of history. On the one hand, it prompts narrators to insist on the usefulness and success of their lives, by stressing the positive aspects of reality. On the other, it forces them to come to terms with the deferral or cancellation of their ultimate goals, with the limited and precarious nature of actual gains, and with the personal sense of discontent and loss of meaning.

The affirmative discourse is sanctioned by the political leadership and by the power establishment; it is available, ready-made, and articulated. The discourse of negation, on the other hand, must piece itself together from scratch every time, and is burdened by the fear of disapproval and isolation. "I'm sorry, comrades, if I'm talking wrong," apologizes a defiant and timid Amerigo Matteucci, "but I'm still for the revolution."

Therefore, the conflict between the affirmative and negative impulse often results in silence, passivity, and assent without participation—"a passive, often merely formal agreement with the party line, a tendency to delegate to others, which prevents dissent from coming to the fore," as a panel of national leaders put it in 1977.¹³ The discourse of negation is distorted, buried, deviated, and allowed to emerge only between the lines, as dream, metaphor, lapses, digression, error, denegation, and uchronia—all forms which give vent to the narrators' feelings and yet control the tension by means of the formal organization of discourse.

WHO MAKES HISTORY

The means of control embedded in the narrative correspond to two major motifs: the "wrong turn" of history is traced to a single agent, and the blame is laid to errors or failures of the leadership.

The latter motif is frequently found also in New Left historiography, where it is used to support the image of a revolutionary working class regularly betrayed by reformist and "revisionist" leaders.¹⁴ Uchronic tales, while apparently taking the same approach, in fact perform an opposite function. Blaming the "wrongness" of history on "our" side means, for one thing, that it is still our side that makes history. It is the same frame of mind which inspired the Pueblo myth which attributes the creation of white

men to Indian black magic, or the black nationalist myth in which the white race is invented by the mad black scientist Yacub.¹⁵

These myths reinforce the group's sense of its central role in history, and suggest that if the group had power to generate the evil powers it also has power to eliminate them: "if Indian magic has created white people, an Indian ceremony will control them."¹⁶ "If natural disasters were caused by something he had done," says Matt Witt about a Navajo Indian, "then there was hope: perhaps he could prevent future calamities by not making those mistakes again."¹⁷

Likewise, the function of the uchronic motif is to keep up hope. If our past leaders missed their chance to "shoot when the thrush was flying by," better leaders in the future won't. The world of our desires is possible: we needn't even change the magic but only work it more correctly, and perhaps replace a few magicians at the top.

The leadership plays, in uchronic tales, a role similar to that of mediators in Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural interpretation of myths: two-faced creatures that hold together conflicting but equally necessary presuppositions. In this case, the contradiction—we, the makers of history, must be right, and yet history is wrong—is explained through the agency of individuals who are *with* us and stand *for* us (in the party, which they represent) but are not of us (not members of the working class in terms of status, power, education, language, life-style, and sometimes income: as Androsciani says, *we* rent, *they* own). The ambivalent, internal/external position of the leadership keeps it all in the family, and yet saves the family from guilt and blame. Allegiance to the party was not based (as outside critics often claimed) on a mythic faith in its infallibility, but rather on the ability to shift its failures to the sphere of myth.

This is where the factual inaccuracy of most uchronic tales becomes relevant again. * If Italy did not become socialist after World War II it was for reasons quite removed from the fact that Togliatti's

¹⁵ I say "most" because there is one event to which the "hypothetic" approach to history might be applicable. The Fascist march on Rome of twenty-eight October 1922 might have easily been stopped "if" the King and the government had used the army against Mussolini. Perhaps history *would* have been different. No narrator, however, uses this event as the start of a uchronic chain: the failure must be on "our" side, not the King's. Incidentally, uchronic versions of history are found also among the Fascists.

line overcame Filippini's (imaginary) opposition; and the triumph of fascism after World War I was not caused by Turati's hesitancy in seizing a power which was never within his reach.¹⁸ The uchronic motif removed the presence of social and political adversaries. It reduced complex historical processes to single events, and complex situations to yes-or-no dilemmas. Thus, it saved the narrators' self-esteem and their sense of their own past, but made it much more difficult to evaluate the party's actual role in those crises and its long-term identity, culture, and strategy. Everything was brought back to the merely tactical plane.

The consequences can be seen at both the levels of everyday politics and political imagination. Most rank-and-file reactions to the historical-compromise policy tended to be couched in tactical terms. "We gave them too much leeway, and were punished in the election" (Veniero Moroli); "Berlinguer offered the Christian Democrats an alliance because he knew they would never take it, and then the blame would be on them" (Amerigo Matteucci); "Look, Berlinguer is no liar. He did it to race faster to our goal" (Dante Bartolini).

But the historical compromise was much more than a tactical move. It was a symptom and a cause of deep changes in the identity, class composition, and political role of the Communist party. This process marginalized many old-time activists, whose identity was so tightly knitted to the party that, while they hurt personally, yet they recoiled from acknowledging what it meant politically. Tactical criticism allowed them to voice their discontent, and yet remove its deeper and most disturbing sources.

The primacy of tactics goes hand-in-hand with an image of history as a series of discrete "turning points," crises, and crucial moments, which dreams of the revolution as a single, traumatic, and violent confrontation, rather than as a slow and deep process of social change. Though all these narrators dreamed of a new world, they were all but incapable of imagining it. They concentrated on the revolutionary seizure of power, but were extremely vague when asked to describe what kind of society they expected afterward. The closest they would come up with was a reference to the Soviet Union—that is, to another existing world. No wonder that, when in

Mario Sassi, an unreconstructed supporter of Mussolini, told a story meant to prove that Italy would have won World War II had not Enrico Fermi and other nuclear scientist defected to the other side.

the 1980s the world of existing socialism collapsed, the party's identity was shaken to its foundations.

The uchronic imagination, thus, reveals the inability of a significant part of the traditional Communist rank-and-file to acknowledge that basic aspects of the structure and theory of the Communist party (and thus of their own identity) may have contributed to the "wrongness" of history. It also reveals that, for many of these activists, it was too painful and difficult to admit—and even to imagine—that the party was becoming something quite other from what they had known and lived for. On the other hand, the uchronic imagination also reveals the failure of official history to explain the existential experience of a majority of the rank-and-file. Uchronia, thus, saves the precious awareness of the injustice of the existing world, but supplies the means of resignation and reconciliation. While it fans the flames of discontent by uncovering the contradiction of reality and desire, it helps to keep this contradiction from breaking out as an open conflict.

The Best Garbage Man in Town: Life and Times of Valèro Peppoloni, Worker*

To add interpretation [to the spoken word] which would convey the right meaning is something which would require—what? An art so high and fine and difficult that no possessor of it would ever be allowed to waste it on interviews.

Mark Twain, *Letters*
Edited by A. B. Payne

They would teach us even if you were gonna be a garbage man, you be the best garbage man you can be. This is what we were taught. If you can't learn to do anything but haul garbage, you be the best garbage man you can be.

Willetta Lee
Hartan County, Kentucky

REPRESENTATIVE STORIES

A question which is frequently raised in discussions of the biographical approach and of oral history concerns the relationship between individual documents and trans-individual realities. I would like to approach this question by analyzing how a single life story relates to broader and shared patterns of culture, and how the common, shared elements relate to what makes this story both representative and unique.

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