The period from 1968 to 1970, in so many respects a social and political watershed throughout Europe, marked the emergence of a women’s movement in Italy. The Italian movement was patterned initially on the model of the American and, to a lesser extent, the British, French, and West German women’s movements. However, feminism in Italy was always conditioned by its development in a country with a long and vigorous tradition of left-wing politics, a militant mass workers’ movement, and Communist and Socialist parties which, together, regularly won over a third of the votes cast in national elections. Furthermore, Italian feminism did not emerge in an intellectual or ideological vacuum. The “women’s question,” as we shall see, had been a key issue of debate in socialist circles throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. With the founding of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in 1892 and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1921, it came to occupy a more or less permanent — if not always central — place in Marxist discourse. Nevertheless, when radical feminism developed in Italy in the late 1960s...
and early 1970s, it was in angry counterposition, not only to the Italian society, the Catholic church and other traditional forces of Italian society, but also to the Socialist Party, the trade unions, and particularly the massive PCI, the largest non-ruling communist party in the world.

Why the feminists were so critical of the Communists' handling of the women's question is the subject of this article. It also focuses on the process through which the PCI was transformed as it came to terms with a feminist critique of its theory and practice. The confrontation and partial accommodation between Communists and feminists which occurred in Italy in this period provides some revealing indicators of interest to anyone concerned with reconciling Marxist and feminist perspectives. This is not simply because the variant of feminism that developed in Italy offered as radical a critique of society as any feminist movement in the world. It is also because the Italian Communist Party, with its hegemonic strategy, is committed to forging links with precisely the kind of "new social movement" that Italian feminism represents. Therefore, in terms of its implications for any future effort to link socialism with feminism, it is important to assess the degree of success that Italian Communists and feminists attained in communicating to each other their respective analyses of society and their visions of a new order.

The Uneasy Alliance of Women's and Workers' Movements

The struggle for women's rights, like other social movements of the nineteenth century, made a delayed appearance in Italy. Given the backward political, social and economic structures that characterized Italy in the latter half of the century, it is not surprising that early Italian feminism should be a history of borrowed ideas, and that the seminal writings should be translations from English or French.1 The absence of a thoroughgoing bourgeois revolution meant that democratic institutions were anything but well entrenched. The influence of the Catholic church — severely restricting women to the roles of wife and mother — was not tempered or restrained by a strong central state. But perhaps the most significant factor accounting for the late emergence of the "women's question" in political life was the slow pace of the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy. For no sooner had the early stages of industrial development in Italy drawn women out of their homes, off the farms, and into the textile mills, than the precondition for mobilization was established and the first organized women's groups appeared in the form of leagues for the protection of women workers.2

Because it was the super-exploited condition of women as workers, rather than their oppression in the family or in society, that first drew women into militant activity, the earliest women's struggles were closely tied to the organized workers' movement. At the turn of the century this meant involvement with the PSI, which presented itself as the partito dei lavoratori and was prepared also to serve as a partito delle lavoratrici, that is, to address the reality of an emergent female labor force. From its founding, the Socialist Party determined to bring women workers under its wing (although not into full membership in the party), if only to neutralize the threat that women supposedly represented as a source of unorganized, unpolticized, cheap labour.

The first lively discussions on the questione femminile took place among the Socialists in the 1890s and were framed, for the most part, in strictly economistic terms. Tensions emerged which have remained central to the relationship between feminism and the Left up to the present time. Women's rights movements found their first home in alliance with the workers' movement or as an integral part of it. But under these circumstances only demands expressed in "workerist" (operaista) terms were accepted as legitimate. The workers' party was very slow to take up demands such as women's suffrage that grew out of a broader analysis of women's oppression. Female leaders such as Anna Maria Mozzoni, who offered a more organic (and therefore more radical) analysis of women's condition, were systematically excluded from real power or influence within the party. Issues that did not relate directly to women in the workplace were labelled as "bourgeois concerns," and indeed, the preoccupation with these issues by bourgeois liberal political forces was seized upon by operaista leadership as proof of their illegitimacy. Again and again women who wanted the party to tackle the social and political aspects of "the women's problem" were accused of racing ahead of the workers and taking up positions too advanced for their consciousness.2 Within the party, radical women found their concerns belittled and themselves ineffectual. Outside the party, they were even more isolated and out of contact with the masses.4 Thus, while the Italian Socialists can truthfully claim that "the women's question" has been a part of their platform from the earliest days of the party, it has always been a highly problematic aspect of the party program.

The PSI position on women remained substantially unaltered in the period following World War I. The massive entry of women into the industrial labour force during the war years was viewed by the party as justification enough for continued focus on the economic
aspects of the women’s question. But apart from seeing women enter
the factories — especially the munitions factories — in record
numbers, the war years also witnessed the emergence of women in
mass street demonstrations for peace and for bread. Notwithstanding
this new type of activism, the PSI line on women remained fixed
on work. And it was this understanding of the women’s question
that shaped the views of those Socialists who, in 1921, broke with
the PSI to form the Communist Party.

The Communist Party and the “Women’s Question”
The formation of the Communist Party in the inter-war period
breathed new life into the women’s movement, thanks in large part
to the importance given to problems of culture by Antonio Gramsci.
Immediately following the break with the PSI, the Italian Com-
munists took up the questione femminile, and from the start it was
placed high on the agenda as one of the “great unresolved national
questions,” all of which were understood as stemming from the in-
complete nature of the democratic bourgeois revolution.5

In the Communists’ theoretical elaborations, women’s emancipa-
tion was understood essentially as economic independence to be at-
tained with the coming of socialism. Communist doctrine explicitly
denied the possibility of a “contradiction” between the sexes,
recognizing only the exploitation of proletarians of both sexes by
the capitalist class.6 As with the Socialists, therefore, the emphasis
for the Communists was still on women as workers, and for both
theoretical and practical organizational reasons they made little or
no attempt to address the non-working woman or to bring her into
the party fold. However, for all the focus on workers and women,
Gramsci did persuade a leading female comrade to explore the im-
lications of culture and customs in the life of women, and in 1921
the Tribuna delle Donne became a regular feature of the Communist
weekly, l’Ordine Nuovo. In this column Camilla Ravera took up the
problems of contraception, abortion, the burden of housework, and
even the commodification of marriage — all extremely advanced
themes for that era. The most radical aspects of the Soviet experience
were also discussed in these pages along with the implications of
socialism for the transformation of the traditional family.7

For the Communists, of course, the theoretical debate on the
women’s question was cut short by the rise of fascism. Not only were
the PCI and the PSI outlawed and the trade-union movement
smashed, but women suffered a loss of juridical status from which
they would not recover for another fifty years. Fascist legislation
pushed women out of the workplace and out of the schools, and ex-
plicitly excluded them from a variety of civic and political activities.
In 1927, women’s salaries were reduced to half those of men. From
1928 they could no longer serve as administrators in secondary schools
or universities. From 1933 they were excluded from civil service ex-
aminations. By the mid-1930s, girls were obliged to pay higher school
fees than boys. In 1936, fascist law made abortion a “crime against
the race.” The limited suffrage granted to women under fascism
became a dead letter when, from 1926 onward, administrative elec-
tions were eliminated.8

Fascist doctrine celebrated womanhood, but only with respect to
women’s reproductive capacity. Feminità was understood as mater-
nity, sacrifice and the rejection of all involvement in social life.
Mussolini instructed Italian women to “have children, many children,
numbers are power!” and medals were awarded to ideal fascist
women — those who had fulfilled their sacred patriotic duty by pro-
ducing a large number of offspring. Any venture by women outside
of the prescribed role of wife and mother was portrayed as threatening
the very foundation of society. And this essentially misogynous
message was transmitted through various fascist mass organizations
created by Mussolini for both women and girls. The “Women Fas-
cists,” “Young Fascists,” and “Little Fascists” groups were designed
by the Mussolini regime. But they were promoted by bourgeois
Catholic women’s organizations working closely with local Catholic
priests.9

Given the meaning of fascism for women, the anti-fascist struggle
waged throughout northern Italy during the long years of Mussolini’s
rule — and particularly the armed resistance after 1943 — became,
by implication, a struggle for the restoration and expansion of
women’s rights. If fascism had restricted women to a narrow, passive,
limited existence as baby-makers, the anti-fascist democratic front
created a new and active model for women. The “Women Fas-
cists,” “Young Fascists,” and “Little Fascists” groups were designed
by the Mussolini regime. But they were promoted by bourgeois
Catholic women’s organizations working closely with local Catholic
priests.9

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against the fascist armies, the role of women in the Resistance was essentially one of aid and service. However, the centrality of women's contributions to the partisan struggle reinforced their claim that the condition of women be pushed as a key issue in post-war legislation. 10

In still another way, the end of fascism gave momentum to the mobilization of women — above all by the PCI. Among many other lessons provided to the Communists by their experience with fascism was that non-working women, those shut away in the private sphere of home and family, had provided a base of support — albeit passive — to the fascist mass organizations. Noting the capacity of fascism to draw housewives into mass associations, and the success of the church in turning bourgeois feminist movements to reactionary purposes, the Communists were determined that non-working women would never again be written off, abandoned to the manipulation of the priests and the appeals of reaction. But how could they be involved in political activity? How could they become part of the "associative life" that was the key to the PCI's challenge to Catholic hegemony of civil society? To do this it was essential to move beyond operaista formulations directed exclusively towards working women or working mothers, and to develop instead a more complex line on the condition of women. To begin with, it was necessary to broaden the conception of the "women's question" to focus on women in the home — women as wives, mothers and housewives. Since in the immediate post-war period only a small fraction of all Italian women were part of the paid labour force, new ways had to be developed to reach women outside the workplace. 11 Above all, women had to be drawn into mass organizations. Where possible this meant recruitment into active membership in the party. But for women who were not yet "ready" or who eschewed membership in a political party, for Catholic women and for Socialists and other women already enrolled in political parties, the Italian Women's Union (Unione Donne Italiane, or UDI) was founded by veterans of the Gruppi di Difesa. 12

From the start, UDI's activities were an extension of the wartime initiatives of the Gruppi di Difesa, being, above all, efforts for the reconstruction of the country: aiding veterans, orphans, and abandoned children; feeding the hungry; and housing the homeless. The Gruppi di Difesa had included among its 70,000 or so partisans, non-aligned Catholic women and even some members of the Christian Democratic Party (DC). With their links to the Vatican and their demonstrated electoral strength, the Christian Democrats emerged in the post-war period as the largest party in Italy and a prime target for the Communists' alliance efforts. But during the Cold War breakup of the wartime coalition, Catholic women — with a few notable exceptions — withdrew from UDI to form the Centro Italiano Femminile (CIF), the Christian Democratic women's organization. Socialists, some members of minor parties, and independents remained in UDI, but although UDI as a mass organization was designed for "all democratic women," it was hegemonized from the start by the Communists. 13 And indeed, UDI's real function — the one that was to shape its activities over the next twenty years — was to be a "flanking" organization of the PCI. The significance of such organizations for the party has been summarized as follows by Maooukian:

Flanking organizations carry the influence of the party into sectors or zones of society into which partisan/political organizations cannot reach or present themselves directly. . . . These organizations carry aspirations, interests and sentiments which are pre-political. . . . or at least pre-partisan. They enlarge the party's sphere of influence. . . . and serve as a "school" for political formation for pre-political, pre-partisan citizens. . . . Flanking organizations extend the social base of the party and serve as a reservoir of cadres, resources and pre-partisan consent. 14

In its capacity as a flanking organization, UDI pursued a series of activities, all closely tied to the major mobilizing thrusts of PCI policy in the post-war period: UDI mobilized women for peace, for nuclear disarmament, and against the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. UDI supported the broader Communist-led struggles for land reform, for guarantees to agricultural wage workers, for workers' rights, and against speculation and cost-of-living increases. UDI adherence to the Popular Front (1947-48) was enthusiastic, with the organization going so far as to renounce its own name and independent personality to become, briefly, the Alleanza Femminile, "a dependent association of the parties of the left" — a loss of identity and autonomy for which a great deal of self-criticism would later be registered. 15 But the clear loss of identity in the Popular Front period was only the first of what would become chronic crises over the problem of organizational autonomy. As a flanking organization UDI was created in order to attract masses of non-Communist women. To do so, it was crucial that UDI be perceived as independent of PCI control. But as we shall see, this goal proved very difficult to attain.

From the beginning it was Palmiro Togliatti, Secretary of the Communist Party since the 1930s, who pushed for UDI, supported the organization, and defended it from its many detractors both inside.
and outside the party. To promote a serious attitude toward UDI, he saw to it that l’Unità, the party daily, gave coverage of every UDI activity and initiative. Indeed, UDI was often provided space at PCI headquarters and sections, as if to suggest that all Communist Party members regarded UDI’s work with respect even if, in reality, they were often bewildered by its existence, when not downright hostile. Every account of the early years of UDI stresses Togliatti’s concern for the organization and notes how often he rebuked its leaders for their inability to think of themselves in more active and independent terms. Urging greater autonomy of action and thought on the UDI leadership and greater attention to women’s specific demands on both the leadership and activists, Togliatti constantly stressed that UDI was not a party and therefore had to develop a more flexible organizational structure attractive to a more diverse range of women. Togliatti was committed to the notion of a genuine interparty organism: pluralist in nature, massive in membership, and capable of promoting the PCI’s policy of alliance by making a sincere appeal to Catholic women. Thus, for example, in an effort to attract more non-Communist women, not only did UDI avoid the issues of birth control, divorce and abortion, but Noi Donne, UDI’s magazine and main mobilizing instrument, focussed mostly on problems like education and childrearing, leaving the battles against speculation in the food sector — an issue with consumer protection overtones today, but a “class issue” thirty years ago — to be pursued in the pages of l’Unità or in Avanti, the daily organ of the PSI.

By 1950, UDI had reached its peak membership of over one million women. But its central dilemma remained. If UDI was not to be a branch of the party, what could it be? As a flanking organization its responsibility was to educate non-Communists and draw them into the sphere of influence of the PCI. But what were its activities to be? How could it distinguish itself from the women’s cells of the Communist Party? There was real confusion for UDI, as for other flanking organizations of this period, as to what “political space” — to use the Italian term — such an associated group might occupy. In the Cold War period of retrenchment and defensiveness the PCI tended to fall back on reflexive patterns of organization and ideology. In this context the mass movement aspects of the Communists’ vision — as well as those departures within the party’s structure from a hard-line class model of organization — were all operating on uncertain terrain. This was true not only for a flanking organization like UDI, but it was true as well for the women’s cells of the PCI.

The party cell, normally organized on either a geographical or workplace basis, was the basic unit of the PCI since its founding. However, contrary to the logic of this organizational structure, separate cells were formed for women until a party statute required in 1962 that all cells be integrated, except in unusual circumstances. In fact, through much of this period the women’s cells existed on paper only. And while they accounted for 25 per cent (numbering 14,043 altogether) of all party cells in the 1950s at the height of the party’s expansion, they had dropped to only 13 per cent (4,536) by 1962-63. Later, in the 1970s, the women’s cells would be resuscitated as part of the party’s response to the challenge of feminism. Furthermore, long-dormant commissioni femminili (at the level of the party federation) were also revitalized, even in cases where the only functionary available to serve as responsabile femminile was a male comrade. However, the problem of a purpose for these units within the party organization remained, and UDI’s efforts to distinguish itself from the commissioni femminili and women’s cells of the party were hampered by the fact that the PCI women’s units themselves were unclear regarding their role. No one seemed certain whether the women’s cells of the PCI should take up only women’s issues or serve rather as a training ground for women to learn about and debate general issues of concern to the party.

As for UDI, other than planting itself firmly on the side of the workers and the popular masses in every situation, no specific guidelines were available. As one leading Communist woman noted about this period (i.e., the 1950s and early 1960s): “in those years UDI did not know how to differentiate its action from that of the parties of the left.” Another wrote in Rinascita, the PCI weekly: “It is undeniable that in certain confusion exists between the activity of the Communist Party and that of UDI: too often this organization has been inclined to develop initiatives analogous to those of the parties instead of developing its own line on women’s emancipation.” It was not so much that a party line would be elaborated within the PCI, which the female comrades would then be obliged to push within UDI. Rather the problem was that the socialization of these women as Communist militants was so complete that they were hard pressed to elaborate a line of thought or analysis on any problem that differed significantly from that already developed by the PCI on the same issue. Such was the world-view of the Communist UDI leaders — in almost every case, women who had already led long and distinguished political careers inside the party — that it was difficult for them to suggest a line more original or specific than the “women’s aspect” of the general workers’ struggles led by the PCI. And as for UDI’s success in extending the
sphere of influence of the PCI or PSI, the few reliable statistics available indicate that membership in UDI trailed far behind the total number of women enrolled in the PCI and PSI, and behind even the female membership of the PCI alone. Furthermore, the geographical area in which UDI showed numerical strength was precisely the same zone in which the PCI was strongest: the so-called "red belt" of Tuscany and Emilia Romagna in central Italy.

**Theoretical Problems of the Questione Femminile**

With the creation of UDI, the Communists had hoped to implement a rather tidy division of labour. The party would continue to appeal to more politicized proletarian women, giving top priority to questions of women in the workplace, while UDI, with its more heterogeneous membership, would address broader issues of concern to all categories of "popular women." As we have seen, even in organizational terms this division of labour presented serious practical problems both to the party and to its flanking organization. However, just as serious for both PCI and UDI women was the theoretical confusion surrounding the Communists' formulations on the women's question.

Several inherently contradictory elements created theoretical and practical difficulties for the Communists in their efforts to elaborate a genuinely progressive line during the difficult years of the Cold War. There were, for example, contradictions between the PCI's stress on the significance of women's work outside the home and the party's support for women's traditional role in the family by its assignment of all issues concerning the family to the commissari femminili. Since the problems of children, health and welfare were posed by the Communists under the rubric of the questione femminile, this tended to reinforce the notion that women's primary concerns lay in the domestic sphere and inevitably involved children. Yet this concept did not square with the idea that emancipation for women could come only with their entry into the productive process. Nor did it square with the PCI's eagerness to see the "insertion" of women into political and social life.

Similarly, while Togliatti vigorously defended women's roles outside the home, we find the Communists — in a position forced on them by attacks from the right — seeking to outdo the Catholics in their commitment to the family as the central unit of Italian society. In this regard, Togliatti often pointed to the fact that the Soviet family had not disappeared but rather had retained its importance during the period of transition to socialism in which great sacrifices were required of the people; the family made these sacrifices easier to bear. As in the Catholic tradition, then, the family was regarded by the PCI as the natural cell of society and a place of refuge against the harsh reality of life in the outside (i.e., the collective) world. Indeed, the family was posed as the key element in the reconstruction of post-war Italian society. As the concept was elaborated by the Communists in these years, the family would not only be preserved, but would become a unit of political activity mediating between the individual and society as a whole.

To be sure, the Communists recognized many of the problems faced by women in the home and they were prepared to examine, criticize and fight for legislation to correct the imbalance of rights and duties of men and women in their family roles. Furthermore, they fought to have the social function of housework, along with maternity, recognized and rewarded with social security benefits and pensions for housewives. However, the Communists attributed the inferior status of women in the family to the economic and civil backwardness of Italy. Rarely did they examine, let alone directly attack, the family as an institution. Nor was women's oppression in the family attributed "to the essential features of the family... which were also determined by capitalism and characterized by elements common to all systems based on the exploitation of one person by another. The Communists did not lay blame for either "direct or indirect exploitation on the man nor did they suggest that a woman need rebel against exploitation at the hands of an individual male oppressor." There was virtually no mention in Communist literature of the direct subordination of the woman to her husband. When such reference appeared it was always with regard to the rural areas of Italy or to the South, as part of the "southern question." And when discussing the abuse of women in the South or in rural backwaters, the Communists always emphasized the social roots of the problem.

Thus, the solution to women's oppression in the home was to be found, not in a more equitable division of household tasks between men and women, nor in the alteration of the superordinate-subordinate character of traditional male-female relationships. In the short run, the Communists proposed the application of technology and the socialization of household services. They envisioned popular housing with communal kitchens, laundries, and baths, along with the sports fields, common meeting rooms and day care centres that inevitably figured as part of the communist model of the ideal workers' community. In the long run, the transition to socialism would resolve the problems of housework along with other defects of the family under capitalism.
In summary, the Communists' efforts to draw women into full participation in political life undermined the traditional figure of la donna-casa e chiesa, that is, the woman who moves only between home and church. But it did not alter substantially internal relations within the family. In the face of the violent anti-Communist campaign waged against the party, the PCI “ended up on the defensive, accepting backward customs rather than presenting itself as a stimulus for the development of more advanced conceptions.” This did not happen because Communist leaders were loath to meddle in the “private sphere” of members' lives. Ironically, the PCI was always preoccupied with the personal life of party militants, but only to recommend conduct that would be above reproach and that would serve as evidence of the sobriety and high moral character of Communist Party members. True to this model is the working-class militant: impressively “serious” in his tie, jacket, and pocket handkerchief, and more bourgeois than a true piccolo borghese in his relationship to his wife and children. Unfortunately this development represents not a deformation, but an elaboration of the model for “personal comportment” suggested to the militant by his party.

Finally, and probably most important, insofar as the Communists understood women’s emancipation as inducing women to participate in the social and political life of the country, it basically did not matter to the party what the issue might be, as long as women could be drawn into it. The issue did not have to touch on women’s specific problems, as long as they participated — preferably massively — in the general mobilization. Once involved, connections could be made, however tenuously, between women and the issue at stake. Understandably, this approach gave rise to some formulations that were often questionable, sometimes ludicrous and, unfortunately, at times even retrogressive:

Women were called upon to struggle alongside the workers’ movement for general objectives and not specifically female objectives: they must struggle for peace, for the well-being of all, for democracy, for children, for the family. The effort to find a link between these struggles and particular interests of women often had highly questionable results: appeals were made to the maternal spirit of women, to their “natural” characteristics of the female soul, in this way falling, more or less unconsciously into an exaltation of the feminine role as understood in the most traditional sense.

The Feminist Critique of the Communists

By the late 1960s these contradictory elements made the PCI the focus of deeply felt resentment on the part of women both inside the party and in the newly emergent student and extra-parliamentary Left. As a radical leftist alternative developed in this period of labour struggles and spontaneous student movements, new groups defining themselves as “socialist” or “Marxist” worked to challenge the authoritarian organization of capitalist society in the workplace, the schools and universities, the media, the state bureaucracy, and in social and political institutions of every kind, including the labour unions and the parties of the “historic Left” — the PCI and PSI. One of the most intense areas of debate concerned the PCI’s (and to a lesser extent the PSI’s) relationship to women. Both female Communist militants and New Left feminists expressed dissatisfaction with the PCI’s handling of the questione femminile. These women took issue with the theory — or lack of theoretical clarity — that underlay the Communist view of women’s role. But they also noted and attacked what they regarded as the sexist practice to which this theory gave rise. Thus criticism was articulated on various levels and was only in part directed at the party’s line on women. More broadly it became a critique of the whole traditional leftist way of conducting politics.

Problematic Conceptualizations

On the most general level of analysis, the new feminist movement represented a challenge to the Communists' tendency to accept a division of life into public and private spheres. Feminists asserted that this conceptualization grew out of the Communists’ failure to analyze the family, and the party’s resulting inclination to accept bourgeois norms as a model for all Italian society. Above all, feminists labelled as hypocritical the PCI’s struggle for public, juridical equality for women accompanied, as it was, by an acceptance of a private, or “personal” domain of inequality.

Feminists also scored the PCI’s unwillingness or inability to acknowledge the specific nature of women’s problems. While the Communists had, from the start, pushed vigorously for “tutelage laws” (i.e., legislation geared to protect women workers), some feminists viewed these safeguards as paternalistic and ultimately damaging to women’s occupational aspirations. The real issue — for the feminists — was that women are oppressed in terms of their gender as well as their class and that the Communists’ line on the questione femminile failed to comprehend the specific oppression of women as women.

Closely related to the problem of recognition of the specificity of women’s issues was another problem of definition. Here there was more confusion among the feminists themselves. Some felt that the
Communists erred in assigning women's problems to the list of superstructural concerns — those belonging to the realm of custom, culture and morality. Others felt that the women's question was indeed superstructural rather than structural. But these feminists asserted that the PCI's failure to define women's problems as "specific" led the party to present inaccurately issues like divorce and abortion as civil rights struggles linked to many other efforts to modernize, rationalize and secularize a creaking, backward, over-centralized state. Instead, these feminists argued that access to divorce and abortion should be seen and struggled for as a means for women to gain control over their own productive and reproductive capacity.

Problematic Strategy and Tactics

The feminist critique of Communist theory was, quite naturally, linked to a critical analysis of party strategy and the tactical decisions and choices to which that strategy gave rise. For, in this same period in which the women's movement was growing, the PCI increasingly embraced the "historic compromise" (compromesso storico) strategy. The historic compromise was geared primarily to a rapprochement with the ruling Christian Democratic Party which had held power without interruption since World War II. The Communists' commitment to this rapprochement forced the party to move slowly and cautiously on issues that might prove offensive to the Church or to moderate public opinion. Given the Communists' concern to open the way to governing in some form of coalition with the Christian Democrats, the feminist movement appeared disruptive. It focused on themes, ranging from women's control over their sexuality and reproductive functions to the distribution of power in the family, which could easily be perceived as accentuating societal cleavages and therefore jeopardizing the party's policy of social recomposition. Moreover, since religious divisions cut across the PCI, much of whose membership and leadership did not subscribe to anticlerical values, the feminist movement's positions could be seen as damaging to internal party unity.

Under the circumstances, the PCI was hesitant in its support for the transformations pushed by the women's movement. For their part, feminists, together with virtually all other political forces to the left of the PCI, argued that the PCI's gradualist approach — marked by efforts to gain the "maximum expression" of all sections of the Italian Constitution that are "compatible with elements of socialism" — prevented the Communists from taking clear and progressive positions on changes essential for the renovation of society.

This shortcoming was particularly evident in the PCI's reluctance to broach either the divorce or abortion issues until forced to do so by the successful mobilization around these themes carried out by the feminists and by the libertarian Radical Party.

The abortion issue provides a clear example of the limitations of the PCI's approach, and the objections raised by feminists to the Communists' "timid reformism." As in the case of divorce legislation, the Communists side-stepped the issue as long as possible, convinced that the Catholic masses were firmly opposed to legalizing abortion and that the party would lose support if it took a position in favor of enabling legislation. However, once the Constitutional Court moved in 1975 to abrogate the fascist legislation that criminalized abortion, the Communists, along with the other parties represented in parliament, were forced to act to fill the legislative vacuum that remained. While the Christian Democrats flatly opposed abortion under any circumstances, the feminists pressured for legislation that would provide free abortion on demand in public hospitals and clinics, available to any woman of any age or civil status who wished to terminate a pregnancy. The PCI made its customary attempt to bridge the chasm between the conservative Catholic stance of the Christian Democrats and the increasingly militant, articulate, and well-organized forces rallied by the feminist movement. To do this, the party sought a middle position, coming forward with a moderate legislative proposal for legalized abortion. The Communists — citing their long-term commitment to free comprehensive health care — proposed that abortion be available without charge. However, ignoring the feminists' arguments for "absolute self-determination" (that is, women's complete control over their own bodies) the PCI's proposal required, in the case of women over sixteen, the consent of a committee of two medical doctors and a social worker, and in the case of minors, the consent of a parent or legal guardian as well as the "committee of experts." In either case, according to the Communist proposal, abortion could only be performed if the committee could establish that the pregnant woman's life or health were endangered. As one observer wrote:

the Communist Party . . . did not abandon the attempt to consolidate the relationship with the Christian Democrats even on the substantive content of the abortion bill. The Communists therefore insisted on restricting women's "right to choose" in accordance with principles they deemed to be generally acceptable to the Catholic masses.

Apart from the tendency always to seek a middle course, from the point of view of feminists, another problem of the PCI strategy...
was that it led all too naturally into political tactics that feminists viewed as bankrupt. The standard gradualist approach of the Communists called for grosse battaglie (great struggles), resulting in piccoli passi in avanti (incremental improvements). In concrete terms, the gradualist approach translated into step-by-step campaigns which worked as follows. First, public information meetings and general propagandistic efforts would be scheduled to highlight or focus attention on a newly perceived issue, beginning with the party faithful and moving out to address “other democratic forces” which could be mobilized in support of the projected reforms. Next, legislative proposals would be put forward, usually in alliance with “other progressive or popular democratic” elements in parliament. These proposals would normally be modified to gain consensus within the alliance. Then a “great victory” for the watered-down version of the originally moderate proposal would be proclaimed amid firm assertions that “the law, while not perfect, is better than the fascist legislation which existed previously.” Finally, a massive mobilization campaign would be mounted to press for the implementation of the new progressive legislation by a sclerotic and corrupt state administration controlled by the Christian Democrats.

In essence, the feminist attack on PCI tactical procedures became a critique of the whole traditional leftist way of doing politics within a framework of wheeling, dealing and compromise with the Christian Democrats. It was also a protest against the party’s propensity to take up or drop women’s issues according to electoral or alliance exigencies. And the charge of opportunist manipulation (strumentalizzazione) was expressed by younger women twice over; it was not only with respect to women’s problems that the PCI was sometimes inclined toward short-term concern for immediate tactical gains, but also with respect to the recently discovered “crisis of youth” in Italian society. In general all of these criticisms could be subsumed under the broad challenge, not just by feminists, but by many New Left groups, to the principle of delegazione, meaning the acceptance of the mediation of the political party between the individual and the state, and the acceptance of the role of the party in establishing priorities for struggle and in setting an agenda and timetable for specific political battles.

Sexist Practice
Yet perhaps the harshest and most telling neo-feminist criticism of the PCI was directed not at the shortcomings of the party’s theoretical formulations, strategy or tactics, but at the treatment accorded to women militants within the party. In essence, feminists argued that the Communist Party hierarchy and organization perfectly reproduced the superordinate-subordinate male-female model characteristic of the rest of society. Although it has a higher level of female representation and participation than any of the other major parties in Italy, it is easy enough to document the disproportionately small number of women in leadership roles at all levels within the PCI structure. Also clear at a glance is the under-representation of women in the party press, both in the daily organ of the party, l’Unita, and in the weekly journal of analysis, Rinascita. “The same can be said,” wrote Communist militant Carla Ravaioli, “of all the major cultural occasions of the PCI, be they congresses, public meetings, seminars on whatever subject: women’s presence is very rare, if not nonexistent.” Significantly, those few women who serve as functionaries in the party organization are normally responsible for the commissioni femminili, or they take charge of the committees dealing with health, social welfare, and other nurturing concerns. Correspondingly, the small number of women who appear regularly in the party press are called upon to write on women’s issues rather than on general questions.

However, beyond the under-representation of women and their point of view at all levels of the party, and beyond the fact that most women listed by the party as “functionaries” serve as “technical functionaries” (i.e., secretaries) rather than “political functionaries,” it is the actual treatment frequently accorded these female comrades that condemns the party in the eyes of women both inside and outside the PCI. The female staff in party headquarters and sections are often exploited by male comrades, presuming upon the women’s good nature and political commitment, in a fashion that surpasses some of the abuses known to secretaries in the private business sector. The fact that many feminists had abandoned extraparliamentary groups for the same reason — the fact that they felt exploited by male comrades who expected women to take responsibility for all the non-intellectual, repetitive housekeeping tasks of political life — did nothing to modify their disgust at observing this same pattern within the PCI structure. Unfortunately, the reproduction of aspects of the classic boss/secretary relationship within the PCI organization was not surprising in light of the often non-exemplary personal lives of male party functionaries. While this pattern has altered markedly in recent years, precisely under the pressure of the feminist critique, in the early seventies characteristically few male PCI functionaries or militants were married to equally active women, or indeed, to women who were involved in regular political activity. The model of militancy and activism for a party functionary simply
might lead a life of steady political commitment. In general, the functionary's wife was limited to keeping the home fires burning and bringing up the children virtually singlehandedly, while the functionary himself pursued his political responsibilities at a frenetic pace. The family lives of rank-and-file Communists have also drawn heavy fire from feminists. As one feminist—a former PCI member—stated tersely, "when you see someone voting for the hammer and sickle with one hand and slapping around his wife and kids with the other, it makes you think."

Finally, the same attitudes that have characterized male functionaries and militants’ relationships with female comrades have normally also applied to the PCI’s dealings with UDI. Long after the latter had sought and won autonomy from the party, many male PCI functionaries continued to regard UDI as a reservoir of female militants to be called out at a moment’s notice to swell the masses at demonstrations. In these cases the lack of prior consultation with, or consideration for, UDI as an autonomous organization may be viewed as a reflection of the overall status of women in the party structure and organization.

Liberation vs. Emancipation

By the mid-1970s, the entire sum of this rather diffuse critique of Communist theory and practice was often expressed in the shorthand terms of "liberation vs. emancipation" or, in a formulation that works linguistically in Italian, if not in English, of femminista vs. femminile. "Liberation" is understood as radical and revolutionary; "emancipation" as gradualist and reformist. The former focuses on the personal and psychological spheres; the latter on public and workplace roles. According to the simplified distinction, emancipatist struggle, the province of the traditional forces of the "historic Left," is an economicistic effort to reform existing institutions and represents, above all, an effort to create equality between men and women, making women equal to (i.e., like) men in that each has equal status under law. Liberation, on the other hand, is seen as the political project of "new political actors" and focuses on the differences between men and women. Accepting no existing sex roles, the emphasis of liberation struggle is on finding "new ways of being" for women, not on becoming equal to or like men, acting as they do in society. By definition liberation calls for the radical transformation of society (i.e., of the organization of private life into families, the organization of public life into parties, the delegation of leadership to others, the authoritarian structure of the schools, the separation of life into public and private spheres and so forth). Above all, since women’s traditional role in the family is seen as a stabilizing mechanism and an economic contribution essential to capitalism, the liberation movement’s attack on the system of sex role divisions is posed by feminists as an attack on one of the foundations of the capitalist system and, therefore, as a revolutionary act.

Of course, institutional changes can have radical consequences, especially in a country like Italy where they may cut to the heart of the system and transform it—particularly when fascist legislation is overturned in the reform process. This was a nuance sometimes lost on those who preferred the simple distinction between emancipation and liberation, or between reform or revolution. In fact, by the mid-1970s the distinction had become blurred and the two terms were increasingly used synonymously. "This is the result," wrote a feminist PCI member, "of the hegemony exercised by the feminist movement which has managed to translate its slogans and watchwords into common sense or common usage." It also reflected the increasing use of the phrase “emancipation and liberation” by a Communist Party that had gradually accepted most of feminism’s critique of women’s role in capitalist society, if not of feminism’s critique of the PCI itself.

The turning point—it is generally agreed—came in February 1976 at the sixth National Conference of Communist Women when Geraldo Chiaramonte, a member of the secretariat and directorate of the national party "extended a hand to feminists," both by employing the term "liberation," and by undertaking an autocritica of the limits of the Communists’ conception of the women’s question. Thus the PCI, having ridiculed, deplored and, worst of all, often ignored the development of feminism for almost a decade, now officially came to terms with the autonomous women’s movement, or "this new constituency" as it was soon defined by the PCI. Whether the Communists or the feminists were more transformed by this new relationship remains to be determined. However, Chiaramonte’s address to the 1976 Communist women’s conference suggests at least some of the limits of this marriage of movimenti femminili and femministi. How to approach this encounter [with feminism]? I believe that we must move, unencumbered and without tricks up our sleeve, with our ideas and our history—but we must be ourselves, ready to correct errors, misunderstandings, delays and deafness, but bringing to the encounter our vision of the world and our opinion regarding the way to struggle to transform it.
On some level, then, the Communists were ready and determined to meet feminism head on. Badly jolted by the failure of its overtures towards the Christian Democrats, and discouraged by the Christian Democrats' unwillingness to entertain the possibility of governing in coalition with the PCI, by the end of the 1970s the Communist Party was calling into question all aspects of its compromesso storico strategy. This process of reexamination opened the opportunity for the party to substantially alter its position on the women's question.

As it turned out, rather than a fundamental rethinking of its approach to women, the Communist Party pursued its standard pattern of selective incorporation of feminist arguments and appropriation of certain feminist formulations. In this manner, the party attempted to gain the kind of control or hegemony over the women's movement that it enjoyed with respect to the workers' movement. And after the late 1970s, many aspects of feminist analysis certainly were incorporated into a Communist line on women, greatly enriching, expanding and enlivening the PCI's thinking on the women's question; many lively features of the feminists' style of political activism were borrowed and modified with excellent results. The party's women's cells and the commissioni femminili in many cases began to move toward more informal, less hierarchically structured forms of debate. The party press—particularly the weeklies and monthlies geared to the intellectuals devoted far greater space to women's issues and began to deal with women's sexuality, the sexual division of labour in the home, sexism in political life, and a range of other issues at the centre of the most advanced feminist discourse.

But the level of Communist presence or influence on the women's movement that was required by the PCI's hegemonic strategy proved difficult to establish. The Communists' "adoption" of feminism was complicated by the fluid and imprecise nature of feminist "doctrine." Moreover, as we have noted, to the extent that feminism could be said to have developed a coherent body of analysis, it was far too critical of the PCI for the Communists to do much more than accept a highly selective, piecemeal version of the feminist problematic. Furthermore, any readiness that the PCI might have shown to push even further in its self-criticism was diminished as the militancy of the movement began to lapse back into the kind of self-congratulatory rhetoric and rehearsal of past "victories" that had been characteristic of their approach to women and women's concerns in the 1960s.

The PCI's response to the challenge of feminism in the vigorous years of the women's movement (especially 1975-79) indicates that the party is flexible enough to modify its line in the face of a radical critique of its positions. Above all, this is true when the movement expressing that criticism is itself vigorous and growing, and occupies an area of civil society that the Communist Party views as part of its natural constituency, that is, an area where the party seeks to establish its presence or hegemony. However, when in the course of what has been called the natural "life cycle" of a protest movement, the strength of that new social movement wanes, the Communist Party is likely to return to a set of formulations that are far more conservative, but easier to reconcile with the more conservative components of its overall alliance strategy and its program for gaining power.

The PCI's often troubled relationship with the women's movement was only one of the contradictory elements characteristic of its overall strategy in this period. Insofar as the PCI posed itself as a "party of struggle," it had to reach out to, and seek the support of, newly mobilized and militant groups such as those that comprised the woman's movement through the 1970s. But insofar as the Communist Party also presented itself as a "party of government," it found itself forced to accept positions essentially supportive of existing institutions: the traditional family and a civil order in which women continue to be subordinate. The result was not all negative, but any sober assessment of the prospects for a durable alliance, not to mention a real fusion, of feminism and socialism, must reckon with the problems and contradictions revealed by the Italian experience.

Notes

This article is an excerpt from a longer work concerning Communists and feminism in the northern industrial city of Turin. The author wishes to thank Yasmin Ergas, Bice Fubini, Stephen Hellman, Jane Jenson, Joan Landes, Colin Leys and Sidney Tarrow for their comments on an earlier draft.

1. John Stuart Mill and Charles Fourier were the most influential social philosophers for the early Italian feminists.

2. The most important early industry in Italy as elsewhere, textile factories employed 170,000 women, 80,000 children, and 45,000 men in 1876. Sandrina Paccini, "Condizione della donna e questione femminile (1892-1932)," in Giulietta Ascoli et al., La questione femminile in Italia dal '900 ad oggi (Milano 1979), 12.


5. Antonella Marrazzi and Enrica Tedeschi, *Donna: Riforma o rivoluzione?* (Roma 1977), 72


7. Negro, “Il PCI e la Questione Femminile,” xxviii (see n. 6 above). On the roots of the PCI’s position on the women’s question in the writings of Lenin, see Teresa Massari, “Masse femminili, partito comunista, e costruzione di una nuova egemonia,” *Critica Marxista* 17:2 (marzo-aprile 1979), 119-22

8. Under fascism the vote in administrative elections was only given to a minority of Italian women who fell into the following categories: widows and mothers of soldiers killed in war or medal of honour winners; women with elementary school diplomas; and women paying annual taxes of at least 40 lira. Marrazzi and Tedeschi see the extension of the vote to women, with its restriction on the basis of education and wealth, as part of fascism’s early efforts to maintain a pseudo-democratic face. See Marrazzi and Tedeschi, *Donna nera* (Milano 1976), 44; and Aldi Tiso, *I comunisti e la questione femminile* (Roma 1976), 57-9

9. Camilla Ravera, *Breve storia del movimento femminile*, 131-2. (See n. 3 above.)


11. Negro, “Il PCI e la Questione Femminile,” 397. The 1951 census shows only 20.2 per cent of the female population as “economically active” as compared with 64.3 per cent for male Italians.

12. Officially speaking, the Gruppi di Difesa della Donna e per l’Assistenza ai Combattenti della Libertà was formed in Nazi-occupied northern Italy in November 1943, and was formally recognized by the CLN in July 1944. In September of that same year UDI was officially founded in Rome, and on 25 September 1944, the Gruppi and UDI merged, taking the name UDI for the whole national territory and so becoming the first mass women’s organization in Italy.


14. Ibid., 177-8


16. An excellent summary of the coverage of UDI in the party press of this period can be found in “Seminario su Noci Donne,” *Posta della Settimana* 16:6 (supplemento) (11 luglio 1977), 1-11

17. Both Yedid Levi and Giulietta Ascoli indicate that there was always some resistance within the party from both male and female militants toward the autonomous identity of UDI. See: Renata Yedid Levi, *Archivio storico dell’UDI torinese: Inventario* (Torino 1979), 9-10; and Giulietta Ascoli, “L’UDI tra emancipazione e liberazione (1943-1964),” in Ascoli et al., *La questione femminile in Italia dal ’900 ad oggi*, 120 (see n. 2 above). There is evidence that leadership positions in UDI were regarded by leading Communist women as a form of exile from the real business of the party, although this can also be said of the other flanking organiza-
tions to some extent as well. In general, "women's work" tended to be undervalued by both male and female Communists whether it was carried out in UDI or in the party's commissioni femminili. Ascoli et al., La questione femminile in Italia dall' '900 ad oggi, 122. See also Teresa Noce, Rivoluzionaria professionale (Milano 1974), 339

18. C.F. Silvana Casmirri, L'unione donne italiane (1944-48) (Roma 1978), 26; Tiso, I communitisti, 71 (see n. 8 above); Negro, "II PCI e la Questione Femminile," 155; Alloisio, "L'Udienza," 34-5, 39 (see n. 15 above); and Ascoli et al., La questione femminile in Italia dal '900 ad oggi, 131-3

19. Casmirri, L'unione, 52. (See n. 18 above.)

20. Ibid., 51

21. Giorgio Galli and Alfonso Prandi, Patterns of Political Participation in Italy (New Haven 1970), 93


23. Nella Marcellino, Rinascita, 8 March 1961. Note that in the language of flanking organizations dominated by the PCI, the term 'parties' is often used euphemistically in place of "the Party" (i.e., the PCI). On this point see Manoukian, La presenza sociale, 177-9 (see n. 13 above). The confusion between UDI circles and the women's cells of the party arose in part because the two groups were often directed by the same women. See: Sixth Congress Nazionale del PCI, "Relazioni sulla attivita dei gruppi parlamentari e della commissione centrale," 339; and Casmirri, L'unione, 52

24. Manoukian, La presenza sociale, 219-23, 303-5

25. But even while supporting women's right to work and urging them into the workplace, Negro notes strong ambivalence in the party's position: "Indeed for a long time the problems of women's insertion into productive activity was presented for the most part, when not exclusively, as a contribution to the family budget . . . . The notion that work outside the home was also a means for self-realization came much later, after feminists outside the party had persuasively argued in these terms for many years." (Negro, "II PCI e la Questione Femminile," 430). In this respect the French Communist Party seems to have been more advanced than its Italian counterpart. See Jenson, "The French Communist Party and Feminism," 124 (see n. 22 above).

26. Palmiro Togliatti, Commissione per la Costituzione, Assemblea Costituente (Roma 1946), 207

27. Marrazzi and Tedeschi, Donna, 87

28. Ibid., 88

29. See: Adriana Seroni, "Togliatti e l'emancipazione femminile," in Aspetti e problemi della questione femminile (8-11 gennaio 1974); and Ascoli et al., La questione femminile in Italia dal '900 ad oggi, 128

30. Negro, "II PCI e la Questione Femminile," 304

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 432, 437

33. Ibid., 448. Ascoli notes: "To represent austerity, and puritanism were not only defensive behaviors or tactical positions taken in response to the confrontation with the Catholic world, which in those years was dominated by the intransigence of Pius XII and still far from conciliatory overtures. These were intrinsic to the customs of the workers' movement!" (Ascoli et al., La questione femminile in Italia dal '900 ad oggi, 130).

34. Negro, "II PCI e la Questione Femminile."


36. Lidia Menapace, "Le cause strutturali del nuovo femminismo," in Ascoli et al., La questione femminile in Italia dal '900 ad oggi, 162


39. Ibid., 271

40. Sebastiani reports in the bulletin of the PCI's Center for the Study of Economic Policy: "In spite of an influx of women into the party since 1971 . . . the total number of women functionaries at the level of the party federation is only 9.5%." Chiara Sebastiani, "II funzionario del Partito Comunista: un profilo," Congiuntura Sociale, 1 (gennaio 1980), 2. See also Claudia Ceccacci, "Alcuni dati sulla presenza femminile nei partiti," La Società 8-9 (dicembre 1977/gennaio 1978), 36

41. See "La Rivoluzione Culturale: Intervista con Aldo Tortorella," in Carla Ravaoli, La questione femminile: Intervista col PCI (Milano 1977), 51
This paper tries to provide an explanation for the practice of black marketeering in the Soviet Union, a country that is both a superpower and the home of the first socialist revolution. Black marketeering, which is characteristic of the Soviet economy, is considered illegal and therefore punishable by law. Circumstances permitting, the authorities promise to eliminate this problem some day. Despite the relevance of this topic to a description of the concrete experience of this economy, we have no intention of exhausting a subject as complex as the relationship between the black market and the country's economic and political system. Since the black market by definition exists unofficially, it does not lend itself easily to studies relying on statistics. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to tackle such a problem during these times of crisis for the Soviet regime, or at least to examine certain crucial aspects such as its emergence, its development and the reasons that account for its present vigour. After having discussed the historical and socio-economic background of this "parallel" economy, we will try to assess the policies adopted...