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Obituary

“What does Rossana say?”

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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Rossana Rossanda, who died on 20 September 2020, played an important role in the Italian communist left, first within the Communist Party - from which she was expelled in 1969 - then as director of the newspaper *Il Manifesto* until 2012. It is said that for a long time in *Il Manifesto*, a historical communist newspaper, the following refrain was heard: “Is Valentino there?” Is Luigi writing? What does Rossana say?” This trio consisted of Valentino Parlato, Luigi Pintor and Rossana Rossanda. The last of the three left us yesterday at the age of 96, after a long life in the camp of the left and the communist ideals for which she fought. Always defeated in the end.

For many generations, Rossana Rossanda was a good teacher, someone you always learned from, even when you didn't agree with her. Because it is obvious that she always defended her ideas in a serious way, with restraint, intelligence and a broad outlook. This look so incisive and severe, made so dense by the life spent in the long upward curve that Italian society experienced after the Second World War and subsequently bruised by the downward curve and the defeat, both personal and collective, accumulated during the last decades of the past century..

La ragazza del secolo scorso - title of her memoirs published in 2005 (by Einaudi Editions) – going up to in 1969, year of the birth of *Il Manifesto*, her most precious legacy, and her expulsion from the Italian Communist Party (PCI) - was long awaited, but identified with her personal defeat. And Rossana Rossanda's life is fully part of the history of the century that she lived through from 1924, the year of her birth in Pola (Croatia, previously in Yugoslavia, afterwards in Italy). From there to Venice, after the earthquake of 1929, and subsequently to Milan, where she studied literature, but encountered the Marxism of Antoni Banfi, a very important teacher for her, who certainly “did not learn Communism at home. “Banfi” was the opposite of the determinism to which Marx is reduced, the opposite of a theology”. He transmitted to Rossana Rossanda a critical and unossified thinking and it is with this thinking that after her apprenticeship in the Resistance - as a courier between Milan and Como, where she had been evacuated, and from where she could circulate packages and clandestine messages - she joined the PCI, in those branches “where one went to describe the other history, this victorious outcome of the Resistance that did not conquer”. The Communist Party that Rossana knew was the “heavy” party, which would weaken in the 1970s and 1980s, but was then populated by men and women for whom “their own lives ceased to appear unforeseen or hopeless and took on real meaning. in a global framework of advances and setbacks”.

Then there were the leading groups, the elected officials, of which she would also be a part, but she belonged to “those in the basement, who went from house to house to collect the membership forms and formed another society within society.” “The country within the country”, about which Pier Paolo Pasolini spoke in the 1970s, which marked a history difficult to understand with the eyes of today, but which left its mark in the imagination and in the lives of those people who, like Rossana, were preparing to carry out their direct intervention in the world. Confident in the future, like all her generation, whether communist or socialist.

From then on, in 1947 she began “political work”, firstly taking charge of the Association for Cultural Relations between Italy and the Soviet Union (a sarcastic destiny, if we take into consideration what happened afterwards next), subsequently a little bit of intervention in the working class, at the gates of the Autobianchi company (Milan), and finally the natural destiny for those who had enrolled at the University at 17 thanks to an average of eight and their intellectual gifts: “I had to bring the House of Culture out of the ruins of 1948,” she wrote in her memoirs.

With the defeat of the forces of the left and the decisive victory of Christian Democracy, the year 1948 constituted a very hard blow for those who thought they could lead the country after the debacles of the war and the need for

reconstruction. The PCI succeeded in overcoming this defeat and, in Milan, the basements of the popular branches and the work in the factories nourished an ambitious and undoubtedly decisive path. Also, because the framework chosen by the PCI with Rossana was that of unity with all the left and with the secular forces.

In this House of Culture, you read everything, Brecht along with Enrico Rame, Franca's brother. Vittorio Gasman came by and “Strehler was from the house”. We can therefore draw the political and cultural profile already sketched out by Banfi and by the art critic Marangoni at the university. Immersed in the broth of communist culture marked by Zhdanovism, which came from Moscow, and by socialist realism, with a direct intervention of the Party in culture and in art, Rossana, on the other hand, developed an autonomous, free, thinking that was always respectful of the common house in which she was active and which she respected. A duplication which marked her biography, and which constituted, at bottom, the fabric of an anxious soul in search of a recomposition of the interior divergence.

The thread was cut in 1956 with the Khrushchev report on the crimes of Stalin, an already belated attempt by the Soviet regime to take a path of innovation and reform. And later the Soviet occupation of Budapest and the bloody repression of the Hungarian uprising. At that moment, Rossana herself wrote: “The age of innocence was over.” “Franco Fortini telegraphed me: ‘I hope the workers will smash your face’”. Faithful to the party, she kept the House of Culture always open, she did not flee from confrontation, “but in the party nothing was as before”. “Communists who make themselves hated are always wrong”. It was at this time, at the age of 32, that her first white hair arrived, a distinctive feature of an existence, a sign of wisdom immortalized in a face, the product of a sharp, personal and political grief.

Something broke, but political life continued, as did cultural work. In those years, they discussed with Sartre and Adorno, Feltrinelli published his *Doctor Zhivago*, also to “make the USSR pay”. The most interesting decade was about to begin, habits and ideas were changing, a new political generation was breaking powerfully onto the scene. Rossana realized this, the PCI - immersed in its bureaucratic rituals and in the deaf confrontations within its apparatus - much less. But it was still the great party of the workers and the people, which made a great political leap in 1963 and again in 1968. Rossana was elected member of the legislature, which saw the formation of the centre-left government led by Aldo Moro. She became responsible for culture on the national level, she was entrusted with relations with intellectuals. She moved to Rome, she knew the leading group, she had an unusual relationship with Palmiro Togliatti.

They tacitly got rid of the USSR and faced the decade of transformations with a rich debate, although in the last instance they were unable to really mark this period: “At the end, in the 1960s, it happened to me and to many comrades the same as the lizard whose tail the cat bit off: it started to grow again.”

Within the PCI, Rossana was a leader, but she was hardly considered as such, the “youngest among the men of the PCI”. The condition of a woman in a male environment was heavy, but she was appointed a member of the mythical Central Committee. She worked with a few young people, whose names were destined to occupy leading positions: Achille Occhetto, Sandro Curzi, Lucio Magri, “the resplendent Luciana Castellina”, but also Alfredo Reichlin and Sergio Garavini. Some of them would mark the history of the 1980s and 1990s, often sharply criticized by Rossana. Thus, she opposed Occhetto's decision to change the name of the PCI and was never enthusiastic about Rifondazione Comunista, initially led by Garavini.

Cultural work excited her, she tried to recover relations with the party, by trying to close the “station of proletarian art”. She moved between Cesare Luporini and Galvano Della Volpe, between Lucio Colletti - when he was still a Marxist - and Louis Althusser, “a robust sportsman in tweed”, the only voice of the PCF which proved interesting.

But the frequent conversations with Togliatti, who had “a long tail from the past,” confirmed that the PCI was not Rossana's party. Certainly, “The Best” (Palmiro Togliatti's nickname at that time) allowed her to publish in *Rinascita*

the famous letter written in 1926 by Antonio Gramsci, in which the secretary of the PCI criticized the CPSU for the way in which it had treated Trotsky, accompanied by a response from Togliatti: “I also have the note that Gramsci left me as an answer. Let’s publish everything”. And everything was published, even though there was no trace of this debate in the history of the PCI; nothing happened.

It is necessary to proceed by cross-checking. After Togliatti’s death in 1964, an internal war broke out, not so much for the succession - which, after Luigi Longo’s transition, everyone imagined should be entrusted to Enrico Berlinguer - but rather for the political line. On the one hand, there was the proposal by Gianfranco Amendola and Giorgio Napolitano in favour of unification with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), a way of saying that it was necessary to be part of the political framework of the centre-left ; on the other hand, the idea of the “new model of development”, defended by Pietro Ingrao, more attentive to new movements and workers’ combativity. With Magri, Pintor, Aldo Natoli and others, Rossana chose Ingrao, who nevertheless “never functioned as the leader of a current, did not calculate his movements, did not move his infantry, and did not defend them when they were attacked.” And Ingrao lost the game, with all his supporters who were marginalized, without any prospect in the party, “excluded from any function in the central or peripheral apparatus”.

The PCI appeared to be a stunned elephant: it did not take advantage of the period 1967-1969, it was immobile and, during the second invasion, that of Czechoslovakia, while condemning the USSR, it confined itself to speaking of a “tragic error. “. During the 1968 congress, Rossanda intervened, among the very few delegates opposed to the majority of the party: “We are gathered here, while the army of a country which claims to be socialist occupies another socialist country”. The Soviet delegation, with others - including the Vietnamese - left the room. Berlinguer said to Rossanda behind the rostrum: “You did wrong, you don’t know what they are like. They are bandits.” And that “they” was the Soviets. But the rupture was made and, when Pintor, Castellina, Magri, Parlato, Eliseo Milani and others decided to relaunch, to do what every intellectual wants to do, that is, create a review... the party decided that the red line had been crossed. The expulsion of the dissidents was voted, they had to look for another place, because it had been decided that no internal debate could be tolerated. Even Pietro Ingrao voted for the expulsion of the dissidents, supported by Beppe Chiarante, Cesare Luporini, Achille Occhetto and Sergio Garavini. “We were no longer of theirs, of ours”. *Il Manifesto* was born, with the title of the first issue of the review “Prague is alone”. Rossanda was also alone, but animated at that moment by a strong confidence in a future which will always be marked by what had happened before. because it was decided that no internal debate can be tolerated. Even Pietro Ingrao votes for the expulsion of the dissidents, supported by Beppe Chiarante, Cesare Luporini, Achille Occhetto or Sergio Garavini. “We were no longer of theirs, of ours”. *Il Manifesto* was born, with the title of the first issue of the review “Prague is alone”. Rossanda was also alone’ but animated at that moment by a strong confidence in a future which would always be marked by what had happened before.

Within *Il Manifesto*, life unfolded with greater clarity, looking towards this previous life. “What does Rossanda say? “, This question takes us back to the intellectual value of women, to the clarity of coordinates, to respect for an ideology which lies precisely in mainstream history, but corrects it, retouches it, asks for a distinct outcome, capable of being renovated and made green again.

The history of *Il Manifesto* directed by Rossana and that of the members of her generation is, indeed, this history. It was the attempt of the political party *Il Manifesto*, as one of the various groups of the new left. This was later the alliance with the PDUP (Partito de Unità Proletaria per il Comunismo], whose leader was Luigi Magri, But all this happened with the gaze always turned towards the common house, towards the history of what used to be, attentive to any sign of movement which could indicate a change of trajectory, a rectification.

Precisely, by the intensity of this relation with this world and this thought, Rossana developed her other great contribution to the understanding of contemporary history, when she inserted the avatars of the *Brigate Rosse* (BR, Red Brigades) in the “family album” of the communist left.

The BR were not like ETA or the Irish Republican Army (IRA), nor the German *Rote Armée Fraktion* (RAF) or the Latin American guerrillas. They were, on the other hand - writes Rossanda in the preface to the interview with Mario Moretti (principal leader of this armed organization) conducted along with Carla Mosca - “a product of the cultures and moods of an industrially advanced country and clearly from the left”. They were the expression of the industrial North, convinced that the Communist Party was “the whole of a ‘communist people’, distinct from the line of the secretariat, of the leadership, of its central committee”.

It would not be so, although during a phase the forces touched and adulated each other. With this idea that the PCI would be something distinct, depending on whether one looked at it from the head or from the base, basically the experiments of the new left also failed. For something new to happen, they had to wait for Occhetto’s initiative, to which *Il Manifesto* and Rossanda in particular were strongly opposed, but without committing to the adventure of Rifondazione Comunista. Just like Ingrao, whose intention to stay “in the whirlwind” (an expression he used to justify his membership in Occhetto’s PDS, after the latter’s liquidation of the old PCI) would become famous. But this history was that of a whirlwind, which carried them all up in it- the orthodox and the critics -, a movement of dissolution of the whole, which fed on errors, illusions, errors of judgment, arrogances, inadequacies... About all this Rossana always wrote throughout the years in articles, reflections and interventions. But always with the look of someone who had already known defeat and knew that nothing could be done about it, with more disenchantment when, with the comrades of always and with the *Rivista del Manifesto*, directed by Lucio Magri, she tried to give life, by turning to Rifondazione Comunista and other souls of the left, to a wider and unitary alternative left alongside the Left Democrats, who were already then sailing full team towards Blairism. We were in the early 2000s and this new attempt also failed.

Seen from the end, it seems a very sad story, like the death by assisted suicide of Lucio Magri, whom she accompanied to Switzerland, friend and in solidarity until the end. When in 2010 she presented the book *El saestre de Ullm* (El Viejo Topo, 2009) during a debate held in the Chamber of Deputies, a sort of meeting with Alfredo Reichlin and Mario Tronti in particular, she recognized Magri’s merit: having reaffirmed the importance of 1917 as a dividing line that could not be reduced to a disaster. But she reproached him for having made too many concessions in his book to the USSR and numerous concessions to Togliattism, including the line advocated by Berlinguer of historic compromise. Something she always opposed: “It was a big mistake,” said Rossanda, seeing that at that time in Europe not only did the risk of a dictatorship not exist, but that one could see phenomena of the crumbling of existing dictatorships, as in the cases of Portugal and Spain.

During this session, she again proposed what we have tried to summarize in the previous lines: the decline of the PCI did not start with the historic compromise or with the phase that followed, between the kidnapping of Moro and the defeat of FIAT ; it began in the mid-1960s - “the decisive years of post-war Italian history” - when, faced with the thaw in society, the PCI “showed itself to be undecided”; it did not know how to help the students in 1968 , it came to accept its decline in the working-class, up to the defeat of the 1970s.

From 1971, date of the birth of the newspaper *Il Manifesto*, until the break with this periodical - never really explained or recounted in an understandable way - Rossanda sought to recover from defeat, to align a cultural and human journey that had finished. *Il Manifesto* was a decisive companion for the politicization and political participation of entire generations, including in its errors and misunderstandings. From this periodical, beyond maintaining a rigorous point of view on issues relating to the working class, the role of the left, the avatars of communism and socialism and the international debate - the special edition of *Il Manifesto* published after the Polish coup against Solidarnosc was memorable - Rossanda always also maintained a consistent vision of constitutional guarantees, committing to the front line against the mounting of the April 7 trial, defending Toni Negri and remaining disillusioned by his flight (as Toni Negri himself recalls in his autobiography). And she became fully engaged in the defense of Enzo Tortora (unjustly condemned by the Italian justice, without legal guarantees), by publicly giving, in 1984, her vote to the former television presenter, candidate on the list of the radicals (Partito Radical), defender of many causes ignored by the traditional left, and more particularly civil rights, for the European elections that year.

“What does Rossana say?”

It is impossible to reconstruct the quantity of interventions and positions taken by Rossana Rossanda. There remains only the memory of a piece of the twentieth century that she has left us after having lived the choice of an exclusive and decisive camp. “A choice of reason. It may be that the fact of having suffered in my own childhood, being torn from my parents by the earthquake of 1929, determined an intolerance to lead a life ruled by others, an intolerance that has not abandoned me. It’s not a theory, it’s a part of me. How can one bear the reality that the majority of those who are born do not even have the possibility to think about who they are, what they will do with themselves, the burning human adventure abandoned.”

Rossana Rossanda will be missed so much.

Original [Jacobin Italia](#).

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