The events in Eastern Europe continue to reshape the Left worldwide. This month the Italian Communist Party (PCI) stages a special congress to discuss a new name, a new form, and perhaps a new party. Here, the PCI's leader Achille Occhetto is interviewed by Eric Hobsbawm about the Italian debate.

We are talking at an historic moment: the Eastern European systems have collapsed, there is a dangerous situation in the USSR, we have become aware that a whole tradition, to which we dedicated part of our lives, has come to an end: the tradition dominated by the October Revolution. Do you agree that we are today at a profound historical turning point?

Yes, I feel that we are at one of those turning points which demand total change, not only in practice but also in theory. I would say that at such a time it is no longer enough to find new answers - we need to ask new questions. I believe that 'really existing communism', by which I mean not the set of ideals which clearly maintain their value, but that communist movement which was born with a specific vision of the party, the state, of organisation and of society, faces a historical crisis of enormous dimensions.

This has brought about the collapse of the state system it gave life to and which had wrongly created the belief - and internationally the whole of the Left has paid for this - that the struggle between Right and Left, between socialism and capitalism, could be concentrated into the struggle between the two blocs. Identifying first with 'socialism in one country' then with defending the bloc forged after World War Two around the Soviet Union, created the belief that this contained socialism’s future. This brought about an historical tragedy, at least in large areas of the world, from which it is going to be difficult to recover.

So why does the PCI seem to us abroad very much on the defensive? Why does it feel responsible for things for which it has no responsibility?

For the PCI the need for change does not arise from the fact of a joint responsibility for what has happened in the East. However, let us be accurate. We have had basically three stages: first, we were the most critical component of the international communist movement; second, we were in open disagreement and, third, we left the movement and declared ourselves an integral part of the European Left.

I think the real problem today is contained in your first question. The world of 1945 has changed radically. In a certain phase we acted as critics within a world divided into two blocs. Today, the Left in Italy, Europe and internationally, faces restructuring.

That means going back beyond 1945. What is in question is the entire perspective of the movements which were stamped with the experience and outlook of the October Revolution. What's left are perhaps the traditions - there are several - of the pre-1917 socialist movements, but also the tradition and experience of
communist movements, like the Italian, which have never been identified with the construction of a totalitarian state. What do you think?

First, even the social-democratic tradition has changed over time. The Socialist International under Brandt is no longer the International stained with the guilt of voting the 1914 war credits nor the Socialist International reborn after the war and very much tied to bloc alignments. In the '50s it often even looked like an instrument of American policy. There has been a major shift in two significant areas: Ostpolitik and North-South relations. This was linked to two men: Brandt and Olaf Palme. One can say that the whole theoretical perspective of international socialism is moving. The issue for us is not one of passing from one tradition to another. What we propose is taking part in an international movement for rethinking the function of the Left. We can do this because we are the communist party which embodies a great reforming and reformist tradition.

It is no accident that we are strongest in the two regions of the country with the richest tradition of reform, but we have brought to this something new and original, namely, the communist vision, not of a subaltern reformism, but of the working classes as autonomous and of their capacity to become the state.

But hasn't the PCI for some time been changing in a reformist direction? What remains is more a formal acknowledgment of changes already taking place, not completely, because we still see some of the old traditions in the party, but which have for some time now been dominant.

In our party, elements of innovation and of double thinking have lived together, which is why we have not been able to exploit fully the potential of a policy capable of presenting our party as the fulcrum of an alternative to the present ruling class. And I don't mean because of the turning point of 1989-90. Unfortunately, for 10 years or so our vote has been in continual decline. Our situation among young people is particularly worrying. This is not due to reduced militancy, as some maintain. I believe our problem is not so much a communist problem but one of the function of leftist parties.

Our troubles began at the same time as those of the Labour Party in Britain, the SPD in Germany and of all those parties who did not just want to manage neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies. There are socialist parties which made the other choice. So left culture and the very manner of being a party needs redefining. We need to find a new form for a party so it is capable of drawing into action and struggle the subjects of today's contradictions, those of the year 2000 and not of the 19th century.

For instance, our traditional idea of the social alliance of workers and peasants is meaningless today, even if it is still represented by the emblem of the hammer and sickle. Today the decisive problem is the relation between the world of work as a whole and cross-class contradictions such as those of ecology, women's liberation, etc.

We feel we need to reconsider the way of being political, the political party as an entity, the programs of the Left. And not as Italians alone but in an international context making our own contribution to a reorganisation of the Left, starting with the Euro-Left.

Agreed, the problem of the PCI is a national aspect of a wider problem, the crisis in the socialist and labour movements during the last 20 years. But is there not also a crisis in the concept of the party?

The party as a means for people's free political association is a basic fact of democracy. But there's no doubt that in Italy, too, the parties have degenerated. There's an attempt to make all decisions through the secretariats of governing parties. So even in a multi-party system like ours, there's an element of party supremacy which stifles real ability, even true entrepreneurial activity. Italian democracy, unlike other parts of Europe, has its specific problem. Since 1945 our democracy has been blocked by permanent Christian Democrat domination, with other parties as satellites, and a major Communist Party excluded from power as such. Now a political party cannot go on for centuries, just preaching ideals. We are not the Catholic church. We are a political party and, as such, the Italian constitution imposes on us a duty to compete for the leadership of the country. So the great political problem is how to create conditions for an alternative in our country. We have started a big shake-up in Italian political life so as to draw out all those left forces which are not with Craxi, not with the Christian Democrats, do not want to be on their side, are not Communists, but who favour opening up this question of an alternative.

But the centre of an alternative would have to be the relation between the Communist supporters and those who support the Socialists. Without the Socialists you cannot have a left alternative.

Of course there is no alternative without the Socialists, but as long as we remain constant the Socialists say they do not want an alternative with us.

Why?

For them we are unacceptable unless the Socialists have become the party which wins more votes than the communists, as everywhere else in Europe. This is the negative position of Craxi, and unfortunately it is blocking the political life of the country.

In your congress resolution you propose a new political formation. If in fact an agreement now with the Socialists is ruled out, who will make up the new grouping?

An agreement with the Socialists is not ruled out. We say that the new formation challenges the Socialists to take the alternative seriously and in fact the very moment we announced this option a discussion opened up within the Socialist Party for the first time in years. Although for the time being that discussion has been discontinued because the socialists are awaiting the outcome of our congress. Let us suppose that the party has come in out of the cold, and suppose you are now within the span of possible government. The people, public opinion, ask you to represent the alternative. But has the PCI or other socialist parties - for this is not a problem specific
to the PCI - have we a concrete perspective, something beyond which all men and women of goodwill share, opinions on the environment, on feminism, the South, down with the Mafia...?

Sorry to interrupt you. Everyone agrees, so long as you don't connect the problems. By that I mean that everyone wants to defend the environment so long as you don't question modes of production and consumption. Everyone agrees on women's liberation as long as you don't question their particular domination at work and in the organisation of society. There's much social hypocrisy today. In fact, all the world supports many of the same ideals; even those which are considered communist values are quietly approved by any democrat. The problem is to find a political project and, at the same time, a party format which can join those different needs in a credible alternative plan on a government level.

But we must never forget one basic fact. In recent years the Communist Party has been in clear decline. Not so much in the percentage vote, which at 27% is still large. It is the fact that the percentage of young voters keeps declining that worries me. From 1945 the young voted for us disproportionately. Now they vote well below our average. How do we speak to these young people?

This is a great problem. What positive reasons are there for choosing this great party? You can see why people vote for Craxi's Socialists, because he and his followers have a whole patronage system and are the managers of a new capitalism. It's not very moral, but it is a reason.

Yes, but the positive reason is also very closely correlated with the changing situation. In the course of time a sort of political stabilisation has occurred. Consumption and job security have improved for a majority of the population. The minority is large but remains a minority. In terms of votes, they are not immediately available for an alternative and can, in fact, be influenced by patronage politics. As long as its internal contradictions do not erupt more visibly, it is a system which has its own inertial force. Even more lively, dynamic, more open political initiatives will not necessarily make any immediate mark on this state of affairs or break it. Nevertheless, it is an effective strategy to bring forward certain positive ideas which, in our opinion, open up a consensus which previously we did not have. So we open the gates to wider support, opening up contradictions in the Socialist Party, but also new processes of unity with the Socialist Party. Open up contradictions in the Catholic world and facilitate unity with very important elements in it. In short, we want to get the Italian political situation moving. Of course, this is not something to be done in a day.

This leads me to the prospects after the collapse of the East European systems, including the very worrying situation in the USSR itself. What's your opinion of this?

In part I have already said that the situation is so dynamic that it is very difficult to make forecasts. It is very important how one intervenes in this situation. I think the European Left has a strong responsibility to control the democratic processes in the East in agreement with Gorbachev.

So far as possible.

Yes, but up to what point is it possible? I don't know. I was in Poland recently and I spoke to everyone: Solidarity, Prime Minister Mazowiecki, Geremek, Cardinal Glemp, Jaruzelski, and the thing which struck me was that everyone had the same will to control the process. Everyone agreed, the Prime Minister, communists, Solidarity, etc on the fact that even German unification must be seen in the framework of wider European integration. This is the way of controlling the situation. But they tell me that, for example, territorial claims towards Poland are at this moment stronger in East Germany than in West Germany because the Nazis are more important there. Nazism had not been eliminated there but merely frozen.

Still, it is a positive fact that for so many decades the nationalities haven't massacred each other.

On the one hand they imposed control, but on the other they have left the problems unresolved.

I have two further questions. The first is the big question of a change in the party name. What is the justification for this?

Really, we didn't start with the idea of changing the party's name, even if this is how it got to the media. We are not ashamed of our name. The proposal was for a constituent assembly for a broader political formation with the participation of other forces with whom we would deal in all matters: the program and, if necessary, the name.

This is not the first time in our history that we have suggested a different formation. Togliatti did so before the cold war set in, Longo himself spoke of a working people's party which should unite the whole Italian Left. Later Longo and Amendola raised the question again, although of course it was different from the present day.

Now it is seen rather emotionally, particularly by those who oppose the political proposals. Certainly, from an emotional point of view, I too am moved. I started as a communist and have done nothing else in my life. I've said many times that I approach a new political formation as an Italian communist. I haven't suddenly become something else. The problem is to assess the validity of this broaden-
The PCI - coming to the end of the road?

ing-out, and of this different form of politics. You can consider, for example, a democratic, popular union which represents different forces, in which the Communist Party remains a determining force even if representation at the level of electoral participation - local, national or European - is of the union itself. Or there may be other ways which can be discussed with the other participants. It is an act of political initiative, something to break the deadlock in Italian politics.

If this political initiative, which has brought us to the centre of attention and has opened discussion not only among communists but in all Italian families, if it is considered as a disaster, a sell-out, a betrayal, then certainly it won't work.

The problem is not that of the name change in itself. Would one pay that price in certain circumstances? Certainly. If you can form this great progressive alignment, fine. But I am worried by the impression of defensiveness.

So many will say: "Oh, they’ve finally recognised that Craxi and the others were right. There is not communism, they’ve admitted their error." But the PCI has a wonderful tradition as the PCL. What one judges is the contents of the bottle, not the bottle itself. In short, what happens if the congress does not accept your majority report because of this - in my opinion, peripheral - element?

First, we must start from the assumption that there was already cause for concern. We were already in a defensive and dangerous situation. In some of the recent administrative elections we lost between 10 and 20% of the votes. That is difficult enough, not to mention what I said about the youth vote. What does this mean? We keep an electorate that knows all these things, and we don't win any new voters. Among the young the party vote in some areas is 12%.

It is very worrying.

It has been of great concern for many years. We have lost millions of votes over the years. So the situation is this. The choice is intended to improve it. We'll have to see. A choice for a renewal doesn't mean immediate improvement. One must have the courage to opt for renewal and accept a period of difficult for later advance. I think the communists and our supporters are much more intelligent than is believed. If there's no excessive drama at the top, then the political idea of winning, of not feeling isolated, of opening a new phase, is an idea that will be accepted.

Anyway, I say and will continue to say that our proposal is not a retreat. During the European election the question of the name came up and I said we were not ashamed and we would not change the name unless we decided that political events made this useful. If some counter-proposal defeats mine it won't be the end of the world, but I think we shall gain a little. There's a whole dynamic part of Italian society that could abandon us, or follow us only with difficulty.

One last word. How do you view the prospects of socialists in the widest sense, all those who identify with that great secular movement in the last decade of the century, not in terms of organisation but as a whole?

I think that, in reality, all socialists must reconstruct their outlook. Not just the communists. I am very firm on this, we are issuing a challenge. Craxi is not right. On the contrary, he is wrong. Once again we are in the vanguard. Doing this we demonstrate that we are again in the avant garde. It is the Socialists who remain in the 19th century, who talk of Proudhon while they manage Italian capitalism at a truly modest level. As for socialism in general we must reopen the debate.

As I said before, we must start with new questions and no longer look only for replies to old questions. In the end I think the collapse in Eastern Europe can even bring back on the agenda a stronger European Left, even give life to the US Left which has been ruined by the division of the world. And this can be a new experience for the Left.

ERIC HOBSBAWM is the author of Politics for a Rational Left (Verso, 1989). A much longer version of this interview was published in the February issue of Marxism Today. It is reproduced here with permission.