

In Memoriam of Helmut (Hal) Sonnenfeldt: Euro-Communism and the "*Compromesso Storico*"

by Cesare Merlini

My first dealings with Hal were about euro-communism and were not easy ones.

First, for young or fading memories, what was euro-communism? The movement took shape in the early 1970s among members of the communist parties of Western Europe – those of France, Italy and Spain in particular – to seek more political autonomy from the dominance of their comrades in Moscow.

In part, euro-communism came as a reaction to the bloody crackdown of the Prague Spring by Soviet tanks in 1968 (a reaction not seen 12 years earlier after a similar repression in Hungary); in part it was the need to reconcile Marxist ideology with societies having acquired enviable affluence in a liberal system;

and last but not least, some thirst of power at the national level after multiple – and at times successful – experiences of governing at the local level.

All that was true in particular for the largest, best-organised and most culturally influential of those parties: the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) in Italy, led by Enrico Berlinguer. The PCI had long been the dominant force in the opposition, while the Christian Democrats (DC) had been sharing the "palazzi" of power with a group of minor lay parties, including the socialists who had left their previous alliance with the communists. The prospect of an entente between the traditionally opposed forces of Catholicism and communism, potentially giving the latter access to a political majority, became known as the *Compromesso*

Cesare Merlini, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), is a former Brookings expert. This article is a shorter reprint of a text published by the Brookings Institution in Washington DC as part of a series remembering the life, career and legacy of Helmut (Hal) Sonnenfeldt – a member of the US National Security Council, counselor at the Department of State, close associate of Henry A. Kissinger – with whom he also shared his German heritage –, scholar at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and Brookings expert. The original Brookings article can be read here: <https://brook.gs/2BfIosW>.

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storico or “historic compromise.”

I was not personally a fan of that prospect, above all because I thought that such a compromise might have frozen Italy’s democracy, depriving it of its essential dialectic between government and opposition. At the same time, I was looking with interest, even sympathy, at the debate inside the PCI about the evolution the German social democrats had undergone after their reformist Bad Godesberg conference back in 1959 as a potential model. Moscow’s hostility against Berlinguer, including a suspected attempt to kill him, was significant in itself. Consequently, I was in favour of encouraging visits to Western countries by communist members and intellectuals who were open to change, including to the US.

In early 1975, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), of which I was the director, agreed to have a joint conference in New York before the end of the year, with participants from Italy and the US representing the respective political, economic and cultural realities. Both sides saw value in trying to include a communist member of parliament in the Italian delegation, and those at CFR were optimistic about obtaining an entry visa.

After an intense spring, I attended a conference on the state of the Atlantic Alliance at Ditchley Park, in the United Kingdom. The list of participants included Helmut Sonnenfeldt, counsellor of the Department of State; a young Joseph Nye; a less young Paul Nitze; Professor Ralf Dahrendorf;

Étienne Davignon from the European Commission; International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) founder Alastair Buchan; historian Michael Howard; and several others.

That was the first time I met Hal. One of the subjects being discussed was political change in Southern Europe; on top of that, the Italian regional and local elections were set to take place in a week’s time. But no mention was made, I believe, of the IAI-CFR seminar.

In July, however, a *New York Times* op-ed by CFR’s Zygmunt Nagorski suggesting “a positive U.S. policy toward Italy’s reds”¹ was extensively quoted in the Italian press, with the usual neglect for the distinction between news and opinions. Somehow the upcoming IAI-CFR event came into the open, including the possible participation of member of Parliament Sergio Segre, head of PCI’s international relations office. The CFR, however, was not in a position to ensure that Segre would receive a visa waiver to enter the United States.

Thus, during the summer, I sent a letter to Hal – no emails at that time – to recall our exchanges at Ditchley and to make a few comments on the recent elections in Italy, in which the PCI had come within two percentage points of the Christian Democrats. In view of this state of affairs and of the reinforced

¹ Zygmunt Nagorski Jr., “For a Positive U.S. Policy Toward Italy’s Reds”, in *The New York Times*, 25 July 1975, p. 31, <https://nyti.ms/1XVNrmm>. See also: Alvin Shuster, “Italian Communist Invited to a Meeting in the U.S. Faces Entry Difficulty”, in *The New York Times*, 14 September 1975, p. 2, <https://nyti.ms/1RDGp1T>.

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euro-communist debate in the country, I suggested that some change in the US government’s visa policy might have been worth considering, possibly beginning with our conference at CFR, of which he had become well au courant in the meantime.

Hal’s response was cordial but not flexible. He mentioned that other American academics had explored similar exceptions with the State Department, but that no applications were made and that a change in visa policy remained unlikely. The assumption at the top was that any opening to European communists, even if limited to academic exchanges, would be read as a green light to their participation in governing coalitions.

Ultimately – also in part due to the unhelpful attitude of the US ambassador to Italy, John Volpe – no visa application was made to the Rome consulate for the participant in question and the conference was postponed to a later date.²

Once the decision was made public, Hal invited me to come and see him during my next visit to Washington. We held a long conversation of the type diplomats term “frank.” The atmosphere was made somewhat tense by the fact that, by pure coincidence, in the very same days a visit by the head of the Italian neo-fascist party was taking place in Washington, including a low-level meeting at the State Department – something that did not go unnoticed

² “Communiqué from the IAI”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (September-December 1975), p. 319-320.

back in Rome, *ça va sans dire*.

A couple of months later, a long article by Richard Holbrooke describing the above in much more detail came out in *Foreign Policy*, bringing to a close that crucial year of 1975, including the related problems in my relationship with Hal.³ The following year, I remember at least one occasion in which the two of us were together: a seminar on arms control in Aspen, Colorado. Two subjects dominated the conversations there: the difficult state of SALT II negotiations and the coming elections in the United States.

The Carter administration inherited the issue of euro-communism and the role the PCI could play in the Italian political scene. Nothing much happened for over a year, except for a number of confidential meetings between the new Ambassador Richard Gardner and the rising leader of the reformist wing of the PCI Giorgio Napolitano, which I was happy to host.

Meanwhile, IAI sponsored a series of debates on the international situation with the participation of political leaders, which may have helped a new development in the Italian parliament in mid-1977: the passing of a resolution reaffirming the guidelines of our foreign policy, above all the commitments to European integration and to the Atlantic Alliance. It passed by an almost unanimous vote, including with support from the PCI.

³ Richard Holbrooke, “Washington Dateline: A Little Visa Problem”, in *Foreign Policy*, No. 21 (Winter 1975-1976), p. 241-247.

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More or less in the same period, the Sonnenfeldts were in Rome. My wife Luciana and I enjoyed having them for dinner at our place, a sign of enduring friendship despite past differences and Hal’s tendency not to be dictated by them. A year or so later, the foreign-policy maker turned (reluctantly?) scholar was again our host in a different context. It was at the margins of a meeting of the European Study Commission, the IISS-sponsored initiative that was very active in East-West exchanges at the think-tank level during the Cold War. Besides him, several others participated, including – guess who – Sergio Segre, the would-be communist participant in the IAI-CFR conference at Arden House that never happened.

The April 1978 meeting occurred just weeks after former prime minister and then-president of the Christian Democrats Aldo Moro had been kidnapped by the Red Brigades. Rome, indeed the entire country, was in shock while we were discussing the uncertain state of *détente*. Italians were deeply divided on whether to negotiate with the terrorists, but he was shot dead after almost two months in detention. In fact, it was the objective convergence between the secretaries of the Christian Democrats, Benigno Zaccagnini, and the PCI, Enrico Berlinguer – along with that of Ugo La Malfa of the small Republican party, – that prevented negotiations with the Red Brigades. It would have generated, in my view, a very risky precedent for the future of the Italian democratic institutions.

During the 1980s – Hal’s most productive period for political essays

– he came more than once to IAI, while the Soviet Union was struggling to survive. Its collapse, the depth of which went beyond any expectation, and the end of the Cold War have been (so far) the most dramatic events in the segment of history we happen to have lived through (with possibly the exception of the end of the “hot war,” when the young Hal had just moved to America and the even younger me was witnessing with astonishment the “liberation” of Turin in northern Italy).

In the following years, Hal came to speak at another foundation I was involved in, the Council for the United States and Italy. In the beautiful surroundings of Villa d’Este on Lake Como, we benefited from his vision and expertise about what used to be the Soviet bloc. We discussed the new European order, which – it was hoped – would transform the unexpected end of geopolitical division into “a sort of unity,” to use Churchill’s words. At that time, the United States was in favour of such transformation.

Finally, to close the chapter on euro-communism: The PCI ceased to exist a couple of years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and took the name Democratic Party of the Left (the latter qualification was dropped later). And in 2006, Giorgio Napolitano became the president of the Republic, a position he would hold for nearly a decade. He exerted a stabilising influence on the shaky Italian political scene, including foreign policy continuity.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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