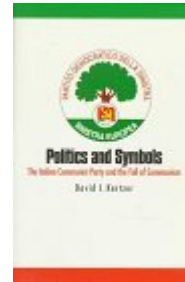


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David I. Kertzer. *Politics and Symbols: The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. xi + 211 pp.p. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06612-8.



Reviewed by Jaro Stacul (University of Cambridge)

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The fall of Communism and Socialist ideologies have received much attention from anthropological scholarship over the past few years. In particular, anthropologists have been engaged in the analyses of the shift from Communism to capitalism drawing on fieldwork conducted in Eastern European countries. In spite of the increasing interest in this transformation, still very little is known about the effects of the demise of Socialism in the Western world from an anthropological perspective. Kertzer's book *Politics and Symbols: The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism* sets out to fill this gap through the analysis of political symbols in light of the fall of the Communist Party in Italy, the Western country where Communism was strongest. The event that prompted an occasion for exploring these themes was the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party (hereafter referred to as PCI) that occurred in 1990, and the creation of two new political formations.

Central to the book is a reappraisal of the role of symbols in modern politics; its main aim is to challenge the view that what explains political action is interest and personal gain, that is to say rational choice. To do so, the author sets out to answer the questions of how political symbols are constructed and altered, and of how people come to recognise certain symbols as legitimate and other as illegitimate. His exploration rests on the assumption that "political perceptions...are symbolically

constructed," and that "people are as driven by emotion as they are by any dispassionate calculation of personal interest" (p. 8).

Thus, the chapter "Making Communist history" outlines the history of the PCI and concentrates on the part played by myth and ritual in the legitimation of Communist ideology. Its aim is to demonstrate that most of the Party's activities in the public arena "consisted in the manipulation of symbols in ritual contexts, helping to identify the party in the public mind with certain images" (p. 24). This is evident in the analysis of the PCI's use of myths and symbols from which its history is constructed. So, for example, the 1977 Party Handbook is taken as an example for its emphasis on special anniversaries such as Gramsci's death or the October revolution. Public commemorations and anniversaries are also mentioned as an example, especially in relation to the sacralization of the places occupied by the Nazis in the 1940s, where partisans had fallen.

The PCI's symbolism and its self-image from the 1950s to the 1970s are also examined in the chapter "Saviors and conspirators." The myth of the Resistance (i.e. the guerrilla movement against the Nazis and the Fascists in Northern Italy in the last years of World War II) is used as the source of legitimation of the PCI's past and present, especially to construct an opposition between the partisans on the one hand and the German invaders

and American and English imperialists on the other. An interesting part of this chapter is the analysis of the relationship between the PCI and the USSR, which shows how the former built the myth of the latter as the only country in the world that would not be imperialist, and the nation with the most advanced democracy. By contrast, vilification of the United States as source of evil informed the Party's discourse until its dissolution. However, the author observes, while in the 1960s the PCI was committed to a heroic image of the USSR, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia Soviet leaders were no longer glorified, and the PCI distanced itself from Socialist regimes.

The chapter "What's in a name?" analyses the potential that the label "Communist" had in the forging of collective identity. The chapter is an exploration of how leaders use and manipulate symbols to provide people with new representations of themselves. The main issue was the necessity to maintain Communist identity while at the same time Communist symbolism was not as powerful as during the Cold War, especially after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. This was patent when the new party (the Democratic Party of the Left, or PDS) gave up its right to the old name in order to distance itself from the repressive regimes in Eastern Europe, and to get rid of a symbolism that had become obsolete. As the author notes, the creation of a new political formation entailed not only the creation of a new symbol (an oak tree at the base of which lay the old party emblem), but also of people's perceptions of the Party and of themselves. Here Kertzer takes on board Abner Cohen's idea that people are attracted to the symbols provided by party elites [1], thereby implying that what Communism means mainly reflects the views of the party elites themselves.

The problem that the birth of a new party posed was whether the new political formation would claim continuity with its past. The author's view that the battle over the Party's history is a "battle over the members' sense of self" (p. 101) is made clear in the chapter "Battling over the past to change the future". Central to its argument is the assumption that the creation of a new Communist identity entailed a battle over the past, and the idea that in the history of the PCI the boundary between political history and political myth was far from clear. So, the Party's changing attitudes towards Stalin reveal that the construction of self-identity was historically contingent.

Similarly, the chapter "Alternative histories" investigates how the new party's leaders remade the past; so, while the PCI distanced its history from that of the op-

pressive regimes of Eastern Europe, the Resistance (and, implicitly, opposition to Fascism) remained central to its symbolism. Even the chapter "The ritual struggle" examines the use of ritual in the battle over the transformation of the Party: it emphasises rites' role in the process by which individuals are identified with given symbolic entities, and draws on a Durkheimian view of ritual as a "collective representation," especially as a device to create solidarity.

In stressing the potential of symbols and their capacity to create a personal identity the author challenges rational action: his argument is grounded on the idea that if symbols are manipulated by power brokers, then political decisions are not necessarily made through a rational process, and emotions may play a central role too.

Kertzer's book is the first attempt to make sense of the transformation of the PCI from an anthropological perspective. Its emphasis on rituals and symbols as "collective representations" doubtless highlights the potential of a Durkheimian reading of politics in the understanding of political changes. However, this is not a new theme, as the author's books *Comrades and Christians* and *Ritual, Politics, and Power* have shown.[2] Moreover, over-reliance on politics as a collective phenomenon might entail the risk of reifying official language and representations, and of playing down the way social actors receive and interpret the values that are imposed on them "from above."

Although the author stresses the relevance of perceptions and emotions, in fact he seems to assume that the values of the party elites are shared by the party followers, and does little to illuminate the question of why, if at all, Communism is still a compelling formulation of selfhood. Thus, "the people" remains an abstract entity, "the people's identities" are constructed in terms of "membership", and crucial elements such as class and gender are not even taken into account. In this respect the author seems to have availed himself of the top-down emphasis inherited from writers such as Gellner or Anderson. His analysis of political symbolism would have been more effective if he had not confined himself to the exploration of politics as "representation," but had instead investigated how the new party ideologies accommodate themselves to local-level discourses.

#### NOTES

[1]. Cohen, Abner, "Symbolic Action and the Structure of the Self" in I. Lewis, ed., *Symbols and Sentiments*, London: Academic Press, 1977.

[2]. Kertzer, David, *Comrades and Christians: Religion and Political Struggle in Communist Italy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980; Kertzer, David, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988.

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