

Letizia Argenterì. *Lelio Lagorio. Un socialista.* Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2020. 328 pp. EUR 19.00, paper, ISBN 978-88-498-6115-0.

Reviewed by Stefano Luconi (University of Padua)

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Commissioned by Matteo Pretelli (University of Naples "L'Orientale")

Lelio Lagorio

Marking the twentieth anniversary of Bettino Craxi's death, the year 2020 has seen an eruption of mainly popularizing and uneven works about the late Italian Socialist leader and former prime minister that have endeavored less to appraise his policies than to reassess his controversial involvement in the political corruption of the last phase in Italy's so-called First Republic.[1] Letizia Argenterì's volume apparently takes an alternative route in the recent literature about the downfall and disbandment of Italy's Socialist Party in the wake of the *Tangentopoli* (bribesville) scandal. Her book intends to offer an academic reconstruction of the biography of Lelio Lagorio, a long-time Craxi stalwart and a lesser Socialist bigwig at the end of the First Republic.

A pupil of jurist Piero Calamandrei, of whom he was an assistant in the School of Law at the University of Florence, and a staunch anti-Communist, Lagorio became a member of the Italian Socialist Party in 1955, joining the autonomist wing that referred to Pietro Nenni and advocated independence from the Communist Party. After briefly succeeding Giorgio La Pira as mayor of Florence for fewer than ten months between 1964 and 1965, he served as the city's deputy mayor until 1969 and

the first president of the Tuscany region from 1970 to 1978. Lagorio used his effective management of local administrations as a springboard to launch his political career at the national level. Following his election to Parliament in 1979, he was appointed to the position of minister of defense in 1980 and retained such a capacity in five different governments until 1983, proving to be a "fiercer" backer of the Western Alliance than any of his Christian Democratic predecessors, as political scientist Joseph LaPalombara has suggested.[2] He then headed the Ministry of Tourism and Show Business from 1983 to 1986 and chaired the Defense Committee of the Chamber of Deputies between 1987 and 1989. In the latter year, he won a seat in the European Parliament for the full third legislative session ending in 1994, when he eventually retired from active politics after declining to be a candidate for another term.

The outcome of numerous years of careful research, the monograph draws primarily on Lagorio's almost uncharted papers, held at the Fondazione di Studi Storici Filippo Turati in Florence; his extensive publications in the form of newspaper articles, essays, and memoirs; and his interviews and correspondence with the author.

Yet, although Argenteri relies largely upon sources produced by Lagorio himself, she never falls prey to the protagonist of her biography and does not fail to cast a critical eye on him, most notably for his reticence about both the Ustica affair of June 27, 1980—when a passenger flight crashed claiming eighty-one lives during a possible dogfight between Libyan and NATO airplanes—and the kickback system benefiting many Socialists. Argenteri's volume also takes into account a conspicuous scholarly and current affairs literature on Italian politics and the Socialist Party in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The study opens as a conventional biography with Lagorio's birth in Trieste on November 9, 1925, and the subsequent relocation of his family to Florence. The initial chapter, on Lagorio's youth, is followed by five other sections about his adherence to socialism, handling of Florence's municipal administration, presidency of Tuscany, and terms at the Defense as well as Tourism and Show Business Ministries. Within this context, Argenteri stresses Lagorio's energy in tackling with the 1966 flood that hit Florence, successful efforts in building an administrative apparatus for the Tuscany region almost from nothing, active support for the deployment of BGM-109 G "Gryphon" missiles in Italy more inside the directorate of the Socialist Party than as a member of the cabinet, tensions with President of the Republic Sandro Pertini over the delay in the mobilization of the army to rescue survivors after an earthquake stroke the area of Irpinia in 1980, and promotion of a tax shelter for financial investments in the field of performing arts.

Readers might expect supplementary details about a few relevant issues: the maneuverings that let a former regional administrator become the first Socialist minister of defense in Italy, while détente was yielding to a resumption of the arms race during the Cold War; Rome's participation in a peacekeeping force for Lebanon in 1982 and the ensuing tension with the United States and France,

as Italy wished to keep its neutrality in the civil war while Washington and Paris tended to back the Maronite-Christian faction in the effort to stifle Islamic extremists; the inner struggle among Lagorio, Valdo Spini, and Ottaviano Colzi within the Socialist Party in Florence, especially on the occasion of the 1987 parliamentary elections; and the author's claim that the US government preferred Lagorio to Craxi as Italy's premier in the mid-1980s (p. 112). One is also likely to wish additional information about Lagorio's stand within the cabinet and the Socialist nomenclature on matters such as Craxi's decision to curb the sliding wage scale in 1984 and to delete the hammer, sickle, rising sun, and book from the party's logo in 1987 to accentuate an interclassist and reformist approach to politics, along with another referendum that repealed multiple preference votes in the elections for the Chamber of Deputies in 1991.

These, however, are not enticing themes for Argenteri. In fact, the focus of her study is the demise of the Socialist Party, the topic of chapter 7, a series of events that covers about a third of the book but occurred after Lagorio had already been excluded from the inner circle of the Socialist leadership and left politically "idle" at such an "elephant cemetery" as the European Parliament (p. 62). Consequently, when it comes to the core of the volume, Lagorio is less a protagonist of Italian politics to examine than an eyewitness to and perceptive commentator on the fall of the Socialist Party to whom Argenteri resorts mostly as a source of insider knowledge.

In retrospect, Lagorio has argued that politicized judges and infighting among Socialists delivered the coup de grace to a party that the exhaustion of the propulsive impulse of reformism had already distanced from civil society.[3] Argenteri develops this latter part of Lagorio's thesis and emphasizes both the failure of Craxi's project of modernization and the Socialists' inability to profit from the 1989 collapse of communism. She contends that massive payoffs, embezzlements,

and malfeasance only added to the previous involvement of a party that little by little renounced its progressive and laborite ideals to turn itself into a machine that occupied power, eager for spoils at all levels, and enabled some of its leaders to gain personal wealth. In Argenteri's opinion, before Craxi's rise to power the Socialist Party "had all the virtues of the Communist Party without the latter's flaws. With Craxi, the Socialist Party acquired the vices of the Christian Democracy and got rid of the Socialist doctrine" (p. 264).

Lagorio emerged unscathed from *Tangentopoli*. Argenteri also reports, albeit without providing a specific date, that he had already conceded that blatant corruption was preventing the Socialist Party from gaining momentum in public opinion and at the polls even before prosecutors began their probes, although Lagorio was actually a late-comer. Argenteri herself acknowledges that, as soon as August 1, 1984, at the peak of Craxi's power, Valdo Spini introduced a bill to enforce transparency in public funding of political parties, which probably contributed to Spini's succeeding demotion from the post of deputy secretary of the Socialist Party.[4] In any case, in Argenteri's eyes, Lagorio becomes the epitome of the traditional Socialist principles and worldview that Craxi irreparably betrayed, dooming his party to ignominious extinction. As a result, the study of Lagorio's career turns out to be primarily a pretext in order to outline a virtuous course that the Socialist Party deliberately discontinued under Craxi's leadership.

Argenteri hardly misses an opportunity to appear in first person in the volume, as if she were less a historian or a political scientist than a sociologist or an anthropologist conducting ethnographic research by means of participant observation. She sometimes also loses her way in overlong anecdotes and digressions, including a few concluding pages about the coronavirus pandemic that was first identified almost three years after Lagorio's death on January 6, 2017. It even seems that she is now and then more interested in

passing sharp judgments on a few protagonists and co-stars of recent Italian politics, without the constraints of a time frame, than in rescuing Lagorio from some degrees of academic oblivion. However, in spite of these drawbacks and the author's sparkling but often idiosyncratic style of writing, Argenteri's study makes a valuable contribution to highlight Lagorio's career and offers better insights into his role in Italian politics than co-eval narratives and posthumous commemorative accounts have previously done.[5] Overall, the book helps draw greater attention to a heretofore overlooked mid-tier statesperson in the late years of Italy's First Republic.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Gianni Barbacetto, *La beatificazione di Craxi: Le falsità e i luoghi comuni sul leader politico che continua a dividere gli italiani* (Milan: Chiarelettere, 2020); Mirko Crocoli, *Nel nome di Craxi* (Lainate: A. Car, 2020); Fabio Martini, *Controvento: La vera storia di Bettino Craxi* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2020); Nicola Scanzini and Roberto Giuliano, *Le fake news su Bettino Craxi: Debito pubblico, sovranismo ed altro* (Chieti: Solfanelli, 2020); and Marcello Sorgi, *Presunto colpevole: Gli ultimi giorni di Craxi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2020). Authors include Craxi's alleged heir apparent, Claudio Martelli. See Claudio Martelli, *L'antipatico: Bettino Craxi e la grande coalizione* (Milan: La Nave di Teseo, 2020). These books were preceded by Mario Pacelli, *Ad Hammamet: Ascesa e caduta di Bettino Craxi* (Rome: Graphofeel, 2019). For a review article of previous literature about Craxi, see Roberto Chiarini, "La memoria maledetta di Craxi," *Nuova Storia Contemporanea* 19, no. 6 (2015): 33-60.

[2]. Joseph LaPalombara, "Socialist Alternatives: The Italian Variant," *Foreign Affairs* 60, no. 4 (1982): 936.

[3]. Lelio Lagorio, *L'esplosione: Storia della disgregazione del PSI* (Florence: Polistampa, 2004).

[4]. Spencer M. Di Scala, *Renewing Italian Socialism: Nenni to Craxi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 243.

[5]. See, for example, Antonio Tajani, *Il Granduca: Lagorio, un socialista ministro della Difesa* (Milan: Consult, 1982); and Regione Toscana, *Lelio Lagorio, lo statista e l'intellettuale*, ed. Renzo Ricchi (Florence: Edizioni dell'Assemblea, 2019).

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