Taking Up the Banner of Austerity: Visions of Economic Transition on the 1970s Italian Left

In 1985, just six years before the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and shortly after the abandonment of its historic compromise strategy, British historian Tobias Abse spared no criticism as he assessed the paths taken by the Italian Communists in the previous decade. Writing scathingly of the weakened position of Communist parties worldwide, but especially of the PCI’s status as “a party without a strategy,” Abse reflected that “like the Catholic Church over the centuries, the PCI in 1976–80 demanded that the poor make sacrifices for the sake of a nebulous future; if the kingdom of socialism was of this earth, it was certainly not for this generation.”¹

Indeed, to many left and right-leaning observers, the storms of fiscal and debt crises, social rebellion, and large-scale economic restructuring that clashed in the 1970s have taken on a significance of biblical proportions. In particular, the compromesso storico (historic compromise), a period in the late 1970s in which the PCI established an alliance with the Christian Democrats and pushed austerity reforms, is often remembered as a reversal of the traditional opposition role of the Communists and the bellwether of a broader retreat from radical visions of economic order. As the largest Communist party in Western Europe, claiming 34.4 percent of the total vote in Italy’s 1976 elections, the PCI and its proposed “Italian way to socialism” in many ways stood at the forefront of the Eurocommunist movement, the supposed

alternative to both Western liberal capitalism and Soviet authoritarian socialism. However, the many labor reforms the Party helped advance throughout the postwar period of economic growth came under threat in the years of the compromise, when it assumed a governing role and the task of managing a country in economic turmoil.

Often obfuscated by accounts of the delicate political maneuvering involved in this governing compromise are comprehensive analyses of the PCI’s turn to austerity policy in this period. Even fewer accounts situate these changes within the charged atmosphere of Italy’s Hot Autumn and workerist and autonomist movements of the late 1960s and 70s, a period which saw the country weather the steepest rise in oil prices in the industrialized world. Amidst demands from extra-parliamentary labor organizations like Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua for worker self-management, equal wages for all, and the eventual abolition of work, the PCI pursued a different path, responding to the oil crisis and serious inflation by approving wage reductions and strict limits on public and individual spending. This dramatic domestic turn mirrored developments on the international front. As Italy sank deeper into balance of payments deficits and steep oil prices magnified the reality of economic interdependence, the Party’s calls for working-class sacrifice complemented a reversal of its foreign policy position toward Western European integration and acceptance of aid from the capitalist world. Meanwhile, a competing third vision, advanced by some PCI members and union representatives, opposed this tactical shift and sought a return to the Party’s opposition role and reformist social democratic platform.

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5 Putnam, “Interdependence.”
These confrontations must be viewed in the context of a transformative decade awash in the tide of globalization and financialization, whether this manifested itself through the shutting of factories or the pressures dealt by international financial institutions. Far from occurring in a parliamentary vacuum, the imposition of austerity and rollback of labor protections met resistance every step of the way. The distancing of the Italian Communists from the proverbial “kingdom of socialism,” then, is better analyzed as a period of contestation between different views of economic order, all impelled by the failings of a faltering global system, than as a singular event, packaged in the domestic electoral dealmaking of the historic compromise.

I. The Post-Bretton Woods PCI

The postwar Bretton Woods system ushered in significant trade liberalization, a relatively stable monetary order, and high levels of foreign investment. Under the 1944 agreements, the American dollar was tied to the value of gold. The dollar-gold system allowed countries other than the U.S. to adjust their monetary policies as domestic conditions demanded, granting governments the flexibility to devalue their currencies and stimulate their economies during downturns. Between 1950 and 1973, the ability to tamper with monetary policy became a principal economic and political lever as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) lowered trade barriers and catapulted countries into competitive production for world markets. In particular, Western Europe distinguished itself as a key exporter, increasing its total exports by $225 billion in a little over two decades.

In Italy, the favorable conditions for international trade and investment ushered in an “economic miracle” from 1948 to 1976, during which the country doubled its exports and began

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to import key raw materials to fuel its industrial boom. However, as Jeffry Frieden notes, “in order to secure the backing of the socialists and their working-class base for the Bretton Woods order, European governments had to accommodate union organization, social welfare policies, and wage increases.” Thus, at the same time that the country integrated itself into the world economy, social security expenditures rose—most dramatically by fourfold between 1970 and 1977—and began to outpace the rate of GDP growth. As the largest force on the institutional left, the PCI played a leading role in implementing social insurance schemes that would provide workers some protections from the vagaries of rapid industrial growth by minimizing unemployment and increasing state aid.

Such measures came at the behest of a powerful working-class base often organized in national industrial unions, such as the Italian General Federation of Labor (CGIL), whose leadership worked closely with the Party. Responding to the demands of unionized labor during the Hot Autumn revolts of 1968 and 1969, the PCI drafted the structural reform bills for national healthcare and universal pensions systems that would eventually pass through Parliament in the late 1960s and construct an expansive welfare state. The Party also showed it was receptive to demands that went beyond social democratic interventions, proposing in a 1964 memo to democratize state social insurance agencies by “transitioning into direct management … by workers.” Along with advocating for reforms that would allow “millions of workers to elect …

9 Frieden, Global Capitalism, 299.
the bodies that manage social insurance,” the PCI championed legislation that would protect wages by adjusting social services to the cost-of-living index. These advances attested to the influence of the labor movement on the PCI, as well as the relative tangibility of the ideal of a worker-run socialist society within the tense environment of labor-business standoffs that characterized the 1960s.

The end of the Bretton Woods order and oil crisis in the 1970s upended this precarious balance of forces. The dismantling of the gold-dollar standard, along with the quadrupling of the price of oil by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), led to high levels of inflation and successive currency devaluations. Italy, which supplied more than three quarters of its primary fuel demand with oil in 1973, was especially vulnerable to the rise in world oil and raw materials prices. To offset double-digit inflation and the rapid devaluation of the lira, the state borrowed heavily from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other countries in the European Economic Community (EEC), incurring foreign debts of nearly $20 billion by 1977. Identifying Italy’s deficit woes as stemming from the “structural weaknesses” of high labor costs, the IMF conditioned further loans on the weakening of hard-won wage protections like the scala mobile, the system that tied wages to cost of living. It was in this context that Enrico Berlinguer, leader of the PCI, announced in late 1973 the advent of a “collaboration … between the popular Communist and Socialist forces and the popular Catholic forces” in order to “not only avoid economic collapse, but also to guarantee … the efficiency of the economic process.”

His newfound praise for the “popular and democratic” elements of the Christian Democrats, as

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well as emphasis on overcoming the dire national economic situation, signaled the PCI’s
willingness to accommodate, and even support, conservative politics during a period of
economic emergency.

The Party’s revised orientation sought to tackle the immediate issues of inflation and
foreign debt, which began in 1976 to dominate discussions of economic and social policy in
Party speeches, publications, and legislation signed by the new coalition government. However,
in prioritizing the fight against inflation and balance-of-payments deficits, it articulated a new
vision of economic order that displaced previous concerns over achieving full employment, wage
increases, and expanding the welfare state in a democratic manner. In a 1976 article written for
the Party’s economic policy periodical, Giorgio Amendola, a leader of the PCI’s right wing,
argued that “the combination of those nodes [of balance-of-payments deficits, state budget
deficits from the redundancy fund, and high interest rates] provokes devaluation, inflation and
the weakening of the lira” and that only “a containment of public consumption and public
spending” could reverse stagnation and “bring about, with strictness and coherence, a program of
… economic development.”20 However, he insisted that such limits on spending, whether by state
entities or individuals, were still compatible with “the values of the highest proletarian tradition”;
indeed, workers would in any case prefer a tightened public sector and “guaranteed
reinstatements in new productive activities” to the “irrepressible social cost” of “sums poured
into wasteful bailout operations.”21 In order to exit the crisis, Amendola pushed, the working
class would have to come together in a different form of solidarity: the solidarity of “sacrifices
carried out by workers for workers, and for the nation, of which the working class is now the
driving force.”22

21 Amendola, “Coerenza,” 4-5.
Although the article was met with much criticism from within the Party, by 1976 a general consensus had formed around Amendola’s appeals for working-class restraint, taking shape concretely in the form of a broadly-backed legislative package in July 1977. The austerity measures brought the issues of inflation and public deficit to the fore, giving explicit directives to “realize the goal of increasing the rate of economic growth within the constraints of reducing the rate of inflation” by “contain[ing] and requalify[ing] all current public spending … of local and social security institutions … temporarily halt[ing] both central and local public administrative functions, save for those of essential character,” and “by revising the wage system and placing controls on the cost of labor.”

Despite targeting working-class gains like social insurance and wage increases, these belt-tightening measures were accompanied by rhetoric that upheld them as inherently modernizing, and even necessary steps in the advancement of a socialist society. Echoing Amendola’s earlier exhortations for the affirmation of working-class values through austerity, PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer presented reductions in public spending and labor costs as a collective “war against waste” and project for societal “renewal” born out of the “internal needs of the working class” in a speech given shortly before the 1977 legislation. Attempting to draw a distinction between the PCI’s line and the repressive austerity programs of “dominant classes and conservative political forces,” Berlinguer expounded that:

For us, austerity is the way to confront the roots of and to lay the foundations to overcome a system that has entered a structural crisis … that system distinguished by waste and profligacy, the exaltation of particularism and unrestrained individualism, [and] of mindless consumerism. Austerity signifies discipline, efficiency, and justice … Now, on what basis can the workers’ movement take up the banner of austerity?

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Austerity is for the communists the true struggle against existing conditions, against the spontaneous development of events, and is, at the same time, the material precondition to launch change. Thus understood austerity becomes a weapon in a modern and current struggle against both the defenders of the existing economic and political system and against those who consider the only possible arrangement of a society to be … backward, underdeveloped, and ever more unbalanced and full of injustices, contradictions, and inequalities.\textsuperscript{25}

In this reading, austerity was the long-awaited opportunity to launch a decisive process of anti-capitalist transformation. By purging both individuals and the state of their excessive consumption, the PCI’s program of austerity would shape the ideal socialist society and citizen, one disciplined into accepting sacrifices for the wellbeing of both the nation and the working class. Such a policy, then, had to be tempered by assurances that economic sacrifice would accompany fundamental changes in a society marked by “injustices, contradictions, and inequalities.” In this vein, Amendola praised the Party for simultaneously turning its attention to social justice reforms like “fresh development in the south,” “the reorganization of our tax-collecting system,” and cracking down on “black labor,” or unofficial, unregulated work.\textsuperscript{26}

However, as Peter Lange argues, the offsetting of the effects of austerity demanded nothing less than “gains in power for the unions and the working class parties, a reduction in the prerogatives of capital, [and] structural reform of the entire way in which economic, and therefore distributive, decisions were reached.”\textsuperscript{27} In the end, these ambitious potentialities did not come to pass, as the redistributive goals of the legislation were dashed by a “civil service … not equipped to combat tax evasion or close loopholes” and foot-dragging by the PCI to guarantee union independence.\textsuperscript{28} Shortly after the Party’s historic electoral performance of 1976, its tacit approval of “higher taxes, enforcement of advance tax payments, cuts in public spending,

\textsuperscript{25} Berlinguer, “Politica di austerità.”
\textsuperscript{27} Peter Lange, “Crisis and Consent, Change and Compromise: Dilemmas of Italian Communism in the 1970s,” \textit{West European Politics} 2, no. 3 (October 1979): 123, \url{https://doi.org/10.1080/01402387908424253}.
substantial rises in electricity charges, telephone tolls and gasoline prices, and a start on modifying inflationary wage boosts.”

Indeed, by 1977, the Party newspaper *l’Unità* was admitting that “nobody is deluding themselves that only through loans from the Fund is it possible to tackle and initiate solutions to the country’s problems,” signaling a pragmatic reversal of the hostility to financial institutions. If the pressures of governance amidst an economic crisis demanded the embrace of Western capitalist integration by the Communists, then they also spurred the adoption of a new vision of economic order entirely. It was one rooted in austerity and the revision of traditional means of advancing working-class interests.

II. The Defenders of Social Democracy

At the 1973 congress of the Italian Confederation of Trade Unions (CISL), the secretary general proclaimed that “there is no power group today, except the union, which can speak in the name of all workers.” The pronouncement highlighted both the primacy of unions in political and economic negotiation and their tensions with the political party, a competing organ of working-class representation. This tension was especially palpable as the PCI reneged on its older commitments to defend wage levels and minimize unemployment, which surpassed 1

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million in fall 1974.\textsuperscript{33} As the Party caved to the exigencies of steering the country back into financial health by unloading much of the cost of deflationary measures onto workers, dissent materialized through spirited intraparty debate and authorized union actions. Countering the PCI’s official austerity line, both internal dissidents and union representatives sought to maintain the integrity of the institutional mouthpieces of the workers’ movement by demanding that austerity not threaten the reformist labor progress made under social democracy. In doing so, they distanced themselves from, on the one hand, the conservative wings of Party leadership and, on the other, the autonomist labor movement that sought to topple the party and union forms altogether.

On the streets and the shop floor, dissatisfaction with the PCI’s new policy mounted. The CGIL-CISL-UIL Federation, an association of the three largest national industrial unions, initially bitterly protested deflationary policies. The dissent came on the heels of a high point for the union movement in 1975, when the federation successfully negotiated an upgrade of the scala mobile system that would adjust wages to inflation.\textsuperscript{34} Decrying proposals by the coalition government to constrain wages, the federation coordinated a general strike in Milan in October 1976 in a display of opposition to “any possibility of a generalized block on the scala mobile.” However, union representatives, too, hesitated to question the legitimacy of the PCI or denounce austerity outright, admitting that the scale of the crisis simply demanded “a political economic line that makes austerity an instrument for exiting the crisis while relaunching a different kind of development.”\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} Hillman, “The Mutual Influence,” 7.
Other unions adopted less charitable positions toward the policies. Threatening to strike over the potential loss of wage protections and other benefits with the signing of the 1977 legislative accord, the metalworkers’ trade union federation emphasized that “our objective is not an alternative to the government, but a change in its recessionary political and economic policies. Our firm point is the rejection of violence.” Thus, though the leadership sought to win favorable reforms from the government through tried-and-true, rank-and-file militancy, they were careful not to endorse the spontaneous anti-PCI tactics and heightened “violence” of the autonomist movement. Labor gains could be won and defended, so union leaders surmised, through negotiation and coordinated, contained strikes. The most effective way to fight austerity was not through the “individualistic fragmentation” and armed anti-capitalist struggle of autonomist groups, but through concerted pressure on the PCI to restore its labor-friendly and social democratic platform.

Many members of the Party’s central committee sympathized with these growing sentiments among unions. In particular, the severe responses to Amendola’s recommendation for “strictness and coherence” demonstrated that the Party was far from unified behind the policy. Luigi Longo, former Party chief and a leader of its left wing, took issue with Amendola’s declaration that workers must absorb the bulk of the austerity shock to right the nation’s finances, writing in response that “a political quid pro quo must be offered and guaranteed, because otherwise the call for sacrifice risks remaining a dead letter.” However, he did not deny that “the workers—who certainly bear no responsibility for the crisis” would need to accept “serious sacrifices.” Unlike Berlinguer, who gestured vaguely at the need for a “renewal,” Longo

insisted on more immediate offerings to alleviate the bitter pill of austerity and safeguard social democratic policies.

Other members, and former members, followed suit. In a discussion around austerity published in an October 1977 edition of L’Unità, several speakers raised concerns over the “malaise” and “widespread dissatisfaction in vast masses of workers” over the policies, emphasizing the need for a redistributive “requalification of public spending” concentrated “toward public and social usage, [and] combating corporate pushes.” In addition, they warned that “the crisis is not in fact soluble with a proper politics conducted primarily at the parliamentary level,” criticizing the central committee’s increasing isolation from its base and unwillingness to “involve the great masses” in policy decisions.³⁹ Lucio Magri, who had strongly criticized the Party’s economic policy and been expelled for it, wrote that while austerity was necessary to “shift income towards collective consumption,” the policy did not go far enough in its redistributive aims to “selectively and rigorously” target luxury consumption.⁴⁰ While stopping short of fully disavowing austerity politics, he and other critics argued for a recentering of workers’ demands that would inform a more equitable response to the crisis and maintain the Party’s prestige as a mass organization.

III. Autonomous Struggle and the Backlash to Tradition

In 1974, the Italian steel company Italsider fired three hundred workers from its Bagnoli plant.⁴¹ Rosso, a periodical involved in the autonomist movement, decried the development as the result of a widespread “restructuring” of factories and increasing “interchangeability of the job

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post through the recomposition of tasks … to ensure the continuity of the production process against both sudden and planned absenteeism.” Within these destabilizing changes for the workers’ movement lay the imperative, it continued, to pursue “new objectives and forms of struggle” that moved beyond unions and factory councils—insti tuti ons “no longer responsive to the needs of the new phase of struggle,”—and to “refuse salaried work … realize the human dimension [of the worker, [and] in a word create communism.”\(^\text{42}\)

These words encompassed the mass disillusionment of much of the working-class electorate as soaring consumer prices, industrial restructuring, and the politics of compromise threatened to erode labor power in both the workplace and representative politics. In the 1970s, heavy international competition, high energy costs, and changing consumer tastes triggered restructuring processes in Italy’s heavy industries; to cut costs, businesses often eliminated or replaced Fordist production line jobs with unstable, precarious employment, which undermined union organization.\(^\text{43}\) In these changing economic conditions, workers advocated not only for the wage protections and benefits traditionally championed by their union and party representatives, but also for the end of “heavy, harmful, [and] exhausting” work.\(^\text{44}\) As the PCI trumpeted its new program of unity and sacrifice, workers already bearing the brunt of industrial reorganization began to regard the Party as another source of exploitation. “Austerity,” as one worker put it, “is a fatigue without respite.”\(^\text{45}\)

Indeed, the influence of autonomist philosophy, embodied by organizations like Lotta Continua and Potere Operaio and articulated by intellectuals like Antonio Negri and Sergio Bologna, into the late 1970s testified to the resentment many workers felt toward the PCI and

\(^{42}\) “Ristrutturazione,” 6.


\(^{44}\) “Ristrutturazione,” 7.

unions. In their view, these institutions were capitulating to business interests to stabilize capitalism.\textsuperscript{46} As the PCI’s austerity line sought to, among other things, achieve a “greater mobility of labor” to lower labor costs and herald a “new economic expansion,”\textsuperscript{47} union leadership also drifted toward a platform of wage containment and labor flexibility.\textsuperscript{48} In 1978, the CGIL-CISL-UIL Federation drew closer to the PCI’s policy with the signing of the “EUR” Accords, which explicitly outlined the objective “to reduce the repercussions of wage increases on overall labor costs.”\textsuperscript{49} Frustrated by these developments, another autonomist publication concluded that “the PCI and the union resolve the [economic] problems not by attempting to relaunch a workers’ offensive … but by smoothing and reversing the objectives we must reach by 180 degrees (the EUR turn).”\textsuperscript{50} Instead, the movement demanded “a guaranteed income, through a jobs guarantee,” “wage equalizations,” “the refusal of increased workloads,” and “reduction in work hours.”\textsuperscript{51}

Through diverse, subversive tactics, extraparliamentary movements unfurled a vision of economic order that spurned reformism channeled through state institutions and embraced bottom-up social struggle. Spontaneous campaigns encouraged the “self-reduction” of prices, or the refusal to pay for goods ranging from bus fares to theater tickets, creation of community-run social centers, and squatting in both public and privately-owned buildings.\textsuperscript{52} In the eyes of many, the oil crisis, rising prices, and general economic instability were the doing of a tripartite ruling

\textsuperscript{47} Amendola, “The Italian Crisis.”
\textsuperscript{48} Magri, “The Tailor,” 283.
\textsuperscript{50} “‘76/’79 PCI/Compromesso storico e bisogni proletari,” \textit{Il corrispondente operaio}, April 1, 1979, 10, \url{https://archivioautonomia.it/autonomie-del-meridione/i-nostri-giornali-autonomie-del-meridione/il-corrispondente-operaio-n-4-1979/}.
class of unions, bosses, and parties. One participant’s testimony reveals the anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist, as well as widespread, nature of the squatting movement in 1970s Rome:

The bosses’ recruitment of armed squads to guard the buildings evicted by the police … show how the state and bosses aim to suffocate and repress the needs of workers in this period of crisis. … On January 24th, 300 families occupied some houses in Portonaccio. These belonged to the Roch enterprise as well as Caltagirone, a massive tax dodger tied to the right wing of the Christian Democrats. In March, Caltagirone would lose 1.27 billion lira in the Casino of Monte Carlo. These occupations were organised by Avanguardia Operaia and Lotta Comunista. … By mid-March this first cycle of struggle had been broken under the deployment of police violence. While political forces such as Autonomia Operaia tried to maintain the momentum through the occupation of churches, these actions lost steam within a few days. Self-satisfied, the PCI waved farewell to the movement on the pages of “l’Unità”.  

The decentralized struggles of the autonomist movement, then, explicitly identified the state, and the PCI by association, as co-conspirators of industry aiding the processes of capitalist dispossession and accumulation. By intervening directly in the material conditions of workers and refusing to embrace the PCI’s economic goals as their own, these “new forms of struggle” sought to subvert traditional labor organizations’ claims to worker representation. In marked contrast to the Party’s vision of an ascetic “proletarian tradition,” autonomist activists pushed not only for the relatively stable employment and wage levels won under the Bretton Woods era, but for guaranteed job security, access to both basic and luxury goods, and less work in general. As such, through its “rejection of both expansion and underdevelopment, and … of a State founded on labor,” the autonomist movement pointedly countered the PCI’s moralizing calls for societal development premised on sacrifice and austerity.

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IV. The “Downward Miracle” of the ’70s

By the late 1970s, Italy was experiencing, as Lucio Magri suggested, a “downward miracle” of widespread economic restructuring, handicapped social services, soaring public debt, and increased terroristic violence in the streets.\textsuperscript{55} With the end of the Bretton Woods agreements in 1971, high prices for oil and other important industrial inputs shook the relatively stable foundations of national and international finances of past decades. The old order of industrial growth underpinned by Fordist production and social democratic compromise seemed to be unraveling. In its place, low-wage, mobile labor, higher unemployment, and cuts in social spending proliferated.\textsuperscript{56} Unwilling to back down from its austerity position due to these economic pressures, but simultaneously suffering electoral losses over the impacts of its prescribed program of economic sacrifice, the PCI was apparently “poised between the contrasting tendencies of radicalism and deradicalization, committed fully to neither while endeavoring to reconcile both” in 1979.\textsuperscript{57}

Competing visions of economic order clashed in and around the contentious policymaking discussions of the PCI. While the party’s more moderate wings viewed the crisis as the culmination of consumerist profligacy and excessive public spending, prescribing austerity as the antidote, others in its ranks saw in the faltering global capitalist order an opportunity to continue the social democratic opposition. Disillusioned with union representation and the PCI’s pragmatism under the historic compromise, the autonomist movement rejected the logics of collective sacrifice and social democratic politics altogether, mounting an explosive offensive against both in the name of uncompromising, anti-capitalist struggle.

\textsuperscript{55} Magri, “The Tailor,” 303.
\textsuperscript{56} Magri, “The Tailor,” 304.
\textsuperscript{57} Sodaro, “The Italian Communists,” 246.
Indeed, the Party’s new slogan (“PCI: Party of Struggle and of Government”), launched in 1976, seemed to express the inherent contradictions in a party poised to govern a crisis-stricken country while also remaining committed to an “Italian way to socialism.” To many observers, its new policies of wage containment, limitations on public spending, and working-class self-discipline were incompatible with previously professed ideals of a democratic, worker-run society. These dissenters remained unconvinced by Party leaders’ claims that, on the contrary, austerity was in itself a proletarian initiative setting the stage for a structural transition to a socialist mode of development. In the end, austerity either would not or could not, as Party officials promised, “transform Italian society and the social relations, way of life, ideals, and values of human coexistence.” Instead, the pragmatism of the revised program left much of its base wondering “where the revolution went.”

Word Count: 4461

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