

# Italo Calvino, Communist<sup>1</sup>

(Notes from the Field)

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Let me begin with two simple statements:

Italo Calvino was an Italian writer who was born in Cuba on October 15, 1923 and died in Siena on September 19, 1985.

Italo Calvino was, throughout his adult life, a communist militant.

Each of these sentences is equally true, in fact obvious; and yet, outside of Italy and especially in the circuit of Anglo-American universities, the second affirmation runs the risk of seeming a surprise. Calvino? Italo Calvino? The writer of combinatory narrative? The emulator of Jorge Louis Borges? George Perec's friend? The theorist of "Lightness"? The same Calvino? A communist? *That* Calvino?

At least in Italy, that Calvino was a communist is not yet news, but as time goes by even in Italy his political activity and the political passion behind his opus are increasingly often set aside. Partly, this is what happens to the classics. But in this case one also senses a great desire to forget an entire piece of recent history. All the more for this reason, it is useful to go over a few simple facts.

Calvino was a communist militant when he participated in the Resistance in Liguria. He was a communist militant when he worked for the Turinese edition of *L'Unità* (the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party), between 1948 and 1949. He was a communist militant in 1957, when he defended *The Fall of Berlin* (1950), the Stalinist propaganda movie directed by Michail Ciaureli on the Red Army in World War II.<sup>2</sup> He was a communist militant in the same 1957, when he left the Italian Communist Party (PCI) along with a few hundred other intellectuals in protest against the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet Union. He was a communist militant when he moved to Paris in 1968 just in time to take part in the so-called *Joli Mai* (he has left us a magnificent, but relatively unknown, letter about it, which is worth citing:

Viviamo le ultime giornate della straordinaria città senza macchine né metro, con code ai negozi, poi il discorso di De Gaulle, le macchine dei gollisti clacsonanti che cercano di penetrare nel Quartiere e sono scacciate, la Sorbona che sembra una fortezza assediata, con katanghesi appostati e i giovani che s'aspettano il peggio e maledicono i comunisti. Nottate in cui non si fa che girare a piedi tra continui allarmi in un clima di eccitazione continua. (...) Mi pare che qualcosa stia davvero cambiando in Europa. Certo si andrà verso l'organizzazione d'una nuova forza rivoluzionaria anche operaia, mentre ormai la via dei partiti comunisti è irreversibile come quella della socialdemocrazia

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and expanded version of a short text that appeared in Italian in *Le parole e le cose*: Gabriele Pedullà, "The Dark Side of the Memos: Il testamento politico di Italo Calvino," September 19, 2015, <https://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=20316>.

<sup>2</sup> Italo Calvino, "Sciolti dal giuramento," *Cinema Nuovo* 6, nos. 120–21 (December 1957): 333–34 and in Italo Calvino, *Saggi 1945–1985*, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 2:1912–14.

alla vigilia della prima guerra mondiale. L'interrogativo su fino a che punto la reazione potrà spingersi sulla via del fascismo sembra non preoccupare i giovani rivoluzionari: e chissà, forse è giusto, perché viviamo tempi talmente diversi da quelli del nostro passato e le cose saltano fuori sempre diverse da come si possono prevedere.

(We are living the last days of this extraordinary city without cars and without a metro, with lines at the stores, then De Gaulle's speech, the honking cars of his supporters who try to penetrate the Latin Quarter but are turned out, the Sorbonne that seems a fortress under siege, with the militants ready to fight and the young who expect the worst and curse the Communist Party. Nights in which you do nothing but walk about among continuous alarms in a climate of continuous excitement. [...] It seems to me that something is really changing in Europe. For sure, it is a step toward the organization of a new revolutionary force supported by the working class, while at this point the path of the communist parties is irreversible, like that of social-democracies on the eve of WWI. The question of how far the reaction will push itself down the road toward fascism does not seem to worry the young revolutionaries: and, who knows, maybe they are right, for we are living times so different from our past and things always happen differently than we can predict.)<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, Calvino was a communist militant in 1977 when, in the *Corriere della Sera* (the conservative newspaper of the Italian bourgeoisie), he praised “the penchant for military discipline” of the PCI, calling it “its most precious historical legacy,” and expressing the hope that the party might be able “to preserve it from ideological assaults” (a tacit, polemical reference to the New Left).<sup>4</sup> He was a Communist in 1979 when, in *la Repubblica* (the progressive newspaper of the Italian bourgeoisie), he recalled his own Stalinism of the 1950s with placid and unapologetic words.<sup>5</sup> But examples could be multiplied at will.

Similarly, if the image of the city returns so obsessively in his books, from *La speculazione edilizia* (*A Plunge into Real Estate*) to *Marcovaldo*, from *La giornata di uno scrutatore* (*The Watcher*) to *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*), it is because for Calvino the city is not a simple conglomerate of houses and buildings (that which in Latin is called an *urbs*), but a combination of men and women who live together (in Latin, *civitas*). And up until the end he continued to think, and to think of himself, within this complex project of re-founding of the human community upon fairer and more rational bases.

As even just these few details suggest, the story of Calvino as a communist militant can be told from many different perspectives, both internal and external to his works. However, it might be interesting to do so from the most difficult one: that is to say, by using as a starting point his most well-known non-fiction work—so well-known that it has become a sort of manifesto of international postmodernism: the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, written in 1985 and published posthumously in 1988.<sup>6</sup> Here, too, in fact, in the

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<sup>3</sup> Italo Calvino to Michele Rago, July 27, 1968, in *Lettere 1940–1985*, ed. Luca Baranelli (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), 1008–10. My translation.

<sup>4</sup> Italo Calvino, “I nostri prossimi 500 anni,” *Corriere della Sera*, April 10, 1977, and *Saggi*, 2:2295. See also “Il senso della durezza,” originally entitled “Perché ho parlato di disciplina militare,” *Nuovasocietà*, May 1, 1977, 28 and *Saggi*, 2:2300–02. My translation.

<sup>5</sup> See also Italo Calvino, “Sono stato stalinista anch'io?,” *la Repubblica*, December 16–17, 1979, and *Saggi* 2:2841, and “Quel giorno i carri armati uccisero le nostre speranze,” *la Repubblica*, December 13, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Calvino always thought of the title for his Norton lectures in English; the title *Lezioni americane* was chosen by the editors with Esther Calvino after the writer's death. See Mario Barenghi's note, “Lezioni americane,” in *Saggi 1945–1985* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 2: 2957.

point apparently most distant from the political engagement that accompanied him his whole life, Calvino's political passions emerge powerfully—even if scholars have for the most part chosen to interpret it as the text of a formalist who was far removed from the battles of earlier years. A closer look at the work will indeed show something quite different.

The *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio/Six Memos for the Next Millennium* were originally conceived as a series of talks to be given at Harvard, as part of the prestigious Norton Lectures series, the very year Calvino died. As is well known, they are a reflection on the six literary virtues that Calvino proposed to hand down to the readers of the next century, especially younger ones. An unforeseen and irreparable event—the author's death, when the manuscript was not yet complete—determined the structure of the *Lezioni/Memos* as we know them today. After his praising of “Leggerezza” (“Lightness”), “Rapidità” (“Quickness”), “Esattezza” (“Exactitude”), “Visibilità” (“Visibility”), and “Molteplicità” (“Multiplicity”), Calvino apparently had in mind a sixth lesson dedicated to “Consistency,” which he had planned to write once he arrived in Boston. He unfortunately did not have the time to do so.<sup>7</sup>

This loss is a pity, because we would have liked to know more about Calvino's thoughts on consistency (I would say: especially on consistency). Yet, it is not impossible to imagine at least in part what Calvino would have written in this last chapter. The standard collection of his essays runs about four thousand pages (including no more than two-thirds of his formerly published texts or maybe even less), and time and again the literary value of consistency does indeed surface in these writings. However, it may be worth noting that at least once, in his lengthy reflection on his debut novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947, *The Path to the Spiders' Nest*) written twenty years later, and published as the preface to the 1964 edition of the text, Calvino explicitly takes a stand against consistency. All of the friends who had read the book before publication, recounts Calvino, reproached him the same alleged error: while the rest of the novel was narrated from the perspective of a child who does not understand the events in which he is involved (the Italian Resistance), towards the end of the book, in chapter 9, Calvino inserted a sudden change of register and made room for the thoughts of a more politically mature communist militant in order to explain the actual historical meaning of that struggle. In the name of “homogeneity,” friends unanimously advised him to cut that chapter; in fact, as Calvino ironically wrote, “a quel tempo, l'unità stilistica era uno di pochi criteri estetici sicuri” (“At that time, stylistic unity was one of the few indisputable aesthetic criteria”).<sup>8</sup> But Calvino held out, and twenty years later was still proud of his decision.

The reader of the *Lezioni/Memos* will not be surprised by this stance, nor will he need to resort to concepts dear to historians of literature like evolution or oscillation to explain the alleged contrast between the respective judgments of 1964 and 1985. The reader will not be surprised, either, because at the beginning of the first chapter Calvino himself explains that the six values he has chosen do not contrast with six flaws, but instead with six other perhaps equally admirable values. As Calvino writes: “Dedicherò la prima conferenza all'opposizione leggerezza/peso, e sosterrò le ragioni della leggerezza. Questo non vuol dire che io consideri le ragioni del peso meno valide, ma solo che sulla leggerezza penso d'averne più cose da dire” (“I will devote my first lecture to the opposition between lightness and weight, and I will make the

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<sup>7</sup> The only trace of this projected memo appears in the appendix to the Meridiani Mondadori edition of the *Saggi 1945–1985*, edited by Mario Barenghi. It is the text of a manuscript entitled “Cominciare e finire” (“To start and to end”), dated February 22, 1985, found with the manuscripts and typescripts of the five memos that Calvino completed. According to Esther Calvino and Barenghi, the author had meant to use it to open and later to conclude his *Lezioni/Memos*. See Italo Calvino, *Saggi 1945–1985*, 1:734–53 and 2:2959–60.

<sup>8</sup> Italo Calvino, “Preface,” trans. Martin McLaughlin, in *The Path to the Spiders' Nest*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun (New York: The Ecco Press, 2000), 13.

case for lightness. This is not to say that I regard the case for weight as weaker, but only that I think I have more things to say about lightness”).<sup>9</sup>

Although Calvino did not repeat this type of consideration about the other four values, there is no reason to think that things were very different for *quickness*, *exactitude*, *visibility*, or *multiplicity*. If Calvino is so explicit in this case, it is only because, in the still very politicized Italian culture of the 1980s, praising lightness could have sounded like proof of disengagement. In the four subsequent lessons Calvino shows that the value he praises often has very much to do with its contrary, for example when he writes that the supreme virtue of vagueness is the result of an absolute exactitude, or when he describes *multiplicity* as the ability to rule over chaos thanks to a small number of principles. So, even if the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos for the Next Millennium* are often read as a sophisticated cookbook for writing good literature, improving certain virtues and avoiding certain vices, this would be a highly misleading interpretation.

In this approach there is another aspect that deserves our consideration. As one first reads Calvino’s table of contents, some of the six literary values seem to contradict the previous. If quickness goes well with lightness, in common perception exactitude does not get along very well with quickness. Similarly, while visibility and exactitude are clearly related, multiplicity and consistency might be more difficult to reconcile. By precisely defining these concepts, the different chapters show that such contradictions are only apparent. At the same time, Calvino carefully avoids dissolving the tension. For this reason, if I try to imagine what he would have eventually written about consistency, I cannot help but see him engaged in a struggle with the famous essay by Leo Spitzer on chaotic enumeration in the Western poetic tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Calvino’s death transformed his memos into a sort of still image, quickly erasing the traces of the tortuous path that led him to these final considerations on literature. However, for those familiar with his artistic, and political, career, it is impossible not to think that all his life Calvino was undoubtedly marked by weight and not by lightness. He was an intellectual who found his way during the Cold War’s coldest years and who never denied that season but rather unceasingly looked for new suggestions and sources of inspiration, without reneging his cultural and political roots. From this point of view, *lightness* in the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos* cannot be an enemy to weight, and—just like in fairy-tales—has a bad twin sister who resembles her very much but who is completely different and is called fatuity. One could even say that Calvino praises *lightness* so much because it was the value most difficult to achieve for someone like him, who never dissociated literary creation from political engagement.

If this intuition is correct and if, therefore, from the beginning Calvino conceived his book by couples, the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos* constantly dialogue with their invisible doubles. This second side—let me call it “the dark side of the memos”—casts the six values opposed to lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency. That is: weight, slowness, vagueness, invisibility (or maybe orality), singularity, and arbitrariness. The list sounds like the potential table of contents of a very promising (but not yet written) book. So that, if after forty years I were to indicate the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos*’ most lasting legacy, I would point to this organization by couple rather than to any of its single chapters.

While I was writing this last paragraph, I wrote, and then deleted, an adverb: dialectically. This is an important point and has directly to do with the fact that for Calvino, thinking by couples was a novelty and somehow an achievement. For a generation of Marxist activists raised on bread and dialectic, the magic number was not two, but three, as the three stages of

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<sup>9</sup> Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Geoffrey Brock (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Leo Spitzer, *La enumeración caótica en la poesía moderna* (Buenos Aires: Instituto de Filología, 1945).

Hegelian thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The story was made up of contrasts, but these contrasts had a meaning only if they could be overcome and reconciled at the end of the path.

In a culture imbued with Hegel and Marx through Benedetto Croce and Antonio Gramsci, this was an essential notion, as only the number three ensured escape from that which would otherwise have been a paralysis of history and thought. Disillusioned with Stalin's Soviet Union in politics and socialist realism in aesthetics, however, Calvino's generation found itself increasingly uncomfortable with the concept of synthesis. And Calvino, who was a tireless reader of philosophy for Einaudi publishing house, soon became familiar with Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno's work and his rebuttal of any sweetened happy ending: the third step had to be avoided at all costs.

For many intellectuals the rejection of dialectics gradually translated into a distancing from political activity and into what might be called a radical "criticism of criticism." This is especially the case of a novelist like Leonardo Sciascia. In the 1970s Sciascia came to terms with the Hegelian roots of his Marxism mainly through the reading of Michel Foucault's reflection on systems of control and discipline, but the final result of this libertarian metamorphosis were his increasingly paradoxical positions as a public intellectual, for instance his harsh polemic against judges engaged in the frontline fight against organized crime in Southern Italy: a perfect confirmation of how the antithesis of an antithesis too often runs the risk of dangerously resembling the thesis it was originally intended to fight.

Differently from Sciascia (and from too many of his peers), Calvino never recanted his Marxist beliefs, and looked to other disciplines to expand his vision and his understanding of the world without disavowing his political commitment. The most important of these disciplines, also for the conception of the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos*, was clearly French structuralism. It is not a mere biographical detail that in 1968 Calvino moved to Paris, at that time the world capital of literary theory. It is in this context that we should place the *Lezioni's/Memos'* implicit coupled structure. Between 1974 and 1976, Calvino worked hard to imagine a new cultural journal along with the young editor Claudio Rugafiori and the young philosopher Giorgio Agamben.<sup>11</sup> In their plans, each issue would have revolved around a conceptual couple such as comedy/tragedy, architecture/vagueness, mother tongue/dead language, biography/fable, law/creature or philology/right.<sup>12</sup> Calvino, then, chose to work around the concepts of lightness and quickness: and there is little doubt that ten years later the *Lezioni/Memos* retained strong traces of this binary proceeding. The model, of course, came from the major categories of linguistics and structuralism then very fashionable: *langue/parole*, paradigm/syntagm, metaphor/metonymy, and diachrony/synchrony. Even if Agamben, Calvino and Rugafiori were more imaginative than Roland Barthes', Algirdas Greimas', and Émile Benveniste's average followers, one can still recognize their influence in these couples.

Calvino was captivated by structuralism, and his fame outside Italy is very much tied to his structural novels of the 1970s, like *Le città invisibili*. But his curiosity about French theory was always mixed with suspicion. Clearly unhappy with Marxist and Hegelian dialectic, at the same time Calvino was not entirely at ease with structuralism's claim to abolish time and history (in fact, as a structuralist writer, Calvino did exactly the opposite, for instance using combinations of tarot cards to set a novel in motion in *Il castello dei destini incrociati* [*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*]).

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<sup>11</sup> See Mario Barenghi and Marco Belpoliti, eds., "Ali Babà" *Progetto di una rivista 1968-1972*. Riga 14 (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> In the preface to the 1996 essay collection entitled *Categorie italiane: Studi di poetica e di letteratura* (published in English as *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*), which sets up several oppositions to explore, including tragedy/comedy, law/creature, biography/fable, Agamben refers to this project and the conversations with Calvino. See Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University, 1999), xi.

This discontent also explains the *Lezioni's/Memos'* original table of contents. French theory erases judgements about the two polarities, as—for instance—one cannot take side for the *langue* against the *parole* or for metaphor against metonymy: they are neutral and always connected. Calvino, on the contrary, is interested in couples because of their recto/verso structure. Without becoming ecumenical, as Calvino always takes sides for his six values, the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos* recognize the potential reversibility of his own assumptions and acknowledge the potential existence of a completely different book.<sup>13</sup>

Each time I read the *Lezioni/Memos*—something that has happened more or less every ten years since my adolescence—I cannot help thinking that the charm of this book has much to do with Calvino's ability to unite his strong opinions with a will to reverse the perspective and a desire to observe the problem from a different point of view, again and again. This attention to the verso of the card is strictly tied both to his taste for literary estrangement (in the wake of Victor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht) and to his political commitment to the struggle of the oppressed. Even after he dismissed dialectic, Calvino could not stop thinking in terms of partial truths and reversible positions.

By a curious coincidence, the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos* share this focus on the invisible side with the other great essay of literary theory written by an Italian writer during the twentieth century, namely Luigi Pirandello's "L'umorismo" ("On Humor"). As is well known, according to Pirandello what makes humor so valuable and what differentiates it from mere comedy is its tendency to dwell on the shadows of the characters rather than on their figures; through this procedure (which implies a deep solidarity of the author with the mocked character) the reader is led to go beyond his own laughter and to discover the pain that lurks behind the features that at first triggered his hilarity.<sup>14</sup> The *Lezioni/Memos* work somewhat in the same way, for Calvino's literary values are values only as long as we look at their shadow and we learn to recognize the full legitimacy of the opposing qualities.

All this seems particularly relevant for us, over forty years after the neo-liberal triumph. Reading the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos* without prejudice, you can feel a clear autumnal tone; in other words, contrary to what many think, there is no postmodernist euphoria in these pages. For an Italian Marxist like Calvino who remained faithful to the ideals of his youth, the political shift of the 1980s meant a tremendous defeat. And the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos* stemmed from a strong dissatisfaction for the present and a no less strong insecurity about the future, which explains why Calvino looked to the new millennium with such intensity. As Giacomo Leopardi and Stendhal had already done in the previous century, Calvino projected himself into the world of tomorrow, trying to put a message in a bottle for future readers because he hardly recognized the new Italy.

Sometimes fear and despair can be an exceptional midwife for good literature, and a book like the *Lezioni americane/Six Memos* seems to prove so. Franz Kafka once referred to a terrible sentence from the Talmud and said, "We Jews only yield our best, like olives, when we are crushed."<sup>15</sup> But, awful as it is, maybe this sentence is also true when it comes to books. And Calvino's lesson is so crucial today also because he shows us how, even in moments of distress, full awareness of defeat can contain hope. "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," as Antonio Gramsci taught three generations of PCI militants. At least from this point of view, Calvino never abandoned the resources of that same dialectic from which, in the last part of his life, he tried to free himself as much as he could.

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<sup>13</sup> This is also apparent from the many different tables of contents and variations projected by Calvino for his *Lezioni/Memos* that were found among his papers. See Calvino, *Saggi*, 2:2961–64.

<sup>14</sup> Luigi Pirandello, *On Humor*, ed. and trans. Antonio Iliano and Daniel P. Testa (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Franz Kafka*, trans. Goronwy Rees (London: Derek Verschoyib, 1953), 98. Cfr. *Menachot* 53b.

We have much to learn from Calvino's fighting spirit. To quote Marco Polo's words, at the end of *Le città invisibili*:

L'inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà; se ce n'è uno, è quello che è già qui, l'inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme. Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e approfondimento continui: cercare e sapere riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio.

(The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.)<sup>16</sup>

“Make them endure, give them space.” When Calvino published *Le città invisibili* in 1972, such a conclusion could have seemed excessively minimalist, maybe pessimistic, but it was just a way to show how big dreams, and utopias too, have to be built little by little, on a journey that does not envisage a definitive landing place. Even today, in the “new” millennium there are not many more plausible recipes. And, clearly, that does not go only for literature.

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<sup>16</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1978), 164–65.