

PIERO BONI: BETWEEN HISTORY AND RECOLLECTION

by Enzo Bartocci

1. On the strength of the evidence contained, the documentation supplied and the unpublished texts now coming to light, the material we have brought together in the present issue of “*Economia & Lavoro*” suffices to piece together a portrait in the round of all that Piero Boni represented in the course of his long life. It also brings new light to bear on certain remote issues involving delicate transitions he witnessed, abandoning some of the reservations that Cofferati mentions in his contribution.

With the documents regarding the “Cayuga” mission we already see emerging the profile of a young 23-year-old socialist committed, in the Rome of 1943, to the partisans’ struggle. Once the Italian capital was liberated, he had no hesitation about undergoing training by the American OSS to be parachuted on the other side of enemy lines, not only to bring back information in support of the fight against the Germans but also, and above all, to play a direct part in the partisan struggle, which saw him involved in major acts of warfare – including the liberation of Parma – for which he was awarded the silver medal for bravery.

It is striking to see the simplicity with which, at a distance of so many years Piero unambiguously illustrates the actions performed in that period of Italian history, almost as if the protagonists’ own lives were not at stake. That is what he was like, eschewing rhetoric while attaching importance to the objectives to achieve and the paths to take to achieve them, and not the price to pay.

Eloquent evidence of this period in his life just to be found in the original documents which we publish. They consist of: *a*) pages drawn from the volume by the historian John Whiteclay Chambers on the enlistment of the forces deployed in Northern Italy, containing frequent and explicit mention of Piero Boni and the activities he performed; *b*) Piero’s description/commentary on the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS) film of the American armed forces on the “Cayuga” mission; *c*) translation of the film’s soundtrack. None of this documentation has hitherto been published.

Accounts of this period are also offered by the “partisan” Giuliano Vassalli with testimony that strikes home not only through the information it provides but also because he gave it shortly before his death. On 8 October 2009 Vassalli, who had gladly assented to my request to offer his reminiscences of Piero in the pages of “*Economia & Lavoro*” after our protagonist’s death, took up, as he said, «a text I had written some years ago, happy to

revise it and complete it». And he wrote to me asking: «When do you think should be sent in by those who take on the task (and I am not sure I will be among them) of contributing to the new book in memory of our dearest Piero?». These pages by Vassalli fill in the picture of Boni's experience as a partisan, framed within the broader history of the Resistance. Perhaps the picture we have of partisan Boni is still incomplete despite the reconstruction he offered in the interview with the historian Simone Neri Serneri and the material published in the book he edited, *Memorie di una generazione. Piero Boni dalle «Brigate Matteotti» alla CGIL* (*Memories of a generation. Piero Boni from the «Brigate Matteotti» to the CGIL*). This also depends on «a certain understatement», Vassalli suggests «with which Boni recounted his experience». It is surely significant, we were told by his daughter Silvia, that Piero «did not reminisce to my sister Marina and myself about the wartime» possibly – she added – «lest emotion should get the better of him, possibly out of modesty, certainly due to reserve in speaking about himself». On the other hand, he was more forthcoming with reminiscences with his grandchildren, when the passage of time had purged the events of those tragic aspects inevitably involved in any war. As time went by the drama of war, the violence and atrocities, could be translated – passing down his recollections to his grandchildren – into the extraordinary account of freedom regained.

2. At the end of the war Piero had his first experience of work initially in the Defence Office of the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity (PSIUP) and then – after three years' work in the administration of the trade union CGIL – he was appointed to direct the party's Union Office. Subsequent to the Socialist Congress of Genoa, in early 1949 Boni went on to work in the organization office of the CGIL. This was a choice that marked a turning point in his life. It was because of these movements back and forth between party and union between 1945 and 1949 that Boni, in the reconstruction he made on various occasions of the history of the Italian union from its reconstitution after the fall of fascism in 1977, the year he left the movement, did not mention a particularly important event in the history of the unitary CGIL which, due to the differences it generated among the internal components of the Union Confederation, contributed to bringing about the crisis that led to the union split up, namely the Marshall Plan. He was't active in CGIL at that time, and therefore he would't speak his mind about events he had not taken part to.

Of the union events that saw Boni involved and indeed playing a leading part we have his accounts – in articles and interviews – in the natural tones characteristic of people who take their work as a vocation. Boni responded to this vocation with commitment and passion, unflagging even when the socialist union current, taking advantage of the new political climate subsequent to the Midas hotel meeting and appointment of Craxi at the head of the PSI, compelled his resignation in 1977. In the matter of his resignation his alignment with Francesco De Martino within the PSI must have had considerable weight, if not decisive, given the relative independence enjoyed by the union component. One thing that certainly played a significant part in his resignation was the fact that his leadership within the socialist component had lost much of its force – as Guglielmo Epifani told us – for reasons of temperament, «for never having set out to create a personal network», so that he was unable to stand up to the pressures exerted by the younger socialist cadres of the CGIL, led by Agostino Marianetti and Ottaviano Del Turco who, we might add, showed exceptional flair in creating networks of solidarity independently of the political contents qualifying them.

Piero never mentioned the reason that led him to this choice, having strong reservations about going into matters that concerned him personally. That Boni had a difficult character

there can be no doubt. However, his stormy outbursts were never a product of moodiness, but of that commitment and dedication to the union that could never suffer intellectual laziness or be subjected to calculations of expediency.

3. If all this is true, as indeed it is, besides the reason given by Guglielmo Epifani, there are two other reasons – I believe – that account for his refusal to create personal networks when he was associate secretary general of the CGIL. In the years of FIOM (the metalworkers' union), on the other hand, things went very differently; also here we must distinguish between two stages. As long as the secretary general was Luciano Lama, with whom Piero always shared with conviction a "reformist" political line, the union network embraced both the socialist and communist components. When, in 1962, Bruno Trentin was appointed secretary general on an even footing with Piero, things changed quite radically, Bruno being of a very different temperament from Lama. He was a cultured intellectual from the study office, with no direct negotiating experience but with an with a natural tendency to ideological constructions, a tendency to see the choices of the union in terms of a system of values often implying symbolic significance. Thus the paths between Boni and Trentin, between socialists and communists, began to separate. Consequently the network of relations changed and another network began to form, according to the wishes of Boni – as I can witness – held together by a common approach to the battles to be fought for renewal of the union. This preliminary remark is necessary to stress the meaning of the two reasons I have previously referred to.

The first reason lay in the reformist conception he had of the union. In fact, Piero belonged to the tradition of such figures as Bruno Buozzi, Fernando Santi and Giacomo Brodolini. This was the tradition he followed conscientiously in his union battles and action, but it did not fire the same enthusiasm among the other socialist union leaders: a leadership that had to some extent become bureaucratic and in any case less inclined than he to open up within the union confederation, from a minority position, dialectical exchanges with the risk of clashes and tension. For example, none of them found it expedient to repeat congresses organized with separate motions, as had been the case with the FIOM Congress of 1964. On that occasion the socialist component led by Piero Boni had embarked upon an intense exchange of ideas of a very high level with Bruno Trentin and representatives of the trade union federation majority meeting at Rimini in the April of 1964 to discuss issues then considered crucial such as democratic programming, the function to assign to the internal commissions, and incompatibility between public appointments and union responsibilities. The meeting also proved a significant success.

The second reason lay in the rigorous sense of autonomy that Piero expected the unions to show in their action *vis-à-vis* the political parties, and in the name of which he fought fiercely – as amply attested by the contributions published in this number of "Economia & Lavoro" dedicated to him – for a true measure of unity for the union as precondition for its autonomy and its definitive validation. It is significant that the progress towards unity starting with the autumn agitation of the metalworkers in 1969 ultimately foundered due to the hostility shown by Italy's major parties, and in particular the Communist and Christian Democrat parties. It was in fact this passionate struggle for unification that constituted for most of the socialist leaders of the CGIL a sufficient reason not to follow Boni in what was considered – with a self-justifying exercise in political realism – a venture that led nowhere. What sense could then have this network of socialist unions leaders, where so different idioms were spoken?

And yet that autumn of agitation – the renewal of the metalworkers' contract, the agreements

reached at last with the Italian Manufacturers' Association on 21 December 1969, its approval by the rank and file and that unitary process that went from strength to strength in the course of the dispute – remained impressed upon his memory as an extraordinary season, although it was not followed by the conclusion that had seemed closer than ever to being achieved.

4. Moral rigour, uncommon courage and faithfulness to his ideals – such are the qualities that define the political and human profile of Piero Boni. In the years left to him Piero, by now president of the Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini, set the foundation to work on the history of socialism, the union, systems of industrial relations and social policies. His keen interest in history derived from the quest for that essential core that gave meaning to political and social life in its endless twists and turns, and meaningful answers to the questions it raised. During his presidency and with his backing important researches were launched that led to the publication of works having considerable impact, belonging to that line of institutional activity for which the charter members had promoted the Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini. In particular, I feel it is well worth recalling the activity performed by the Milanese section of the Foundation to which owe, more specifically:

a) publication, also in English, of the findings of a research project unique, I believe, in this field. My reference here is to two splendid tomes, *La memoria del 1° Maggio. Storia, iconografica della festa dei lavoratori: gli inizi, il radicamento* (*Recalling 1 May. History and iconography of the workers' public holiday: the origins, the roots*), edited by Andrea Panaccione, with presentation by Alceo Riosa, published by Marsilio Editore in 1988. The two volumes had been conceived as an international collective work such as to reflect, as Andrea Panaccione pointed out in his introduction, the various international contexts, from Europe to the Americas, from Asia to Africa, and from Australia to New Zealand, evoking the diverse spirits, conditions and forms of the collective memory with which this secular ceremony of the world of work is celebrated. To this end a great many scholars from universities and cultural institutes of the five continents were called upon to collaborate on the work. In his presentation of the volumes in a meeting subsequent to publication Piero pointed out that the history of 1 May is «a history of freedom, democracy, social progress and aspiration for a world without conflict».

b) the *History of the Socialist Party*, in three volumes (Marsilio, 1978), tracing out the vicissitudes and events of that Italian political party as they developed from the time of its foundation. What we have here is the publication of a series of lectures which, without pretending to provide the full picture of the developments in Italian socialism and over the period considered, still prove rich in pointers and prompts to renew and continue research on this topic, for study of the past with a historical-critical approach serves not only to revise ideas about what lies behind us but also to enhance our awareness of present issues. The various contributions bear the prestigious names of Giorgio Spini, Simona Colarizzi, Santi Fedele, Carlo Vallauri and Maurizio Degl'Innocenti, to mention but a few.

c) the *History of the Union* in three volumes (Marsilio, 1982) with a preface by Bruno Brezza. Here, too, we have lectures examining union life and action in Italy as it developed from the origins up to the 1980s. While departing from the specialist tradition – Bruno Brezza pointed out – it is at the same time a work that set out to supply methodologically up-to-date and culturally significant material. Contributions came from scholars and union workers of varied extraction and approaches: suffice it to mention Idomedeo Barbadoro, Giuliano Procacci, Maurizio Andreoli, Adolfo Pepe, Camillo Brezzi, Giulio Sapelli and Gian Carlo Jocteau, among many others.

5. As historian and university professor, Piero Boni focused his attention and research work on these topics: publications like *FIOM, 100 anni di un sindacato industriale* (*FIOM, 100 years of an industrial union*, Meta-Ediesse, 1993), or *Memorie di una generazione. Piero Boni dalle «Brigate Matteotti» alla CGIL, 1943-1977* (*Memories of a generation: Piero Boni from the Matteotti Brigades to the CGIL, 1943-1977* – edited by the historian Simone Neri Serneri for the publishing house Lacaita in 2001), as well as reports, interviews and essays attesting to his keen interest as a rigorous and painstaking historian concentrating on topics that found his commitment as partisan, socialist and union leader, and to which he had dedicated his entire existence.

The evidence offered here, the unpublished material and documentation until recently wrapped in oblivion – like the documents from the US Department of State, which we publish in this number of “Economia & Lavoro” – cast further light on his life in the Resistance and his first 30 years in the Italian union movement subsequent to liberation, as well as the significant role he himself played in the historical developments of the union.

With regard to union history, of the unpublished material particular importance attaches, I believe, to Piero’s interview with Giovanni Adonto, President of the Vera Nocentini Foundation of Turin. In some respects this can be said to supplement the lengthier and wider-ranging interview with Simone Neri Serneri, although reference is to a more limited period of time, namely union history between 1944 and 1969-70. This was a period that, as Piero explains citing a text by Aris Accorsero, went «from disputation to dialogue», continuing with the beginnings of the unification process. These pages contain reflections on the formation of the new group of CGIL leaders (Lama, Boni, Brodolini, Trentin); the influence that Giuseppe Di Vittorio’s teachings exerted over them; the new relations between FIOM and FIM-CISL opening up with the advent of the organisation’s new leadership, when Macario, Carniti and Castrezzati replaced the “old guard” led by Volonté and Zanzi; the debate on the importance of autonomy and, subsequently, on the incompatibility between public office and union responsibilities; the impact that the formation of Centre-Left governments had within the union and the debate on the union-democratic programming connection which – as mentioned with reference to the FIOM Congress of 1964 – became one of the central objects of discussion for the union confederation in Corso Vittorio. The interview concludes with some acute observations on the reasons that, according to the interviewee, lay behind the failure of the unification process for the unions – an object of supreme regret for Piero, and a wound that never healed.

6. The interview concludes with a phrase that, as I see it, constitutes a particularly useful key to interpret the present situation of the unions in their reciprocal relations and the relations they have with their counterparties, the employers and their associations, and the various governments alternating on the scene. Essentially, Piero observed, the unity of the unions in the 1970s was seen by the two hegemonic parties of the government and opposition majorities as something that could upset the political equilibrium and balance of power upon which rested the “imperfect bipartite system”, as Giorgio Galli had described it.

In the present season unity for the unions is once again being seen as a destabilising element, especially by the government parties, which see in this possibility the creation of a centre of power counterbalancing their monopolistic conception of power – power that fails to grasp the importance of redistribution and the consequences, potentially grave as they affect Italy’s social cohesion, that failure to appreciate the importance of the issue may entail. As once observed by Émile Durkheim in his *The Division of Labour in Society*, the

more their existence is individualised, the more socially dependent people become, and this is what we are seeing today. At the same time, the conception of “need” and “dependence” have been profoundly influenced by what Schumpeter called in *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy*, the «turbine of creative destruction», referring to technological, industrial and social change. The democrats of the left, in turn, missed the opportunity that lay before them – thanks to party components of important social areas that had historical links with the Catholic, communist and socialist traditions: the cultures, that is, with which the traditions of the great union confederations were imbued – to create a political and social project by virtue of which they could prove significant interlocutors for the unions. And then, once again, Confindustria (the Italian Manufacturers’ Association) proved incapable of defining – at the cultural level, in the first place – a fundamental approach to the world of work and unions, not only in terms of cost of agents of conflict but, to begin with, as the other face of the goods and services production system and as fundamental component of a consumption demand for goods directly correlated with their lifestyle. In globalized society the unions of the western countries tend increasingly to show themselves potentially open to a social contract, having a role to play in social cohesion and the creation of the democratic equilibria of the countries where they at work and contribute – resisting increase in inequality – to a process of more equitable redistribution. For this to come about the need is to promote agreements between the unions rather than aggravating or at any rate taking advantage of the existing divisions. The employers’ associations and, in particular, Confindustria have, however, ultimately accepted as area for confrontation the sloping ground that the present government seems to favour, at the bottom of which there is no social peace but, rather, the eternal return of endemic conflict, as happens every time the difficulties of the social situation are tackled without going deep into the real problems of a society undergoing a profound transformation in which the questions and issues it is fraught with extend to the worldwide scale. Finally, the unions’ difficulties seem to be growing as they fail to adjust their lines of bargaining policy and social policy demands to the situations they are faced with, in the first place because they have no clear idea of the lines along which society is evolving, taking insufficient account of the pitfalls constantly opening up beneath them, often deepened by their own behaviour. In other words, they do not seem to have pieced together the full picture of what is going on in this feverish process of transformation and so are unable to apply to it union policies dictated by good sense. The point is that policies, demands and bargaining activities can only be the final stage in an incisive analysis of a world that is changing and which, in changing, forces the historical actors on the scene to adjust their actions to intelligent interpretation and understanding of the ongoing changes, following their evolution. For these reasons the distance between the unions seems to be primarily the product of a cultural shortcoming that is increasingly making itself felt. Despite the lack of unity and meaningful conceptual lines the trade unions are applying good sense, renewing contracts on the basis of common demands although there is separate agreement on contract reform.

Starting afresh with common contracts and renewed cultural commitment, such as the unions have in fact been able to show on various occasions, they could, as Piero Boni had so deeply wished, return to the idea of a common project. They could do so without creating excessive illusions for themselves or the rank and file but taking on a firm commitment to reconsider, with the appropriate means of analysis, the possibility of emerging from an economic and social situation that is extremely worrying since it sees the fundamental rights of the citizens at stake. If the unions were to take on this commitment they would

find by their side Foundations, Cultural Institutions and intellectual support that now find no place in union choices and policies but which would be ready, I believe – with the roles responding to their particular characteristics – to play an enthusiastic part, renewing the rapport between culture and politics, in debate and exchange of ideas regarding, in the first place, revision of the theoretical framework and criteria with which to evaluate this extraordinary process of transformation of labour underway on a planetary scale, within which the fates and fortunes of entire categories of workers are at stake, together with the unions that which interpret their needs and hopes.