

## **‘From Zionism to Communism’: Emilio Sereni and the Consiglio di Gestione in postwar Italy**

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*(Received 19 October 2020; revised 28 February 2021; final version accepted 6 April 2021)*

This essay demonstrates that it is impossible to appreciate the actions of the Italian communist Emilio Sereni without considering his Zionist background. Anyone who is interested in understanding the complexities of communism in the past century and to avoid simplistic conclusions about this ideology will benefit from the study. The problem at stake is that researchers often approach communism in a monolithic manner, which does not adequately explain the multiform manifestations (practical and theoretical) of that phenomenon. This ought to change and to this extent this essay hopes to contribute to that recent strand of historical research that challenges simplistic views on communism. More specifically, by analysing the Management Councils that Sereni created in postwar Italy, we can see that many of their features in fact derived from, or found their deepest origins in, his previous experience as a committed socialist Zionist. The study, then, also relates Sereni to and looks at the broader experiences of early twentieth-century Zionism and Italian communism in the early postwar years.

**Keywords:** Emilio Sereni; communism; socialist Zionism; Workers’ Councils; Italian Communist Party.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, communist studies have been enjoying what one may call a renaissance after the apparent stagnation which lasted the quarter-century that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Gilman–Opalsky 2011, 20). Promising scholarly trends on communism that developed in the 1970s and 1980s struggled to develop amid the ending of the USSR project, with the history of, for example, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) often becoming the stick with which neo-liberal politicians like Silvio Berlusconi hit at rivals, depicting them as supporters of one, monolithic communist project that was totalitarian in essence and, obviously, evil (Fantoni 2014, 822). The so-called ‘second generation’ of historians of communism was enriched by geographical awareness, empirical abundance and theoretical acuteness but struggled through the 1990s ‘end of communism’ (and, apparently, of history) (White 1987, 209–11). However, things have changed significantly in recent years and a new generation of (more or less radical) scholars, boosted by the 2008 financial crash (Priestland 2009, xvi), have appeared, who are critically interested in, and sometimes even supportive of, Marxism and communism. This new generation enjoys, among other things, the privilege of historical perspective and intellectual coolness, providing distance from a sometimes irritating party discipline and from the 1990s, and of the post-2008 experience

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of failed capitalism – the year 2020 further enriching their perspective. Indeed, communism is now being studied with an innovative analytical lens and renewed interest.

More broadly, important contributions to the study of communism and Marxism have been achieved by original and interdisciplinary perspectives, including global intellectual history and history from the bottom-up. These have allowed scholars to avoid the ‘monolithic’ trap of studying communism as the one, crystallised ideology of Marxism that creeps (or crept at any rate) unchangingly through time and space and at different strata of society, and to appreciate it in its various manifestations, with continuities and turning points (Linden 2007, 1–10). Of course, one must also avoid the other snare, and not fall into some form of extreme relativism which might depict ‘Marxisms’ or ‘communisms’ with an ‘s’ as entirely different epistemological worlds with no interconnecting linkage whatsoever (Kangal 2020, 2). In Italy, critical and anti-monolithic historical analysis has already yielded some positive results and allowed scholars to appreciate communism in its liminal complexities (Forlenza 2019), both at the ‘high level’ of intellectuals or CP central committee directives and from the bottom-up (militants or local politics), and their relationship (Bellassai 1999).

In Italy, one fellow-traveller who has recently come under intense academic scrutiny is Emilio Sereni (Losacco 2020; De Nicolò 2019). Emilio (1907–77) was an extraordinary Italian figure of the twentieth century, whom Eric Hobsbawm remembered correctly as ‘universally erudite’ (Hobsbawm 2002, 352). He was born in 1907 to a bourgeois family of Jewish origin of the Roman community and at a young age became an active socialist Zionist in the Avodah (or Avodà, which means ‘labour’ in Hebrew) group, which he helped found in 1921. In the late 1920s, he joined the Communist Party of Italy (PCdI) and after the Second World War was for a short spell Minister for Postwar Reconstruction and later for Public Works (Quaini 2011, 27). During these years he supervised the formation of Management Councils (CdG, *Consiglio di Gestione*) (Soverina 2014, 147). As Sereni envisioned them, they were meant to be legally recognised assemblies which included representatives of both labour and capital. These centres would control and direct heightened production, allowing an increasingly responsible working class to participate in the democratic life of the nation. Unfortunately for him, these initiatives suffered from a lack of interest from the leadership of the PCI (which changed its name from PCdI in 1944). Furthermore, the 1947 expulsion of communists and socialists from the Italian government at the hands of the US-backed Christian Democracy doomed the councils to die in swaddling clothes (Vittoria 2006, 64). By the late 1940s these councils had essentially disappeared.

At present, academic interest in Sereni is focused mostly on discovering his political interventions in the decades after the Second World War. Some aspects of this new enterprise are questionable, however, and run the risk of monolithically looking at ‘Sereni the staunch communist’ while missing important elements of his formative years and their significance for understanding his actions as a communist. A frequent and troublesome issue with Serenian literature, which Alon Confino (2012, 13–21) has already pointed out, is the excessive reliance on what I label the ‘mechanic conversion view’. This is the interpretation by which he underwent a neat and clear-cut shift from one ideological bloc (socialist Zionism) to another, entirely incompatible one (communism) sometime between 1926 and 1927. In the words of Giorgio Vecchio (2011, 340), perhaps the most popular commentator on him, ‘Mimmo’s [Emilio’s nickname] conversion to Marxism must be placed at the beginning of 1926 [...] the conversion was completed only in 1927’.<sup>1</sup> This view is not inaccurate to the extent that Sereni’s frame of mind changed, extending its scope beyond just the Jewish nation to include the whole of humanity (Confino 2010, 176). However, the view is problematic as it encourages the tendency to overlook the continuities in his thinking and fosters the perception of artificial ruptures. In other words, he could not simply abandon

and eradicate his Zionist heritage to start anew a communist life. Instead, it is better to see his adherence to Third-International communism as a layer which he added to a 'deeper stratum' of socialist Zionism from the late 1920s.

One of the troubling consequences of this monolithic conversion view is that it has (mis)led many scholars to gloss over Sereni's socialist Zionist past, with many continuities in his thinking often being ignored. Most researchers, then, have only partially understood his actions at later stages of his life. For instance, some scholars (Pacelli 2019, 50–51; Musso 2002, 201–7; FISEC 2018), have maintained that the postwar councils were his response, in the form of an almost specular image, to the councils that were created in the Italian Social Republic (RSI) from 1944. Although the CdGs were in part an answer to contingent problems of postwar Italy, this analytical scope has failed to appreciate that the qualities which Sereni's idea of councils displayed and the language that he used to described them mirrored, to a great extent, many of the themes which were discussed in the 1920s socialist Zionist circles like Avodah. It is within such a tradition that he had spent his formative years and there that we ought to look if we intend to understand, at least more accurately than at present, his communism in the postwar period.

To my knowledge, David Bidussa (2000, li–lv) alone has explicitly pointed out the relationship between the postwar Management Councils and Sereni's Zionist tradition. His analysis, however, has been limited to essentially only mentioning an imaginary dialogue about the construction of the councils in postwar Italy between Emilio and his brother Enzo, who was murdered at Dachau in 1944 and under whose guidance Emilio had begun his Zionist adventure. Similarly, it has also been said that many of his projects related to labour in the postwar years could be seen as 'a middle-ground between a *kolkhoz* and a *kibbutz*' (Canepa 2019, 160). But these, or similar, scant remarks on his Zionist heritage in relation to the councils are insufficient to reach a satisfactory understanding of at least some of his communist practices.

The historiographic issues caused by the mechanical conversion view deserve a remedial response. This can also enrich our appreciation of Emilio Sereni, one of the most extraordinary figures of the Italian twentieth century, as well as of some of the interactions between socialist Zionism and communist practices like those represented by the CdGs. Thus, I argue in this piece that the socialist Zionist formation of the young Sereni influenced, or at least informed, the envisaging of the postwar Management Councils which he developed as a communist. So this essay aims to demonstrate that there were considerable similarities which cannot be overlooked between the qualities that the councils in postwar Italy ought to have had in Sereni's eyes and many of the themes that were central to the socialist Zionist tradition when he reached intellectual maturity in the early 1920s. To argue for the relationship between Sereni's Zionist origins and the postwar councils is not to say that socialist Zionism was the exclusive, or even the primary, influence on his conceptualisation of the CdGs. Intellectual movements such as socialist Zionism and communism shared a common socialistic background (Halbrook 1982), and it is obvious that the two movements and the themes that they touched on cannot always be discerned neatly. To put it another way, this article does not claim that we should look exclusively at socialist Zionism to understand his postwar actions, including the envisaging of the councils. Rather, it points to the fact that his youthful Zionism often represented the genesis for much of his political thinking in later years (though this was enriched by Marxism) and that we must therefore study this Zionist tradition to reach a more comprehensive understanding of his communist practices.

To investigate his tradition as a socialist Zionist in relation to the councils becomes all the more necessary when we consider that he was possibly the most active PCI leader to insist on the development of CdGs. These councils were one of his main preoccupations at the time and an analysis of his private correspondence, of many of his publications that have mostly gone unnoticed by

previous scholars, and of PCI central committee minutes will substantiate this point. Another element which makes this tradition relevant in our historical quest is the fact that many Italian communists criticised these councils as reformist or even reactionary (Petrillo 1979, 140–41). So, the very fact that CdGs stood at the periphery of what was ‘mainstream’ Italian communist strategy in the postwar period further strengthens the case for locating the origins of his thinking about the councils not in the conventional communist discourse of postwar Italy but elsewhere (Daneo 1975, 87–96). As the essay will demonstrate, the primary locus of such inspiration was the socialist Zionist milieu, including the Avodah group and Sereni’s brother Enzo, which valued the councils and to which Sereni had once belonged.

In the first part of this research, the young Sereni and the milieu of socialist Zionism in which he dwelt will be analysed. This will extrapolate some of the prominent concerns of Sereni and his companions, particularly those in the Avodah to which both he and his charismatic brother Enzo (1905–44) belonged. They included the antagonistic relationship between productive labour and parasitic capital, the formation of legally recognised councils to manage such antagonism, the pedagogical preoccupation of Jewish pioneers and the builders of a new Palestine, and the theme of the autonomy of the Jewish people and avoidance of their isolation. In the second part of this article, after a brief summary of the years from Sereni’s alleged ‘conversion’ to the end of the Second World War, it will be demonstrated that many of these concerns resurfaced, at times almost identically, when he, in the position of a communist official, envisaged Management Councils for the furthering of communism in postwar Italy.

### Part One: The formative years as a socialist Zionist

A short article published in the journal *Israel* in January 1923 (Sereni Emilio 1923a), in all likelihood his first publication, bears witness to the early activism of this young boy of only 15 years of age. The essay was titled ‘Problems of and Possibilities for Jewish Agriculture in Palestine’ and reflected the eagerness for political activity that ran high in Zionist circles at the time. It had the political function of presenting the Jewish migration to Palestine as a concrete possibility rather than an exotic dream, as it was often depicted (Bidussa 1992, 185–6). The article also functioned as a means to instruct aspiring colonists to Palestine on some of the technical problems linked to the land and how to solve them in order to increase productivity.

The widespread preoccupation with pedagogy among Zionists was combined with highlighting the importance of practical experience. For them, the division between intellectual and manual efforts was something to overcome. As an article written by one of the members of the Avodah stated (*Israel* 1922a):

Propaganda is a formidable weapon which must not be neglected, but one which can become sluggish if it is not supported by real models, by practical work and action. ... [T]here is no better teacher than action, no better pedagogical tool than the intimate contact with the rough reality of everyday life.

Sereni (1923a, 5–6) similarly stated in his first article that ‘certainly, the practical education of the settlers can only be perfectly completed in the farms’, adding shortly after that ‘only the practice of colonisation can give us the answer to many problems [...] that cannot be solved in the experimental stations’. The relevance of practical experience was reiterated by him (Sereni 2015, 22–3) over 20 years later, when in August 1946 he penned in his private diary:

[T]oo often we [Italian communists] have thought and still think that our experiences and ideological elaborations are a common heritage of all Italians. That’s not true, and it couldn’t be true. ... [O]ur

experience cannot be transmitted by magic or metaphysics .... What we need is history and, in some ways, that Italians can relive our experience.

Early commitment to socialist Zionism meant that from a young age he was engaged with difficult issues, working to solve them. Many of these were technical problems and included the relationship between and evaluation of available workforce and funding, the education of colonists and the development of concrete ways to control and improve labour productivity. Shortly after Sereni's first publication, he printed a second article in November 1923, 'The Land Problem in Palestine', in which he opposed the agronomist Izhak Wilkansky's argument that Jewish colonies in Palestine needed more land rather than agricultural intensification. From his point of view, it was erroneous to focus on one element alone, land, and both land and funding ought to be considered at that point in time. As he put it (Sereni Emilio 1923b, 3):

[L]and, of course, is necessary, but one should never be lured by titles. To buy land is fine; however, to put everything else aside because of it is a mistake. Our colonising enterprise is about to begin and, though it is impossible without land, it is likewise unattainable without money.

He also lamented the existence of private property in the colony because of its anarchic nature, which could 'cause, due to speculations, an artificial rise of prices' and '[b]y continuously increasing the number [*quantità*] of men, without expanding the land or increasing their productivity at the same rate, the landowners can, without any merit or effort, continuously increase prices and make considerable profits' (Sereni 1923b, 3)

In addition to these two publications, three articles published in *Israel* in 1926 inform us that Sereni remained a committed activist in the Zionist circle of Naples, the Parthenopean city next to which he was completing his higher education (Fabiani 2019, 63). There, he took part in cultural meetings on Jewish songs (*Israel 1926a*), celebrated the ninth anniversary of the 1917 Balfour Declaration (*Israel 1926c*) and argued that, as the journal put it in November 1926, a 'Jewish life in the diaspora can only be achieved when there exists a national centre from which Jewish life and culture will radiate' (*Israel 1926b*). Indeed, then, to see 1926–7 as a mechanical switch that made Sereni a communist risks an anachronistic caesura of his thinking. Instead, his support of that communism which the Third International offered is best seen as a response to growing fascist trends (Bidussa 2000, xxv; Mangoni 2006, 75), in Italy and abroad, and not as a revolution that erased his influential past. As he explained in a September 1927 letter to his brother, in which he informed Enzo of his adherence to the Third International, 'there are powers in this world which will wipe out Jewish Palestine in a heartbeat if we fail, as we have done so far, to take them into consideration' (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 15–16). Quite likely, for Sereni and many others in similar conditions to his, both in Italy and elsewhere, for example Eric Hobsbawm, communism seemed to be the best, perhaps the only, viable alternative to *exist* in a world which seemed on the verge of collapse (Hobsbawm 2002, 62–77).<sup>2</sup>

It has been demonstrated that he was active in Italian socialist Zionist circles well into the 1920s. It is sensible here to study this movement in some more detail insofar as some of the debates of the time would be relevant to his conceptualisation of the councils in the postwar period. The rise of Italian Zionism took place in the early interwar period against the backdrop of growing Italian ultra-nationalism. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 had promised the recognition of a Jewish state in Palestine but, especially after the rise of Fascism, many Italian Jews were sceptical about, or afraid of, entering the arena of politics (Mangoni 2006, 67–75). At the time, two main groups influenced the intellectual and cultural, but not necessarily the political, life of Jewish communities in Italy. The first was led by Alfonso Pacifici and pointed to the need for small, vanguard-like groups of orthodox Jews who would lead to the cultural rejuvenation of the Jewish spirit.

Returning to the land, for them, was not necessary at the time because the diaspora was a constitutive element of Jewishness and Pacifici did not consider political action desirable (Bidussa 1992, 196–204). The second group, more influential for Italian socialist Zionists, saw Dante Lattes as one of its main exponents. He aimed at fostering a slow, broad-based cultural movement, based on elements such as language and school, which would direct Italian Jews to migrate to Palestine and toil its land. The call for political activity was in this case encouraged (Luzzatto Voghera 1992, 63–8).

Dissatisfaction with the lack of concrete political action within the existing Jewish paradigm in Italy was one of the main reasons behind the formation of the Avodah. The group was founded in Rome between late 1921 and the early months of 1922, and was strongly influenced by the long tradition of socialist (or labour) Zionism, aiming at the holistic formation (political, cultural, technical, etc) of a generation ready to develop colonies in Palestine for the rebirth of the Jewish people. The Avodah programme was written by Enzo with the help of the socialist Zionist Mosè Beilinson, who probably stressed the need for a political turn at the expense of purely cultural activities, and the importance of productive labour (Bidussa 1992, 211–20). Beilinson was a Russian émigré who went to Italy in 1918. His close friend's daughter, Xenia, would marry him in the late 1920s, becoming with him a communist (Luzzatto 1992, 144).

The concept of productive labour was fundamental for the Avodah group. In fact, the idea is central to traditional Jewish economic thinking more broadly. In short, productive labour was the essential activity with which men could, firstly, please God and, secondly, overcome the scarcity that existed outside the Garden of Eden (Wilson 1997, 29–51). This activity was often associated with physical effort or, as it was put in socialist Zionist circles, with 'struggling with the sweat of your forehead' (Gordon 1930, 264). By contrast, speculative activities associated with capital, e.g. money-lending, were seen as idle and condemnable (Muller 2010, 18). So, as the Avodah founding programme stated, the organisation

wants the rejuvenation [*risorgimento*] of the Jewish people in Palestine to take place through the creation of a free Jewish society, where there will be *neither exploited nor exploiters*, and that the diaspora people of Israel will return to a productive life and to an organic Jewish culture. (*Israel 1922b*)

Similarly, the introduction to the programme stressed the antagonism between labour and capital, explaining that

[the] social conditions of Eretz Israel will differ radically from those of the diaspora. In the countries of Jewish dispersion, Judaism shares with the rest of the world workers' exploitation at the hands of capital, the slavery of labour, and, as its specific sign, bears the quality of unproductivity. (*Israel 1922a*)

In the socialist Zionist ideology, the two elements of productive labour and capital were placed in a necessarily antagonistic relationship. This was, of course, nothing new within the broad socialist tradition. The theme is vast and what is of relevance here is how the socialist Zionists chose to solve this contradiction, since this view influenced the way in which the communist Sereni envisaged the postwar councils. The solution to the antagonism took the form of a recognised organisation such as a council that could handle all the queries sprouting from the tension between labour and capital. For instance, Moses Hess, the celebrated theoretician of labour Zionism, put forward the idea of 'an Association' for the 'common exploitation of Nature' and 'the cooperation of all the forces of production' (Hess 1918, 165). And, he continued, in 'this Association, the antagonism between capitalistic speculation and productive labour ... will simultaneously disappear' resulting in 'all social parasites being excluded' (165). A similar point was also made by Aharon David Gordon (1930, 273–4), who was one of the influential ideologues in the late 1910s and early 1920s Zionist circles, including Enzo and Emilio's. For him, it was desirable 'to set up a special commission of suitable men ... whose task was to regulate all business and relations between Jews and

Arabs'. At the time, it shall be highlighted, many Zionists including Sereni saw Jews in Palestine as the representatives of capital while the Arabs were normally associated with labour. As he stated in his 1927 dissertation (Sereni 2010, 353), in Palestine, 'capital was Jewish, labour was completely Arab'.

To see councils as the desirable option for the resolution of labour-capital antagonisms was part of the so-called Zionist 'constructivist' strategy for Palestine. This derived from late nineteenth-century 'nationalist socialism', which blended criticism of Marxism and liberalism with (religious, ethnic and cultural) nationalism (Sternhell 1998, 6–18). Nationalist goals were prioritised over class interests, allowing for, or even encouraging, class-cooperation for the sake of building up the (Jewish) state (Marzano 2017, 90–92) – as we shall see, something similar occurred in postwar Italy. Palestinian constructivism was expressed in the 1916 memorandum *The War and the Jews* and supported by most socialist Zionists in the interwar period (Kelemen 1996, 78–9). These were normally associated with Poale Zion ('Workers of Zion'), the Marxist-Zionist movement created by Ber Borochov in the early twentieth century (Frankel 1984, 329–30). After the 1919 split in Poale Zion, the more nationalist-oriented Ahdut HaAvodah ('Labour Unity'), which included figures like David Ben Gurion and Berl Katznelson, continued supporting constructivism – in 1930, Ahdut HaAvodah would unite with Ha-poel Ha-tzair ('Young Worker'), originally founded by Gordon, to form the Mapai ('Workers' Party of the Land of Israel') party (Goldstein 2002, 85). In contrast, the left-wing minority went on to form the Palestine Communist Party which was granted access to the Comintern in 1924 after abandoning ideas of building a communist organisation, i.e. for the international proletariat, on nationalist lines (Franzén 2007). The tension between 'nation' and 'class' and the question of which community one chooses to belong to (one nation or the international proletariat) becomes pressing at extreme times, such as during a war. It was one, perhaps the main, reason for the distancing between Sereni and Enzo, and, in fact, many nationalist Jewish youths felt the ambiguity in these years (Wendehorst 1999, 45). For Emilio it was 'either or', while Enzo argued that 'one must have a sense of proportion' and that 'the solution to the Jewish question ... is worth this little apparent discrepancy [*piccolo strappo apparente*]' (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 20).

As Enzo told his brother in February 1928 (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 78), 'I want to give my work a "constructive" character'. For him as well, the strategy to partially settle, or at least improve, the existing discrepancy between labour and capital while constructing the state was to form recognised organisations. In what he termed a 'council of labor', both labour and capital were to be represented, allowing 'workers [and] the representative of the bourgeoisie *as a class*' to meet and discuss their issues (Sereni Enzo 1936, 289). He was aware that conciliatory councils were not the definitive answer for the resolution of the conflict between labour and capital, but at least they avoided chaos in the Palestinian lands while Eretz Israel was being built. As he explained, under a capitalist regime the situation would never be solved entirely but, at least, the 'anachic [*sic*] status of things today' would be improved and in Palestine, the Jewish people 'will have founded our future on a sound basis' (Sereni Enzo 1936, 289).

By 'anarchy' Enzo meant the rule of private entities under a capitalist system. In Palestine, this had resulted in a chaotic situation and 'hundreds of cheap Arab workers are streaming into Jewish colonies *without any control*' (Sereni Enzo 1936, 291). The word, as Anita Shapira (1989, 628) has explained, was often used by labour Zionists like Ben-Gurion when discussing urban cooperatives under the supervision of the Histadrut (labour federation) and many in that tradition 'reverted repeatedly to the word "anarchy" ... to describe any negative phenomenon which required "uprooting"'. For Enzo, then, as for Gordon, Ben Gurion and other fathers of Zionism – and Sereni in later years – labour councils were seen as centres of productive labour where speculation

would be weeded out and they should be legally recognised to legitimise the struggle of the workers against anarchic capital. In Enzo's words, they would be 'bringing the fight for work under the jurisdiction of institutions' and creating a 'legal and real basis' for the 'regulation of the labor market and employment' (Sereni Enzo 1936, 290–92).

In Enzo's eyes, it was reprehensible that the labour councils did not have sufficient power to impose legally-binding verdicts, and this outcome was for him desirable. Nonetheless, councils would still have a social impact in the communities in which they were constituted and that, for the time being, had to be accepted. As Enzo explained, although the 'centrifugal forces interested for their private profit in anarchy do not care for the decisions of Jewish "authoritative" bodies', councils could still play an influential role in society through 'moral authority without executive force' (Sereni Enzo 1936, 297). It is very likely that he was influenced by these words, which continued to inform his actions for the rest of his life. This point is further strengthened, if not confirmed, by the fact that a copy of the work where many of the ideas regarding the councils are expressed is now stored at his library in Gattatico. Its flyleaf reads, 'To Xenia and Uriello from Enzo', recalling his chosen Hebrew name (Uriello or Uriel) during his Zionist phase.<sup>3</sup>

Enzo Sereni is a rich and complex figure, whose ideas we ought to explore here in some detail insofar as they influenced his conceptualisation of Management Councils in the postwar period. A staunch socialist Zionist, Enzo's influence on his younger brother was a key inspiration for his participation in the movement (Soverina 2010, 106). His attendance between 1924 and 1927 at the Portici school, where he graduated with a thesis on the Jewish agricultural colonisation of Palestine, should be seen as a consequential, tactical move in this sense – and not as the primary reason for his interest in the themes of the land or the peasantry, as has been suggested.<sup>4</sup> In 1927, Enzo migrated to Palestine – in a move that showed courage in the face of, and fastidiousness about, the political passivity of Jewish circles in Italy – where he later co-founded the Givat Brenner kibbutz (Pontecorvo 2002, 176). Emilio's intimacy with Enzo, whom he was supposed to join in Palestine after graduation, can be gauged from a letter that he wrote shortly after the older brother's departure, where he stated that 'I will never feel as close to them [Enzo and Emilio's other siblings] as to you, of course: perhaps, the fact that together we put ourselves at risk represents a stronger bond than that of brotherhood and friendship' (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 12). As he admitted to the older brother in 1927:

So far, us two have represented almost a unity of thought; and, generally, it was you, no doubt, who brought novelty to our cooperation. It was you who made me understand Zionism, it was you who made me understand the meaning of secularisation. ... And you know that I have always been grateful to you for this. And our collaboration has never been destroyed. (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 53)

The cooperation ended when Emilio joined the PCdI and gave up his plans to move to Palestine. Enzo went on to become a leader in the labour movement in Palestine. In 1944, he parachuted into Italy on a mission to rescue Jewish prisoners. He was captured, transported to Dachau and murdered (Bondy 2012).

The main concern in Enzo's life was to increase the autonomy of the Jewish people, which would lead to their independent growth and self-determination. The Zionists were the vanguard that would emancipate the Jewish nation, achieving autonomy and thus ending the Jewish diaspora (Bidussa 1992, 155). As Enzo pointed out in March 1924, Zionism would solve the Jewish question by 'creating an autonomous life for us in Palestine' (Sereni Enzo 1924). He then added, '[i]ndeed, for countries where Jews live in large, united national groups, a solution had been proposed for a long time: autonomism, that is, the creation of autonomous Jewish national bodies' (Sereni 1924). Autonomy of the Jewish people was one of the main themes in the life of any



Zionist at the time, and the issue resonated in much of Enzo's engagement with his younger brother, as a lengthy passage from a letter written in October 1927 exemplifies. In it, Enzo stressed once again the issue of autonomy, explaining that

despite the opposition of many of the Jewskzia [Jewish section of the Bolshevik Party], even the Comintern had to accept the principle of *territorial concentration* and *productivisation* (colonisation of Crimea) as a means of solving the Jewish problem. This is because, even with all the autonomy which the Soviets have undoubtedly given, the assimilation massacred the Jews since they lacked the economic *base*, without which autonomy is unthinkable. (We must always remember our state of eternal minority!) (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 35–6)

More practically, autonomy meant Jewish independence through means of productive labour. As mentioned above, the issue had to do with the contraposition between productive labour and usury (e.g. speculative trade). In Europe, Christians persecuted the Jewish people for centuries, banning them from conducting 'honest' physical labour and forcing them to rely on what were often considered to be speculative and unproductive activities (Muller 2010, 15–30). Enzo followed this train of thinking, which was also in line with that of two of the main ideologues of left-wing Zionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Borochof and Gordon. For all of them, Jewish emancipation could only be achieved through a return to productive labour after centuries of speculation (Luzzatto 1992, 150–51).

For Enzo, then, autonomy was essential for the solution to the diaspora by means of productive labour and the construction of a solid economic independent centre for the Jewish nation. He expressed this view during the 1924 Jewish Youth Congress in Leghorn, which witnessed him and Pacifici as the main protagonists of an intense debate over the role of politics for the Jewish people (Mangoni 2006, 67). As Enzo had it, the achievement of an 'autonomous, not marginal, Jewish culture will be possible only on the basis of the normal economic life which will be re-established in Palestine, when there will exist a Jewish proletariat' (*Israel* 1924b, 16). The Jewish state would offer the foundation where both Jewish capital and labour could flourish, thus creating an autonomous centre that would allow the Jewish people to reach emancipation and control over their lives. Enzo reiterated the point a few years later, writing in 1936 that the

*Zionist aim may be described in general terms as the effort to concentrate Jewish masses in Palestine in productive occupations on the basis of the possibilities of employment that will be created by private and national Jewish capital. This concentration must lead naturally to the political as well as the economic autonomy of the Jewish masses.* (Sereni Enzo 1936, 281)

It should be added that productivity was not associated with efficiency. Expressing a view which would characterise his position in the postwar period, Enzo argued in a 1927 article:

The ability to solve the Jewish question lies in the will to revolutionise Jewish life and to put it on new foundations. If Zionism sags into compromises, becomes accommodating or reneges on the principle of *labour* as the basis of reconstruction, in the name of Americanism and of the 'efficiency' touted by Russian-American Jewish jokes [*ebreonzoli*], it will cease to be Zionism. And, therefore, it will no longer be feasible or represent the solution to the Jewish problem. (Sereni Enzo 1927)

The point was of particular importance for Enzo and, in a letter to Emilio that followed immediately the publication of his article, he repeated that 'indeed, Zionism disappears when it "reneges on the principle of labour as the basis of reconstruction, in the name of the *efficiency* of "politicians"' (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 188).

Autonomy required being productive for the sake of emancipation and, by contrast, not being an unproductive parasite on labour. Parasitism was one of the main worries of Enzo's circle of Zionists, with many discussing and publishing on the topic. As Emilio wrote to Enzo in November 1927, the 'only chance of recovery for the Jewish people is their re-productivisation.

Without it, the problem of the Jewish people will never be solved' (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 56). Emilio reiterated the point a few months later when, defending his choice to join the Communist Party of Italy, he explained that '[b]y fighting the struggle of the proletariat, I am fighting the struggle of the Jewish people, of their productivisation and its secularisation, of course. Nobody here wants to anatomise life!' (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 70.)

Similar preoccupations were expressed by other members or sympathisers of the Avodah group. One of them, Ciro Glass, was an influential figure within the Italian Jewish community and organised a group in Florence following the blueprint of Enzo's Avodah in Rome. He was also one of the leading figures in the first trip of Italian Jews to Palestine in the early 1920s (Bidussa 1992, 186–211). As Glass (1922) explained in the article 'Avodah's Practical Labour', the Chalutz or Chalutzim (those who moved to Palestine to set up agricultural communities) were to be the ones engaged in the regeneration of the Jewish people, leading them not by intellectual work but by practical example and 'no longer being parasites on other national economies, as they are today'. And, as he added later (Glass 1922), 'We do not have producers. That's why I said we are parasites. Parasites in a social and economic moral sense.' Similarly, in 1924, a memorial article (Fishmann 1924, 4) remembering Gordon's guidance for labour Zionists, argued melodramatically that one his favourite hobbies was to root out weeds because they were for him 'the symbol of that parasitism, against which he had fought with all his might. As in all his educational activity, so here too he wanted to eradicate right from its roots the great evil of our people: unproductivity.' Enzo (1936, 299–300) also joined this criticism against parasitism, arguing that 'Jewish autonomy, as we need it in order to straighten the crooked backs of our people and to develop our creative powers' could find a 'basis in contemporary Palestine' only through the productive labour derived from 'Jewish-Arab co-operation'.

Before moving to the second part of this work, we shall highlight that for Enzo autonomy and isolation must not be conflated. To be isolated from the broader society was a widespread preoccupation within Jewish circles in the early twentieth century. For instance, the journal *Israel* had been founded in 1916 for the purpose of breaking the cultural isolation which characterised other journals that considered Jewish life as a 'happy place', such as Flaminio Servi's *Vessillo Israelitico* (Bidussa 1992, 192–3). Enzo (1936, 282) expressed clearly this distinction in a lengthy passage worth citing in its entirety:

We must not confuse the concept of our *autonomy* with the concept of our *isolation*. We must not conclude from the demand for autonomy, which has a basis, that there is therefore a necessity for isolation. Political and economic independence are the foundations on which all Zionism rests. This means that there will be Jewish workers, Jewish farmers, Jewish capitalists, who will work in an economy in which they will not exercise special and partial functions, but in which they would fulfill *all the functions in all parts of the economy*. This completeness in functions, and not our isolation, is the necessary pre-supposition for our economic and political autonomy. And that this completeness in occupations must be characteristic of the masses and not of a small number, is the second condition for the attainment of Jewish autonomy, and the solution of our basic malady in the Diaspora.

In other words, isolation meant the lack of relationship between elements and had a negative meaning. Zionism was a totalising experience and a sense of what could be considered monism accompanied the world view of many of its supporters (Pinto 2000, 872–6), including Enzo, Borochoy and Emilio. Thus, totality was a key analytical element to understand the world and the isolation of its single elements must be avoided at all costs. Enzo had already brought the issue up during the 1924 Leghorn Congress, stating that 'Jewish youth cannot limit their interests to the Bible, to the Talmud, to Jewish history but must engage with *life in its entirety*' (*Israel* 1924a, 5).

The issue of isolation did not simply derive from conceptual considerations but was also a very practical one, especially for the Jewish colonists of Palestine. In those lands, in fact, isolation meant fragility. Sereni (1927, 368) accepted this line of reasoning and, as he explained in his dissertation, ‘in some areas of Palestine, especially the northern regions, the occupation of certain lands would have been impossible for isolated settlers given the unsafety of those places’. In a later passage he added that the ‘Arab world is only affected indirectly by the effects [of the economic crisis]. So, the Jewish workers are alone and isolated, and cannot exercise the moral pressure on the Palestinian government to obtain the necessary measures’ for social change (Sereni 1927, 486). Autonomy was necessary for emancipation and did not exclude, but rather encouraged, the constant relationship between various elements (labour and capital, Arabs and Jews) within a certain reality.

### **Part Two: Sereni’s Management Councils in the postwar period**

As explained in the previous section, Emilio was deeply involved in an all-embracing socialist Zionist environment since a young age. He immersed himself in certain themes which he viewed as essential to the practical actions that groups like the Avodah advocated. Productive labour was the means to achieve Jewish autonomy and therefore control over their own life: it was the antithesis of parasitic activities. Many socialist Zionists around Sereni agreed that recognised councils were suitable productive centres to handle the tension between labour and capital in the construction of Eretz Israel. Indeed, as Enzo and others emphasised, labour must be productive, though not necessarily associated with efficiency, and isolation avoided at all costs. This second part of this essay, after a brief summary of the period between his alleged ‘conversion’ and the end of the Second World War, intends to demonstrate that the councils that Sereni envisaged at the end of the conflict reflected many of the Zionist themes discussed above. Similarities are striking and were not accidental, so it can be argued that the origins of his conception with regards to the councils lay, to a great extent, in his socialist Zionist heritage. The Management Council that the communist Sereni contemplated was a productive centre to bind together labour and capital on a legal basis. Ensuring an autonomous development of labour, it would allow an educated working class to control and direct increased production.

For him, the years between his so-called ‘conversion’ in the late 1920s and the end of the Second World War were a time of progressive entrenchment in the PCdI and of constructing and cementing his identity as a communist. In this, a string of *force majeure* events and his constant opposition to Enzo played an important role. Emilio seemed to have undergone most of the intense events which characterised the interwar period and shook his life with remarkable (perhaps disturbing) normalcy. Probably, this was in part due to his natural disposition. For instance, he described his experience in Fascist jails as almost comparable to ‘coming back from holiday ... in these years, I could work a lot ... you had a certain peacefulness ... that allowed your work, even when it was intense, to not be nagging or overwhelming’ (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 122; FISEC 2018). Similarly, years later, party meetings or his deteriorating health conditions were often noted down with nonchalance in his personal jotters, side by side, as if they were of equal importance (Vecchio 2019b, 204–09).

Emilio’s business-as-usual attitude was also forced or at least strengthened by events, which kept on pressing him without any break. As has been pointed out (Forlenza and Thomassen 2016, 155), events such as those he went through were extraordinary and shocking and allowed very few intellectuals the leisure to ponder over their own conditions. Emilio was arrested shortly after receiving his party card, spending five years in various prisons between 1930 and 1935

(Vecchio 2019a, 69). Immediately after his release, he fled Italy and joined the CP centre abroad in Paris, where he was immediately occupied with the struggle against fascism during the Spanish Civil War (1936–9). As he explained to Enzo in 1937, not without some pride, ‘events of recent months have forced all of us into a very intense situation that requires all of our strength ... [our lives] have now all been reshaped by the pace of our work’ (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 144). When the Second World War broke out, he had to go into hiding in Vichy France. Captured and almost executed, he managed to escape, becoming one of the leaders of the Italian Resistance during the civil war that engulfed the country between 1943 and 1945 (Vecchio 2011, 345–82). In all this chaos and with the Fascist enemy pressing, there was very little or no time to pause and reflect alone over one’s own path.

Another important element which might have constantly pushed him closer to the PCdI throughout this period was his relationship with Enzo, with whom Emilio maintained a continuous intellectual engagement. More specifically, he increasingly entrenched himself in party positions partly in opposition (Forlenza 2020, 130–31), or at least with reference, to his elder, Zionist brother. Their correspondence bears witness to their self-defining opposition: in a significant passage from a 1932 letter that Emilio wrote to Enzo, he rubbed in his brother’s face that communism was the ‘foundation [*impastazione*] of my life’ yet turned to him with affection when talking about the lack of companionship in the crowded cells, stating that ‘in addition to Xenia ... you are in the end the only one who can help me’ (Sereni and Sereni 2000, 115–16). Perhaps these two brothers continued as adults the rivalry that they started as children, epitomised in *Il gioco dei regni* (*Game of Thrones*, 2007), the novel by Emilio’s daughter Clara, based on their family life (Confino 2012, 17–19).

Several elements lead us to speculate that Emilio came to reckon with his own (communist) identity in relation to past experiences only after the end of the Second World War. The brotherly dialogue had been existential for his communism because it had helped define his own position during the interwar years. This changed with Enzo’s death. Emilio’s reaction to it is illustrative. He discovered the terrible news shortly after the end of the conflict and, as he explained to his mother and sister in November 1945, ‘something truly within me broke down, not just something, but a whole part of me’ (Sereni 2011, 310). A letter that Emilio wrote in 1946 in reply to Raffaele Cantoni, president of the Israelite Communities Union corroborates this:

You may rest assured that, as an elected member to the Constituent Assembly, I will always keep in mind the example that Enzo provided us with – his sacrifice of tenacious and heroic attachment to one’s convictions. You are aware that my political principles do not coincide with those of our beloved Enzo; but this diversity of conviction will certainly not be an obstacle for me in defending, at this very serious moment in the life of Judaism, and of all humanity, the democratic and national rights of the Jews. (Sereni 2011, 60)

Indeed, many of the questions that were central for the Zionists in the early 1920s gained widespread attention after the end of the war (Canuto 1982, 34–9). Perhaps, then, something like a new identitarian chapter in his life, without Enzo and yet with his ghost, had to be written. Emilio’s identity was both freed from and lacking Enzo, thus in need of at least partial reconstruction (e.g. certainties, symbols, meaning) (Forlenza 2019, 7–8).

Also, one can sense some identitarian cracks in the communist edifice that Emilio had been building since the late 1920s and some echoes of the old Zionist self by reading his diary in 1952 around the time of the death of his first wife Xenia. Using his long-abandoned Zionist name (Uriel), Emilio (Sereni 2015, 174) wrote: ‘The venerable dirge shall be heard / That Uria and Xenia in bygone times forged’. Later he added, ‘not even our little girls, if they’ll ever read these lines, will understand what Uriello and Loletta’s [Xenia’s nickname] love was, how deep

it was' followed by 'How difficult it is, without Loletta ... because you believed in Uriello, even when Uriello did not have confidence himself' (Sereni 2015, 181). Of course, these examples do not indicate any caesura, be it in 1945 or 1952. Rather, they strengthen the point that Emilio's communist identity continued to be fuelled uninterruptedly throughout the 1930s and that some liminal introspection, however meaningful and confused, occurred only in the postwar years (Forlenza 2019, 13–14). Perhaps, staring at himself in the mirror during these years, he might have caught a glimpse of Uriel encroaching on the reflection of PCI leader Sereni. At any rate, as the war was coming to a close, he set to work, as was his usual practice – this time for the construction of Management Councils in the debris of Italy.

The context within which Sereni created the CdGs was that of PCI postwar strategy in Italy, which is worth a brief explanation insofar as his work fitted into it. The strategy was launched by its leader Palmiro Togliatti in 1944, when he called for the formation of a mass party, the so-called New Party. The PCI ought to function within broad society and its new parliamentary democratic institutions to further, allegedly, the cause of communism in Italy (Forlenza and Thomassen 2016, 186–93). As Donald Sassoon (2014) has demonstrated, the party line in these years consisted primarily of first, increasing social participation in the economy by fighting private monopolies and agrarian monolithic strongholds and second, fostering a democratic culture in the sphere of politics. These were the guidelines that were followed, for instance, when the PCI insisted on the formation of the National Hydrocarbon Authority and on the reorganisation of the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction (IRI). A report compiled in 1945 by the National Liberation Committee of the IRI group, a similar entity to a CdG, stated that it was necessary that 'even in the new Italian Democracy, IRI shall continue to support [business] with funding and coordination tasks within the framework of a socialised national economy .... [We are] *determined* to heal and moralise the entire life of IRI's companies in the interest of the community and the working masses by placing them in direct control of the society within which they work'.<sup>5</sup> This 'progressive democratic' line continued to be elaborated between 1944 and 1946, attempting to bring together all the toiling classes, including industrial workers, peasants and progressive intellectuals (Cassata 2012, 470).

His struggles in this period, including the Management Councils, derived from this strategy. According to him, the formation of the councils, coupled with agrarian reform (aiming at helping the small and medium peasantry and at diminishing the power of agrarian monopolies), would help to insert the industrial working class in the productive and social life of the nation. Eventually, they would upset the balance of existing power relations in Italy and allow the working classes to gain the upper hand over the bourgeoisie. The councils were not a tool for a swift take-over against 'bourgeois' parliamentary democracy but rather a way of building up working-class power within recognised institutions. His strategic thinking is exemplified by notes that he wrote in late 1947 in preparation of *City and Countrysides in Italian History*, an ambitious multi-volume project which never came to fruition in its entirety (Moreno, Raggio 1999, 91). As he had it, the answer to the question 'Why the issue [of councils] concerns us' lay in the 'workers' and peasants' alliance for power. The problem, he insisted, was 'current and contemporary'. The Congress of the South [the Congresso Democratico del Mezzogiorno, organised in December 1947 by communists, socialists and the largest Italian trade union (CGIL)] and the ... Management Councils' were part of this strategy.<sup>6</sup> For Sereni, these could have been effective communist policies for Italy and he lamented the lack of support from the party leadership. At the central committee meeting that followed the disastrous April 1948 elections, when progressive forces like the communists were heavily defeated, he pointed out that 'our campaign ought to have been based on the Land

Committees and on the Management Councils but it wasn't. Our campaign should have been set up as a struggle of all popular organisations'.<sup>7</sup>

Within the framework of the communist strategy described above, his envisaging of the councils reflected many of the concerns that were first raised when he was a young socialist Zionist. In other words, although his goal in the postwar period was to further the cause of communism, the way to achieve it largely reflected, or was strongly informed by, his heritage. For the sake of clarity, we shall qualify the councils in terms of organisation and functions. Three main characteristics were present in the CdG organisation. First, a Management Council was a productive centre composed by two elements on equal terms: labour and capital. For Emilio, these must be given the same platform by means of an equal number of representatives and, as he explained in September 1945 at the Odeon Theatre in Milan to a crowd of workers, the Management Council 'consists of a joint representation [*rappresentanza paritetica*] of capitalist property and workers' (Sereni 1945c, 19). Similarly to what Enzo and other Zionists said about the limits of labour councils within the anarchic capitalist regime, Sereni (1945b, 6–7) stressed that, although the 'management council does not mean that workers will own factories', thanks to the newly created CdG, 'the factory is not an end in itself within the national production, but is a social occurrence that gives birth to thousands of workers'. Organic terms that equated the CdG to a life-giving centre mirrored the language that the Zionists had used to describe the national rebirth of Eretz Israel.<sup>8</sup> The Italian working class, then, would work for the (national) community and not merely for the random enrichment of some private interest.

Second, the CdG must avoid the isolation of its elements, so capital and labour must be held in a state of constant interaction. In postwar Italy, as it had been for the Avodah group, autonomy meant the possibility of labour growth in a more or less independent way, free from the stranglehold of parasitic capital. Isolation, on the other hand, was seen negatively. Echoing the words of his brother Enzo and his own concerns about the isolation of Jewish pioneers in Palestinian lands, he (Sereni 1946) explained in February 1946 that the 'exclusion from the new body [the CdG] of the representatives of capital' was not 'appropriate' because it led to the isolation of the workers. Instead, 'its equal composition would ensure much more effectively that constructive cooperation which is the *raison d'être* of the councils' (Sereni Emilio 1946). A few months later, during the first CdG national meeting in October 1946, he stressed further the need to avoid isolation through an anecdote involving him and a Turin worker. As he recalled it, 'we [said the worker], are far ahead in Turin, we have driven the capitalists out of the factories and now the workers and technicians rule the factories. I told him [replied Emilio] that we have taken a step further in Milan, forcing the capitalists to participate in the Management Councils' (CDII 1947, 240). It should be mentioned that Sereni was not against the formation of independent (exclusively for workers) trade unions. But the conflation between 'a workers' organisation', including only workers, and the council, 'an organisation that is not and cannot be only an organisation of workers', must be avoided (CDII 1947, 239).

The third feature that characterised the organisation of the Management Council was its legal basis. Of course, councils, just like any other form of structure in society, must enjoy some form of social recognition. What is striking is the similar emphasis that Emilio, just as Enzo had done years before, placed on the form which this recognition ought to take – that of legality, which he justified with reference to the specific historical setting or concrete situation in which Italy was at the time. As Emilio (Sereni 1946, 7) had it at the Odeon, in Italy the 'propertied classes [*classi possidenti*] must understand, and be convinced through concrete legislative and executive acts, that they do not enjoy a divine right which is superior to that of the same propertied classes of Britain or America' (CDSPCI 1946, 7). Emilio's private documents further strengthen the point. In a letter he received

from Adelio Pace, one of the members of the CdG at the Montecatini factory, his attention was drawn to the phrase ‘we are on the eve of a legal recognition of the CdG’, and he agreed to write an article in the journal of the PCI, *l’Unità*, to support the communist offensive in the legal sphere.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in private Sereni expressed a certain distaste for illegal activity, writing in his diary in late September 1946, ‘I am not one of those who have a romantic nostalgia for illegality. ... I have no particular passion for illegal offices’ (Sereni 2015, 26).

That communists should strive for legal recognition of the councils may at first appear an obvious postulate which any member of the PCI would have supported. In fact, evidence points to the contrary and he was often in a minority position when attempting to make the CdG a legal entity. During an insightful exchange of opinions that took place during the meeting of Italian communist leaders in June 1945, he stressed that the ‘Management Councils have been appointed in some factories, but the appointment has not been, so to speak, legalised, openly accepted by the industrialists. They work, but silently, without having been officially recognised.’<sup>10</sup> To this, Luigi Longo, in many ways the second-in-command in the PCI, replied in a dismissive manner, claiming that for the councils ‘formal recognition has relative importance’ and insisting in a blustering tone that ‘[o]nce the Management Councils have imposed themselves, we may also ask for formal recognition’.<sup>11</sup> Later, the minutes testify, he ‘insists on the need to consolidate the existence of the Management Councils with formal recognition by industrialists’.<sup>12</sup> Longo was unmoved and finished off his practical proposal with a catchphrase: ‘The Management Council must valorise itself, through facts.’<sup>13</sup> How, in actual terms, that was to be accomplished remained a mystery.

Why his proposals were often frustrated falls outside the scope of our enquiry. Here we can only speculate that his Jewishness might have contributed to suspicion amongst his comrades at a time when a Stalinist wave of anti-Semitic purges was tormenting the Soviet Union and European communist parties more broadly (Muller 2010, 172). This nefarious campaign, in fact, added to the widespread anti-Semitism that already existed in Italy, where Jews had to go ‘about the business of “not remembering” and “not forgetting” in a private and discreet manner’ (Lichtner 2018, 463).

Besides the long-term goal of a radiant communist future, what were the functions of Sereni’s Management Councils? Primarily, they were three: to educate the workers, to control and direct production and to increase productivity. The pedagogical role of his councils found its genesis in the widespread concerns of the Avodà Zionists to foster social and moral responsibility amongst the workers and increase their technical knowledge. The Italian working masses, he claimed, had fought bloodily to free the country from Fascism. The councils were one way to ensure that they could enjoy a higher level of responsibility in the novel society to the formation of which they had contributed. As he put it, new democratic life ‘arises in the centres of the productive life of the nation; there is a new sense ... of responsibility of the working class, of all workers, which sprouts and flourishes’ (Sereni 1945a, 264). Responsibility was coupled with a sense of morality and the CdG ‘ought to check and deliberate in particular ... on the economic and moral treatment of staff’.<sup>14</sup> Evidence shows that in his eyes the councils were working properly, and, from a long report on the Pineta di Sortenna sanatorium council, he underlined the phrase ‘*exploiters of diseases and of the work of others [have been] eliminated, the situation has been brought to an honest and moral level*’.<sup>15</sup>

Management Councils would also contribute to the proletariat’s technical education regarding production, resembling the task that Sereni had set for himself in his first articles on the Palestinian lands and their problems. It had also to do with overcoming the division between intellectual and manual labour, echoing themes that were dear to socialist Zionism (Bidussa 2000, lii–liii).

In his speech to the Marelli workers, Sereni introduced the new person responsible for production, the engineer Brasca, as

a leader who must disprove forever the lie that those elements who are only interested in the rebirth of reactionary forces can dare arouse the people. The lie that they attempt to spread among the working masses is that there exists an unbridgeable abyss between manual and intellectual workers [*lavoratori del braccio e della tecnica*]. (Sereni 1945b, 4)

And, he added, although Brasca was a specialist, he was a ‘new type of manager’ in that ‘he had dedicated his whole life to the growth of production and to social improvement and that’s why *he was chosen by you* [italics added]’. We should not, of course, overlook the communist intellectual context of postwar Italy. His words on Brasca and the CdGs more generally were in line with the construction of what Rosario Forlenza (2010, 191) has called the ‘new religion of democracy’, in which communists utilised images from urban or civic traditions, like town councils, in their process of meaning-formation. This aimed at fostering locally a new democratic culture that was respectful of the nascent Italian Republic.

The second function that the councils ought to fulfil in his construction was that of allowing the workers to control and direct production. This would lead to the workers’ responsible participation in the economic life of the country, ensuring that it would not drift again into the hands of warmongering dictatorships, and, instead, production would be reorganised towards the new, peaceful goals of Italian society after years of Fascism and war. For example, at the Odeon Theatre, Sereni stated that the councils were

a means of introducing into the economic life of the country an element of control and co-responsibility of workers. They will ensure national orientation for the reconstruction work, so that it will develop in the national interest and not for this or that particular group (Sereni 1945c, 19)

And, he added, CdGs ‘are not socialism, although they can become an effective and powerful element for *education* towards socialism. They are and must be bodies of control and national responsibility’ (Sereni 1945c, 19). In this sense, it is misleading to claim, as some have done, that the only two historical options for the councils were to disappear or to start a process of proper collectivisation of the Italian industry (Pacelli 2019, 51). Instead, it is better to see the councils as a (reformist and not revolutionary) tool for learning and spreading the communist or socialist way of life, something which the PCI was carrying out in many ways, including sending Italian communist fugitives to Czechoslovakia (Cooke 2012, 895).

The final function of the CdGs was to increase production. This had largely to do with the concept of productive labour, which, as has been explained in the first part, was of fundamental importance for the socialist Zionists. His diary of these years is saturated with the idea of productive labour and production, as the passage below illustrates:

One can study only by *producing*, and, for him [Giorgio Napolitano], only a *production* plan can be an effective and focused study plan. I said to him: now you have to do your bachelor thesis. Choose the topic well, a topic that is related to your actual current activity. I helped him in the choice. And now, I told him, you shall coordinate your readings around this centre, this *production*. Rest assured that if you want to seriously produce, the needs of production will lead you to readings even in different fields; but in this way your readings will have focus, they will be concrete and effective, and not scattered. You will make yourself (you will begin to make yourself) a culture, which is not a culture if it is not work, if it is not production, if it is not practice. (Sereni 2015, 45)

Much like what Eretz Israel was for the Zionists, and certainly using a similar language to describe them, his Management Councils were the centres that would funnel and fan productive labour, bolstering in turn the productive capacity of the nation. In a remark that echoed the somewhat mystical return of the Jewish people to a life of productive toil, he (Sereni 1945b, 7) explained to the Marelli



workers in 1945 that to ‘achieve what we want ... we [must] *return to labour* [my emphasis] with a firm conscience’ after the years of subordination during the Fascist regime.

Of course, far from being simply a theoretical point, to reinvigorate industry was a concrete and dire necessity since Italian productive output (not its potential) in many fields had diminished drastically during the war (Gundle 1990, 205). In an interview in May 1945, he argued that only ‘if the working class enjoys the effective right to participate in the management of production’ through the councils, ‘will the toiling masses be able to bring enthusiasm and awareness of national interest to the work of reconstruction’ that would increase productivity and save Italy (FCM 1945, 10). Later, at the Odeon, he (Sereni 1945c, 23–6) repeated this point, adding that the ‘Management Council is an organ that ... joins the company’s direction, bringing in the workers’ constructive contributions’ and that ‘studies the means to increase the company’s [*impresa*] production and yields [*rendimenti*]’. Nor was labour to accomplish this in isolation – avoiding what had been a major concern for the Avodah Zionists in the 1920s – and the communist leader remarked in 1945 that they must ‘accept the collaboration of those capitalists who honestly direct their businesses in a productive, and not speculative, sense’ (Sereni Emilio 1945c, 17).

Sereni’s strategic actions with regard to the councils were in line with Togliatti’s constructivist strategy for postwar Italy. In fact, they were also not discordant with those of the socialist Zionists (including Enzo, obviously) who prioritised nation over class for the construction of Eretz Israel (Kelemen 1996, 78–9). Indeed, the nationalist socialist idea of constructivism accommodated quite comfortably the strategies of both Togliatti and the socialist Zionists. Bidussa has gone as far as affirming that he had to ‘implicitly acknowledge the correctness of his brother’s assessment’ insofar as constructivism was concerned. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to ascertain with precision whether he accepted wholeheartedly the position of ‘nation’ over ‘class’ – this would also require a much broader discussion on the debate of socialism in one country, on the role of foreign and national capital, on labour relations with ex-fascists and industrialists and more. A quote from Sereni’s 1946 letter to Giuseppe Aiello may elucidate his view on the issue without distracting us from the main thrust of this essay. Responding to Aiello’s complaints that the epuration of fascists in Italy had not been carried out properly after the regime’s defeat, he (Sereni 2011, 61) stated, perhaps conceded, that

politics is the art of possibility; everything that from a personal point of view may seem right is not always possible, nor in fact concretely right, in a given, concrete situation. ... To go and say that Mr X must be expelled because he was a fascist is useless and, today, not even right.

At this point, enriched by past experiences (including Enzo’s death), he did seem more open, maybe begrudgingly, to reckon with a ‘*piccolo strappo apparente*’, not unlike his older brother in the past.

Before concluding it is noteworthy to point out that Emilio, similarly to the way Enzo had argued in the 1920s, did not focus on ‘efficiency’. This did not mean, of course, that Emilio disregarded efficiency but, rather, that it did not constitute his primary concern. For instance, in a report from the Breda factory, which was probably compiled sometime in the summer of 1945, Emilio highlighted a long paragraph, which described the productive situation:

Absolute lack of raw materials, cessation of all war orders and consequent transformation of war production into peace production. For a clear political criterion, it was necessary to avoid that a purely economic concept in terms of labour prevailed. Following the directives of the higher political bodies, even before they became executive, the directive committee not only refused to impose any sackings, but immediately put into practice the hiring of all the persecuted politicians, patriots, prisoners of concentration camps, people who had refused the RSI recruitments, military personnel fired after 1939 for

recruitment reasons. *An impressive total of about 1,500 people* [underlined by Emilio]. In the absence of real productive work, efforts were made to stabilise the piecework system to 70 per cent.<sup>16</sup>

What attracted Emilio's attention was the relatively high number of people employed, disregarding the fact that they were not strictly efficiently employed in productive labour. Much as constructivist Zionists in the 1920s saw Jewish collective employment as a way to consolidate their grip on the land in Palestine (Sternhell 1998, 32–43), His primary concern was to increase quantitative employment to strengthen the position of the working class in Italy. Productivity was connected to having a large quantity of people engaged in active labour so, in the margin of the paragraph quote above, he remarked in red pencil, 'Hiring of patriots, veterans, etc.'. <sup>17</sup> Later, in the passage following the paragraph mentioned above, he also highlighted '700 workers' and next to it added 'Reconstruction Brigades'. <sup>18</sup> Of course, by the time Sereni penned these words, his commitment was to communism. This, as I hope to have demonstrated, had nonetheless been built on the substantial foundations of socialist Zionism and continued to be informed by them.

## Conclusion

Emilio Sereni contributed deeply to the intellectual life of Italy, for the most part under the hammer-and-sickle banner. This essay has shown that Emilio's socialist Zionism influenced his actions and thinking as a communist, informing the envisaging of Management Councils in post-war Italy. Many of the concerns which Emilio shared with his brother Enzo as a member of the Avodah group in Rome manifested quite clearly in the formation of the councils. In Emilio's eyes, these ought to be a legal centre to bind productive labour and parasitic capital, avoiding the isolation of the Italian working masses. Much like Enzo, Emilio did not care much about efficiency and argued that by returning to productivity, the workers would regain control over their life and, eventually, Italian society. By the mid-1940s, Emilio's thinking was enriched by years as an entrenched communist, with this identity having been cemented by pressing events and by the relation and opposition to his older brother. However, to overlook the Zionist influence on this Italian figure – as the 'mechanic conversion view' has done – can no longer be accepted. Certainly the 'commies' were (and are) not blank sheets of paper on which one monolithic ideology was neatly written. Often different, and at times almost contradictory, ideological strata and other intellectual assumptions piled up and coexisted underneath the same peaked cap. This was definitely the case for Emilio Sereni.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to Andrea Caracausi, Timothy Perrine and Federico Picerni for their precious suggestions. They contributed significantly to the publication of this article. Tyler Lycan and Gareth Davis showed great patience by proof-reading the piece in English – not my mother tongue. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Modern Italy* for their comments on my initial submission.

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## Notes

1. All translations from Italian into English are mine. All emphasis in quotations is in the original, except where stated.
2. Reading the same passage, Richard Evans seems to have a different appreciation of Hobsbawm's reasons for being a communist (Evans 2019, 43). However, evidence seems to prove that the point put forward here is more convincing. For instance, see, Hobsbawm 1995, 143–56 and BBC Two 1994.
3. This copy of *Jews and Arabs in Palestine* is stored at the Istituto Alcide Cervi (IAC), Fondo Emilio Sereni (FES).
4. The error is pervasive. See, for instance, Quaini 2011, 22; Napolitano 2019. On the contrary, Luigi Musella (1989, 701–03) has correctly pointed out that Emilio's choice was part of the brothers' broader Zionist plan.
5. IAC, FES, b28 'Consigli di Gestione', 'fasc. 134', report of CLN representatives at the IRI, Milan, August 1945, fo. 1.
6. IAC, FES, b2 'Note e Appunti', 'fasc. Città e campagne nella storia italiana', private notes, 27 December 1947.
7. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci (FIG), Fondo Mosca (FM), mf. 199 'Verbale Direzione Pci', 26 April 1948.
8. Terms that related to life were used in many nationalist enterprises at the time, including the Italian *Risorgimento*. See Forlenza and Thomassen 2017, 293–4.
9. IAC, FES, b28 'Consigli di Gestione', 'fasc. 134', letter from Adelio Pace to Emilio Sereni on the agreement for the formation of the 'Gruppo Montecatini' CdG, 6 August 1946.
10. FIG, FM, mf. 231 'Verbale direzione Pci', 12 June 1945.
11. FIG, FM, mf. 231 'Verbale direzione Pci', 12 June 1945.
12. FIG, FM, mf. 231 'Verbale direzione Pci', 12 June 1945.
13. FIG, FM, mf. 231 'Verbale direzione Pci', 12 June 1945.
14. IAC, FES, b28 'Consigli di Gestione', 'fasc. 133', pamphlet by the CdG organising committee, 'Il Consiglio di Gestione nei grandi complessi industriali', fo. 3.
15. IAC, FES, b28 'Consigli di Gestione', 'fasc. 134', report on the Management Council Sanatorio di Pineta di Sortenna in preparation of the First PCI Congress in Sondrio, 'Relazione inviata al I° Congresso del P.C.I. in Sondrio, sul Consiglio di Gestione del Sanatorio di Pineta di Sortenna', 13 Oct 1945, fo. 3.
16. IAC, FES, b28 'Consigli di Gestione', 'fasc. 134', follow-up to the report on the CLN Breda organisation, 'Seguito al rapporto', 1945, fo. 1.
17. IAC, FES, b28 'Consigli di Gestione', 'fasc. 134', follow-up to the report on the CLN Breda organisation, 'Seguito al rapporto', 1945, fo. 1.
18. IAC, FES, b28 'Consigli di Gestione', 'fasc. 134', follow-up to the report on the CLN Breda organisation, 'Seguito al rapporto', 1945, fo. 1.

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### Italian summary

Questo saggio vuole dimostrare che è impossibile inquadrare correttamente le azioni del comunista italiano Emilio Sereni senza considerare la sua formazione da sionista. Chiunque sia interessato a comprendere le complessità del comunismo nel secolo scorso e ad evitare conclusioni semplicistiche su tale ideologia trarrà beneficio da questo studio. La ricerca ha spesso affrontato il comunismo in modo monolitico. Questo approccio non consente, tuttavia, di spiegarne adeguatamente le sue manifestazioni multiformi (pratiche e teoriche). Si rende perciò necessario procedere ad un cambio di paradigma e questo saggio si propone

quindi come un contributo al recente filone di ricerca storica contrario a visioni semplicistiche sul comunismo. Più specificamente, analizzando i Consigli di Gestione che Sereni contribuì a creare nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra, si ravvisa come molte delle loro caratteristiche fossero derivate, o avessero trovato le loro origini più profonde, nella sua precedente esperienza come socialista sionista. Lo studio mette dunque in relazione Sereni alle più ampie esperienze del sionismo del primo Novecento e del comunismo italiano nei primi anni del secondo dopoguerra.