ARTIGO

Labourism and communism in Britain: a historical perspective

Kevin Morgan
University of Manchester

In an essay published in 1906, the German sociologist Werner Sombart famously posed the question: 'Why is there no Socialism in the United States?' The absence which Sombart identified was not so much that of socialism but that of any mass party of the American working class, an unfilled political space that has since proved to be a perennial stimulus to thoughts and debates as to nature of American exceptionalism. Across the Atlantic, this literature has had an echo in 'exceptionalist' interpretations of British labour history that focus not on the absence of a mass working-class party, for in the shape of the British Labour Party this was very much in evidence, but on the weakness of the Marxist traditions that were apparently so influential in continental Europe. Why was it, as Ross McKibbin has put it, 'that, before the First World War, political Marxism's classical moment, Britain alone of the major European states produced no mass Marxist party... ?'[1] The question is not one confined to McKibbin's supposed 'classical moment', nor in fact did the pre-1914 period mark the high point of 'political Marxism' in most European countries. It was only after 1945 that communist parties, by now a quarter of a century old, emerged as the dominant vehicle for left-wing politics in France and Italy. By all indicators except, perhaps, that of creative socialist thinking, the presence of these parties in their respective societies was incomparably more extensive than that of their 'classical' predecessors. Elsewhere in Europe the communists were not remotely a hegemonic force, but neither could they be dismissed as irrelevant. In Britain, however, organised Marxism appears at first glance to have remained almost as peripheral a presence as when Marx himself laboured virtually unnoticed in London's British Museum. Relatively untroubled by legal persecution or state harrassment, the British Communist Party (CPGB) was, it would seem, only the more effectively marginalised by less coercive methods. In the spirit of Sombart and McKibbin, the present paper therefore poses the question: why was there no mass communist party in Great Britain? And

[1] R. McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Britain?' in *Ideologies of Class*, Oxford University Press pb edn. 1991, p. 2

what, if not that of a mass party, was the role that the CPGB did nevertheless play on the British left?

The perils of this 'Why was there no...?' approach to history should perhaps be restated at the outset. While all history is, in a sense, comparative history, theories of exceptionalism pose special problems by their implicit assumption of some real or notional yardstick of 'normal' or even 'natural' historical development against which to judge the exceptional. In the case of late nineteenth-century labour history, the 'normal' or ideal type, from which the exceptional is held to depart, is usually the German SPD: hence, no doubt, McKibbin's reading of the SPD's unquestionable 'classical moment' as that of 'political Marxism' as a whole. This supposed 'normality' of German social democracy is particularly problematic, not least because the general conjuncture of Wilhelmine politics which shaped the SPD has more commonly, if just as problematically, been seen in terms of a German Sonderweg than as conforming to any normal, or specifically Anglo-Saxon, model of capitalist development.[2] Other historians have queried the vaunted 'normality' of European social democracy as a whole, notably Philip Foner in advancing his arresting hypothesis that, with the decline of a socialist politics of mass encapsulation, the American exception may yet turn out to be the European rule.[3] If such caveats are appropriate in the case of classical social democracy, they may seem all the more telling when applied to the post-war history of European communism. After all, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), reputedly the most successful of these parties and certainly the most nearly analogous in its international standing to the SPD, is seen by most commentators to have gone through a lengthy process of 'decommunisation' or of 'escape' from its exceptional origins.[4] This 'normalisation' of the PCI has now been strikingly confirmed by the abandonment of its name, programme, even its very identity, and by its re-entry into government to the implausible accompaniment of rising share values. The French communists, meanwhile, by resisting such a programme of adjustment are held to have brought about their own inexorable decay. Such readings are not

[2] For the problems of German exceptionalism, see David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: bourgeois society and politics in nineteenth-century Germany*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984.

[3] Philip Foner, 'Why is there no socialism in the United States?', *History Workshop*, 17, 1984.

[4] See Ronald Tiersky, *Ordinary Stalinism: Democratic centralism and the question of communist political development*, Allen & Unwin, Boston, 1985; Cris Shore, *Italian Communism: the escape from Leninism. An anthropological perspective*, Pluto Press, London, 1990.

without their own preconceptions, but they do at least underline that there is nothing normal, still less abnormal, about a mass communist party, and to explain its absence in Great Britain requires something far more nuanced than a theory of British exceptionalism. What such an exploration can provide, however, is not only an insight into some of the distinctive characteristics of the British labour movement but also perhaps, if more obliquely, of the equally distinctive circumstances which gave rise to a mass communist politics in large parts of mainland Europe.

The comparative weakness of the CPGB can be established fairly straightforwardly. The simplest statistical indices of relative party strength, notably electoral support and membership figures, seem unambiguously to confirm the party's fringe status. Throughout its history the CPGB was free to contest parliamentary elections, subject only to a prohibitive constituency deposit, and from the late 1920s onwards the party generally put forward anything between ten and a hundred general election candidates.[5] Of these, only four in the party's entire history were successful, and most of the others secured derisory votes. Partly the problem was due to Britain's 'first-past-the-post', constituency-based voting system, which has consistently excluded not just the communists but all except regionally based minority parties, such as the Welsh and Scottish nationalists. It is largely for that reason that the CPGB has, since the Second World War, been a steadfast advocate of electoral reform. That the communists, unlike the far right, did nevertheless gain at least a handful of parliamentary seats indicates that it too enjoyed certain regional concentrations of support. Three of these in particular stand out. Two of them were coalfields, those of Scotland and South Wales, whose bitter legacy of industrial confrontation provided a rich seam to be worked by pit and community activists.[6] The third was inner London, and more specifically London's East End. Here, in dense and wretched housing conditions, was concentrated Britain's largest Jewish community, radicalised by the threat of fascism and often bearing direct or ancestral memories of revolutionary agitations against the Habsburgs or Romanovs. The result was a potent coming together of revolutionary politics and ethnicity that culminated in the return of a Communist MP for

[5] The exception was in 1935 when, in pursuit of its united front objectives, the CPGB put up only two candidates in the interests of a Labour election victory

[6] Three of the CPGB's Welsh and Scottish strongholds are analysed in Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows: communism and working-class militancy in inter-war Britain*, Croom Helm, London, 1980.

Stepney in the 1945 general election.[7] That election also marked the CPGB's electoral peak nationally, and the party gained a creditable average of 14.8% of the vote in the 21 seats it contested.[8] Its isolated successes cannot disguise a starker reality, however. Even in areas where communists were influential in industrial and community struggles, the party was nearly always unable to translate this influence into electoral support.[9] The contrast with France and Italy, where by the 1970s the communists administered great tracts of the local state and nurtured credible aspirations to government, could not have been greater.

Party membership figures tell a similar story. With its few thousand members scattered among the indifferent millions, the CPGB could not remotely bear comparison with the vast communist countercultures that rivalled the Church itself in parts of Latin Europe. After falling as low as 2-3,000 in the party's formative years, CPGB membership then picked up considerably with the development of popular front and anti-fascist politics in the 1930s. Mirroring its electoral performance, the Second World War again marked the party's peak membership of 55,000, but the post-war period saw a slow but inexorable decline. A particular haemorrhage of support occurred when the party lost a quarter of its members following Khrushchev's secret speech and the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. The following years saw a marked recovery, but this tailed off again in the mid-1960s. In 1970 the membership was still around 30,000, falling to 20,000 ten years later, and it was only in the party's final decade, one of political disintegration, that the figures went into freefall. Even in its headiest days, however, the party could hardly be mistaken for Togliatti's partito nuovo, the communist 'anti-parish' that embraced over two million Italians. Perhaps in secular Britain, where the parish itself was much decayed and few sought its communist equivalent, such conceptions of the mass party were less attractive. '... [T]he fundamental reason why our Party does not grow is that you comrades do not want it to grow!', general secretary Harry Pollitt chastised delegates to the CPGB's 1945 congress. 'The Party wants to

[7] See Henry Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism 1935-45*, Vallentine Mitchell, Ilford, 1995

[8] While the seats contested obviously included communist strongholds, including three where it obtained over 40% of the vote, the party was also concerned to present itself as a genuinely national party. Thus, for example, it put its agricultural policies to two rural seats in southern England, where its vote fell to as low as 1.6%.

[9] For an example of this discrepancy see James Hinton's case study 'Coventry communism a study of factory politics in the Second World War', *History Workshop* 10, 1980

be a narrow Party, it wants to be a Party of exclusive Marxists.'[10] But even if Pollitt was right, and if the more appropriate comparison is with the Leninist-Jacobin conceptions of the party held by the French Communist Party (PCF), the relative membership ratio was still generally around 20:1. Moreover, the the CPGB's was increasingly in later years an ageing membership, in sharp contrast to its earlier appeal to militant young workers. By and large, the generations of militants who joined in the 1930s and 1940s remained dominant in the party, and the CPGB was only a very limited beneficiary of the radical mobilisations of the 1960s and 1970s. Some thoughtful activists were drawn by the more strategic perspectives of Eurocommunism, but ardent spirits were now more likely to join one of the newly proliferating Trotskyist groupings. Still others joined no party at all, as issue-based movements threw into question the whole Leninist cult of the party. Even before it eventually dissolved itself in 1991, the British Communist Party had seemed for some time to be dying of old age.

The CPGB's history does not, in short, immediately lend itself to triumphalist renditions. That does not mean that the party did not make its own distinctive contribution to British politics, and the nature of this contribution will be explored in the final part of this paper. To provide a context for this discussion it is first worth offering some thoughts as to the possible reasons for the CPGB's relative failure. A number of possibilities readily suggest themselves. The first, which would link the years of communism with those of McKibbin's classical moment, is the general lack of purchase of revolutionary politics in modern Britain. Never during the CPGB's seven decades was the British state even threatened by constitutional breakdown, and it is revealing of Britain's relatively orderly political development that the CPGB was one of only a handful of European communist parties never to be suppressed. While the twentieth century globally has been summed up by one outstanding British communist historian as an 'age of extremes',[11] British domestic politics remained characterised by a gradualism and incrementalism that gave little scope for volatile new formations of any variety. Britain's fascists, it should be remembered, never elected a single member of parliament, nor even a local councillor, a record far worse even than the communists'. This immunity to what George Orwell called 'the ruthless ideologies of the Continent' feeds easily into powerful national myths, bearing that grain of

[10] *Communist Policy for Britain: report of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party*, CPGB, 1945, 35

[11] Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Michael Joseph, London, 1994

truth that all myths have, as to British instincts for tolerance and compromise. 'There is no revolutionary tradition in England, and even in extremist political parties, it is only the middle-class membership that thinks in revolutionary terms', Orwell wrote in his wartime celebration, *The English People*. 'The average Englishman is unable to grasp their doctrines and uninterested in their grievances'.[12] This much vaunted pragmatism and empiricism might seem to have advantaged the untheorised semi-socialism of the Labour Party as opposed to more ideological or programmatic alternatives. 'We are a solid people and very practical, and not given to chasing bubbles', the Labour Party's father figure, Keir Hardie, wrote to Friedrich Engels in 1889.[13] There was not one of Hardie's successors who would have disagreed. 'A further characteristic of the British movement has been its practicality', wrote Clement Attlee, head of Labour's first majority government. 'It is characteristic... that the origin of the Labour Party is to be found in fact rather than theory.'[14] By historians as well as contemporaries, the Labour Party has been seen as the natural vehicle for British working-class interests, to which continental traditions of social democracy, let alone its offshoot communism, were somewhat alien.[15]

To this beguilingly teleological perspective, an emphasis on two critical defining moments should be added. The first was that of the CPGB's formation, the result of nearly two years' protracted negotiations which were only finally concluded in January 1921. In most of Europe this process of forming a communist party was effected through a split in the main body of social democracy. The character and proportions of the split varied from country to country, but all communist parties formed in this way had some inheritance of ideological legitimacy, organisational resources and continuity of leadership. In France it was the socialist party's famous Tours congress in December 1920 that voted to transform itself into the French Communist Party, and the PCF daily *L'Humanite* was suitably emblazoned both with the international's hammer and sickle and the proof of native authenticity: Fondateur: Jean Jaures. In Italy, only the Comintern's insistence on its uncompromising 'twenty-one conditions' put paid to an even broader movement of support for the new

[12] George Orwell, *The English People*, Collins, London, 1947, 9, 22.
[13] Cited in Stanley Pierson, *Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism. The Struggle for a New Consciousness*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1973, 199.
[14] Clement Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective*. Gollancz, London, 1937, 30, 36.
[15] See for example the writings of Henry Pelling, spanning as they do both late Victorian and twentieth-century British labour history. Defining texts include *The Origins of the Labour Party*, Oxford University Press. Oxford, 1966 edn; *The British Communist Party. A Historical Profile*, A. & C. Black, London, 1975 edn.

international. Even despite this breach with Serrati's centrists, the purified party of Gramsci and Bordiga was very far from being a negligible quantity. In Britain, however, there was no real split in the labour movement, but only a coming together of relatively peripheral Marxist sects. The infant Communist Party did not even retain the membership bequeathed it by its predecessors and in its earliest years was proportionately far more dependent on Moscow's material resources than its European sister parties.[16] Of established labour movement figures, only the irrespressible Tom Mann found a new allegiance in communism, and of the movement's institutions only the Labour Research Department fell under communist control. It was in this very period that the Labour Party, with its new constitution and national organisation, was establishing itself as a mass reformist party, and from the beginning the communists were unable seriously to compete with it.

The second defining moment was that of the political reconstruction of Europe in 1944-7. Across the continent, the rebuilding of democracy required both new constitutional settlements and the remaking of party systems, tabulae rasae that could not have been better timed from the communists' point of view. The mid-1940s marked the apogee of communism not just in Britain but in most of Western Europe, as anti-fascist coalitions emerged to harness or deflect popular expectations of fundamental social change. That nearly everywhere these coalitions embraced the communists was inevitable. This was a day of reckoning with the right and of thanksgiving to the Soviet state as liberator. Domestically the communists had played a role within their respective liberation movements to which even their opponents paid tribute. Moreover, whatever the obvious drawbacks of Leninist forms of organisation, in conditions of illegality, to which they were arguably best suited, they had permitted a continuity of communist party organisation and activity which no other anti-fascist party could match. The results were most striking in Italy and in a very real sense the modern Italian Communist Party dates not from the party's foundation in 1920 but from Togliatti's svolta di Salerno of 1944. Within three short years the PCI's seven thousand or so illegal cadres had blossomed into a great mass movement some two million strong. In France, the hiatus of illegality was very much briefer and the continuities with prewar communist politics

[16] Reliable figures are only now being established, but it is already clear that funding of the movement in Britain was disproportionate to its relatively tiny membership. For example, the budget for the CPGB agreed in March 1922 (200,000 gold roubles) was evidently twice that of the French Communist Party's and around half that of the German and Italian parties; see Dmitri Volkogonov, *Lenin: Life and Legacy*, HarperCollins, London, 1995 edn, 399.

much more obvious. Even so, in France as in Italy it was in this period that the communists established themselves as unquestionably the dominant presence on the left, and briefly as the largest party of any persuasion. Having established such support and influence at the very inception of their respective postwar settlements, both the PCF and PCI were able to maintain their positions - in national elections, in local government, in trade unions and social movements - for the next generation and beyond.

In Britain the communists had no such second window of opportunity. Crown, constitution and dominant forms of representation alike remained unaffected. With Labour's election victory in 1945, the prewar government went decorously into opposition, and the prewar opposition responsibly into government, where it proceeded to carry forward the reforming momentum of the all-party wartime coalition. The achievements of this 'revolution by consent'[17] should not be underestimated, but compared with the upheavals of the continent British politics was almost placid in its sense of precedent and propriety. Nor could the British communists' battles for wartime production compare with the heroic partisan struggles that earned French and Italian communists such national legitmacy and esteem. Britain's war was won by the redeployment and revitalisation of existing political forces, not by recourse to the communists. British politics remained, imperturbably, as difficult to break into as any democratic system very well could be.

The British electoral system, as already mentioned, was identified by communists and others as a critical instrument of closure. 'The undemocratic electoral system... is deliberately used to make real Parliamentary expression of opinions other than those of the two dominant party leaderships a matter of the utmost difficulty', noted the CPGB's 1951 programme, *The British Road to Socialism*.[18] Quite as important, particularly given the CPGB's relative disregard for the parliamentary sphere, was the very different character of Britain's Labour Party from European social-democratic parties. Its roots in a unified trade union movement, continually renewed through the unions' predominant representation at Labour's annual conference and on its executive committee, gave the Labour Party a unique legitimacy as the authentic vehicle for British working-class interests. It also guaranteed it a level and stability of funding that its fluctuating individual membership could never have provided. Moreover, the very fact that, 'standing outside the

[17] A phrase we associate with the Labour Party's foremost intellectual of the period Harold Laski.

[18] *The British Road to Socialism*, revised edn CPGB, London, 1952, 11

European social democratic world',[19] the Labour Party lacked any formal ideology or programme meant that left-wingers, including Marxists, very often found the Labour Party a more credible focus for their socialist aspirations than either the Communist Party or its predecessors. The Labour Party was always an ecumenical party, or 'broad church' as it liked to describe itself, and in theory at least its broad federal constitution embraced both trade union and socialist affiliations. It was in this distinctive context that in 1920, while the Bolsheviks were carrying through their historic rupture with social democracy right across Europe, Lenin himself enjoined British communists to seek affiliation to the Labour Party.[20] Such applications were always rejected, the communists being perceived as both trojan horse and electoral liability. Nevertheless, Labour's doors remained very much open to individual left-wingers. At both grassroots and parliamentary levels, the party always included a fair sprinkling of ex-communists, near-communists and, at least according to some hostile sources, crypto-communists.

For the comparative failure of the CPGB there are therefore a whole number of reasons touching on the stability and impermeability of British political institutions. What they all seem to boil down to is the overshadowing presence of the Labour Party as the historic party of the British left. The interpretation offered here is thus explicitly one that focuses on the political or superstructural level. Indeed, it is not always clear that the economic, structural and demographic factors adduced in McKibbin's analysis of the earlier period are nearly distinctive enough in themselves to explain the peculiarities of the British experience.[21] While British conditions admittedly did not offer much encouragement to revolutionary politics, the non-appearance of a mass Marxist party of

[19] James Joll, *The Second International 1889-1914*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1968 edn, 179.

[20] See his speech to the Comintern's Second Congress in *Lenin on Britain*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1934

[21] McKibbin notes very helpfully the impact on class politics in Britain of such factors as occupational sectionalism, plant and company size, associational cultures, housing types etc. The problem is that he never employs a true comparative method to consider the extent to which similar factors produced similar, or divergent, results in continental countries. Indeed, his whole essay has only the vaguest references to any other European country. Moreover, McKibbin barely considers the differential salience of these factors within Britain and the extent to which these differences correlate with the relative local or regional appeal of a Marxist class politics. It is notable, for example, that the very few strongholds of Britain's Marxist Social Democratic Federation included small-to-medium-sized towns of small plants, cottage-type housing and a working class divided by skill and gender (e.g. Burnley, Lancashire, a cotton town, and Northampton, a centre of the boot and shoe industry).

social reform, such as the PCF, the PCI and the SPD before them essentially were,[22] is best explained at the political level, by the lack of political space. However problematic the concept of political space, especially if used so rigidly and deterministically as to negate historial agency, it was this absence of an identifiable role for it in British politics that was to prove fatal to the CPGB.

If anything, the problem intensified in the party's later years. In its formative period it could at least claim a revolutionary communist identity that could not readily be accommodated by the Labour Party. Even in the 1940s and 1950s, when its revolutionary mission had already become unclear, it had its association with a world communist movement which, as many on the left saw it, was marching from triumph to triumph. That was one, if only one, of the reasons for the big increase in Communist Party membership during the Second World War, when cynical older comrades were occasionally heard muttering about the influx of 'Red Army members'. After the crisis of 1956-57, when the party lost fully a quarter of its membership, these Soviet linkages came increasingly to seem something of a liability, and from the 1960s onwards the CPGB leadership began slowly but unmistakably to distance itself from the USSR. By this time the sense of the party as the indispensable, revolutionary agent of change in Britain was tenuous indeed. As early as its Labour Party affiliation campaigns of the 1940s, the CPGB had itself acknowledged Labour's absolute centrality to the British class struggle. '... [T]he proposal of the affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party is a British question... corresponding to the genius and traditions of the British movement', wrote R. Palme Dutt, the CPGB's leading theoretician. 'It could arise in no other country, because in no other country are the conditions comparable.'[23] This position was subsequently reaffirmed in successive drafts of the CPGB programme *The British Road to Socialism*, the first dating from 1951 with inputs by Stalin himself.[24] In thus accepting that the 'British road' lay through a Labour government 'of a new type', the communists left a big question mark over their own precise function, excluded as they were from the Labour alliance. '[S]ome members saw no point now in working inside the Communist Party when the party was no longer distinguishable from the Labour movement', recalled one veteran communist; 'they might as well be in the trade union

[22] While all communist parties had their ultra-sectarian phases, it was their credibility as national-reformist parties abjuring 'adventurism' that gave them such enormous social presence from the 1930s (in the case of the PCF) and 1940s (the PCI).
[23] R. Palme Dutt, *The Road to Labour Unity*, Labour Monthly, London, 1943, 7.
[24] See Kevin Morgan, *Harry Pollitt*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1993, 167-70.

as officials or inside the Labour Party.'[25] With the CPGB's declining political effectiveness, such attitudes must have become increasingly common.

The British Communist Party can therefore be seen to have failed both in its original grand purpose and by the standards set by some of its European sister parties. That does not mean, however, that its role in British politics was entirely a negligible one. Indeed, the recent quickening of academic interest in the party's history may serve to confirm one of commonest cliches of British labour history: that the influence and significance of the Communist Party was quite out of proportion to its limited size and electoral support. That this was so was due partly to certain historic weaknesses of the Labour Party, partially compensated for by the CPGB, and partly to those distinctive political characteristics which made a communist party potentially so effective a political instrument. A consideration of these characteristics, which can be grouped under the two headings of organisation and ideology, provides an insight into the more positive roles that the CPGB was able to play.

Organisation

Like all communist parties, the CPGB was a disciplined and centralised organisation that had a far greater proportion of active members than other political parties. Indeed, its very failure to develop as a mass party meant that fewer passive members were attracted to it than, say, the PCI, let alone social-democratic parties without vanguardist pretensions. The scale of the CPGB's ambitions was such that, particularly in its earlier years, the party's tasks always seemed greater than the resources that it had to deal with them. For that reason there was serious concern that the party demanded too much of its members, and that this itself acted as a deterrent to all but the most passionate recruits. 'Better methods of organising Party work must be initiated in order to enable the Party members to avoid reaching a point at which every evening is fully occupied', the party's 1935 congress demanded. 'At least one or two evenings per week should be kept free for self-education and social life.'[26] Older party members have confirmed this relentless

[25] Harry McShane (with Joan Smith), *No Mean Fighter*, Pluto Press, London, 1978, 241

[26] It is not surprising perhaps that at the same congress CPGB secretary Harry Pollitt commented on the 'amazing amount of domestic unhappiness' in the party's ranks. '"we are looked upon as wife deserters", "we are never at home" - and the consequence is that squabbles and strife develop, and the wives of our own Party members become some of the

pressure to be incessantly active. 'It was absolutely ridiculous', one of them remembered. 'The people were putting in such a ridiculous amount of their time that it would put off anybody that wasn't prepared to do that.'[27] However detrimental to its members' domestic lives and its hopes of mass recruitment, this awesome level of activity did mean that the CP's influence was assiduously disseminated through broader campaigns and organisations that utterly transcended the party's own limitations. It was of critical importance in this respect that the Labour Party's was essentially an electoralist conception of politics that largely eschewed extra-parliamentary mobilisations.[28] In other words, the political space that was lacking for a mass Marxist party was most certainly there for a campaigning agitational style of politics, and the CPGB filled this role with tremendous flair and imagination.

A few examples are enough to make the point. One is the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), active during the mass unemployment of the inter-war years and the only effective unemployed organisation that Britain has ever had. Organised and led by communists, many of them victimised industrial activists, the NUWM was active at a number of levels, from the famous Hunger Marches which culminated in great mass demonstrations in London, to its local trade-union type activities defending unemployed claimants. As such, its influence and even its paying membership reached tens of thousands when Communist Party membership was a mere fraction of that.[29] In many ways its irrepressible campaigning methods served as a model for the many other communist-led social movements, of which the most notable were perhaps the tenants' and squatters' movements of the 1930s and 1940s.[30]

International affairs were another field in which the CPGB was able to provide a campaigning edge that the Labour Party usually lacked. In the 1930s the emphasis was an anti-fascist one and the CPGB, like other communist parties, saw a staggering proportion of its membership

---

worst advertising agents for the Communist Party'. *Harry Pollitt Speaks - A Call to All Workers*, CPGB 13th Congress report, London, 1935, 42, 73.

[27] Interview with Edmund Frow, 10 September 1987

[28] The classic indictment of this fact is Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour*, George Allen & Unwin, London 1961

[29] The best account is Richard Croucher, *We Refuse to Starve in Silence: A History of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement 1920-1946*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1987

[30] See Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics 1935-1941*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989, 277-297, for an account of the 1939 Birmingham rent strike, and James Hinton, 'Self-help and socialism: the squatters' movement of 1946', *History Workshop*, 25, 1988

(some 10 per cent or more) enlist to fight in Spain. In later years the biggest campaigns were over peace, the Soviet-inspired petitions of the Cold War period eventually giving way to the more neutralist Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, in which the communist element was submerged in a much broader movement of the anti-war left. Most important of all, perhaps, were the CPGB's anti-imperialist agitations at the heart of what was the largest empire the world has known. From its earliest years the Comintern identified anti-colonialism as one of the key responsibilities of the British party and from the early 1930s British communists nurtured friendly relations with the leaders of nascent national independence movements. Jawaharlal Nehru, for example, who later became India's first post-independence premier, was in regular contact with R. Palme Dutt and in 1938 secretly addressed the CPGB's central committee. Kwame Nkrumah, future leader of Ghana, was actually a member of the CPGB for some time in the 1940s. Even Jomo Kenyatta, not normally thought of as a communist, was in 1930 reported by the British authorities to have joined the CPGB. Certainly Kenyatta made a number of contributions to the party's press in this period. Contacts such as these arose from persistent efforts at day-to-day solidarity work, albeit that these efforts were generally confined to a committed minority of party members. Stephen Howe's definitive account of *Anti-Colonialism in British Politics* gives much prominence to the CPGB's role, and it is a prominence that was very much deserved.[31]

Arguably the most significant of the CPGB's broader activities were those in the trade union movement. In heavily industrialised Britain, communists inevitably saw the workplace as the key site of the class struggle, the arena where capital confronted labour over the basic fact of economic exploitation. From the 1920s to the 1970s, in fact, the CPGB's 'economism', though not usually called by that name, was one of the party's most frequently acknowledged weaknesses. Moreover, unlike the Labour Party, the British trade union movement only intermittently and inconsistently operated bans and exclusions against communists. In most unions, most of the time, there was nothing to stop communists from obtaining leading positions in both national and district organisations. Particularly from the 1940s onwards the party made good use of these opportunities.[32] Paradoxically, the very ageing process which could

---

[31] Stephen Howe, *Anti-Colonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire 1918-1964*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993.

[32] Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the trade unions 1933-1945*, Scolar, London, 1995, provides a detailed account of the establishment of communist influence in the engineering and mining unions.

hamper its activities in other spheres meant that it was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that the party's influence in the British trade unions reached its peak. By this time, the young industrial militants who were socialised into left-wing politics in the 1930s and 1940s had reached the age where they now sat on union executives, or district committees, or drew salaries as union officials. Some of them, like engineers' leader Hugh Scanlon and miners' leader Arthur Scargill, were no longer formally members of the Communist Party, but retained close links with the party and its industrial department.[33] In this sense, we are talking about a broader left-wing milieu into which communists were completely integrated and to which they added formidable organisational and caucusing skills. Moreover, if communist influence in the unions peaked in the 1960s-1970s, so did the unions' influence in British society as a whole, and communists were key actors in the industrial struggles that rocked successive British governments in those decades. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) provides an obvious example. As early as the war years communists had secured leading positions in the Scottish and Welsh coalfields and by the 1970s they were a central component of the increasingly powerful left-wing faction in the NUM. If the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974 were one factor which helped bring down the Comservative Heath Government in 1974, another was the defeat of Heath's industrial relations legislation by a coalition in which communists again played a leading role. Such activities revealed a thread of continuity going right back to the party's syndicalist origins and this enduring industrial presence may perhaps be seen as one of the CPGB's most significant achievements.

[33] Scargill had never been a member of the Communist Party but only of the Young Communist League. Nevertheless, Scargill's presence in the miners' union, first in Yorkshire and then nationally, was critically dependent on his links with communist activists. See Paul Routledge, *Arthur Scargill*, HarperCollins edn, London, 1994.

Ideology

The second major contribution of British communists was to the dissemination of left-wing ideas in Britain. That this would be so was not entirely apparent from the outset. In its early years the CPGB's overwhelmingly working-class composition contrasted markedly with the Bolshevik leanings of sizeable sections of continental intelligentsias. Indeed, it may partly explain the weakness of British Marxism that there did not really exist a British intelligentsia in the continental sense.[34] Moreover, early British communists took an ouvrieriste pride in their own stolid virtues, to which they contrasted the instability of intellectuals such as dominated other European communist parties. 'It was composed of intellectuals, poets, journalists, lawyers and petit-bourgoisie', the CPGB's first chairman, a foundry worker, reported disapprovingly after attending a PCF congress. '... [T]he wildest scenes imaginable ensued. The delegates and the Presidium alike stormed and raved as, it seems to me, only Frenchmen can.'[35] It is notable that almost alone of communist parties, the CPGB was scarcely even distracted by the tremendous ideological controversies that rocked Bolshevism in the 1920s, but simply lined itself up with the dominant Stalin faction. That vein of anti-intellectualism never quite disappeared from the British party. It was there in 1939 when general secretary Harry Pollitt invoked 'English common sense' against the party theoretician Palme Dutt.[36] It was there in the crisis of 1956-7, when defecting intellectuals were denounced by party loyalists as fickle and vacillating.[37] It was there even as late as the 1980s, during the debates over 'class politics' that would eventually rend the party into fragments.

Nevertheless, from the 1930s onwards the few pioneering communist intellectuals, such as the Cambridge economist Maurice Dobb, were joined by scores of younger figures who were to achieve notable reputations in their fields. One reason for this was the attraction of Soviet socialism to western wishful-thinkers disillusioned by capitalism and its degeneration into fascism. Another was the broadening of communist culture to encompass all that seemed progressive in modern

---

[34] McKibbin develops this point, *op. cit.*, 32-6

[35] Tom Bell, report on Comintern 4th congress to CPGB council meeting 10-11 February 1923 and report on PCF congress November 1922, RTsKhIDNI 495/100/109, 495/100/62

[36] Morgan, *Pollitt*, 110, also 123-5

[37] Ironically, the most outspoken attack on 'backboneless and spineless intellectuals who had turned in on their own emotions and frustrations', was by an Oxford-educated sometime academic, Andrew Rothstein; see Pelling, *British Communist Party*, 180

thought. Nor should organisational factors be overlooked, as communist intellectual work was in time brought under the aegis of an impressive range of professional groups. Of these, the Historians' Group in particular stands out for its contribution not only to British intellectual life but to Marxist thinking worldwide. Its outstanding figures included Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, John Saville, Rodney Hilton and Victor Kiernan. Although most of them left the CPGB in 1956, they took with them a Marxist historical approach that would become almost canonical in the ensuing decades. In other fields too, the Communist Party acted as the main vehicle in Britain for Marxist ideas, particularly in the middle decades of the century.[38] Its importance was bizarrely attested in the 1970s by the so-called 'Gould Report' on the Marxist penetration of British higher education. This alarmist document attracted much publicity by its identification of red professors burrowing away at the minds of their students. Particular attention was drawn to the very successful Communist University of London, organised annually by the CPGB to bring together left-wing academics and activists.

In a less diffuse way, the CPGB also made a direct input into the policies of the Labour left. Here again the concept of political space may be helpful, for one of the extraordinary things about the Labour left was its severe theoretical poverty. While Labour right-wingers and revisionists produced serious intellectual exegeses such as Durbin's *Politics of Democratic Socialism* (1940) and Crosland's *Future of Socialism* (1956), no such elaboration of the socialist case from the left was ever forthcoming. Certainly, between the 1920s, when the ILP advanced its 'Living Wage' policy, and the 1970s, when intellectuals like Stuart Holland developed a more sophisticated approach to political economy, the Labour left seemed entirely bereft of any strategic sense of what to do with state power should it ever acquire it. In this respect the communists, as they slowly freed themselves from Leninist-Stalinist dogmas, were able to make a very real contribution. The Alternative Economic Strategy (AES) developed by Labour during the left-wing ascendancy of the 1970s showed very clearly the influence of communist economic thinking. So did the hostility to the EEC which was a central component of the AES. Whereas the Labour left had initially responded positively to ideas of European integration, the communists had never been other than totally hostile and by the time of the 1975 referendum, when the CPGB played a prominent role in the 'Get Britain Out' campaign, this position had

[38] Neal Wood. *Communism and British Intellectuals*, Gollancz, London, 1959, provides a dependable assessment. Gary Wersky, *The Visible College*, Allen Lane, London, 1978, is an excellent collective biography of five left-wing British scientists.

become left-wing orthodoxy.[39] Even the culture of voluntarism in industrial relations, whose militant apotheosis caused such problems for successive governments in the 1960s and 1970s, owed a good deal to the influence of communists. As late as the 1980s, when many of these positions were being called into question, a much weakened Communist Party played an appreciable role in the so-called realignment of the left. Its controversial journal *Marxism Today* not only pioneered the concept of Thatcherism but, as it advanced a 'New Times' agenda of post-Fordism, identity politics and the declining salience of class, set at least part of the agenda for Labour's current modernisers. In the battle of ideas as much as in grassroots campaigning, the CPGB was able at least partly to compensate for the narrow electoralism of Labour Party socialists.

It is clear, to conclude, that the British Communist Party was never a mass party; and, because of what E.P. Thompson called 'the peculiarities of the English', particularly the peculiarities of the English labour movement, there was never really any chance that it could have been a mass party. To make too much of the comparison with the French or Italian communist parties is therefore to risk missing the distinctive contributions to the British left that the CPGB was able to make. Essentially, these were two. First, it acted as a left-winger group, organising campaigns, distributing propaganda, bringing a sense of coherence to wage and industrial struggles and working closely with likeminded members of the Labour Party. Secondly, it functioned as a left-wing think-tank, almost analogous to the Fabian Society, its influence to be judged less by its numbers than by the spread of its ideas. It is significant that when in the 1940s the Communist Party put its case for affiliation to the Labour Party, it was precisely on these grounds: that it should be permitted to fulfil its role within the Labour alliance as the most dynamic of the socialist societies. The parallel it drew was with the Independent Labour Party, British Socialist Party and Fabian Society, organisations of socialist activists in an earlier period of Labour Party history, and it argued for the restitution of this federal model by the acceptance of CPGB affiliation. 'The Labour Party is not a unitary party like a Continental Social Democratic Party', it argued. 'The Labour Party is... an alliance of trade unions, co-operatives, socialist societies or parties, and individual members, representing a widely varied range of viewpoints and tendencies but united around the common aims of the

[39] See Jonathan Schneer, *Labour's Conscience: the Labour left 1945-51*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1988 for the earlier views of the Labour left. Tom Nairn, 'The left against Europe', *New Left Review*, 75, 1972 is a powerful critique of later orthodoxies.

labour movement... In such an alliance, in the section of "Socialist Societies", organised Marxism, represented by the Communist Party, has a legitimate place."[40] The CPGB was not, of course, to be allowed to occupy that place. Nevertheless, it was through its tireless efforts to perform such a role, even from its position of exclusion, that the British Communist Party arguably made its most telling contributions to British labour politics.

[40] Dutt *op cit*. 43.