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West European Communist Parties in a Post-Communist Europe

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West European Communist Parties in a Post-Communist Europe¹

AT ONE TIME THE OBJECT OF INTENSE ACADEMIC AND POLITICAL SCRUTINY west European communist parties have become, in the post-communist world of the 1990s, a relatively unstudied breed. While there has been avid attention focused on the transition of ex-communist regimes and a spate of new literature on the future of democratic socialist parties in eastern and western Europe, the fate of the west European communist movement after the collapse of communism in eastern Europe has gone largely unnoticed and unstudied.² This article, therefore, addresses two broad questions. First, what is the current state of the west European communist movement and how has it been affected by the East European Revolutions of 1989? Second, what are the prospects for the movement in the late twentieth century? An assessment of the movement's present state and future prospects is not

¹ This paper was presented to the seminar 'Aspects of the Emerging New European Order' organised by the author in the European Studies Research Institute, University of Salford, in the Spring Term of 1994. It is an amended version of a chapter which appears in Martin J. Bull and Paul Heywood (eds), *West European Communist Parties After the Revolutions of 1989*, London, Macmillan, 1994. An earlier draft of this paper was presented to the seminar series on Comparative Political Parties run by Maurizio Cotta at the European University Institute in 1992-93. The author thanks the participants and Paul Heywood for their comments. An up-dated article will appear in *West European Politics*, January 1995.

² Some recent literature has gone a little way towards filling this gap: see *ibid.*; David Bell (ed), *West European Communism and the Failure of International Socialism*, London: Berg, 1993; Frank L. Wilson, 'Communism at the Crossroads: Changing Roles in Western Democracies', *Problems of Communism*, May-June, 1992; Frank L. Wilson, *The Failure of West European Communism: Implications for the Future*, New York, Paragon House, 1993. Regarding individual parties, developments in the largest communist party in the west, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), have been monitored more closely than other west European communist parties, particularly through the volumes of *Italian Politics. A Review*, London, Pinter, 1990-1993 (various editors).

possible, however, without first evaluating the movement's past: what *was* the west European Communist movement before 1989 and what condition, domestically and internationally, was it in? The article, therefore, begins with an evaluation of the movement in the period prior to the 1989 revolutions. It then assesses the impact of those revolutions on the west European communist movement, before finally weighing its future.

THE MOVEMENT BEFORE 1989: AMBIGUITY, DECLINE AND FRAGMENTATION

The West European Communist Identity

Evidently, when reference is made to a west European communist *movement* it is to a particular 'set' of political parties. Yet, beyond a common label, what were the factors binding these parties together which allowed them to constitute a common family and a grouping in the European Parliament, and which made them unacceptable as coalition partners to most other parties?

Historically, the common factor was indisputable. These parties were products of the 1917 Russian Revolution. In the pre-second world war (and part of the post-war) period this was translated in terms of abject loyalty to the Soviet Union's dictates. In the latter part of the post-war period, abject loyalty was gradually replaced by a privileged link with Moscow based on a shared recognition of the Russian Revolution and communist rule. Two other binding factors followed from this privileged link: these parties' teleological nature (i.e. their commitment to building a society different from the capitalist one) and their internal

organisational principle, democratic centralism, which ensured appointment through co-option and suppressed internal dissent.

Yet, it would be wrong to reduce the west European communist movement to a set of parties having been based on these binding factors as distinguishing characteristics. On the one hand, as is evident from a considerable amount of social science research, the strength and persistence of these factors varied between and inside parties and changed over time.³ On the other hand - and inseparable from the first point - many, if not most, of the parties (at least from 1956 onwards) wished to distinguish themselves not only from other western parties (which the above factors successfully did) but also from the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) and communist parties in eastern Europe. They did this through claiming that, whatever the nature of their goals for reshaping society in a socialist direction, they would nonetheless respect those rights and privileges normally associated with 'bourgeois democracy': parliamentary institutions, civil liberties, pluralism of political parties and interest groups etc. As with the first set of factors, however, the degree of commitment to these principles varied between and inside parties and over time.

Broadly speaking, then, the west European communist objective was to carve out an identity which was distinguishable from western parties (liberal democratic and social democratic) on the one hand, and orthodox communist parties on the other, and since this exercise involved borrowing from both traditions, the result was a high level of ambiguity

³ The literature is too vast to cite here, but it should be noted that the best of it was focused on two parties, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the French Communist Party (PCF). Donal L. M. Blackmer and Sidney Tarrow (eds), *Communism in Italy and France*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975, was a milestone in this respect.

which aroused suspicion about the parties in both the west and the east. The west European communist movement is best seen, therefore, as having been located on an 'ambiguity continuum' ranging from 'more orthodox' parties - such as the French (PCF), Portuguese (PCP), Greek (KKE), German (DKP) and Belgian (PCB) - to 'more liberalised' parties - such as the Italian (PCI), Spanish (PCE), British (CPGB), Swedish (VKP), Finnish (SKP) and Dutch (CPN) - the continuum also having been latently present inside the parties in the form of internal party debate. The closer the parties came to the centre of the continuum the more ambiguous their nature. The ambiguity was perhaps best symbolised in the notion of the 'third way' (which constituted the heart of Eurocommunism): that western communist parties would build socialism whilst upholding those rights and traditions associated with the western democratic tradition. Real change, however, in the direction of liberalisation (i.e. in the sense of a transformation into non-communist parties of the left) was ultimately constrained by the mechanics of democratic centralism. Yet, as will be argued below, this issue crept up the political agenda in the 1980s.

The State of the Movement: the Domestic Context

The Eurocommunist period of the mid-1970s was seen at the time as a 'golden era' which held out the promise of government for several of the parties. From hindsight it was a peak from which began an inexorable decline and a crisis of multi-dimensional proportions. Although the parties refused to see this as a crisis of a movement, there were common factors at work: long-term socio-economic changes which had resulted in a decline in the traditional working class (the bedrock of these parties' support) and class-related voting behaviour; the rise of the 'new politics' and concomitant decline in salience of economic issues (on which communist parties essentially relied); the rise of the 'new right' and an

'anti-state' consensus in the 1980s (when these parties' programmes were traditionally predicated on state intervention to restructure society); and the total discrediting of the Soviet model (the historical association with which was an indelible mark on these parties' nature). The crisis did not affect all of the parties to the same degree, and their varying fortunes depended much on their abilities to adapt to the changes and to exploit the peculiarities of party political competition in their respective countries. Nevertheless, for all of the parties, the crisis was multi-dimensional and common trends were visible.⁴

Electorally, as can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, almost all of the parties suffered a decline (in some cases a sharp drop) in the 1980s in their levels of support at the national and supra-national levels (most suffered a decline at the sub-national level too). In particular, parties which were viewed as major actors in national politics in the early 1970s - such as the PCI, PCF and SKP - had lost a large percentage of their support by the late 1980s. A significant element of this decline was younger voters, suggesting that WECPs were failing to attract new voters and that their decline might, therefore, be irreversible.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the decline of the parties in the 1980s see Marc Lazar, 'Communism in Western Europe in the 1980s', *Journal of Communist Studies*, Vol.4, No.3, September, 1988.

Table 1. Performance of West European Communist Parties since 1974 in National Elections (%)

	CPB	PCP	PCF	PCE	PCI	VKP	CPGB	SKP	KKE	PDS	DKP
1974	3.2						1.6 ¹		9.74 ²		
1975		16.6						19.0			
1976		14.39			34.37	4.8					
1977	2.7			9.4							
1978	3.2		20.6								
1979		18.8		10.8	30.38	5.6		17.9			
1980		16.75									
1981	2.3		16.2								
1982				4.1		5.6					
1983		18.07			29.89			13.4			
1984											
1985	1.1	15.49				5.4			9.8 ³		
1986			9.7	4.6							
1987	0.9	12.2			26.61			13.7 ⁴			
1988			11.28			5.8					
1989				9.05 ⁵							
1990									10.28 ⁶	2.4	2.4 ⁷
1991		8.8				4.5 ⁸		10.1 ⁹			
1992					16.6 ¹⁰						
1993			9								

CPB: Belgium; PCP Portugal; PCF France; PCE: Spain; PCI: Italy; VKP: Sweden; CPGB: Britain; SKP: Finland; KKE Greece; PDS & DKP: Germany (Party of Democratic Socialism (formerly Socialist Unity Party) and German Communist Party)

Notes

1. Oct. election. Vote thereafter too small to record e.g. 1987: 22/100 of 1% of all votes cast (6,000 votes).
2. Two parties on joint list.
3. and 1.8% for the KKE-Eso
4. Combined vote of two parties, after split in party. Democratic Alternative (DEUA) obtained 4.3% and SKP 9.4%
5. As part of United Left (IU).
6. Two parties on joint list.
7. Did not field candidates but supported PDS.

8. Left Party.
9. Leftist Alliance
10. Rifondazione comunista obtained 5.6% as a response party.

Sources: Bell (1993); Bull and Heywood (1994); press reports; unpublished party documentation.

Table 2. Performance of West European Communist Parties in 1984 and 1989 European Elections (%)

	1984		1989	
	%	Seats	%	Seats
Belgium (CPB)	1.47	(-)	-	(-)
France (PCF)	11.2	(10)	7.71	(7)
Greece (KKE) (KKE-Eso)	11.62 3.4	(3) (1)	(SAP) 14.5	(4)
Italy (PCI)	33.3	(27)	27.6	(22)
Luxembourg (KPL)	4.11	(-)	4.8	(-)
Netherlands (Rainbow Alliance includes CPN)	5.6	(2)	7	(2)
Portugal (CDU Alliance includes Ecologists)	11.5	(3) (1987)	14.4	(4)
Spain (IU)	5.3	(3) (1987)	6.06	(4)

Source: Adapted from Waller (1989), pp194-5.

At the *organisational* level, most of these parties also suffered a decline in membership, as can be seen in Table 3, and a concomitant decline in activism as the class cohesion of their electorates and memberships dwindled. Obtaining reliable membership figures is difficult, but even the claimed or uncorroborated figures show a decline from earlier post-war peaks and confirm the existence of a relatively small membership by the late 1980s.

Table 3. West European Communist Parties: Selected Membership Figures

(in thousands: 1, = one million)

	PCP	PCF	PCE	PCI	CPGB	SKP	KKE	PDS	DKP
1977			202	1,814	25				
1978		520	171	1,790					
1979				1,759	20.5				
1980				1,751		51			
1981				1,714	18.5				
1982				1,673					
1983	201			1,635	15.5				
1984		380		1,619					
1985				1,595	12.7				
1986			60	1,551		32			
1987			62	1,508	10.3				
1988	199			1,462	8.5				
1989				1,420	7.6				
1990	120	585.6	55	1,320	4.7	c.32 ¹		c.280	c.20
1991				989.6 ²	4.7		c.40		
1992									
1993					1.2 ³				

PCP: Portugal; PCF: France; PCE Spain; PCI: Italy; CPGB: Britain; SKP: Finland; KKE: Greece; PDS & DKP: Germany (Party of Democratic Socialism (formerly Socialist Unity Party) and German Communist Party).

1. Leftist Alliance
2. Democratic Party of the Left
3. Democratic Left

Sources: Bell (1993); Bull and Heywood (1994); press reports; unpublished party documentation.

Notes: Accurate membership figures for communist parties are difficult to find. Many of the figures in the table are claimed and uncorroborated.

Socially, the parties suffered increasing isolation through their declining influence in the trade union movement (and the crisis of the trade union movement itself) and a declining 'presence' in their respective societies, perhaps best reflected in the decline in sales of party newspapers.⁵ At the *intellectual* level, the parties suffered in the 1980s from the onslaught of the 'new right' and the loss of intellectuals essential to responding theoretically to that challenge. *Strategically*, many of the parties reached an impasse as the prospect of achieving office as part of a government whose goal would be the restructuring of society became more remote. Many appeared, by the late 1980s, to have exhausted all strategic alternatives, and the experience of the PCF in the early 1980s confirmed the hazards for communist parties seeking office.

Finally, at the *internal* level, as the intensity of the crisis increased so the pressure of dissent inside the parties became greater in the 1980s. In many of the parties, and particularly those where liberalisation had already begun, debate over strategic alternatives was gradually overshadowed by a debate about these parties' very identities. If there was a common fundamental division in this debate it was between those who felt that the putative 'distinctiveness' of west European communist parties had become an albatross which should be jettisoned, and those who believed that the root of the crisis lay in deradicalisation and the *de facto* reduction of objectives to monitoring or overseeing capitalist development *à la* Mitterrand-González-Craxi. In short, the 'ambiguity continuum' (noted above) along which western communist parties could be located gained more and more prominence inside the parties themselves. The leadership position in this debate was invariably either 'centrist' (attempting to mediate between the extremes, while proceeding with some liberalisation) or 'orthodox' (resisting any moves in this direction). Common to both positions was a preference for debate to focus on external strategic issues than on internal issues concerned with the parties' identities.

⁵ The significance of the party press should not be underestimated since it has always been the chief means of communication between the leaders and members and, latterly, the focus of open debate inside the parties. The internal dispute inside the CPGB in the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, took on a form of warfare between the party's two newspapers, the *Morning Star* and *Marxism Today*.

The State of the Movement: the International Context

The international context in the 1980s compounded the west European communist movement's domestic problems.⁶ The post-1956 history of international communism was characterised by a consistent decline in the control exercised by the CPSU over the international movement and a growing diversity in the relationship of western communist parties to Moscow as a consequence of the degeneration of the Soviet Union's image abroad. Eurocommunism in the 1970s was predicated on the rejection of the Soviet Union as a universal model of socialism.⁷ Eurocommunism's demise in the late 1970s simply confirmed that a uniform relationship of non-ruling communist parties to Moscow - whether based on autonomy or dependence - was unlikely to occur again. The 1980s consequently witnessed a fragmentation of the parties in their relationship to Moscow. Some parties, such as the PCF, PCP and KKE, reaffirmed the validity of their link with Moscow. Others, such as the PCI and PCE, continued to distance themselves. Indeed, the PCI went as far as to enact a definitive 'rip' (*strappo*) with Moscow over Jaruselski's seizure of power in Poland in 1981. The international issue increased the intensity of divisions inside the parties.

In this context, the appointment of Gorbachev as General Secretary of the CPSU in 1985 and the beginning of *perestroika* had a paradoxical effect in changing the nature of the debate over the western communist parties' relationship to Moscow. On the one hand, being 'pro-Soviet' no longer meant 'pro-Stalinism' but 'pro-reform'. 'Pro-reform', moreover, did not entail abandoning socialism. It is important to remember that the declared goal of *perestroika* was to reform socialism, *not* destroy it. Whatever lay behind the rhetoric, the hopes engendered by this possibility gave western communist parties a new focus, for if Gorbachev were to be successful it offered a

⁶ The following argument draws partly on Martin J. Bull, 'A New Era for the Non-Rulers Too: West European Communist Parties, *Perestroika* and the Revolutions in Eastern Europe', *Politics*, 11 (1), 1991, pp. 17-19.

⁷ Eurocommunism was the most 'fashionable' period of the west European communist movement, and spawned a vast literature; for a select bibliography see O. A. Narkiewicz, *Eurocommunism, 1968-1986. A Select Bibliography*, London, Mansell, 1987.

new and more convincing model of development to which these parties could aspire and which could provide a possible solution to their domestic decline. Consequently, west European communist parties were led, willy nilly, into a convergence of positions based on support for *perestroika* (and a type of support that differed from that given by other non-communist parties in the west). Even the PCI, which (as noted above), having apparently made an 'irrevocable' break with the Soviet Union over Poland, re-established a privileged relationship with the CPSU in the form of the so-called 'new internationalism', and in January 1989 the *strappo*, by mutual consent, was buried as a break with a ruling group which had abandoned the goals of socialism.

On the other hand, despite an apparent convergence of positions *in support of perestroika*, divisions deepened in the west European communist movement over the implications of the reform programme for the parties themselves. *Perestroika* allowed some parties such as the PCI to pursue internal liberalisation more vehemently, while placing others such as the PCF and PCP under increasing pressure to begin internal reform. The latter's refusal (despite growing internal pressures) to respond to these pressures enhanced the existing division in the west European communist movement at the same time as modifying its exact nature: it was now a matter of 'pro-Soviets' versus 'pro-Stalinists'. The latter's support of *perestroika* was increasingly viewed as no more than paying lip service to the concept. The most vivid illustration of the changed nature of the division was the decision of the PCI and PCE, after the 1989 European elections, to leave the existing communist group in the European Parliament and create a new formation, 'For a United Left'. In fact, deputies elected on communist lists were from then on enrolled in no less than four separate groups.

In short, the appointment of Gorbachev exacerbated the fragmentation of the west European communist movement but not in the direction in which it had been heading before the beginning of *perestroika*. Before 1985 liberalisation had gone hand in hand with detachment from Moscow; after 1985 it drew on the example and support of Moscow. This new (or re-)attachment made the impact of the revolutions of 1989 on the west European

communist movement greater than it might otherwise have been in as far as those revolutions involved a rejection of *perestroika* as a means of reform because of its evolutionary nature. There is an evident paradox here in that without Gorbachev the dramatic changes in eastern Europe would not have occurred. Yet, it can nonetheless be argued that had west European communist parties not been seduced back into a 'special relationship' with Moscow in the period after 1985, they may not have found themselves quite so bewildered and overtaken by events in the Summer and Autumn of 1989.

THE IMPACT OF THE 1989 REVOLUTIONS

For the west European communist movement the immediate significance of the revolutions of 1989 lay in their qualitative difference to existing developments in the Soviet Union. As already noted, the declared goal of *perestroika* was to 'reform socialism'. Whatever the actual meaning of this it meant that change was limited and evolutionary in character. The changes in eastern Europe, however, took on a radically different dimension: they were concerned with throwing out not only Stalinism but socialism altogether. The unexpected nature and speed with which the events occurred, coupled with the erstwhile optimism in Gorbachev's reform programme, caught the west European communist movement unprepared and the remarkable situation arose of communist parties in eastern Europe - beginning with the Hungarian - shedding their names and heritage while parties in the west continued to hold on to theirs. The western parties were thrown into turmoil as they confronted a common dilemma: should they abandon their principles, names and heritage wholesale or, if not, how could they dissociate themselves from the failure of their eastern counterparts while maintaining those principles intact and a degree of political relevance in their respective countries? The central issue, then, for the west European communist movement shifted almost overnight from one concerned with whether and how to adapt themselves to reverse long term decline to an issue focused fundamentally on whether and how to transform themselves in order to survive

Four and a half years after the revolutions, that issue remained at the heart of the movement, even though several parties had gone a long way to attempting to resolve it definitively. The impact was to intensify divisions both *between* and *inside* the parties.

The divisions existing *between* west European communist parties were intensified to the point at which it became difficult in the early 1990s to view them any longer as a 'family' of political parties. The 'ambiguity continuum' was stretched to breaking point. Broadly speaking, the parties can be seen as having divided into three groups in their (leadership) responses to the revolutions.⁸

First, some rejected the idea that the changes in eastern Europe required any changes to the parties themselves. These orthodox marxists and pro-Soviets continued to believe in the viability of the international communist movement and the relevance of the communist goal, as traditionally understood. The PCP, PCF, PCB and DKP fell into this category, although three of these (the PCF, PCP and PCB) may now be headed in the direction of the second category (outlined below), the PCF and PCP under new leaders in 1993.

⁸ These groups were first tentatively outlined in Martin J. Bull, 'A New Era for the Non-Rulers Too...', op. cit., p. 19. The relevance of Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organisations and States*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1970, to the dilemma facing west European communist parties and the leadership responses to it should be noted (something which is also apparent in the final section of the article). The three groups do not exhaust the possible responses. Jürgen Habermas, for example, in his analysis of the consequences of the collapse of communism for the theoretical traditions of the west European left, identifies six interpretations: 'Stalinist', 'Leninist', 'reform-communist', 'postmodern', 'anti-communist' and 'liberal' (Jürgen Habermas, 'What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left', *New Left Review*, No. 183, September/October). One can find traces of all these interpretations in the debate inside the parties, but they are not particularly helpful in identifying the actual path which the parties followed. The three groups could obviously be sub-divided further according to other nuances, but this would detract from the aim here which is to provide a relatively simple analytical categorisation by which the responses can be differentiated.

Secondly, some parties argued that the failure of communism in eastern Europe represented a failure of a degenerated model of socialism (stalinism) and not socialism *per se*. Indeed, with the final collapse of this model, it was argued, new opportunities opened up for western communist parties, no longer constrained or tainted by its presence, to develop the original principles of Marxism in the context of the changes brought about in advanced capitalist society. The PCE, KKE and *Rifondazione comunista* fell into this category, with the possibility of other parties joining them from the first category (mentioned above).

Thirdly, some parties concluded that the collapse of communism in eastern Europe represented a failure of communism itself, requiring the shedding of the name, symbols and heritage of west European communist parties and their transformation into non-communist parties of the left. This road was followed by the PCI, CPGB, VKP, SKP and CPN.

In the four and a half years since the collapse of the Berlin Wall the west European communist movement has disintegrated through the different responses of the individual parties. Their erstwhile fragmentation has become separation and, in the future, it will no longer be possible to generalise about these parties as a 'family' nor fruitful to study them within the same analytical framework. Asking why the parties reacted so differently is, to a large extent, misguided. Had the parties all reacted *in the same way* then it would have been pertinent to have asked why. As argued earlier, the differentiation between communist parties before the revolutions of 1989 was considerable and the movement was undergoing further fragmentation. By the late 1980s the only thing which really united these parties was support for the attempt to reform, and therefore save, socialism in the Soviet Union. Yet, even this, at the same time, divided the parties further because of its implications for their own internal reform. The failure of the attempt to reform socialism and the subsequent collapse of the 'socialist motherland' removed the last vestiges of possible unity, and the parties quickly divided in the paths they followed. What it confirmed was what students of west European communism have long-argued: that, despite their identification

under a common label, parties such as the PCI and PCF were always very different political animals.

Paralleling the divide between the parties have been divisions *inside* the parties themselves. Indeed, it is possible to detect elements of all three categories of response (outlined above) present inside most of the parties. The intensity of division inside each party has obviously varied. In general, those whose leadership responses place them in the third category have suffered greater inner turmoil. This is not only because their choices involved finally crossing the Rubicon, but also because the parties which responded in this manner were those which had already undergone a degree of liberalisation. These parties, therefore, had already become more open and democratic in their internal operation, thus providing more orthodox elements inside the parties with the opportunity to oppose openly the leaderships' proposals. The PCI provides the best example here. Its internal reform programme began almost a year before the revolutions in eastern Europe, and at its 18th. Congress in March 1989 the party effectively dismantled democratic centralism as an organising principle. Consequently, when the leader Occhetto launched his proposal to transform the party into a non-communist party of the left he had already lost the mechanisms of control and suppression of dissent which democratic centralism provided, and the party was thrown instantly into its worst crisis. The leaderships of the more orthodox parties such as the PCF, on the other hand, were able to control more effectively opposition to their position through the traditional party structures (although this is not to suggest that they remained free from increasing pressure).

Shorn of their status and mutual support as part of an international movement and deeply divided amongst and inside themselves, the west European communist parties, unsurprisingly, failed, in the four and a half years after the revolutions, to resolve their domestic crises. Although the east European revolutions swept away an entire political order they did not attenuate the domestic problems which lay at the heart of the decline of the communist movement in the west. Those problems remained - and remain - in place and the parties still need to address them. With the exception of the PCE (as part of a coalition of the left in Spain), elections in the four and a half year

period since the collapse of the Berlin Wall have confirmed the continuing decline and growing political isolation of parties either carrying, or until recently carrying, the communist label.⁹ This introduces the question of the future of the west European communist movement.

THE PROSPECTS FOR WEST EUROPEAN COMMUNISM

The west European communist movement as we have known it is dead. This is not to suggest that communist parties will no longer exist in the west, but those which remain cannot be the same as before. However firm their refusal to countenance change, they have to face the fact that the collapse of international communism embodies a change in their own nature. West European communism in the post-war period was the product of a specific mix of factors which emanated from a mistaken optimism in the Soviet Union and a painstaking, but incomplete, attempt to gain independence from that country. The ambiguous identity which resulted constituted the heart of the west European communist tradition, and it is that tradition which has disappeared. What, then, are the prospects for west European communist parties? Are they all destined to follow the Italian, British, Swedish, Finnish and Dutch examples in seeking a non-communist identity or is there a future for communism in Europe? Broadly speaking, one can identify three possible scenarios or avenues for parties of the old west European communist tradition: first, remaining an unchanged 'more orthodox' communist party; second, becoming a 'refounded' communist party; and third, changing into a non-communist party of the left.

Remaining an Unchanged 'more orthodox' Communist Party

It is evident that, even if - as the PCI experience admirably demonstrates - embarking on the transition to non-

⁹ It is possible that, in the future, the Italian PDS may prove to be another exception in so far as support for the traditional ruling parties in Italy has collapsed; however, as will be noted below, its decline thus far has actually steepened.

communist status is an arduous and risky business (the outcome of which is far from clear) *not* doing so constitutes, in many ways, as much of a challenge. This is not just because of the collapse of the international communist movement but also due to the turning of the liberalisation process in eastern Europe against everything these parties have stood for. Germany's unique case is symptomatic here. The SED (the east German Communist Party), in quickly changing its name to the PDS, would have no truck with the hardline party in the west (the DKP) because the latter's stalinist credentials were regarded as an impediment to attracting new sectors of the German vote. In short, the western communist parties which have refused to countenance change have been left gaping into a void, linked to what is universally regarded as a failed experiment and to a label under which there is increasingly little to sell.

The argument against this scenario is that the massive dislocation and economic hardship caused by the regime transitions and the consequent disillusionment with the entire process might work to these parties' advantages. Parties such as the PCF, for example, were quick to criticise the effects produced by the attempt to introduce capitalism in eastern Europe. Yet, despite popular disillusionment with the changes there, the driving force of opposition to them has come from hard-line communist elements willing to consider violence to gain their objectives, something which suggests that if a revival of 'communism' were to occur it would be in the form of a military *coup*. The attempted *coup* in the Soviet Union in 1991 and the military show-down between Yeltsin and hard line elements of the Russian Parliament in 1993 were significant in revealing the sort of allies with which unchanged western communist parties could become associated. Significantly, the PCF, after the resignation of its leader Georges Marchais in 1993, decided to drop internationalism and reorganise the party, effectively abandoning democratic centralism.

Seen in this context, the domestic prospects for unchanged western communist parties are to remain hard-line parties of protest which represent the most disadvantaged sectors of society. However, this role - which parties

such as the PCF used to play effectively - has changed as a result of the decline and fragmentation of the working class. Protest parties now represent an inter-class mix of those most disillusioned with advanced capitalism and communist parties may find themselves competing on the same terrain as extremist parties and movements from the other end of the political spectrum: hardly a scenario dear to Marx or Lenin.

Becoming a 'Refounded' Communist Party

How far can a west European communist party modernise itself without 'crossing the ford'? *Rifondazione comunista* - which was born out of a split from the PCI shortly after the crucial vote to transform the party into the PDS - can claim to be the only real 'new' communist party. With 5.6% of the vote (in 1992) it is a small party, although its achievement is greater than its percentage suggests when viewed in the context of the Italian party system. Yet, the party is indelibly associated with the CPSU because of the previous pro-Soviet location inside the PCI of its leading personnel (such as Armando Cossutta). Indeed, some critics would argue that it is an unchanged 'more orthodox' communist party which stayed behind when the PCI took its leap forwards.

The party's name, however ('Communist Refoundation'), does sum up aptly the key question: can communism be refounded? This is an issue which goes beyond the parties' responses in touching on more profound theoretical issues. There is a clear division on these issues between east and west (besides the obvious divisions in the west itself). Many western Marxists were slow to recognise that the 1989 revolutions involved not only the overthrow of stalinism but of socialism *per se*. Because the revolutions were made possible by Gorbachev's reform experiment it had been too easy to assume that this accelerated form of liberalisation would retain Gorbachevian (i.e. socialist) objectives.¹⁰ That the reality was so different was first confirmed for western Marxists in late 1989

¹⁰ A point aptly made by Frederic Jameson, 'Conversations on the New World Order', in Robin Blackburn (ed), *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism*, London, Verso, 1991, p. 256.

at a meeting between members of the British New Left and erstwhile east European dissidents, then in the mainstream of their countries' revolutions. The latter rejected the former's continued commitment to socialism, insisting that their peoples had rejected socialism altogether and that what was returning in eastern Europe was 'the concept of Western civilisation' or 'the idea of the West'. David Warszawski, a Solidarity journalist, for example, stated that 'the Polish people have rejected socialism as such', and that 'you people speak a language we no longer understand.'¹¹ Indeed, David Selbourne's analysis of the attitudes and beliefs of east Europeans during the period of the revolutions found that many of them admired Margaret Thatcher and aspired to a form of hybrid Toryism.¹² The first elections after the revolutions (in countries such as Hungary and East Germany), where conservative parties proved most popular, confirmed these trends. Moreover, as already noted, those who, since then, have become disillusioned with the transition to capitalism have turned to orthodox extremism rather than the promise of a reconstituted Marxism.

The left in the west has not been so quick to consign Marxism to the historical dustbin. True, the awareness of the almost universal rejection of the doctrine in eastern Europe has caused considerable despondency; but there are various theorists who - and parties and party factions which - remain committed to Marxism as an ideal (while unequivocally denouncing stalinism). Their primary objective now is to investigate Marxism's new potential in the aftermath of the collapse of the communist regimes.¹³ The possible appeal of this attempt should not be too readily written off. The victorious gloating which characterised some immediate responses to the collapse of

¹¹ David Selbourne, 'Apologists Must Apologize', *The Times*, 6 November 1989.

¹² David Selbourne, *Death of the Dark Hero. Eastern Europe 1987-1990*, London, Cape, 1990.

¹³ For a flavour of some of the contributions to the debate see, for example, Robin Blackburn (ed), *After the Fall*, op. cit.; Christiane Lemke and Gary Marks (eds), *The Crisis of Socialism in Europe*, London, Duke University Press; and Lauri Karvonen and Jan Sundberg (eds), *Social Democracy in Transition: Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe*, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1991.

communism (perhaps best symbolised, rightly or wrongly, in Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*¹⁴) has given way to more sober and realistic assessments of the future of Europe. These have been influenced by the deep problems experienced by the countries of eastern Europe since the collapse of communism, showing that a transition to capitalism is neither smooth nor inevitable. They have also been influenced by the problems which have beset western Europe since the collapse of communism, in the form of rising extremism and nationalism of the far right, which have revealed that capitalism's erstwhile strength and unity was, at least in part, due to the existence (and threat) of the communist monolith.

It is possible, therefore, that, if the dangers of destabilisation and extremism were to continue in the long-term, western parties acting as vehicles for a rejuvenated form of communism might find some popular appeal. Yet, that will depend on their own ability to unite around a common set of principles and action. The experience of *Rifondazione comunista* in this attempt is significant. Having started life in an optimistic and united spirit, the party has already been wracked by a leadership crisis over the party's political line, which resulted in the resignation of the leader, Sergio Garavini, in 1993.

In the short to medium-term, the success of western communist parties will probably depend less on their ability to 'refund' communism than on the nature of domestic political competition, the strength and image of the existing socialist parties and the relationship the communist parties have with them. In Spain, for example, the relative success of the PCE-led 'United Left' (IU) was made possible by public disillusionment with the governing socialist party's apparent abandonment of its socialist ideas. This type of support, for obvious reasons, may prove to be ephemeral. Nor is it clear that retaining a specifically 'communist' label is essential to exploiting political competition of this kind because the electoral support may amount to little more than a warning to the socialist

¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

party that it has moved too far towards the centre (the New Left party in Sweden, for example, continued to play this role despite its abandonment of communism). Indeed, being 'too communist' can undermine the ability of a left-wing party to play this role, as the failure of the PCF to gain at the expense of the French Socialist Party shows. There is, in short, a long and difficult road ahead for those parties committed to 'refounding communism'. But, difficult as it is, these parties will be aware from the third scenario (below) that renouncing the attempt will not necessarily solve their problems. This awareness, more than anything else, may ensure the persistence of communist parties in western Europe.

Becoming a Non-Communist Party of the Left

The five parties which have made the transition to the status of 'non-communism' (the PCI, CPGB, VKP, SKP and CPN) have shown it to be a process fraught with difficulties and uncertainties, the political effects of which (in the short-term at least) have been far from beneficial. None of the parties has managed to arrest the continued electoral and organisational decline. On the contrary, in some cases, the decline has steepened. The PCI-PDS transformation, for example, has cost the Italian party 10.5% of its vote (between 1987 and 1992) and 330,240 members (between 1990 and 1991, a figure over three times as high as the 1989-90 loss and eight times as high as the 1988-89 loss), part of this decline being due to *Rifondazione comunista*. Similarly, the CPGB-Democratic Left transformation has cost the British party two-thirds of its membership (down from 4,742 in 1991 to 1,234 in 1993). The internal turmoil generated by the transition process, moreover, has not abated. There remain substantial remnants of opposition inside the parties to their very existence as non-communist parties. Preferring to continue the struggle from within, these members' objective is to radicalise the party and its line (or, at a minimum, prevent its further deradicalisation). In the Italian PDS, for example, the opposition has labelled itself the 'Democratic Communists', an indication of the direction in which they would take the party if they gained control.

What, then, does the future hold for ex-communist parties which have chosen this road? The most profound problem they face concerns the political movement they are entering. They have - albeit with difficulties - successfully left one political movement: a threshold has been crossed and now separates the ex-communist parties from those still carrying the label. In renouncing their communist identities these parties are, whether purposefully or by sheer action of the political tide, entering a new political movement: that of 'social democracy', of the non-communist left. This is perhaps most vividly expressed in the Italian PDS's decision to leave the 'United Left' Group in the European Parliament and to apply to join (and subsequently be accepted by) the Socialist Federation and the Socialist International. In leaving one political movement for another, the simple question arises: what is the state of the political movement the ex-communist parties are entering? The answer is that it is also a movement long in crisis. Under whatever labels they have been campaigning ('social democratic', 'democratic socialist', 'socialist', 'Labour') the parties of the non-communist left have, in the 1980s, been grappling with many problems analogous to those facing western communist parties: electoral and organisational decline, an identity crisis and the need to find a new programme of policies.¹⁵ Small wonder, then, that the parties which have made the transition to non-communist status have chosen to avoid any reference to 'democratic socialism' or 'social democracy' in deciding their new names, opting instead for names such as 'New Left', 'Democratic Left', 'Democratic Party of the Left'. Besides reflecting compromises forged inside the parties between different factions, these names amount to an implicit recognition that if the political movement the parties have just left is in crisis the one they are entering is not in much better shape.

The new party names also amount to a statement that ex-communist parties are in search of something different from the known traditions of the non-communist left. This search for a different identity within the non-communist left is not something new. Indeed, the 'social democratic tradition' has always contained within it

¹⁵ For a recent summary see Martin J. Bull, 'The Crisis of European Socialism: Searching for A (Really) Big Idea', Review Article, *West European Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (July), 1993.

considerable diversity.¹⁶ Most notable, perhaps, was the emergence of southern European socialism in the 1970s and 1980s which differed in many respects to western social democracy of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, that experience is perhaps indicative of the task facing a 'new democratic left' of ex-communist parties. The expectations generated by the coming to power of the French, Spanish and Greek socialist parties - which claimed not to have been deradicalised like the more traditional social democratic parties - quickly turned to disillusionment as the socialist governments failed to achieve any restructuring of society. Most damning, however, was the apparent willingness of some of them - despite their radical rhetoric - to abandon their democratic socialist principles and adopt state-patronage policies typical of their predecessors. After this experience the arrival of another 'new breed' of democratic socialist parties coming from yet another historical tradition is hardly likely to generate confidence amongst potential members and voters. Significantly, at the moment in time when, theoretically speaking, there is no longer any historical reason for socialist and communist parties to be split, the fragmentation of the socialist-communist area is greater than ever before: communist parties have divided amongst themselves, one (the PCI) has split in two, and no communist and socialist parties have managed to reunite. The idea of a 'new democratic left', then, more than anything else, seems to symbolise the fact that ultimately the problems faced by both political worlds ('refounded' communism and the non-communist left) amount to the same thing: the crisis of the democratic socialist project itself. In this sense, the passing of the post-war western communist tradition does not solve anything for the left in Europe; rather, it simply exposes the depth of its current plight.

¹⁶ Stephen Padgett and William E. Paterson, *A History of Social Democracy in Postwar Europe*, London, Longman, 1991).