

‘THE SPREADING NOTION OF THE TOWN’\* :  
SOME RECENT WRITINGS ON FRENCH AND  
ITALIAN COMMUNISM

*The Italian Communist Party: the Crisis of the Popular Front Strategy.* By Grant Amyot. London: Croom Helm, 1981. Pp. 252. £17.95.

*The Theory and Practice of Italian Communism*, Vol. 1. By Alastair Davidson. London: Merlin Press, 1982. Pp. 302. £5.50 (pb).

*The Strategy of the Italian Communist Party.* By Donald Sassoon. London: Frances Pinter, 1981. Pp. ix + 259. £17.75.

*Unions, Change and Crisis: French and Italian Union Strategy and the Political Economy, 1945–1980.* By Peter Lange, George Ross & Maurizio Vannicelli. London: Allen & Unwin, 1982. Pp. viii + 295. £20.00.

*The French Communist Party: a Critical History 1920–1984.* By Max Adereth. Manchester University Press, 1984. Pp. xv + 326. £27.50.

*The French Workers’ Movement: Economic Crisis and Political Change.* Edited by Mark Kesselmann. London: Allen & Unwin, 1984. Pp. viii + 350. £22.50.

*The Rise of the French Communist Party 1920–1947.* By Edward Mortimer. London: Faber & Faber, 1984. Pp. 431. £30.

*Les Municipalités Communistes.* By Raymond Pronier. Paris: Balland, 1983. Pp. 475. Ff. 69.

*Histoire Intérieure du Parti Communiste.* By Philippe Robrieux. Paris: Fayard, 1980–1984. 4 vols.

*French Communism in the Era of Stalin: the Quest for Unity and Integration, 1945–1962.* By Irwin M. Wall. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983. Pp. xii + 268. £27.95.

Everybody, it seems, loves a loser. The marxist revolutionary project may be consigned to the dustbin of history, but it lives and thrives in the history books. The fascination exercised over a recent generation of Anglo-American scholars by the seductively alien experience of communism in western Europe has borne fruit in hundreds of books and articles devoted to the subject (concerning the marxist experience in east-central Europe there has been rather less enthusiastic interest...). It might be supposed that such a high level of concern would at the very least cast

\* Some ne’er advance a judgement of their own,  
But catch the spreading notion of the town;  
They reason and conclude by precedent,  
And own stale nonsense which they ne’er invent.

Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*

some light on the most obvious feature of western communism – the utter collapse of a marxist *politics* in the lands of its birth.

With regret, one must report that no such explanation is forthcoming. Now it could very reasonably be argued that no such explanation *could* be forthcoming, but this means that at a certain point you must cease to take seriously the account offered by the European Left of its own history and purpose. However, most authors in the field achieve no such distance from their subject matter – it is an enduring characteristic of writings about the Left that they are consistently sympathetic to their material. This has its advantages, in understanding of language and motivation, but it means that critical observations tend to come from within the terms of reference of the protagonists, so that we very rarely obtain any sense of explanation, as distinct from definition and description.

These comments apply independently of the discipline whence the writer comes. The history of the Left is common terrain for political scientists, political sociologists, political theorists and historians, all of whom bring to it certain occupationally characteristic obsessions. These in turn are refracted through the various national traditions and themes which have entered the literature as commonplaces in the study of Italy, France, etc. After a few years of intensive activity, writings on certain topics begin to collapse into a few familiar grooves. Add to all this the self-imposed restrictions emanating from the emotive and still sensitive discussions around communism and (especially) anti-communism, and studies of such as the Italian or French Communist movements become alarmingly predictable. The books noticed here are no exception.

For students of the PCI the keywords are ‘Gramsci’ and ‘strategy’: for those who write about the PCF interest centres on the ‘tribune party’, the ‘working class’ and ‘continuity’ (which also occupies the attention of italianists). These concerns overlap, of course. A number of recent writers on French communism have sought to unveil a strategic continuity, although this interest has rather diminished in the face of election returns which suggested that the only strategy in play was that of the gods.<sup>1</sup> Conversely there is no lack of interest in the Italian proletariat. But the emphases have been consistently different.

The Gramsci cult is surely on the wane.<sup>2</sup> There is a limited amount to be said about what he actually wrote and how it fits in or adds to the marxist tradition. There is even less to be said about his contribution to modern Italian politics – he died long before the PCI became a mass party, and Togliatti’s use of gramscian ideas about alliances and political integration owes rather a lot to his *own* reading of the situation in post-war Italy and the need to avoid a repeat of the débâcle of the early twenties. It is true that it suited Togliatti and his heirs to make reference to the martyred Gramsci in justification of their policies, just as it has on occasion suited communist historians to bowdlerize Gramsci’s later critical reflexions on bolshevism.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of the historiography of the PCF see Tony Judd, ‘Une historiographie pas comme les autres: the French communists and their history’, in *European Studies Review*, xii (1982), 445–78.

<sup>2</sup> Among dozens of English-language studies, one might note the following: Joseph Femia, *Gramsci’s political thought* (Oxford, 1981); L. Salamini, *The sociology of political praxis. An introduction to Gramsci’s theory* (London, 1981); Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and marxist theory* (London, 1979); Walter Adamson, *Hegemony and revolution* (Berkeley, 1980); Martin Clark, *Antonio Gramsci and the revolution that failed* (London, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Paulo Spriano, *Gramsci in carcere* (Rome, 1977).

But this is very much part of the history of the PCI as an actor on the domestic and international scene in later years. It owes little to Gramsci and only a dim prospective light is cast on the history of communism in Italy by even the most acute account of Gramsci's own thinking. There seems little doubt that the obsession with Gramsci has its roots in the perceived inadequacies of marxist thought elsewhere and the desire to make of the Prison Notebooks and other works a source for radical political strategies in other times and other places.

Only thus could Alastair Davidson seriously claim that the triumph of the PCI 'lay in the creation of this new Marxism', or suppose that he had told us anything about Italian history in this opaque exposition of Gramsci's argument:

The Italian proletariat's alternative view of the world to that of the dominant class existed *in gremio* only in so far as it was material in its counter-organization, that is, in its history, which had, given the class structure, to be that of a counter-hegemony over possible allied classes.

At least Gramsci had the excuse that he was in prison and had to write in code...

The taste for chat about strategy derives directly from the enthusiasm for Gramsci, of course. But whereas Gramsci was free to speculate and calculate in an enforced limbo, writers like Sassoon and Amyot are, one might suppose, constrained by the actual course of historical events. One would be wrong. The PCI, and Togliatti in particular, apparently had a strategy even when they did not realize it. Sassoon makes of the politics of constructive opposition thrust upon Togliatti and his party by circumstance and opportunity a 'strategic alternative [which], though consistent with the thinking of the PCI in the preceding period, was not formulated in an explicit and programmatic manner'. But perhaps Togliatti at least had some such strategy in mind? Apparently not: 'He went as far as he could with his developments at the strategic level. This, of course, meant that an elaboration of his ideas at the theoretical level could not be arrived at, hence the apparent empiricist form which many of his pronouncements took.'

Nor is the strategy of the PCI one which the author has thus inferred from the silence of its practitioners. Sassoon disarmingly admits that 'the theoretical underpinnings of this policy was [*sic*] never explicitly elaborated by Togliatti and it is even possible that he would not accept it as a realistic assessment of Communist strategy'.

The only reason for believing that the PCI has a strategy thus emerges unambiguously. Without some such hypothesis writers like Sassoon cannot understand on the one hand the seemingly random tactics and tactical switches which have coloured the history of communism in Italy as elsewhere, nor on the other the failure of these tactics to add up to anything more than a steady 30 per cent of vote and a secure implantation in local government. The apparent untidiness of communist behaviour is the feature which most distresses modern writers, it would appear.

This urge to find method in the Party madness is not peculiar to the italianists. But students of the PCF don't have a Gramsci to lean on. It would stretch credibility to claim that the *French* communists had got it all thought out in a lucid and far-seeing fashion. So the striving for a vision of continuity here finds different outlets. For Irwin Wall, the PCF has sought ever since 1934 at the latest to integrate into French society. Far from flattering the Party with a strategic project, he asserts against the evidence that all it ever wanted was to be part of the parliamentary game, to come in from the cold. *This* is the clue to its mysteries. Thus where Sassoon offers

ideological succour to the PCI, Wall (and he is not alone) chooses to ignore ideology altogether. This allows him to dismiss revolutionary language and action as all part of the great tactic of integration. Even wartime collaboration is ground into the common mill: 'The party's flirtation with collaboration in 1940-41 was also more of an example of integration with the mainstream of French society than of negation.' Blame stalinism on the mendacious Duclos (poor Thorez being unfortunately detained elsewhere), assert that the search for unity with the socialists began in 1934 and has continued unbroken ever since, and you have a history of French communism which is indeed consistent and logical. It is a pity that it is neither plausible nor correct. Wall and others like him who see the history of the PCF in similarly functionalist terms are blind to those very features which make communist parties unique (and worth writing about), to wit, their profound internal contradictions. Little wonder Wall finds Annie Kriegel's account of the PCF's origins 'metaphysical' – all those subtle complications...<sup>4</sup>

If a seamless continuity is the hammer of French communist historiography (even as the Party historians *themselves* are admitting that it ain't so), then the revolutionary working class is its anvil. With the exception of the Lange, Ross and Vannicelli volume and a few of the contributors to the Kesselman collection, few writers seem to have noticed that the working class in France is not only shrinking fast. It has also never been very revolutionary (differing in this respect from its artisan and peasant forebears), and has not shown any very marked propensity to support the organized Left. Only some 20 per cent of the French labour force was unionized as late as the end of the 1970s, and if the PCF did better than other parties among the industrial proletariat, it never succeeded in mobilizing them behind it on a significant scale.<sup>5</sup> It is ironic that English-speaking writers on the PCF so readily dismiss its ideology, which they ought to take more seriously, but take at face value its claim to speak for the 'workers', a claim almost wholly ideological, not to say metaphysical in nature (as a sociological assertion it is and has always been an untruth).

Mortimer, Adereth and Wall all accept the importance of the PCF-industrial proletariat axis (though all pay insufficient attention to the way in which the PCF attempts to forge such a bond, via the Confédération Générale du Travail), Wall even adopting for his own Pierre Daix's self-interested assertion that stalinism never reached the workers and was confined to intellectuals and party leaders. It would be nice to believe this, but in its day-to-day form stalinism was on the contrary rather well adapted to rank and file tastes. This explains the enduring appeal of Stalin and stalinist practices to members of a certain generation (in France *and* Italy) long after the guilty intellectuals had left and the leaders were dead and discredited.

The common thread running through the literature on PCI and PCF alike is a distaste for taking the history of communism on terms other than those it has itself imposed. That is why this sort of exercise is more easily undertaken from abroad – in Rome or Paris the obsession with continuity and correctness of line for so long characterized official party literature that writers from the outside were obliged to think in other ways about the trajectory of their local revolutionary movement. For

<sup>4</sup> Annie Kriegel's best work is still her magnificent doctoral thesis, *Aux origines du communisme français* (Paris, 1964, 2 vols).

<sup>5</sup> For more detailed studies of the relationship between the French communists and the labour movement see René Mouriaux, *La CGT* (Paris, 1981) and George Ross, *Workers and communists in France* (Berkeley, 1981).

this reason alone the locally produced studies are more faithful to the nuances of the historical experience. Some of them too much so, of course – Robrieux's massive work of reference is so divorced from any attempt to set events in a context of place or time that we quite lose ourselves in the (admittedly fascinating) minutiae of gossip, personality and faction. There must be more to it than *that*, the reader reflects after another sixty pages on the 'real' reason why Thorez emerged as party leader. Or else less.

How, then, should one set out to establish some purchase upon the history of communism in the West, avoiding the avalanche of nominalist rubble as well as the deceptively smooth glaciers of 'strategy', 'continuity' or 'integration'. What, if anything, is it all about?

Part of the answer lies in achieving a reasonable balance between 'interior' and 'exterior' histories of national communist movements. For too long the history of the international communist movement was conceived as little more than that of the Communist International, an odd (albeit deserved) compliment to Lenin's success in destroying the traditions of the Second International. The backlash has taken the form we have noted, with scholars falling over one another to assert the peculiarities of the various Italian or French 'roads to socialism'. There is an intuitive plausibility to both accounts, of course. What precisely distinguished communism from 1919 until the late seventies was its dependence upon the identity of the Russian experience. Gramsci, for one, would not look nearly so interesting were it not that his whole output was geared to the problem of applying leninist methods of organization and action to Italian social and political conditions. The French questioned less, only to discover that from the late fifties at the outside they had nothing to offer by way of improvement on Lenin's tactics, and no hope of applying these in France.

It follows from this that we must take seriously the international dimension of communism for most of its history – communists certainly did so. The French and Italian parties in particular learned this lesson to their cost when they were condemned in 1947 (at the first meeting of the new Cominform) for failing to adapt with sufficient speed to the advent of Cold War politics.<sup>6</sup> Small wonder that as late as 1969 Berlinguer was still stressing the 'positive' aspect of Soviet society in his tentative criticisms of the invasion of Czechoslovakia; as for the French, they remain even today attached to the sheet anchor of the 'globally positive' achievements of the eastern bloc revolutions. Where else, after all, can they go? Stalinism may have been a dysfunctional aberration, but the support it secured in all non-governing communist parties was not an accident.

The universality of the experience of the European Left did not begin with the first meeting of the Third International. Alastair Davidson berates the poor misguided Turati for 'imposing' a Minimum Programme on the PSI in 1900, using government repression as an excuse for abandoning revolutionary tactics. But such minimum programmes were commonplace – by 1910 they *were* socialism for most of its adherents, as Rosa Luxemburg noted with frustration. To suppose that it was Gramsci and the PCI's historical achievement to transcend the self-imposed reformist limits of pre-1914 social democracy is to make two important errors, both arising from the tunnel vision imposed by national histories of an international experience: World War I and October 1917 broke the 'mould' everywhere, and

<sup>6</sup> On the famous meeting at Sklarska Poreba, see Eugenio Reale, *Avec Jacques Duclos, au banc des accusés à la réunion constitutive du Kominform* (Paris, 1958).

in similar ways. National context only helps us account for the widely differing balance between old socialists and new leninists when stability returned after 1923. And even if we credit Gramsci with having written Italian communist history for the generation after 1944 it is hard to see how the *practice* of communism in Italy differs sharply from the aspirations of Turati and his fellow 'reformists'.<sup>7</sup>

A similar story could be told for France, where the parliamentary successes of the SFIO were only momentarily discredited by the appeals of a revolutionary communist alternative. From 1924 until 1981 the experience of communism in the West is remarkably similar across national boundaries – saving only those differences imposed by force from without, or by counter-revolution at home. If the Italian party was less successfully bolshevized than the French the credit goes to Mussolini, who deprived the PCI of a domestic political existence just at the moment when Stalin was imposing maximum rigidity and obedience upon the satellite parties. Yet even the newly minted PCI of the Resistance generation did not escape from the wider strategy of Russian provenance (and here, in the realm of geo-diplomacy, it seems to me not improper to write of 'strategy'); it may be that Togliatti in his *svolta di Salerno* was changing the very direction of radical politics in Italy, denying revolution to that minority of armed resisters who sought it and setting the pattern of political integration and conciliation which has since characterized PCI practice. But the French and Belgian communists experienced identical instructions, just as all three were under identical pressure a few years later to turn labour unrest to political advantage in the hope of undermining centrist regimes now regarded as American puppets.<sup>8</sup>

It cannot be denied that communist parties were always more comfortable when international considerations encouraged a softer domestic stance. The years 1934–9, 1941–7 and 1962–77 were a lot easier for the French communists than had been the periods before and between. But this is only another way of noting that in the effective absence of any prospect of fulfilling their revolutionary *raison d'être*, communist parties became rather good at mobilizing large numbers of people for limited goals – precisely the sort of unworthy and futile undertaking for which they had condemned their socialist ancestors. But they remained communist, willing to switch back again to the discomfort of systemic opposition and unembarrassed by the sort of extra-national justifications these switches required (witness Togliatti in August 1939 claiming unbroken continuity with the Popular Front line of 1935!).

This said, there are indeed ways in which historians might incorporate national peculiarities into their accounts of a self-consciously international movement of men and ideas. But they are external to the projects of the communists. There are a number of reasons why Togliatti and his successors have always been uneasy about 'servile imitation of the Soviet model'. The first is that the leadership of the Left in Italy has for a very long time now been in the hands of an educated elite, and one acutely conscious of the peculiarities of Italy's history. In a society unified by force, profoundly culturally and economically divided, and with a middle class whose

<sup>7</sup> For the earlier period of Italian socialism, see Leo Valiani and Adam Wandruszka, eds., *Il Movimento operaio e socialista in Italia e in Germania dal 1870 al 1920* (Bologna, 1978); *Socialismo e Socialisti dal Risorgimento al Fascismo* (Bari, 1974); Paulo Spriano, *Socialismo e classe operaia a Torino 1892–1913* (Turin, 1958).

<sup>8</sup> For an interesting study of the way in which the PCI emerged from the resistance experience in a major province, see David Travis, 'Communism in Modena: the development of the PCI in historical context, 1943–1952' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 1985).

commitment to liberal democracy was far from assured, revolutionaries of the Left had to tread with care. This was perfectly plain even before Mussolini brought the point home after 1924. One way of describing this problem was to think of Italy in terms of an uncompleted bourgeois revolution, where many of the 'historical' tasks of the middle class now fell to the movement of the workers. But not just the workers, for the omnipresence of a peasant population, whether as owners or labourers, meant that the task of any radical movement which wished to survive was first to mobilize the countryside behind it, or at least ensure that it was not in opposition. Gramsci's reflexions on this problem were very much to the point, and were a salutary corrective to the rather mechanical emphasis upon the industrial workers favoured by socialists of Turati's generation. But as a project for communist strategy it amounts to little more than the suggestion that the PCI take seriously the facts of Italian political life. Which it has tried to do, to its advantage.<sup>9</sup>

The other salient feature of *Italian* marxism is that it spent much of its youth in combat with anarchism, and this early problematic has left far deeper scars on the PCI than any conscious strategic imprint. The anarchists had a degree of backing in the peasant organizations for a while, which explains the socialists' preference for looking to the towns, as well as Gramsci's grasp of the urgency of detaching the peasantry from landlords and anarchists alike. In the long term, however, the struggle with the anarchists fused with the experience of fascism to make Italian communists (and, of course, the non-communist Left) peculiarly conscious of the need for stability, organization, a long-term perspective on the possibilities for change and in general what Togliatti in 1964 defined as a 'party which intervenes in the life of the country in a positive and constructive way'. The years of terrorism from Left and Right alike in the late sixties and seventies merely confirmed this preference. The Historic Compromise makes much more sense seen in *this* context than as some profound but obscure step in a hidden but consistent strategy of which, as we have seen, even Togliatti apparently knew nothing!<sup>10</sup>

A similarly localized range of constraints operates on the history of communism in France, albeit in a very different direction. From a marxist point of view, the problem with *French* history is that things went *too* well. There was a bourgeois revolution (*the* bourgeois revolution), there was by 1880 a liberal and reasonably democratic regime which had the support of a republican middle class. The task of the Left in France was thus precisely to distinguish itself from the traditions of the republican bourgeoisie, not to act for it, as in Italy. The obvious and only way to achieve this goal was to define oneself in terms of the only social category not historically identified with the republican movement but yet available for radical politics – the urban working class. In this lies the obsessive workerism of the French Left, the emphasis upon the necessarily *proletarian* identity of socialism (and, later, communism) in contrast with the cross-class republicanism whose revolutionary claims it sought to usurp.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For these matters see John Davis, ed., *Gramsci and Italy's passive revolution* (London, 1978); Sidney Tarrow, *Peasant communism in southern Italy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967); Mario Alicata, *La Battaglia delle idee* (Rome, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> See A. Nascimbene, *Il Movimento operaio italiano tra spontaneità e organizzazione, 1860–1890* (Milan, 1976); S. Merli, *Proletariat di fabbrica e capitalismo industriale: il caso italiano, 1880–1900* (Florence, 1976); A. Riosa, *Il sindacalismo rivoluzionario in Italia e la lotta politica nel partito Socialista dell'età giolittiana* (Bari, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> On this theme see Judt, *Marxism and the French Left* (Oxford, 1985), chapter 2.

The other peculiarly French question surrounded the matter of revolutionary organization. The model of revolutionary action bequeathed to socialists by the Jacobins might be inapplicable after the failure of the Commune, but it exercised a powerful emotional pull. The efforts of Jaurès and his contemporaries to cast socialist tactics in parliamentary terms always risked leaving unclaimed territory on the left fringe of French politics, and it was a happy chance that Lenin, for his own reasons, merged marxist analysis and Russian revolutionary traditions via the adoption of mid-nineteenth-century French insurrectionist myths and theories ('Blanquisme à la sauce tartare', as one French sympathizer dubbed it). Communist organization and perspectives have thus always had a certain particular resonance in France (as has Lenin's emphasis upon centralized control of action and theory, in a country where centrifugal sentiments in politics as in administration have never flourished). It is absurd for a historian of the French Left to purport to deny the impact of Russian traditions on communist practice. The point is to grasp just how and why those foreign forms proved uniquely well adapted to the indigenous French inheritance. This doesn't tell us anything about the prospects for communism in France (responsibility here lies with the inherent defects of the project), but it does help explain why in France, unlike Italy, stalinism in its most virulent forms (organizational as well as ideological) flourished for so long and lives still.<sup>12</sup>

Considerations of this sort suggest that those who seek to import a dose of purposeful rationality into the history of western communism would do better to abandon silent strategies or reductive searches for continuity of proletarian support and return instead to Hegel. For the history of the relations between national and international communisms is utterly dialectical. It would be tidier if we could agree with Edward Mortimer that the PCF became a 'national' party by accident in 1934 and that all its troubles and contradictions flow in a straight line thence. But this, like Amyot's suggestion that Resistance-generation Italian communists were 'scarcely politicized' (and thus readily mobilized behind Togliatti's 'new' strategy), begs all the questions worth asking. In both countries Lenin succeeded in splitting the old united socialist movement by depicting it as unable to achieve the revolutionary goals it continued to claim for itself. The initial appeal of communism was thus its very *difference* (as Blum and Serrati both noted in their efforts to discourage socialists from breaking with the past). Only when the specifically *revolutionary* promise of bolshevism was broken at home did the emphasis switch to its revolutionary achievements abroad, simultaneous with its new domestic task of mobilizing support for tactical and limited ends. This paradox, of support for stalinism in Russia and a search for a more integrated political role at home, was only a contradiction if one supposed that the original project of 1919–21, violent revolution in the West, was still on the cards. In reality the apparent paradox could endure indefinitely – witness the much-remarked fact that in the fifties and sixties many French and Italian communists were simultaneously reformist in their politics and stalinist in intra-party organization (or else paleo-stalinist in their ideas but in favour of more inner-party democracy, as Althusser in 1978).

<sup>12</sup> On stalinism in France see Dominique Desanti, *Les Staliniens* (Paris, 1974); Bernard Legendre, *Le Stalinisme français* (Paris, 1980) and E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Paris-Montpellier: P.C.–P.S.U. 1945–1963* (Paris, 1982). A case study in the mood of the period can be found in the work by G. Malaurie and E. Terrée, *L'affaire Kravchenko* (Paris, 1982), while a more recent series of events is chronicled in *Kremlin PCF: conversations secrètes* (Paris, 1984), dealing with the relations between the PCF and Moscow at the time of the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The common thread binding the history of communism, then, is not its practice or its goal but its origin. The fact that, even at its most repulsive and sectarian, stalinism in France (especially) and Italy could maintain its claim upon the traditions of radical politics in those countries points to something rather significant in the way in which it was grafted on to those traditions in its formative years (which is why history, rather than political science or sociology, is the key to the problem). One part of the achievement lay in communism's success in establishing organic relations with a major trade union movement. In countries where socialism and syndicalism had distinct and antagonistic histories, this was a genuine innovation and an enduring one, even if the 1970s saw serious efforts by the unions to establish their own priorities and policies.<sup>13</sup>

A second feature of the communist experience common to France and Italy alike (though not much replicated elsewhere) is the emphasis upon municipal power. In both cases, though in different ways, this interest in local government was less a policy than a *pis aller*, a holding operation in the face of a stalled advance on the national front. Over time it has become a 'long march through the institutions', but whereas in Italy the control of major cities has given the PCI precisely that credibility it sought as a respectable participant in pluralist democracy, the French communists have come to see municipalities as a source of power and cash, rather than legitimacy. Hence the (frequently illegal) effort that goes into winning local elections. But in both countries running Bologna efficiently, or controlling Ivry to the advantage of Party funds, has from very early on (the mid-twenties in the case of the PCF) been one of the few ways in which communism could distinguish itself from the mainstream traditions it sought to inherit or replace and thus justify in retrospect the bolshevization of the local socialist movement.<sup>14</sup>

By far the most significant aspect of communism in western Europe, in the longer run, is its impact upon radical political thought. I do not mean by this, *pace* Althusser, that stalinism's major sin was to distort marxist theory. But the most remarkable achievement of communism in both countries under discussion was its monopoly of marxist debate. Even, especially, among non-communist marxists for whom the communists' claim to inherit the mantle of ideological truth was the chief barrier to their own claims to attention. It is noteworthy that none of the works under review confronts this subject. Adereth, to be sure, prefaces his book with the interesting claim that 'As a Marxist, I am bound to feel a good deal of sympathy for the PCF'. And so he ought, since communism is most of what marxism as a politics has been about in this century (though he probably doesn't mean quite that!). But for those who have some serious interest in explaining the damage done to the Left by Lenin's intervention into socialist history (and Adereth is not, I think, among these), these books are very disappointing.

The difficulty seems to be that in rejecting the old idea that there was something called international communism we have vacated the subject of its very essence. It is not necessary to accept the communists' *own* account of the theory that informed their behaviour in order to see that this must be so. Some of the very best accounts

<sup>13</sup> For the Italian labour movement see, in addition to works noticed here, J. Couffignal, *Les syndicats italiens et la politique* (Grenoble, 1978); *Problemi dell movimento sindacale in Italia, 1943-1974* (Milan, 1976); P. Craveri, *Sindacato e istituzione nel dopoguerra* (Bologna, 1977).

<sup>14</sup> Among many studies of communists in local government see most recently D. Kertzer, *Comrades and Christians: religion and political struggle in communist Italy* (New York, 1980), and D. Lacorne, *Les notables rouges* (Paris, 1980).

of the phenomenon of communism conceived as an ideological project have been by writers thoroughly sceptical of the *truth* of the propositions they described. But what Lichtheim, Kolakowski and others *have* shown is just why Lenin's alternative seemed so interesting to so many people and continued to be of interest long after it had ceased to be reasonable to believe it would work. And herein lies the clue to an understanding of the failure of the Left in twentieth-century Europe.

If we confine our attention to the structure or function of communist movements we risk two errors. The first, as I have suggested, consists of historical myopia, of failing to see how the rather odd present configurations came about. The second involves the necessary supposition that there *is* some functional role performed by political parties. This fallacy is not confined to those who seek strategy or purpose in the recent history of the Left. It afflicts all those who seek some rational relationship between what communists *do* and the objective possibilities open to them in the world where they act. Since such a relationship is not at all self-evident, there is a built-in preference for ascribing rationality to some invisible function, whether strategic, integrationist, tribunal or whatever. Very few studies of the subject nowadays avoid such an approach.<sup>15</sup>

If we ask instead what it is that communists thought they were doing, when they left the old socialist parties, when they joined the Resistance, when they cheered Thorez and worshipped Stalin, or when they continue to vote for the Party today, we discover a rather different constellation of explanations. In some places they are supporting the party in power, in others pursuing a deep local tradition of loyalty. On some occasions they were expressing opposition to an existing government, on others voicing support for a set of immediate propositions. But always and everywhere they were joining or supporting a movement which for most of its history, in Italy, France and elsewhere, claimed a monopoly on the understanding of the purposes and means of profound social change. In other words, being a communist was the expression of an elective affinity very explicitly tied to a special and well-defined experience – political revolution from above. Because *all* the European radical discourses of the nineteenth century pointed in some such direction, but only the Russian model could claim to have fulfilled its promise, Lenin's transformation of the European radical sensibility was a huge success. For it to lose its appeal depended upon either the emergence of a plausible alternative or else for it to be seen to be without sequel. No alternative has been forthcoming, and there have in a sense been many sequels, albeit overseas (which in part accounts for the importance of non-European revolution, suitably romanticized, in the extending of the viability of marxism in its European cradle).

Thus communism was able to exercise a monopoly on the Left in Europe for far longer than any account of its functional capacities might suggest. Unless, that is, we understand functionalist accounts of the Party to incorporate the *necessity* of the revolutionary paradox. Whereas it is usually asserted that in the West as in Moscow ideology and historical reference are redundant, I would argue that it was *only* the determined maintenance of the Leninist reference that enabled PCI or PCF to survive intact. The more they had in practice to adapt to national circumstances and the evidence of their own failure *as* revolutionary organizations, the more

<sup>15</sup> Although this comment is directed for the most part at political commentators in this country and the U.S.A., it applies with equal force to a number of leading French experts, most notably Georges Lavau (see his *A Quoi sert le Parti Communiste Français?* (Paris, 1981), notably chs. 1 & 2).

important it became to establish the credentials with which they set out. Far from being an embarrassment or a hindrance, the belief system of communism and its international identity have been central to its survival. And with that system of thought has gone the virtual impossibility of recapturing the high ground for alternative forms of radical politics. This is the present condition of the Left in Europe, and it is as yet unaffected by the decline in the constituency of the PCF, or by the PCI's public disaffiliation from Moscow-centred 'panzer-communism'. In this story there are some very real losers indeed, and it would be good to think that interest in the history of European politics might now move in their direction.

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