Eurocommunism: when the past and present of the European left meet

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The Eurocommunist tradition, the product of a breaking away from the authoritarian communism of the USSR, had its high point in the 1970s, when, in Southern Europe - in Italy and France for example - it developed its own programmes and attempted to take power. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) played a hegemonic role across the whole of the left spectrum, but by the end of the 1980s it had been transformed into a non-communist party; while the Communist Party of France (Parti Communiste Français, PCF), which had retained its communist identity, had been eclipsed on the left by the Socialist Party under the leadership of François Mitterrand. In the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a number of parties influenced by the Eurocommunist tradition participated in governmental alliances, and in some cases supported minority governments. But its momentum had been lost and the hopes it had raised were unfulfilled.

However, the Eurocommunist project did not completely die out. A few decades later, Eurocommunism influences are part and parcel, or even the same, as the radical left in many countries (Syriza being the obvious example of this). At the core of this tradition is an antagonism towards social democracy, and the conviction that the latter is not capable of playing the hegemonic role that is necessary if the left is to make any real advances, at least not in South Europe.[1]

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Nevertheless, today the challenge from the left against neoliberalism on the one hand, and social democracy on the other, seems to have weakened. Since the electoral victory of Syriza in 2015, which once more temporarily raised hopes on the left, the party has rejected its anti-establishment position, and is ready, like the PCI, to enter the social-democratic camp.

Eurocommunism remains relevant in the current conjuncture in terms of the resonance between its own rejection of authoritarian communism and more contemporary attempts by European radical left parties to articulate an alternative within a liberal democratic (and neoliberal) framework. But, beyond this, Eurocommunism is seen by many as the conjuncture where the past and the present of the European left come together.[2] The historical transformation of these parties has delivered some compelling lessons - in terms of how mass appeal is lost, how social democracy returns so often as the name of the game, and how a party's vitalising relationship with society and wider progressive movements can be progressively lost. It is worthwhile, then, to return to this history. Necessarily briefly, we look here at the historical transformation of PCI, and compare it with the later transformation of Syriza in Greece.

The early history of the Partito Comunista d'Italia (PCd'I), which was launched in 1921, is closely associated with Antonio Gramsci, who became leader of the party in 1924. In 1926, together with other communist leaders, Gramsci was imprisoned by the fascist regime in Italy, and began writing what became his prison notebooks. His theoretical work recognised at a very early stage that the struggle for socialism in societies with a more advanced civil society than existed in Russia before the revolution needed to adopt a 'war of position' across civil society: and the struggle was not only concerned with the economic level but also encompassed the arts, the sciences and culture (parts of the 'superstructure', which interacts with the economic base but not in a mechanical way). This further defined the role of the political party: as part of the working class it had to develop a culture that could challenge the superstructure of capitalist societies.[3]

Under Mussolini, Italian communists operated in conditions of illegality. And after the rise of Nazism in Germany, the Communist International of 1935 made the battle against fascism central to its strategy and adopted its 'popular front' strategy, which involved building a cross-class alliance to defend democracy. When the Spanish civil war began in 1936, many Italian Communists fought on the side of the

Spanish democrats. This popular front strategy has been the subject of criticism ever since, and it has also become a contested issue in contemporary left parties. After the financial crisis of 2008, both Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain embarked on the task of the construction of 'a people' through cross-class alliances, and, later on, joined in governmental/parliamentary alliances in order to stop the neoliberal policies of the right.[4] This brings the question of popular fronts close to current discussions on populism, although there is a difference between the two: while popular fronts can be perceived in more instrumental terms, populism demands a more radical transformation of the actor's identity, and a common identification with a signifier.

The PCI's history of anti-fascism and the partisan struggle during the second world war meant that by the end of the war it had become a mass party. Togliatti, who was very influenced by Gramsci, had become party leader in 1927, and after the war, under his leadership, the party adapted to the new conditions and attempted to develop a democratic road to socialism that was suited to the situation it faced in Italy (which became a more prominent theme after the Stalinist invasion of Hungary in 1956).Togliatti's influence, especially in the 1960s, shows the persistence of the same debates within the left over the last seventy years: the relationship between parties and movements and the difficulties in constructing a democratic, left alternative.

In the 1968 general election, the PCI received 26.9 per cent of the vote. Enrico Berlinguer, who was committed to the continuation of the democratic orientation of the party, became the secretary of the party in 1969, though he was unable to prevent the expulsion of the group around Il Manifesto. For Berlinguer, the unity of the working and popular classes was central to the formation of a government for a 'democratic turn', and in 1973 the party launched the politics of the 'historic compromise', which proposed an alliance with Christian Democrats. In 1975 the PCI received 33.4 per cent of the vote in the regional elections, and at the national elections of 1976 it won 34.4 per cent. In 1977 the communist parties of Spain, France and Italy established the golden period of Eurocommunism. And at Berlinguer's funeral in 1984, two million people paid their respects. However, the historic compromise strategy did not succeed, and the party's vote started to decline. After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the PCI, now led by Achille Occhetto, changed its name, symbol and political programme, and the Democratic Party of

the Left (PDS) came into being in 1991. The PDS joined the Socialist International (which is a social-democratic organisation) and the Party of European Socialists (PES, the social-democrat group in the EU parliament). From that moment onwards the party declined both in membership and percentage of the vote.

The Occhetto turn signalled a delegitimisation of the party's past, and, in effect, its dissolution. This was a serious blow to hundreds of thousands of members. According to Luciana Castellina, around 400,000 members now abandoned any form of political action. Castellina had been expelled with the Il Manifesto group but had returned to PCI in 1984 at the invitation of Berlinguer. For Castellina and many others, the transformation of the PCI meant it had become a 'light' party, a non-ideological party where the members were losing power vis-a-vis the voters, and was focusing on single issues rather than a holistic vision of the world.[5]

A similar trajectory and series of dilemmas were witnessed by Syriza - an alliance within which Greek communists played a major role - when it achieved electoral power after the financial crisis of 2007-8.

The Greek Communist Party of the Interior (KKE Interior) was originally formed in a split from the orthodox Communist Party (KKE) in 1968, and it was embedded in the Eurocommunist tradition. From the beginning of the post-dictatorship period, the KKE Interior had tried to establish a left political identity of moderation, but it had not managed to translate this into electoral power. More inclined towards alliances than confrontation, the first congress of KKE Interior in 1976 had adopted a position of support for building alliances with the majority of the political forces, aiming for the stability of the country. In its early days it was not aiming to overthrow the right-wing government of New Democracy (ND), since it did not perceive a viable alternative. For some, this position was seen as a sign that the party had given up its claim to the space of the Greek communist movement, while at the same time having no clear goal as an opposition party. Nicos Poulantzas himself, who was a member of the party, was critical of this absence of any autonomous ideological identity, although in the end he accepted the need for the creation of an anti-right bloc uniting the forces of change.[6] In the meantime, however, PASOK had managed to create a socialist party with a mass base, and it had no need for any help from the KKE Interior.

In 1991 the KKE Interior became the Coalition of the Left, the Movements and Ecology (SYN); and in 2004 SYN became the largest of the organisations

that formed Syriza, which brought together parties of the extra-parliamentary left (including diverse groups like Trotskyites and Maoists), people and groups from the tradition of the alter-globalisation movement of the 2000s, and some from the social-democratic tradition - who were mainly incorporated into Syriza after the 2012 election.[7] PASOK's record of support for austerity measures in response to the country's debt crisis had eventually led to a collapse in the party's fortunes, and over time Syriza took its place as the biggest left party. It adopted a more confrontational position, becoming more like a populist left party, and taking on the grievances of the indignant movements, translating them into a division of the political space between the forces supporting imposed austerity (national and European) and a left alternative. Syriza was elected to power in January 2015, and re-elected in September 2015 (after accepting the EU's lending agreement). It formed a parliamentary coalition with Independent Greeks (ANEL), a nationalist right-wing party formed in 2012, which therefore wasn't implicated in the financial state of Greece, and which held onto an anti-austerity rhetoric. This alliance attracted a lot of criticism.

Syriza PM Alexis Tsipras had won the June 2015 referendum calling for the rejection of the proposed repayment terms of the Troika (EU, IMF, ECB) - with 61.31 per cent voting in favour - but the Syriza government was eventually forced into implementing them. To anyone recognising the Eurocommunist strand within the party, it was obvious that it would have been impossible for Syriza to put itself outside the EU or the Eurozone - as a faction of the party now suggested. But the reluctant decision to accept the Troika's terms led to a split in the party.

There was also a lack of internal democracy within Syriza, and it proved to be incapable of engaging with its own activists/members once in government - just as, according to Castellina, had been the case with the PCI; and this was one of the reasons that many people disengaged from Syriza, leaving a number of groups without a political 'home', or leading them into establishing small parties and organisations that had no kinds of hegemonic role.[8] The lack of participation in Syriza's decision-making processes by its members, and the absence of strong links with civil society, has for some time been recognised as a problem for the party, and in the past few years this is supposed to have been 'remedied' by gimmicks such as the move to digital platforms like iSyriza, and the creation of think tanks with 'experts' who could advise Tsipras directly. Digital forms of communication may well

have some potential of furthering participation, but, as we know from the example of Podemos, such forums are also susceptible to top-down manipulation; while the addition of a layer of think tanks and expert-advisors can be seen as testament to the leadership's distrust of the grassroots. It is also worth noting that the 2022 conference was only the third to have been held in the last eight years - a practice far from the annual conferences of parties like Labour.

The 2019 general election in Greece led to the formation of the right-wing government of Konstantinos Mitsotakis, and by the time of the 2023 election, the right was able to win with an eyewatering vote share of 41 per cent.

As part of an attempt to bring Syriza within the social-democratic family, Alexis Tsipras had been an observer of the PES, and French President Francois Hollande had often invited him to the closed meetings of European social-democratic leaders. This attempt to antagonise PASOK (from 2018, PASOK - Movement for Change, PASOK-KINAL), and to move to occupy the political space of the centre, created bitter fights within the party, between those who wanted an enlargement of potential electoral support and a clear social-democratic direction, and those who were less willing to part with the left identity of the party.

Tsipras resigned in the aftermath of the 2023 general election, and the leadership election that followed was won by Stefanos Kasselakis, a political neophyte who is unknown on the Greek political scene. Kasselakis succeeded in winning over both the 'left' and the old guard of the party, and in a way this concluded the debate over retaining a left identity. But thus far the direction of travel has clearly been towards the terrain of social democracy, albeit with a 'patriotic populist' strategy which at the time of writing remains ambiguous and not clearly defined.

The big question for Syriza and other parties of the democratic left today is how to retain their left identity, defining clearly their difference from social-democratic parties, and their more systemic proposals for dealing with the institutions of the state once in power. As we have seen, the solution to this problem for the PCI was to itself become a social-democratic party.

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These and other issues are explored by the contributors to this special issue. Oscar García Agustín looks at the recurring presence of Eurocommunism in

contemporary Spanish politics, and argues that many of the issues and dilemmas faced by Eurocommunists in the 1970s and 1980s continue to resurface in the current conjuncture; looking back at this history can thus help us to learn from past successes and mistakes.[9] From this perspective, Eurocommunism is a reminder of the challenges and risks inherent in constructing a left project that aims to become hegemonic and to govern. García Agustín warns, however, that reproducing the logics that created the old antagonisms and splits within the left has not so far proved itself to be the most efficient strategy for expanding the political space.

Some of these issues re-appear in the interview with Gaspar Llamazares, who was coordinator of IU (United Left) between 2000 and 2008, and co-founded Izquierda Abierta (Open Left) in 2012, with the aim of building a larger progressive coalition. Llamazares is a defender of the legacy of Eurocommunism, understood as the defence of socialism and pluralism within the political and parliamentary system established during the Spanish transition to democracy after the death of Franco, and as the formation of a large progressive coalition to gradually change the capitalist system.

Andrea Donofrio examines recent scholarship and discussion on the histories of the PCI and PCF as well as the PCE, the three main Eurocommunist parties of the 1970s. He sees the return of discussion on Eurocommunism as being related to the wider decline of communism since the fall of the Berlin Wall. He argues that the actions, decisions and strategies adopted by these parties can only be understood if they are framed within the historical and geographical context of the 1970s. His conclusion is that, ultimately, Eurocommunism failed to find a way of combining a reformist strategy with a revolutionary identity: it abandoned core aspects of its previous strategy without finding a convincing alternative.

We also reprint here a 1979 interview with Nicos Poulantzas, who was a member of the KKE Interior and a leading figure within Eurocommunist and wider European left debates in the 1970s. Poulantzas is being asked by his interlocutors to think through some of the difficult issues as they are unfolding, including how to define the role of the party once it had abandoned the idea of the 'frontal smashing of the state': previously, 'reformism' had been identified with those who had never supported such a position; now the party had to both avoid and redefine reformism through a different strategy, based on profoundly transforming existing forms of representative democracy and maintaining a connection to a mass activist base.

Poulantzas recognised the need to re-imagine the role of the centralising party while also embracing a plurality of autonomous social movements. But this question was as difficult to answer in 1979 as it is now.

Sally Davison writes about how these major developments in Western Europe played out in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), from the point of view of a party activist. Although the CPGB was a small party with no prospect of parliamentary representation, debates within the CPGB mirrored those taking place in the bigger parties. Davison describes the battle to find an international communist identity that was not based on Soviet communism - the culture and politics of which many in her generation completely rejected - and the bitter arguments that took place between the Eurocommunists and the traditionalists. She also discusses the importance to the CPGB of social movements and alliances.

The article by Rivka Saltiel, Matthias Naumann and Anke Strüver was not commissioned as part of the main theme of this issue: they were asked to write because of the current success of the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ) in the city of Graz, where communists are the leading party and run local government in coalition with the Greens and Social Democrats. The KPÖ has followed a rather different trajectory from that of the other parties discussed in this issue, but KPÖ politicians in Graz (and now Salzburg too) have their own specific take on defining a role for communists within a liberal capitalist democracy. The party's success is based on its focus on everyday concerns such as housing, tenants' rights, public health, education and mobility issues, as well as its battles against austerity and neoliberal privatisation. It is strongly committed to social infrastructure at the scale of people's everyday experiences and explicitly critical of top-down state solutions. The authors see this as a local political expression of relational care, and argue that this model can provide new perspectives for a left that is currently in crisis.

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The two other main articles in this issue deal with aspects of the UK Labour Party's current strategy for government. Following on from articles in previous issues of *Soundings*, the authors are gloomy about Labour's commitment to progressive change: it is probably fair to say that the UK Labour Party has little sense of the need for systemic change, or for any connection to a mass base.[10]

Mike Makin-Waite discusses recent developments in Burnley - 'Labour's 'most winnable' target seat', but a constituency which has recently seen a mass defection of Labour councillors because of the leadership's position on Gaza. Makin-Waite has been writing about Burnley for a long time, focusing on the background to its becoming the first place where the British National Party won council seats, and its role as a 'forerunner' of what came to be known as the 'Red Wall' phenomenon. Burnley has a long history of being at odds with mainstream opinion, and one way of understanding this is to see it as symptomatic of local leaders' distance from the sources of social, cultural and political power. As well as looking at longer-term trends of de-alignment between Labour and constituencies which have previously supported it, Makin-Waite argues that the Labour leadership's managerialist and controlling culture has narrowed the space for discussion and shallowed debate across the party; its inability to engage with and represent the energies of so many of the people who see themselves as supporters of its values may well be a herald of further instances of disaffection.

In Kevin Blowe's discussion of his longstanding work with Netpol - the Network for Police Monitoring, a coalition of organisations of which he is currently campaigns coordinator - he is equally pessimistic about Labour's probable strategy on 'law and order'. This includes Labour's stance on both the policing of protest and the routine experience for many people of oppressive policing within their local community. Blowe thinks it very unlikely that Labour will do anything to address the drastic loss of civil liberties arising from the Tories' Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Act, and the Public Order Act. In spite of the unpopularity of the police across the country, Labour remains fully signed up to the agenda constructed by the media and Westminster politics, which sees total support for the police and their demands as non-negotiable - and regards criticisms of their ever-increasing powers as resulting from an 'extreme' position. Blowe concludes from his observation of Keir Starmer at the DPP that he doesn't understand the massive imbalance in power between the individual and the state; an incoming Labour government is thus unlikely to provide a greater degree of protection to people who are vulnerable to overreaching state power in its many different forms.

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Notes

1. Giannis Balabanidis, *Eurocommunism*, Polis 2015, pp396-7 (in Greek).

2. Ibid, p572.

3. Interview with Aldo Tontorella, 13 January 2021, in Argiris Panagipoulos (ed), *100 Years PCI*, Avgi 2021.

4. See K. Morgan, M. Prentoulis, S. Canos and J. Gilbert, 'Alliances, Fronts, Parties and Populism', *Soundings* 65, 2017.

5. Interview with Luciana Castellina, 10 April 2019, for *Infiniti Mondi*, in Panagopoulos, *100 years PCI*.

6. Balabanidis, *Eurocommunism*, pp186-190.

7. J. Milios, 2016. 'Does Social Democracy Hold Up Half the Sky? The Decline of PASOK and the Rise of SYRIZA in Greece', in I. Schmidt, (ed), *The Three Worlds of Social Democracy: A Global View*, Pluto Press 2016, pp127-45.

8. Marina Prentoulis, *Left Populism in Europe: Lessons from Jeremy Corbyn to Podemos*, Pluto 2021.

9. The parties in Spain which remain either influenced by Eurocommunism, or for which Eurocommunism figures as an important reference point - for either good or ill - are the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), Izquierda Unida (IU, United Left), Podemos, Unidas Podemos and Sumar.

10. See Howard Stevenson, 'Higher education policy and a future Labour government: distinguishing the probable from the possible'; Adam Peggs, 'The rise and rise of real estate neoliberalism', both in *Soundings* 84-5, summer/autumn 2023; and Gareth Fearn, 'New management, old energy: The UK Labour party's revanchist energy policy', *Soundings* 83, spring 2023.