

# Introduction: 1968 and after – between crisis and opportunity

*Richard Cross*

**T**he political shockwaves which intersected at the decisive ‘historic moment’ of 1968 are without parallel in the narrative of twentieth century communism. The crushing of the Prague Spring by Soviet tanks (in an ‘intervention’ – to use the Kremlin’s anodyne and implausible description of its military invasion); the student uprising in Paris; the ‘shock and awe’ of the audacious Tet Offensive in Vietnam; the worsening of the Sino-Soviet split; and the political convulsions which heralded the emergence of a ‘new left’ inspired by anti-authoritarianism and libertarianism: these and other events threw the aspirations, politics and practice of the entire left into the sharpest possible relief. The combined political pressures of 1968 shed harsh light on a communist left ensnared by crisis and divided over the question of how to best respond to the opening up of new political opportunities.

Just over twenty years separate the upheavals that communist movements across the world faced in 1968 and the endgame of the Soviet era; though few of the new generation of left critics of stalinism could possibly have foreseen how the edifice of state communism would eventually crumble. If 1968 opened up a novel political terrain in which new left agendas could flourish (while communist parties either retrenched into belligerent orthodoxy or sought renewed distance from the prescriptions of Moscow), the ‘meaning’ of 1968 ultimately proved a chimera. For that reason, the upheavals of that year might be seen as the final decisive turning point in the communist century. This issue of *Twentieth Century Communism* explores how communist parties and movements responded to (or struggled to engage with) the crises and opportunities posed by 1968 and its reverberations.

The familiar narrative of 1968 and its aftermath explains how the communist movement was rocked by the crushing of the Prague Spring and the experiment in building 'socialism with a human face'; and by the eruption of an upstart new left which saw the ossified monoliths of 'obsolete communism' as just as much a part of the problem as the systems of capitalist rule that this new pluralist oppositional force sought to challenge.<sup>1</sup> For those libertarian leftists, the Paris May revealed the French communist party and its union cadres 'as the final and most effective "brake" on the revolutionary self-activity of the working class'.<sup>2</sup> The formation across Western Europe of a dynamic new libertarian left diaspora posed profound challenges to the communist movements and parties across the world, in and out of government, even though, in most cases, the threat that it posed was more ideological than material.

Those convinced by the imperative of loyalty to Moscow saw in the challenges of the new left reaffirmation of the value of traditional communist precepts. Such communist agents saw in the political upsurges of 1968 evidence only of deviation, subversion and the spectre of 'counter revolutionary' challenges to the order of 'actually existing socialism'. For reformist elements within the communist parties (in particular those outside of the Eastern European bloc) the challenges of 1968 appeared more readily to be opportunities to reinvigorate the communist project with a refreshed set of guiding principles. For those forces, demands to 'humanise socialism' had an immediate resonance and utility. Those forces on the left outside of the traditional orthodox communist mode understood 1968 to be the moment of their breakthrough; the time when the critiques and counter-proposals of this new progressive oppositional left had at last found reflection and leverage in the real political world, in a context in which the political and social momentum showed some signs of shifting in its direction.

One of the defining characteristics of this process was the growth of the phenomenon of 'polycentrism': the assertion of the authenticity of national roads towards socialist advance was given credence by the forward march of de-Stalinisation in the years after the 'double crises' of 1956. The tremors of 1968 are seen to mark a new era in centre-periphery relations in the international communist movement, establishing new dynamics in the relationship between Moscow and national party centres outside of the Soviet bloc. Within those sections of the globe where

communist governments held state power, the varied responses made by communist parties and movements to the crushing of the Prague Spring and the deepening of the Sino-Soviet split revealed sharply different assessments of the shifting centres of political gravity within 'official communism'. The requirements of the Kremlin notwithstanding: 'it was clear to any observer at the end of the sixties that the communist movement had ceased to be an international unity and was becoming steadily less so', and that, even within the communist bloc, 'individual party states were unmistakably moving along different paths to divergent national agendas'.<sup>3</sup>

For some, the pressures increased the utility of compliance with Soviet foreign policy. Others saw significant new political opportunity in the ability to forge new, and at least partially independent, local strategies and practices. In a related vein, reformist elements within some communist parties, excited by and in sympathy with many of the critiques of the new left, used the opportunity of the changing political climate to press for a reworking of the practice of their own organisations (where they did not decide to decamp to join those left-wing critics working outside, and often in competitive hostility to, the communist parties they had left behind). These reformists aimed to remake the political profile of communist parties, and to reimagine the role of their organisations in ways which sought to undermine previous vanguard style conceptions of their parties' role. Others of more traditional communist hues responded to the challenge of the new left with retrenching impulses which restated the existing and time honoured precepts of their political agents. Communist parties across the globe also faced unanticipated political rivals that were emerging from within the 'new social movements' – from the reinvigorated ranks of trotskyism and anarchism, and in the new guise of maoism. In some instances these new modes of leftist thinking and practice presented themselves as recuperative forces that could reorient and reinvigorate traditional marxism. The traditionalists saw the new militant activists of the 1968 wave not as potential political allies (or fellow travellers) but as political opponents who risked distracting the socialist vanguard into pointless and misguided acts of political distemper. 'These false revolutionaries ought to be unmasked', French communist leader George Marchais resolutely declared.<sup>4</sup> The belief that the nature of the new left's critique of leninism only reinforced orthodox communism's

'self-evident' imperative was deeply engrained in the culture of orthodox communism.<sup>5</sup>

There was no certainty that the only consequence of the increased autonomy encouraged by polycentrism would be increased liberalisation and reform-minded agenda in communist parties across the world. In many cases, the rise of independent thought led to a restatement and a retrenchment of traditional principles. In the early 1970s, Eurocommunism would encourage the articulation of new communist programmes, particularly amongst theorists and party intellectuals interested in exploring a more plural and expansive view of communist political practice. In many respects, Eurocommunism, as a political current, cohered through the experience of shared opposition from within the communist camp to Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. As communist reformists came to see party orthodoxy as an intractable obstacle to political renewal, while communist traditionalists increasingly viewed reformers as hostile to the communist project itself, schisms in communist organisations outside the Soviet bloc and China became common. Whatever the merits or shortcomings of Eurocommunism might have been, 'parties large or small which adopted it with any degree of enthusiasm all suffered splits and fragmentation'.<sup>6</sup>

For the Italian Communist Party, the years immediately following the 'historic compromise' suggested that a new collaborative, liberal politics could attract encouraging levels of electoral support; but the embrace of Eurocommunism did not insulate the PCI from the onset of compound crises by the close of the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> For French communists, the party's backing for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, combined with its equally robust condemnation of the militancy of French students and strikers at home, positioned the PCF in direct opposition to the Eurocommunist dynamic. In the medium-term, the limited programme of liberalisation under Marchais accompanied a revival in the PCF's electoral fortunes, but the conflict between the 'modernist, libertarian and anti-totalitarian' impulses of 1968 and the party's resilient orthodoxy re-emerged in the 1980s, as the electoral tide turned.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the best efforts of its enthusiastic supporters, Eurocommunism proved incapable of sustaining convincing political momentum, and increasingly its ambitions revealed a threatening disconnect between the pluralist, participative strategies of the Eurocommunists and the contin-

uing assertion of the apparent ‘indispensability’ of communist *party* agency).<sup>9</sup> It might be argued that for many of its western communist party advocates, Eurocommunism’s ‘transformative potential’ (in the social, cultural and political domains) went largely unrealised because of a misplaced focus on narrow electoral and institutional goals.<sup>10</sup>

If for most communist movements in the world, the many-sided ‘critique’ of 1968 proved ultimately to be unanswerable, communism’s evolving attempts to absorb, reinvent or refute the notion of ‘communism with a human face’ or ‘libertarian communism’ reveal a great deal about both the homogeneity and heterogeneity of global communism’s final quarter-century.

The birth of polycentrism did not give rise to a new, singular international experience, and relationships between communist parties also varied (as did those between the agencies of communist governments and oppositional communist movements beyond the eastern bloc, in particular). Not only was there no automatic correlation between greater autonomy and liberalisation amongst communist party officials; there were also continuities in the relationships between the centre and periphery of the communist movement after 1968 (as well as ongoing peculiarities and dysfunctional elements). Preoccupation with the ruptures of 1968 risks obscuring these potent continuities. The historiography of the shifting relationship between centre and periphery has not always accounted for either its specificity or its complexity. Often, ‘a simplistic picture of the contrast between the “democratic” Italian and Spanish communist parties and the “Stalinist” French Communist Party impeded a more subtle analysis of contexts and factors’.<sup>11</sup> The efforts of what were themselves *oppositional* parties of the left to meet the challenge posed by new left-wing rivals could take sharply different forms.

In this issue of *Twentieth Century Communism* Phil Edwards explores how the Italian communist party (PCI) struggled to deal with the emergence of radical competitors to its left, announced by the events of the ‘hot autumn’ of 1969. Using the ‘cycles of contention’ model, Edwards suggests that the PCI’s relative success in responding to the first wave of this new left alternative, by adopting an effective gatekeeper role, were not replicated when a second (more consciously ‘autonomist marxist’) current emerged. For the PCI, the decision to oppose outright, rather than critically engage with, this second wave of leftist challenges proved costly for

the party; it suggested that a strategy of denial and denunciation of 'illegitimate' political forces to the left of the communists' own could not be relied upon to deliver the hoped-for political outcomes – that of strengthening the party's appeal and reinforcing the efficacy of 'legitimate' forms of labour movement practice.

Elsewhere in Europe, new possibilities for radical social and economic upheaval emerged in the early 1970s. Raquel Valera's study of the Portuguese communist party's (PCP) engagement with the 'revolutionary upheavals' which followed the military coup that ousted the Salazar regime in April 1974 provides a fascinating case study of the dilemmas facing a western communist party in a polycentric, post-1968 context. Valera argues that, despite the explosive domestic political situation and the political leverage potentially at its disposal, the PCP singularly failed to support or champion this emergent revolutionary movement. Emerging from illegality, the party was accepted as a legitimate member of the new provisional government. However, Valera argues, rather than rallying the workers to press ahead with the revolutionary process, the PCP opted to denounce strikes and diminish the effectiveness of the newly energised workers' movement. In the event, whatever potential there might have been for socialist revolution went unrealised.

The impact of polycentrism was, of course, experienced by all communist parties. In some, the increased opportunities for domestic independence intensified existing internal political divisions. The Greek communist party split in 1968, into an orthodox wing that reaffirmed its loyal connections to the Soviet bloc, and a reformist current which was far more receptive to the potential of Eurocommunism. When Greece emerged from military rule in 1974, and the communist party was able to adopt a legal, legitimate identity (as it had in Portugal), the orthodox KKE continued to demonstrate its unflinching support for the international prescriptions of the eastern bloc. Andreas Stergiou explores to what extent this traditionalist strategy proved to be successful in the Greek context (within relative terms).

A very different perspective on the reverberations of the Paris May Days is provided in Gavin Bowd's account of the little-documented state visit by France's General de Gaulle to Ceausescu's Romania in the midst of the *événements*. This official visit not only removed de Gaulle from the epicentre of the convulsions affecting France; it also required the communist

Romanian authorities to play host to the head of state at a time when the streets of the Paris were in the throes of riots and demonstrations that the PCF soon began to oppose outright. The claims of the west European new left to challenge the old and ossified ways of thinking, and to present a truly revolutionary alternative, were often treated with suspicion by those in the old left determined to protect the ideologies of the pre-1968 era.

The new left's claims for the totality of its critique of the 'old ways', and for the apparent 'comprehensiveness' of its own new agenda, was complicated by its engagement with the politics of gender. Without question, the new left offered women militants new opportunities to voice, mobilise and take action; but the new left did not automatically challenge the male dominance of the public political space, and the thoroughness of its critique of gender relations was often halting and inadequate. Women activists frequently had to challenge the precepts of the new left and demand the space in which to contribute and find their own political paths (not, of course, that there was a single feminist narrative). In her wide-ranging contribution, Brigitte Studer explores the complexities of the contested process through which a new 'feminist subject' emerged.

The interview in this issue with the late Sam Russell, long serving CPGB member and reporter for the British communist *Daily Worker* and *Morning Star*, offers a revealing and candid insight into the internal political calculations of the British communist party, and of Russell's own identity as a communist journalist, before, during and after the upsets of 1968. In the context of 1968, Russell is a fascinating figure, not only because he was a witness to the withering of the Prague Spring, and clashed with his editors over his attempts to analyse the nature of this communist crisis for a British readership, but also because Russell's critical stance in 1968 contrasted so sharply with his earlier fulsome support for the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Russell's increasingly critical perspectives on the Moscow model in the years that followed did not convince him of the need to break with the CPGB, and his identity as a communist remained an important association for him until the British party's demise in 1991. The rich complexities of persistent political identity is the central theme of Stephen Hopkins's study of Spanish writer and politician Jorge Semprún, a member of the PCE leadership who was expelled from the party four years before the upheavals of 1968. Throughout his writing Semprún has returned time and again to the

formative and defining experiences of his communist political identity, and Hopkins's study explores the 'complex relations with national identity, democratic legitimacy and individual commitment' which Semprún has attempted to mediate and reconcile.

For the international communist movement the opportunities of 1968 (whether they were to rebuke reformism; embrace polycentrism; or refashion the revolutionary ambitions of the left entirely) would find their ultimate resolution in the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989-1991 and the 'end of communism' (in its twentieth-century manifestation at least). If the meta-narratives of 1968 illuminated what would prove to be a false dawn for communism and the left, it cannot be claimed that that was because the necessary political prescriptions were ignored: retrenchment and orthodoxy, experimentation and innovation, breakaways to the left – each of these was tried and ultimately found wanting. How many of these failures might warrant the epithet 'glorious' will remain a matter of permanent debate amongst left historians of the era, but the twenty-one years separating the destabilising upsurge of 1968 and the terminal communist crises of 1989 unquestionably reveal themselves as one of the least predictable and most uncertain periods in communism's century.

## Notes

1. Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). The most striking demonstration in Latin America of the spirit of 1968, and of the agency of student activism, were the protests which ended in the infamous Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City in October 1968, just prior to that country's hosting of the Olympic Games; see Keith Brewster (ed.), *Reflections on Mexico '68*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell/Society for Latin American Studies, 2010.
2. Solidarity, 'Paris: May 1968', *Solidarity*, June 1968; republished in Dark Star/AK Press (eds.), *Beneath the Paving Stones: Situationists and the Beach, May 1968*, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2001, p64.
3. Willie Thompson, *The Communist Movement Since 1945*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, pp155-6.
4. George Marchais, quoted in: Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2004, p223.



5. Thomson, *The Communist Movement Since 1945*; David Childs, *The Two Red Flags: European Social Democracy and Soviet Communism Since 1945*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp60-4.
6. Willie Thompson, *The Left in History: Revolution and Reform in Twentieth-Century Politics*, London: Pluto, 1997, p184.
7. See, for example, Stephen Hellmann, *Italian Communism in Transition: The Rise and Fall of the Historic Compromise in Turin, 1975-1980*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
8. Marc Lazar, *Maisons rouges. Les Partis communistes français et italien de la Libération à nos jours*, Paris: Aubier, 1992, pp127-34.
9. For a discussion of the British context see Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times: The Final Years of British Communism, 1964-1991*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2004, pp201-23.
10. Carl Boggs explores this theme, in relation to the PCI in particular, in *The Socialist Tradition: from Crisis to Decline*, New York & London: Routledge, 1995.
11. Maud Bracke, *Whose Socialism? Whose Détente?: West European Communism and the Czechoslovak Crisis, 1968*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007, p8.