



Introduction: communist youth, communist generations: a reappraisal

Leo Goretti and Matthew Worley

Organisations of *youth* [...] which openly declare that they are still learning, that their main task is to train party workers for the socialist parties [...] must be given every assistance. We must be patient with their faults and strive to correct them gradually, mainly by *persuasion*, and not by fighting them. The middle-aged and the aged often *do not know how* to approach the youth, for the youth must of necessity advance to socialism *in a different way, by other paths, in other forms, in other circumstances* than their fathers.¹

The above quote comes from Lenin, speaking in 1916 on the role that the International League of Socialist Youth Organisations might play in the struggle *for revolutionary internationalism, for true socialism and against the prevailing opportunism*.² Originally founded in 1907 in Stuttgart, and then abruptly collapsed following the outbreak of the First World War, the Socialist Youth International was re-established as a pacifist, radical network by Willi Muenzenberg in 1915. Two years later, after the October Revolution, the revamped Youth International sided with the Bolsheviks. On 20 November 1919, its allegiance to the Third International was then sealed by its transformation into the Communist Youth International (KIM), which remained active alongside the Comintern until 1943.³ In the post-war period, a somewhat looser coordination between communist-led youth organisations (including student networks and antifascist fronts) was guaranteed by the pro-soviet World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY), created in November 1945 in London and still active today. The main





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efforts of the WFDY were directed toward the organisation of the World Youth Festivals, a soviet-sponsored, pro-communist gathering that took place every two to three years, generally in an Eastern European capital, with the participation of some dozens of thousands of left-wing youths from all over the world.⁴

Although the categories of youth and generation were never as central as that of class to communist ideology, Lenin's article and the existence of the KIM and the WFDY prove that communist leaders were always mindful of the importance of developing youth-specific policies and organisations. Karl Marx himself, in drafting the 'Instructions for the Delegates of the provisional general council' of the First International, had remarked upon the need to develop an alternative pattern of education that, through 'the combination of paid productive labour, mental education, bodily exercise and polytechnic training', might 'raise the working class far above the level of the higher and middle classes'.⁵ From an orthodox communist standpoint, it may be argued that youth and generational issues represent but a sub-section, a specific moment, of the wider working-class- (and party-) led struggle for political power. This view was voiced also by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, where he emphasised (probably so as to counter the youth-oriented propaganda typical of Italian fascism) the uneven entanglement of generation and class conflicts: in the end, it was always the latter that triggered the former. In his view, generational tensions had some political significance only when 'related to class issues' and, in particular, when "“young people” [...] of the ruling class [...] rebel themselves and join the progressive class that has historically become ready to take power'.⁶

Youth issues took an additional meaning in those countries where communist parties were able to gain power. Here the regimes had to face the challenge of providing young people with a truly socialist education, looking toward the final aim of establishing a new, socialist (and superior) society. As Juliane Fuerst has written, many leading bolsheviks held 'utopian and eschatological theories' according to which 'only a young person unspoiled by the experience of capitalism was to become the "new soviet man or woman" in possession of a true communist consciousness'.⁷ The flipside was that any time young people showed





signs of cultural non-conformism, out of line with the socialist values and beliefs fostered by state education, socialist regimes strove to discipline and 're-educate' them.

Despite this longstanding attention paid by communist leaders, parties and regimes to youth issues, and even though young communist leagues existed in virtually all the countries where communist parties were active, until recent years the topics of youth policies and communist generations have been somewhat overlooked by historians. The few exceptions have tended to focus on the years immediately after the October Revolution, pointing out the contribution of national young socialist leagues in the establishment of communist parties in places such as France and Italy, where in 1920–21 the young socialist federations voted overwhelmingly in favour of turning into young communist leagues.⁸ These studies focused mainly on political-organisational issues, such as the relationship of the young communist leagues with the adult parties, and their function as a 'breeding ground' for adult cadres.

More recently, the study of communist youth has been revived and revamped as a result of the more general renewal of political history. In the wake of the 'cultural turn', growing attention has been paid to the narratives, myths, beliefs and identities (in other words, the 'political culture(s)') fostered by political parties and movements.⁹ This approach seems particularly promising to the study of youth politics, since youth is frequently the phase in which political activists gain their first experience of militancy. Thus, it is often at this stage that the moulding of their political identity – their 'political socialisation' – takes place. As has been noted by Helmut Fogt, the beliefs and values that politically-active people learn and internalise in their youth tend to have a long-term impact on their worldview.¹⁰ Elaborating on the seminal work of the German sociologist Karl Mannheim, it can be argued that the socio-historical context in which a young political militant is socialised can *potentially*, depending on whether an epoch-making event such as a war, a revolution or another major crisis occurs, bring about the development of a generation-specific political identity.¹¹ Thus, it is possible to talk about the existence of several distinct 'communist generations' of militants who, albeit belonging to the same ideological family, developed





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different political identities as a result of the specific historical conjuncture in which they first joined the communist movement.¹²

This culture-and-identity-oriented approach has paved the way for a new wave of studies on communist youth. Not surprisingly, such research emerged first in the field of Soviet studies. In 2000, Anne Gorsuch published her book on *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents*, which eschewed a focus on soviet youth organisations in favour of an insightful analysis of the 'discourse' on youth and its education, its reception/rejection, in the years of the NEP. Gorsuch analysed both the ideas put forward by politicians and social scientists for the socialist transformation of youth, and the autonomous responses of the latter toward state policies.¹³ Catriona Kelly, too, in her *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (2005), dealt with the popular myth of Pavel 'Pavlik' Morozov, a 13-year-old pioneer who allegedly had denounced his father because the latter was a kulak who had tried to betray the soviet regime. The teenager was then murdered in revenge by some relatives. Kelly underlined how Pavel's myth was adapted over time so as to match the changing needs of Soviet pedagogy.¹⁴ More recently, Juliane Fuerst has published the first comprehensive account of *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (2010). In this, Fuerst underlined the extent to which the 'dominant identifier' for young people growing up in the period of late Stalinism was not 'ideology' but 'consumption'. The new consumerist expectations and behaviour of young people, however, were not necessarily in contrast with their identity as soviet citizens.¹⁵ In addition, several doctoral theses on Soviet youth (e.g. Sean Guillory's work 'We Shall Refashion Life on Earth: The Political Culture of the Young Communist League, 1918-28', or Gleb Tsipurky's 'Having Fun in the Thaw: Youth Initiative Clubs in the Post-Stalin Years') have been recently defended.

In a similar vein, an increasing number of studies on communist youth and generations in non-Soviet countries (both on the Western and Eastern side of the Iron Curtain) have been carried out. Interestingly enough, despite the small size of the CPGB and the British YCL, historians of British communism have been at the forefront in this field of investigation. After the pioneering work of Mike Waite on the YCL and youth culture, the issue of generational cleavages within the CPGB has





been discussed in *Communists and British Society* (2007) by Kevin Morgan, Andrew Flinn and Gidon Cohen. In their view, the CPGB was generally characterised by ‘a high degree of inter-generational cohesion’, that was nurtured in ‘multiple sites of inter-generational contact’. Nonetheless, at specific conjunctures (namely, the 1920s and the 1960-70s), generational tensions emerged, also as a result of internal struggles to control the party.¹⁶ In his *Communism in Britain: From the Cradle to the Grave* (2007), Thomas Linehan has devoted an entire section to communist childcare, the communist children’s movement and the British YCL. According to Linehan, the CPGB had ‘a strong and quite marked generational focus, in that it sought to address the experience of party life and membership at the principal phases of life’.¹⁷ More specifically, Linehan remarked upon ‘the deep sense of belonging and emotional attachment to an ideal which transcended the self’ which was characteristic of the young communist experience in – and, we might add, beyond – Britain.¹⁸

Following these works, several scholars have embarked on research projects – mainly doctoral dissertations – concentrated on communist youth policies and organisations. This special issue offers a first overview of this new research, thereby revealing the questions it addresses, the approaches it utilises, and the first tentative conclusions towards which it is leading. The contributions focus on a number of European countries in an attempt to highlight both similarities and differences between communist youth policies in various national contexts. Certainly, non-soviet youth networks were (to a different extent at different times) impinged upon by the political line and the strategic priorities of the USSR. Nonetheless, in developing their youth organisations, communist parties could not but take into account the specific political, social and cultural features of the national context in which they acted.

This combination of exogenous and endogenous factors influencing communist youth policies is made clear in Leo Goretti’s article on the gender role models for communist girls in Italy between 1945 and 1956. According to Goretti, catholic views on morality had great bearing on communist education for girls: in order not to be accused of moral depravation, the Italian Young Communist League embraced a rather traditional view of girls’ role in society.





A comparison between two different national contexts (Britain and the Netherlands) is developed in Elke Weesjes' piece on the upbringing of children in communist families. Taking issue with the idea that communist families were an ideologically insular, inward-looking microcosm, Weesjes points out the contrast between the public and private aspects of communist education. A similar tension between the ideological dimension and the practical experience of being a young communist is stressed in Pia Koivunen's article on Finnish communist youth at the World Youth Festivals in the 1940s and 1950s. Koivunen argues that participating in the Festivals did not lead automatically to the assimilation of communism as defined by the organisers, as contemporary non-communist accounts often tended to imply. For example, young delegates seemed keen on exchanging fashionable consumption goods, often coming from Western countries or the USA.

The increasing difficulty faced by communist movements dealing with the emergence of youth cultures based on the consumption of youth-specific items (music, films, clothing) in the second half of the twentieth century is the topic of the Evan Smith's article on the CPGB. More specifically, Smith explores how the CPGB interacted with subcultures such as punk, hip hop, indie and acid house/rave in its final years. The contrast between a Gramscian wing of the CPGB that showed enthusiasm for youth culture as a means to reach the younger generation and the traditionalists who were far more sceptical because of the 'hedonism' inherent in the new youth styles is extensively discussed. From inside a socialist state, Juliane Brauer demonstrates how punk music in the GDR served as a means to contest the values and beliefs that the 'educational dictatorship' of the regime strove to put forward among the younger generations. In Brauer's view, the relationship between the punk movement and the socialist government can be described as a clash of contrasting 'emotional styles'. Finally, the importance of generation changes for the development of communism (and politics more generally) is explored by Kimmo Rentola in relation to Finland.

It may come as something of a surprise that none of these articles deals directly with 1968, the movements around which are traditionally seen as the pinnacle of youth activism in the last century and have recently





been the subject of numerous studies. Indeed, the previous issue of this journal was devoted to the turbulence occasioned by 1968.¹⁹ As far as youth politics are concerned, the impact of 1968 was mixed: on the one hand, it signalled a renewed interest in politics (often to the left) among the younger generations; on the other hand, the heterodox, anti-authoritarian mindset of young radicals was often at loggerheads with the severe, discipline-oriented and party-centred mentality of older communists.²⁰ In order to discuss these questions, we have included here an interview with Detlef Siegfried, who has recently published an impressive volume on 1968 in West Germany.²¹ Siegfried contextualises the German 1968 from an international perspective, looking at the relationship between consumption, politics and the role played by the new German Communist Party (DKP) in the radical milieu.

One final point: this issue of *Twentieth Century Communism* was born out of a conference on *Communism and Youth in the Twentieth Century* organised at the University of Reading on 5 April 2011 and sponsored by the Economic History Society and the Royal Historical Society. By publishing a selection of the contributions made at this conference, we hope to offer a foretaste of where the 'new generation' of studies on communist youth are heading.

Notes

1. V. I. Lenin, 'The Youth International: a review', originally published in *Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata*, 2, December 1916, now republished in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 23, *August 1916-March 1917*, ed. by M.S. Lewin, London-Moscow: Lawrence & Wishart-Progress Publishers, 1964, p164.
2. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 23, p163.
3. On the KIM, see R. Cornell, *Revolutionary Vanguard: The Early Years of the Communist Youth International (1914-1924)*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982.
4. On the WFDY, see J. Kotek, *Students and the Cold War*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, pp76-81, and the website of the organisation <http://www.wfdy.org> (last time accessed: 14 July 2011).
5. K. Marx, 'Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council:





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The Different Questions', originally written in August 1866, now available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1866/08/instructions.htm> (last time accessed: 14 July 2011). For an overview of Marx and education, see R. Small, *Marx and Education*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.

6. A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Vol1, *Quaderni 1-5 (1929-32)*, ed. by V. Gerratana, Turin: Einaudi, 1975, pp115-16.
7. J. Fuerst, 'Youth', in S. Pons and R. Service (eds.), *A Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p877.
8. On France, see J. Varin, *Jeunes comme JC: Sur la jeunesse communiste*, Vol 1, *De 1920 à 1939*, Paris: Editions sociales, 1975; on Italy, see G. Gozzini, *Alle origini del comunismo italiano: Storia della Federazione giovanile socialista (1907-1921)*, Bari: Dedalo, 1979; R. Martinelli, 'I giovani del movimento operaio italiano dalla FGS alla FGC', in *Movimento operaio e socialista*, 3, 1976, pp247-84.
9. L. Black, "'What kind of new people are you?' Labour, the people and the 'new political history'", in J. Callaghan, S. Fielding, S. Ludlam (eds.), *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour politics and history*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, pp23-38; S. Fielding, 'Looking for the "New Political History"', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42, 2007, No3, pp515-24; U. Frevert, H.-G. Haupt (eds.), *Neue Politikgeschichte: Perspektiven einer historischen Politikforschung* Frankfurt a.M: Campus, 2005.
10. H. Fogt, *Politische Generationen: Empirische Bedeutung und theoretisches Modell*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1982, pp17-25.
11. K. Mannheim, 'Das Problem der Generationen', and 'Das Problem der Generationen (Schluß)', in *Kolner Vierteljahrshefte für Soziologie*, 7, 1928, Nos 2 and 3, pp157-85 and 309-30, now republished as K. Mannheim, *Le generazioni*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2008.
12. For an example of how the concept of Communist generations can be fruitfully put into practice in historical studies, see A. Kriegel, *The French Communists: Profile of a People*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, especially Chapter 5, 'Stratification', pp98-135; P. Buton, 'Les générations Communistes', in *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire*, 22, 1989, pp81-91.
13. A. E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.





14. Cf. C. Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero*, London: Granta Books, 2005.
15. J. Fuerst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
16. K. Morgan, G. Cohen, A. Flinn, *Communists and British Society (1920-1991)*, London-Sidney-Chicago: River Oram Press, 2007, p232.
17. T. Linehan, *Communism in Britain: From the Cradle to the Grave (1920-1939)*, Manchester-New York: Manchester University Press, 2007, p3.
18. Linehan, *Communism in Britain*, p61.
19. *Twentieth Century Communism*, 3, 2011, '1968 and after – between crisis and opportunity'.
20. A. Schildt, D. Siegfried (eds.), *Between Marx and Coca-Cola: Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies (1960-1980)*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2006.
21. D. Siegfried, *Time Is on My Side: Konsum und Politik in der westdeutschen Jugendkultur der 60er Jahre*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006.

