

# Editorial

The term ‘cultural turn’ is generally associated with a shift in leftist, socialist and communist politics after 1956. The upheavals of that year – primarily Soviet intervention in Hungary and Nikita Khrushchev’s revelation of the atrocities committed by Stalin – triggered realignments on the left, both within and without of the communist movement. At the very least, the Soviet Union’s claim to a scientifically rigorous interpretation of marxism was damaged. More accurately, the Soviets’ position as a revolutionary exemplar – a workers’ state building towards a progressive, democratic socialism on the foundations of marxist theory – was effectively undermined. As is well-known, there followed a period of rancour and division across the communist movement. Splits and soul-searching competed with blinkered intransigence and engrained loyalties too deep-rooted to expunge. New guides and approaches were sought: marxist thinkers from the past were dusted off and re-assessed; new theories were forged that ostensibly grew from Marx but often strayed so far as to break away into -isms of varying hue and relevance. The ‘new’ became ‘post’ as certainties dissolved into a vista of subjectivities.

This issue of *Twentieth Century Communism* was inspired by two things. First, the ‘cultural’ dimension of post-56 leftist politics may be read in a number of ways. In reductionist terms, it points to a refocusing of marxist praxis away from class and economics and towards the broader processes by which the ruling class asserts and maintains its power. Most famously, of course, Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony began to inform leftist thinking, inspiring activists to engage in struggles beyond the workplace and in life itself. But what did this mean in practice? Theories of ‘hegemony’ and ‘cultural materialism’ remain pertinent today – the ideas of Gramsci, Raymond Williams and others continue to provide insight. But they also generated fierce discussion

within the left that fed into and informed the trajectories of individuals and movements ostensibly committed to the same revolutionary objective. The fragmentation of the left post-56 was both a product of its vibrancy and the increasingly contested nature of its point and purpose. Attention, therefore, may be fruitfully given to both the ideas generated by the new left and across the 'new social movements' that evolved into the later twentieth century and to the ramifications of such developments on the composition of the left, its priorities, and the spaces in which it functioned.

Second, culture – as in the arts, sports and so on – always claimed a place in the communist schema. Debates over the revolutionary role of the artist and of culture more generally have long been filtered through a marxist lens to locate its value as a 'weapon in the struggle' or as a component part of a developing socialism. From Russian futurism to rock'n'roll, surrealism to folk music, political meanings were read into or projected through cultural forms as diverse as they were conflicting. In Britain, 1930 saw debate within the British party as to coverage of 'capitalist' sport (especially football and horse racing) in the *Daily Worker*; in the early 1970s, youth culture came under the party microscope. In both cases, tensions emerged between those concerned with the mode of (cultural) production and those interested in the ways by which the working class adopted and participated in cultural activity. Neither debate brought definitive answers (dare we say it, but *taste* and personal proclivities often seemed to rub against – or were tenuously justified by – 'scientific' analysis). As a result, the contested nature of culture was revealed in ways that informed class relations and political priorities.

The articles compiled here thereby serve two purposes. First, to explore instances where culture informed political debate within the communist movement; second, to examine how the wider 'cultural turn' fed into communism's development over the twentieth century. No claim is made to a comprehensive analysis. Rather, we conceived this issue as a kind of historical prospecting ... drilling into times and places to uncover moments of cultural contestation, experimentation and politicisation.

Several of the articles stemmed from papers given at a symposium sponsored by the Political Studies Association in Durham in January 2014. Others were commissioned to fit the requisite theme. The first

two, by Mattie Fitch and Fiona Haig, take us up to 1956. Fitch investigates the politics of the French Communist Party during the popular front, considering the extent to which this may be read as a precursor to the post-war 'turn'. Haig, meanwhile, concentrates on the Italian party, specifically the Gorizia federation's attempts to realign its politics in response to the shock of the Soviet's intervention in Hungary.

Key to the post-56 'cultural turn' was the emergence of youth-cultural and counter-cultural movements that challenged Communist Party claims to provide the revolutionary vanguard. Just what was the revolutionary potential of a youth-centric politics and culture? Was rock'n'roll the soundtrack to rebellion; or simply a distraction to detour a rebellious spirit into 'safe' and profitable channels? Tim Brown tackles the issue head-on, focusing on Germany, to consider how communist and counter-cultural politics interacted around the conjuncture of 1968. Back in the UK, Paul Stott looks at how the emergence of 'identity politics' over the 1960s and 1970s led to fissures that cut across the unravelling left and continue today.

Two shorter pieces conclude. Mike Waite assesses the political trajectory of Cornelius Cardew, whose adoption of maoism in the early 1970s led him to rethink his cultural politics and eschew his earlier avant-gardism. Gavin Bowd follows Nicolae Ceaușescu's own peculiar cultural revolution, revealing how it helped prepare the way to his overthrow in 1989.

Taken all together, we hope the issue intrigues and kindles interest in communist culture and cultural politics more generally. That culture provided a contested space for communists to engage in the *struggle* should, in itself, inspire further research. But the ramifications of the 'cultural turn', with regard to the class basis of marxism and the evolution of the left, deserves far closer attention than has been given hitherto.