

# Editorial

## Communism's print culture

Less than a decade ago, the perception that 'the party' was an outmoded structure irrelevant to radical left politics was widespread.<sup>1</sup> The striking – if inevitably uneven and contradictory – emergence and progress of actually existing leftist parties in the conjuncture shaped by the 2008 crash has transformed the terms of reference.<sup>2</sup> Theoretical discussion has returned to questions about socialist strategy, and in particular the challenge of re-imagining and reinvigorating the Marxist party in new times.<sup>3</sup> Historical analysis of the structures and experiences inherited from the past have a key role to play in this process. The national communist parties with which this journal is centrally concerned continue to haunt the contemporary radical political imagination.<sup>4</sup> Jodi Dean's recent work usefully invokes a psycho-analytical framework to describe what she sees as the necessary, ongoing historical engagement with these parties.<sup>5</sup> For Dean they were never identical with themselves but rather 'ruptured, incomplete, irreducible.' Wider in aspiration, practice and experience than their official lines and the Stalinism that disfigured them, they remain, she argues, in need of continuous working through.<sup>6</sup> The editor's framing hypothesis for this special issue of *Twentieth Century Communism* is that communism's print culture – the voluminous international body of printed material in which communists spoke sometimes to themselves and sometimes to an immanent Party comprising a not-yet persuaded community of readers – is an especially rich and challenging site for that process.<sup>7</sup>

Modern-day readers reaching the end of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) might be forgiven for feeling short-changed. The challenge outlined is epochal (the making of a 'permanent army' of dedicated revolutionaries fit to wage war on the class enemy). The means seem prosaic

(the formation of a national newspaper).<sup>8</sup> The apparent disjunction says much about the centrality of print culture in the Leninist tradition. For Lenin in 1902 the organizational challenge of linking together locally-rooted Russian cadres in the production of an underground national newspaper would lay down the network from which a national party structure could arise. This network would in turn be reinforced and deepened by the radicalised consciousness that the newspaper would foment among readers. Production, distribution and consumption were an indissoluble process, with print actively shaping the world it also described. The question posed, ‘can the newspaper be a collective organiser?’ was solidly rhetorical.<sup>9</sup>

Through and after the revolution the printed word was the nerve-structure of the international communist movement. The Comintern insisted that ‘all periodical organs’ of the party should come under ‘exclusively Communist editorship’, an edict that codified Lenin’s scattered writings on the relationship between party and its publications.<sup>10</sup> These addressed ‘literature’ in both senses – party propaganda and broader practices of writing – and sought to destabilise the image of a future classless culture the commonsense mental frameworks which saw them as mutually exclusive.<sup>11</sup> The Comintern and its satellite organisations would be duly forthcoming with support and criticism for the full spectrum of parties’ endeavours in print, from newspaper production to publishing houses.<sup>12</sup> Sporadic forays would be made by communists into other media – film and radio especially in the Soviet Union – but print would remain the primary medium of the international movement outside the communist world. This was partly for practical reasons (relative low production costs, the possibility of working in exile and underground); it was also for strategic ones (to work with the grain of existing cultural habits in an age of mass literacy in the west, and with the autodidact traditions of their labour movements); and also, internationalist ones (keeping levels of communist consciousness sharp among the movement’s geographically remote cadres). So integral, in fact, was the newspaper or periodical to twentieth-century Communist identity that it formed the natural medium of dissidence for those who wished to stake a claim to greater communist authenticity and to charge the official movement with Stalinist deviation from the movement’s true soul.<sup>13</sup>

It is inevitable and right that historiography of communism has been centrally committed to analysis of its central structures and experiences: its international bodies and networks;<sup>14</sup> its national parties;<sup>15</sup> the relationships between parties and national cultures and labour movements;<sup>16</sup> the trajectories of its leading figures;<sup>17</sup> and, more recently, to communist subjectivities.<sup>18</sup> All of these approaches would, however, be enriched by a deeper understanding of the means through which knowledge was produced, shared and consumed, and the ways in which communist consciousness was shaped and reinforced in the process. That involves, substantially, deeper analysis of communist writing, reading, and the print culture which remained its key mode of communication well into the televisual age. The sheer scale of this lost world is powerfully conveyed in Dave Cope's recent conspectus of the print culture of the small and relatively marginal British party, *Bibliography of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (2016). Running to over three hundred and fifty closely-printed pages, the book lists and briefly summarises 7273 publications produced by or about the party, and also restores to view the expansive cultural apparatus – publishing houses, bookshops, distribution centres, literature secretaries – through which its periodicals, newspapers, pamphlets and books were circulated within and beyond its membership. As Cope writes, Communism's 'belief in the written word was boundless'.<sup>19</sup>

The national studies and bibliographies from which future comparative analyses of communism's print culture might be based continue to appear, and this special issue is a contribution to that broader project.<sup>20</sup> The articles gathered range across five national contexts, four outside the Soviet Bloc (Australia, Sweden, Italy, Britain), and one within it (Poland), and cover the duration of twentieth-century communism. They were commissioned by the editor mainly from emerging scholars currently producing challenging work in the field. Methodological considerations no less than the desire for global coverage informed the process of inviting and selecting contributors: the majority come from text-based disciplines (literary studies, visual studies, media studies), the intention being to showcase innovative analytical work produced at the interface of cultural, historical and political studies. On one hand, this was to challenge the parameters that sometimes confine the coverage of communist

writing when conducted in the broader field of literary and cultural studies, by creating space for arguments explicitly concerned with the communist institutional contexts (party, party groups, journals). On the other, it was to bring to historiography the insights produced by deeper analysis of individual cultural artefacts.

Elinor Taylor's essay, "'The voice speaking, desired, awaited': Jack Lindsay, *1649*, textual form and communist historiography' is a good example of the latter. Taylor reads Lindsay's critically neglected Popular Front period novel, *1649: A Novel of the Year* (1938), as an archive of a creative historiographical impulse brewing within British communism at odds with what would soon become dominant communist readings of the English Civil War as sparked by the clashing tectonic plates of feudal and capitalist modes of production. Instead she sees Lindsay's awkwardly untimely novel as foregrounding the work of individual agency, culture and communication in historical change in ways more readily associated with the New Left.

Other contributors directly make the case for bringing to the study of national communisms theoretical perspectives and debates from other disciplinary fields. Kristin Ewins' article, 'Swedish communism in print, 1917-45' surveys the formative period of Swedish communism through the prism of its key publications. Drawing on the burgeoning field of periodical studies, she brings to the study of communist newspapers analysis of the formal properties of a distinct cultural form whose complex meanings are often lost to approaches which merely mine for content.<sup>21</sup>

Mila Milani's 'Translation and ideology in post-war Italy: left-wing publishers and the Italian Communist Party' addresses the PCI's strategic adoption of Antonio Gramsci as theoretical lodestar. Milani describes a fascinating and distinctly 'Gramscian' cultural intervention through which, in the 1940s and 1950s, the PCI sought to win cultural and intellectual prestige by associating itself with the translation and circulation of literary works, a process underpinned by the assumption that the most effective ideological work might be done precisely in spheres apparently most remote from ideology. The thrust of her argument takes issue with contemporary theoretical positions derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu which, in stressing the relative autonomy of the literary field

from politics, tend to privilege the second term – autonomy – at the expense of grappling with the complexities of the relative embeddedness of the cultural in the political.

The question of Comintern or party ‘core’ and national, regional or group ‘periphery’ that has structured much communist historiography features in a number of the essays. Samuel Hyde’s “‘The vicious circle: communist cartooning, internationalism and print culture 1917-25’ keeps a careful eye on Comintern edicts about publications, but also looks outward to Britain’s national culture. Hyde at once foregrounds the rootedness of early communist cartooning practice in the traditions of the labour movement and traces how, far from imposing a dead-hand of centralised orthodoxy, the early 1920s ‘Bolshevisation’ process – with its emphasis on breaking with previous social-democratic traditions in the name of communist revolutionary internationalism – unlocked significant innovation in British communist cartooning.

Carl Tighe’s ‘Number crunching the engineers of human souls’ focuses on the first twenty-five years of communist rule in Poland and analyses the status of Polish writers as a social group. Rich in statistical detail and drawing on the sociological survey conducted by Andrzej Siciński, Tighe’s study presents Polish writers as a recalcitrant elite reluctant to fulfil the pedagogical and ideological function envisaged for them by party ideologues and who preserved through new times the prestige they had enjoyed in pre-war Poland.

The primary motivation of Anthony Ashbolt and Rowan Cahill’s article “‘And the lives are many’: the print culture of Australian Communism’ is recuperation. Their essay surveys the cultural world of Australian communism which, they argue, attained a profile in national life disproportionate to the party’s size, despite being marginalised through the Cold War and obscured by the politico-cultural narrative which it effectively set in place.

Matthew Kavanagh’s essay, ‘British Communism, periodicals and comprehensive education, 1920-56’ is dispiritingly topical at a moment when the British Conservative Party is proposing to build new tranche of grammar schools. He argues that communist teachers were far more creative in debates about curriculum, pedagogy and consciousness than has been

recognised, and that party journals were a key location of their various interventions. Though overlooked by communist historiography more typically angled at industrial workers, communist schoolteachers, he argues, played a role in shaping of post-war educational provision and a significant if embattled role in the long-haul struggle for educational democratization and the coming of the comprehensive school in the 1960s.

Glyn Salton-Cox's essay, "Polemics pertinent at the time of publication": Georg Lukács, *International Literature* and the Popular Front' argues that modes of historical analysis circumscribed by national boundaries potentially miss the magnetic pull across and through cultures of what he calls, after Katerina Clark, the 'cosmopolitan patriotism' of Soviet culture in the 1930s as promoted by publications such as *International Literature*. Produced in a number of languages simultaneously, this periodical (1932-45) was read not only for news of national literary scenes but, more importantly, for assessment of the balance of forces between capitalist cultural decline and 'progressive' cultural movements and energies whose pole was naturally Moscow. *International Literature* was, Salton-Cox argues, a talismanic publication for many 1930s leftist cultural intellectuals which translated and disseminated significant theoretical works internationally. Its neglect from subsequent nationally-focussed accounts of the period, he argues, distorts the historical record, in the British case by exaggerating the parochialism often attributed to its leftist intellectual currents.

What, then, emerges from this diverse collection of essays when taken together? A couple of brief observations will have to suffice. The collection suggests that working with the broader category of print culture rather than the subdivisions that communist themselves often contested (newspapers, periodicals, literature, aesthetics) is productive in making visible patterns of thinking shared across these forms and debates. For example, taken in the wider frame, the key characteristics which Georg Lukács valued in the realist historical novel analysed here by Taylor and Salton-Cox – totality of social reach, concern with 'typical' characters which embodied social processes and enabled readers to grasp history's movement – become legible once more as the sphere-specific articulations of the questions about epistemology, pedagogy and consciousness

which they always were. Lukács on the novel becomes intriguingly reminiscent of Lenin on the newspaper, another apparatus for complex seeing capable of educating readers by exposing ‘the interrelations between *all* classes’ and thus the deeper, ‘typical’ pattern behind surface phenomena.<sup>22</sup>

In encompassing early (Ewins, Hyde), Popular Front (Taylor, Salton-Cox) and later (Milani, Ashbolt and Cahill, Tighe, Kavanagh) print culture, the collection variously undermines, challenges and finesses widely shared perceptions of an opposition between early ‘Leninist’ crudeness of interventions in the cultural field and later ‘Gramscian’ sophistication, productively re-focusing attention on the writing and legacies of two of twentieth-century communism’s key thinkers. Ewins’ essay demonstrates that revisiting Lenin’s writings such as ‘Party organisation and party literature’ (1905), with its emphasis on culture as prefiguration and an active material *process*, reminds us that the later, Stalinist, creation in Lenin’s name of reductive models of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ in which ‘cultural’ activity was a secondary reflection of economic processes is a distortion of his thought.<sup>23</sup> This reduction is inseparable from the politically damaging construction of ‘Leninism’ as a model of insurrectionary vanguardism impatient with allegedly secondary matters of culture and civil society. It impoverishes contemporary Marxism no less than ‘culturalist’ appropriations of Gramsci – also covered here – which bracket off *his* thinking about capital, class, state and party from the writing on hegemony and civil society and thereby diminish him to a forefather of Cultural Studies antithetical to ‘Leninism.’<sup>24</sup> Taken collectively, the essays gathered here are greater than the sum of their parts in revealing that close analysis of communism’s print culture can play a part in unsettling such sedimented conceptions at a time when contemporary history is suggesting they need to be revisited and worked through.

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## Notes

- 1 This tendency found resonant theoretical expression in the ‘idea of communism’ debate inaugurated by Alain Badiou, for whom the Marxist party was only ever the socialist state in embryo, an invention of the past

- which weighed like a nightmare on the brains of the living. For Badiou the fundamental challenge now was ideological rather than organizational: to reinscribe communism into political discourse Alain Badiou, ‘The Communist Hypothesis’, *New Left Review* 49, January-February 2008, [www.newleftreview.org/?view+2705](http://www.newleftreview.org/?view+2705); the early stages of the debate continued in Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran, London : Verso 2010; Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek eds., *The Idea of Communism*, London: Verso, 2010.
- 2 As Susan Watkins has recently outlined, oppositional social movements were slow to galvanise in response; the formation of national projects angled at politics – in the sense of the transformation of the totality of social relations – was predictably slower still. Watkins, ‘Left Oppositions’, *New Left Review* 98, March-April 2016, pp5-30.
  - 3 See, for instance, Pablo Iglesias, ‘Explaining Podemos’, *New Left Review* 93, May-June 2015, pp93-22 and his *Politics in a Time of Crisis: Podemos and the Future of Democratic Europe*, London: Verso, 2015, especially pp176-96; Bécquer Seguí, ‘Podemos and its critics’, *Radical Philosophy* 193, September-October 2015, pp 20-33; Alex Callinicos of Britain’s SWP and Stathis Kouvelakis, of Syriza’s central committee debated ‘Syriza and Socialist Strategy’ in central London on 25 February 2015; the debate was hosted by *International Socialism* printed in *Socialist Worker* on 14 and 21 March 2015, and can be viewed on [youtube.com/watch?v+FV2CTBjlpQ](http://youtube.com/watch?v+FV2CTBjlpQ); the essays by Peter D. Thomas, Gavin Walker and Jason E. Smith in *Theory & Event* 16.4, Winter 2013.
  - 4 Though apparently opposites, approaches which see these parties as straightforwardly reducible to the Stalinism with which they were cankered actually share much – in terms of evasion and self-consolation – with those which view them from perspectives of defensiveness or nostalgia.
  - 5 Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, London and New York: Verso, 2016, pp209-51.
  - 6 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, London: Verso, 2012, p239.
  - 7 These views are the editors alone, and don’t necessarily reflect those of either the contributors or the journal’s other editors.
  - 8 Lenin, *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*, Moscow: Progress, 1973, p167, p172.



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- 9 Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, p156; Lars T. Lih, *Lenin*, London: Reaktion, 2011, pp78-83
  - 10 Reprinted in *Lenin on Britain*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1941, p 218; the key essays here are 'Party organisation and party literature' (1905), 'The tasks of the youth leagues', (1920), and 'On proletarian culture' (1920). Lenin, *Selected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart 1968, pp148-53, pp607-21, pp621-23.
  - 11 Lenin, 'Party organisation and party literature' (1905), *Selected Works*, pp148-53.
  - 12 The archives of the CPGB's in-house publisher, Lawrence & Wishart, reveal the extent of Soviet guidance via the company Saffronova. Box 4, Lawrence & Wishart Records, 1927-51, GEN MSS 703, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
  - 13 See for instance the documents gathered in John Callaghan and Ben Harker (eds), *British Communism: A Documentary History*, Manchester: MUP, 2011, pp186-206 relating to E.P. Thompson and John Saville's *The Reasoner*.
  - 14 Serge Wolikow, *L'Internationale communiste (1919-43). Le Komitern ou le rêve déchu parti mondial de la révolution*. Paris, Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2010; Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*. Hounsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
  - 15 José Gotovitch, *Du communisme et des communistes en Belgique. Approches critiques*, Bruxelles: Aden, 2011.
  - 16 Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France 1934-39*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009; Mattie Fitch, 'The people and the workers: communist cultural politics during the Popular Front in France', *Twentieth Century Communism* 9 (2015), pp40-68.
  - 17 Albertina Vittoria, *Togliatti e gli intellettuali. La politica culturale dei comunisti italiani (1944-1964)*, Rome: Carocci, 2014.
  - 18 For an overview of these modes, see Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-9*, London: Rivers Oram, 2007, pp1-11; the book is itself an instance of the latter.
  - 19 Dave Cope (ed), *Bibliography of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, London: Lawrence & Wishart 2016, p8.
  - 20 Philip Bounds, *British Communism and the Politics of Literature 1928-1939*, Pontypool: Merlin, 2012; Vittoria, *Togliatti e gli intellettuali*; Marie

- Cecile Bouju, *Lire en Communiste. Les maisons d'édition du Parti Communiste Français*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010;
- Elen Cocaigh, 'The left's bibliophilia in interwar Britain: assessing the booksellers' role in the battle of ideas', *Twentieth Century Communism* 4, 2012, pp218-30.
- 21 See, for instance, the newly launched *Journal of European Periodical Studies* 1.1, Summer 2016.
- 22 Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, p79, p143. Lukács' own *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought*, 1924; London: Merlin, 1967, remains one of the best introductions; see also 'Lenin and Questions of Culture' (1946) in Tyrus Miller (ed and trans.), *György Lukács: The Culture of a People's Democracy, Hungarian Essays on Literature, Art, and Democratic Transition, 1945-48*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2013, pp26-45.
- 23 Known as 'reflection theory' and described by E.P. Thompson as 'that intellectually constrictive orthodoxy which, descended in some part from [Lenin's] *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*' was congealed by Stalin and dispersed through the international Communist movement as doctrine.' E.P. Thompson, 'Caudwell', *Socialist Register*, London: Merlin, 1977, p240; the key work in the congealing process was the so-called 'short course' or *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union / Bolsheviks*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1939. This is discussed further in my 'Jack Lindsay's Alienation' forthcoming in *History Workshop Journal*.
- 24 See Perry Anderson's 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review* 1/100, November-December 1976, and also 'After Gramsci', *New Left Review* 100, July-August 2016.