

Labour with knobs on?

The recent historiography of the British Communist Party

In 1951, one of Britain's most virulent fascists and anti-Semites, Arnold Leese, described Britain's first fascist organisation, the British Fascisti of the 1920s, as 'merely Conservatism with knobs on'. By this he meant that these Fascisti could not properly be regarded as fascists at all, that fascism and conservatism were inherently different things, and in this judgement he has been echoed by most subsequent historians. With much ink spilt on elaborate definitions and typologies, a shared concern in what has come to be called 'fascist studies' has been with the generic features distinguishing fascism in its various manifestations from rivals and forerunners to right and left, and more than liberalism, socialism, or conservatism itself, the specificity and singularity of fascism has seemed a matter both of analytical precision and moral necessity.

On the other hand, in the elaboration of these typologies, it is the relationship with contiguous movements and traditions, whether radical or conservative, that simultaneously helps locate and explain the national varieties of fascism and illuminate wider histories from their distinctive perspective. Though imaginable as an ideal type, providing a sort of measuring stick for the fascist content of actual historical movements, the historicisation of fascism means that the real is always discovered mingling with or borrowing from other movements as well as aspiring to supplant or suppress them. In Britain, those other movements were generally conservative ones, and in its discourses of race, class, and gender, and its ambivalent responses to modernity and the specific anxieties of the inter-war years, it is on the more conservative aspects of British political culture that fascism, though never more than a marginal phenomenon, can sometimes throw a light. This interplay between the national and the international, assisted by the glamour of the exotic, may be one reason why so meagre a movement has generated a literature altogether disproportionate to its actual size and influence. Rarely, says Richard Thurlow, 'can such an apparently insignificant topic have been responsible for such an outpouring of ink'.¹

Perhaps there is a parallel with the historiography of the British Communist Party (CPGB). Though estimates of the party's influence naturally vary, recent years have seen a degree of academic interest in the CPGB which it is difficult to correlate with any empirical measure of the party's standing. Within the field of British labour history, the ILP, the SDF and even the Fabians seem neglected by comparison, and an interest in the communist party *as* a party has

¹ Thomas Linehan, *British Fascism 1918–1939. Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester, 2000), 1–12 for a review of the historiography, and 61–71 for the British Fascisti; Thurlow cited by Julie Gottlieb, review of Dave Renton, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s* and Nigel Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain, Twentieth Century British History*, 12 (2001), 262.

seemingly bucked the trend away from institutional histories that has otherwise seemed inescapable. The opening up of relevant archives, both those of the Comintern in Moscow and of the CPGB itself in Manchester, offers part of an explanation.² So in some cases does a hankering, nostalgia or sheer compulsion for political controversies that have largely petered out in actuality. More generally, the immense contribution to the development of British labour historiography of communists and former communists like Edward Thompson, John Saville and Eric Hobsbawm helped secure within this tradition the high profile of the activist groups whom the communists hailed as their own forebears. If the celebrated makers of Thompson's English working class seem cut from the same cloth as the activists with whom Thompson himself had grown up politically, that was because Thompson and other communist historians of his generation had begun writing about them precisely to recover this lineage.³ Hence it is not really so surprising that these communist activists in turn should have come to interest later historians in the Thompsonian tradition. Some of them have even offered to rescue the communists, as Thompson did the Luddites, from the 'enormous condescension of posterity'.⁴

Historiographically, the CPGB has thus been approached very much as a case of labour with knobs on. The character of these knobs has generated considerable controversy, and the communists' own claims to represent Labour's conscience, its pioneers or its unsung rank and file have never been possible to take entirely at face value. Even so, whether in sympathetic or more critical treatments, it is as a sub-genre of British labour history that the serious academic study of the CPGB has been undertaken. Historians of the party have neither sought nor attained the distinct identity represented elsewhere by the long-established 'Historians of American Communism'. Nor has there been any significant overlap in the historiography of communism and fascism under the common rubric of 'extremism', and reviews of CPGB histories could not be imagined appearing, as they have done in Germany, in a yearbook of terrorism and extremism.⁵ In Manchester's National Museum of Labour History, the archives of the British Labour and communist parties sit together in a posthumous realisation of the unity that proved so elusive during the CPGB's actual existence, and they do so as a considerable convenience to the several historians of British communism who are also historians of the wider labour movement.⁶ Though there has since 1996 appeared a twice-yearly

2 See Kevin Morgan, 'The Archives of the British Communist Party. A Historical Overview', *Twentieth Century British History*, 7 (1996), 404–421.

3 Thompson's classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963) was published seven years after he left the CPGB and contains no such direct allusions. In earlier writings, for example E.P. Thompson, *The Struggle for a Free Press* (London, 1952) they are perfectly explicit.

4 See for example Neil Barrett, 'A Bright Shining Star. The CPGB and Anti-Fascist Activism in the 1930s', *Science & Society*, 61 (1997), 11; also Neil Barrett, 'Organised responses to fascist mobilisation in South Lancashire, 1932–1940' (Manchester, PhD thesis, 1996).

5 Historians who have looked at both communism and fascism, notably Neil Barrett and David Renton, have stressed the antagonism between them, not any perceived affinity; see Barrett, 'Organised Responses'; Renton, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s* (Basingstoke, 2000).

6 Of the authors of CPGB histories in the 1990s, two – Andrew Thorpe and Keith Laybourn – had already produced monographs on the Labour Party, while Willie Thompson was to produce a sequel to

Communist History Network Newsletter, edited from Manchester and providing reports and reviews of recent work and activities, such links have been entirely informal and intermittent, and it would be regarded as the last word in over-specialisation were it otherwise.⁷ One simply cannot conceive of a British equivalent to the newly established journal *American Communist History*, or the respected French publication *Communisme*, launched in the 1980s with Annie Kriegel's benediction and providing a forum for scholarly work in the same tradition. Whether this reflects on the CPGB itself, or on its historians, or whether indeed the two issues cannot be properly disentangled, it is as an aspect of the history of the labour movement that the sub-plot that was British communism has most often been recounted.

Historiographical interest in the CPGB therefore represents, and in some variants caricatures, the ambiguous character of much British labour history as a construction both of and by the political left, albeit in the broadest understanding of the term. In that respect, the analogy with fascist historiography is misplaced, for even the party's fiercest critics have tended to portray its activists as doughty fighters sold short by the movement to which they mistakenly gave allegiance. What the parallel with fascism does suggest is that as well as this sort of case study in left-wing activism, the CPGB's history can open a window onto wider issues of international and comparative labour history which have not always figured conspicuously in the agendas of British labour historians. It is not just that communism, like fascism, has exercised a large influence on twentieth-century history, though it is true that the CPGB's international associations have been a major preoccupation for its historians. But beyond this issue of vicarious significance – so often a consolation to British communists themselves – it is through the interface of the local, the national and the international that these transnational movements offer the prospect of rich insights into the indigenous or national cultures in which they struck such different roots.

Communism in this respect offers particularly intriguing possibilities. Given its clear, unequivocal and systematic character as an international movement, for many years possessing a single command structure, the problems of definitions and parameters that have figured prominently in fascist studies can largely be taken for granted.⁸ Instead, a large part of communist historiography has traditionally been concerned with the character of this command structure, and sophisticated institutional studies have had an obvious rationale in the institutional dynamic of terror itself.⁹ On the other hand, this unequalled attempt at political cen-

his own CPGB history on the *Long Death of British Labourism* (London, 1993). Their communist party histories are all discussed below.

⁷ The *Newsletter*, currently edited by Richard Cross and Kevin Morgan, is archived at <http://les.1.man.ac.uk/chnn>. Its coverage is mainly but not exclusively focused on Britain and other English-speaking countries.

⁸ The concept of Stalinism, sometimes denoting a system, sometimes particular characteristics of that system (terror or the cult of personality) and sometimes a period in its history, has not of course had the same self-evident parameters.

⁹ See for example Nils Rosenfeldt, *Stalin's Secret Chancellery and the Comintern. Evidence about the Organisational Patterns* (Copenhagen, 1991) and the several contributions of Peter Huber, for example: 'Structure of the Moscow Apparatus of the Comintern and Decision-Making' in Tim Rees and Andrew

tralisation means that the national variables of communist history – variables, for example, of recruitment, social composition, political culture and policy implementation – have primarily to be explained at the local or national level, with the result that the explanations offered are likely to tell us a great deal about the communists' host societies. At least in the heyday of the Comintern's ultracentralisation, one is provided with as close as one is likely to get to laboratory conditions for comparative history.

In this respect, following the logic of Ross McKibbin's famous essay on the alleged absence of 'Marxism' in Great Britain, the relative 'failure' of British communism is potentially as illuminating as its modest successes.¹⁰ Occasionally, in the literature on the inter-war period, it has been grouped with fascism as demonstrating Britain's essential stability and constitutionalism – the 'revolution that never was' – and the consequent 'failure' of political extremism.¹¹ Alternatively, it has been taken as a confirmation of the overwhelming legitimacy and appeal of a native Labour tradition.¹² Whatever one's view of these assessments, it is in its relations with the rest of British society that much of the most stimulating work on the CPGB has always been written; and yet it is on the more specialised and introspective question of its relations with Moscow that writing on the subject has compulsively turned. That is the tension that I will try to bring out in the brief overview that follows, concluding with the thought that it is in the adoption of a more comparative approach to the CPGB's history that the most promising possibilities for its future development lie.

London–Moscow, Moscow–London

Internationally, the 1990s was the decade of the 'centre-periphery' debate. At a conference devoted to the subject held in Moscow in 1994, the French historian Claude Penneret subtitled his contribution 'Paris–Moscou, Moscou–Paris' and from the peripheral vantage points of their different national capitals this was the axis on which the bulk of the new work based upon the Moscow archives revolved.¹³ In what was fittingly referred to as a race for the archives, British historians, however, seemed curiously diffident about joining in. At the Moscow conference, Kevin McDermott, a historian of the Comintern and not specifically of the CPGB, was the only British participant. When the following year there appeared the first ex-

Thorpe (eds), *International Communism and the Communist International 1919–1943* (Manchester, 1998), 41–66; 'The Cadre Department, the OMS and the "Dimitrov" and "Manuilsky" Secretariats During the Phase of the Terror', in Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rojahn, *Centre and Periphery. The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents* (Amsterdam, 1996), 122–152.

10 Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?' in his *Languages of Class* (Oxford, 1991 edn).

11 See for example John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *Britain in the Depression. Society and Politics 1929–1939* (London, 1994 edn); Andrew Thorpe (ed.), *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter, 1988).

12 Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy, *Under the Red Flag. A History of Communism in Britain* (Stroud, 1999). This account has been heavily criticised for its superficial analysis and factual errors.

13 Claude Penneret, 'Thorez-Marty: Paris-Moscou, Moscou-Paris' in Narinsky and Rojahn, *Centre and Periphery*, 203–217.

tended treatment of British communist history drawing upon the new materials, it was the work not of an academic but a journalist, Francis Beckett, and although a worthy enough contribution by its own lights, it did not pretend to take forward the scholarly understanding of the party's history.¹⁴ By the late 1990s, a steady trickle of academic papers making use of the archives was beginning to become apparent.¹⁵ But in comparison with the triple-decker special issues of *Communisme*, and the blasting open of the 'secret world' of the US communist party, the CPGB's historians must have seemed as insular and monoglot as the Comintern used to complain of the CPGB itself.¹⁶

In fact there was more to it than that. Though it sometimes seemed as if the only purpose of communist history was to ponder the significance of 'orders from Moscow', in reality the existence of such 'orders' had always been as plain as the moustache on Stalin's face. When I began my own doctoral research on the subject in the 1980s, the real problems caused by a lack of internal archives did not include an inability to perceive the correspondence between the policies of national communist parties and the decisions of the Comintern. Nor was this element underplayed in the first of the recent one-volume histories of the CPGB, Willie Thompson's *Good Old Cause*, written without the benefit of internal archives in the early 1990s.¹⁷ Every single independent history of the party had long confirmed this fact, which had only ever been an issue of contention among communists themselves. It is true that even in the 1980s there were still old-style party loyalists insisting on a degree of strategic autonomy that was belied by an overwhelming quantity of circumstantial evidence and flew in the face of the stated precepts and ethos of the Comintern itself.¹⁸ Moreover, in other countries these loyalists and their parties were sometimes a far from insignificant force, and where the issues of communist policy included the rise of Hitler, fall of France or post-war division of Germany, it was inevitable that the impulsion to settle old debates on the basis of new evidence would be strongly felt. In Britain, though, it was among more liberal elements within the CPGB itself, long inured to doing battle with the party's 'Stalinists', that the urge to 'fill in the blank spots' by recourse to the archives was first in evidence. The year after the publication of my own research, hinging on the party's volte-face over whether to support the war in September–October 1939, proceedings of the CPGB's hitherto concealed deliberations were published by the 'party' publishers Lawrence & Wishart, with an introduction by the veteran Eurocommunist Monty Johnstone, the first British historian to make use of the newly opened archives. It is a fascinating docu-

14 Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within* (eds). *The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London, 1995).

15 E.g. Andrew Thorpe, 'Comintern "Control" of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–1943', *English Historical Review*, 113 (1998), 637–662; Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party and International Communism' in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds), *Communism. National and International* (Helsinki, 1998), 183–206.

16 Two special three-part issues of *Communisme* were devoted to new archival findings in 1992–1994. Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and F.I. Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven & London, 1995) was the first of a number of volumes carrying 'explosive' revelations about the CPUSA based on original documents.

17 Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause. British Communism 1920–1991* (London, 1992).

18 See the proceedings of a conference of the CPGB History Group, John Attfield and Stephen Williams (eds), *1939. The Communist Party and the War* (London, 1984).

ment and the volume was justifiably well received internationally. Nevertheless, on the fundamental character of the Comintern's intervention it added very little that we did not already know.¹⁹

Among British historians generally, what Brigitte Studer and Berthold Unfried have described as the 'descriptive positivist approach' to the newly accessible materials thus held few attractions. Put bluntly, the traditional approach to Comintern historiography – in Studer and Unfried's words, 'the one-sided evaluation of ideology and politics, especially the limited focus on the particular "line" and its exponents, the countless changes in tactics, the "deviations", the infighting and splits, the expulsions and resignations' – could seem an antiquarian and even mildly obsessive preoccupation.²⁰ Where however the availability of new archives did make an immense contribution to our knowledge and understanding was in respect of the *quality* of the relations between the British party and Moscow. Though overwhelmingly we knew that the key policy changes of the Comintern period were not determined in Britain, our notions were remarkably hazy as to how exactly these policies were communicated to and imposed upon the CPGB. Effectively, the loose terminology of 'orders from Moscow' was a confession of ignorance, for British communists were not in any formal sense bound by Moscow's instructions, and beyond a narrow leading cadre (and disputably even there) risked stronger possible sanctions for maintaining their party membership – from victimisation to possible imprisonment – than they could normally have anticipated for defying or ignoring it. It was clear that this was a voluntary, terminable and negotiated relationship, and with the rise of history 'from below' its complexities began to be explored through an increasing body of oral testimonies and the imaginative use of local or broader labour movement archives.²¹ By the end of the 1990s it was more or less universally accepted that the actual political practice of communists varied considerably according to industry or locality, to cite only the most obvious variables. If debates continued, it was over the political significance of such activities in comparison with the formal party 'line'.

What was left more or less undisturbed was the lowly 'high' politics of the CPGB, with the label 'King Street' – location of the CPGB's national headquarters – continuing to serve as a sort of shorthand for a monolithic party leadership, exactly as 'Moscow' served as a shorthand for the Comintern and those who gave it orders. Not only had institutional archives been inaccessible, but – in contrast, for example, to the American party – the remarkable loyalty and longevity of the CPGB's leading cadre meant that few chinks of light were provided by the

19 Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War. Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics 1935–1941* (Manchester, 1989); Francis King and George Matthews, *About Turn. The British Communist Party and the Second World War. The Verbatim Record of the Central Committee Meetings of 25 September and 2–3 October 1939* (London, 1990). See also Monty Johnstone, 'The CPGB, the Comintern and the War, 1939–1941. Filling in the Blank Spots', *Science & Society*, 61, 1 (1997), 27–45.

20 Brigitte Studer and Berthold Unfried, 'At the beginning of history. Visions of the Comintern after the Opening of the Archives', *International Review of Social History*, 42 (1997), 421–422.

21 Examples might include James Hinton, 'Coventry Communism. A Study in Factory Politics in the Second World War', *History Workshop*, 10 (1980), 90–108; Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1984); Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*.

personal papers and testimonies of defectors.²² Without the partial deposit in the British Library of the less sensitive personal papers of *eminence grise* R. Palme Dutt, there would have been almost nothing; and although the extent of Dutt's influence has sometimes been too readily dismissed, it is also true that the CPGB's historiography was inevitably stamped by this partial evidential legacy.²³

Therefore, 'King Street', by and large, had to do. In my own book *Against Fascism and War* I did attempt some tentative distinctions, and hunches as to policy stances which in one case at least turned out to be wholly mistaken.²⁴ More insistently, a differentiated analysis was pursued by Nina Fishman in her account of communists and the trade union movement which distinguished between the so-called 'young Turks' of the Bolshevising ultra-left and older, wiser 'revolutionary pragmatists' like party secretary Harry Pollitt and sometime industrial organiser J.R. Campbell. Based on extensive research over a period of more than a decade, Fishman's reconstruction of communist work in the mining and engineering industries, and among London passenger transport workers, has rightly been acclaimed. Nevertheless, her attempt to delineate factions within the party leadership necessarily rested on a more slender evidential basis and while in many respects insightful now seems too schematic to be wholly convincing.²⁵

The most obvious form of differentiation, once it became evidentially feasible, was that of biography. Already communists had received biographies as writers, artists or scientists, and through the work of writers like Gary Werskey and Wendy Mulford our understanding of the commitments of communist intellectuals was far more vivid and complex than in the case of party leaders.²⁶ (It is also true that many party leaders could not have been rendered vivid and complex even by a William Shakespeare.) Prior to the opening of the archives, only one leading figure, the Indian communist MP for North Battersea, Shapurji Saklatvala, had been the subject of a scholarly biography, and this was only practicable because of Saklatvala's widely reported public utterances and longstanding involvement in the broader labour movement, the source of his original parliamentary nomination.²⁷ Though communists had featured prominently in the multi-volume *Dictionary of Labour Biography*—another example

22 This relative paucity of sources may be gauged by comparing the 'pre-archival' standard narratives, L.J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party. Its Origin and Development until 1929* (London, 1966) and Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York, 1986 edn).

23 Not the least of the difficulties was that the British Library deposit included out-letters of Dutt's but no incoming correspondence. Smaller groups of Dutt's papers were entrusted to the CPGB archives and to the CPGB loyalist and biographer of Harry Pollitt, John Mahon. The last of these is now held by the Working Class Movement Library, Salford.

24 Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, 69–84 etc. The mistaken hunch was that Harry Pollitt would have been one of the communist leaders looking favourably upon conscription in the spring of 1939.

25 Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions 1933–1945* (London, 1995).

26 Gary Werskey, *The Visible College. A Collective Biography of British Scientists and Socialists of the 1930s* (London, 1978); Wendy Mulford, *This Lively Place. Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Lives, Letters and Politics 1932–1951* (London, 1988).

27 Mike Squires, *Saklatvala. A Political Biography* (London, 1990).

of their implantation within the structures of British labour history – it was not really until the 1990s that entries began to appear of leading party members.

It was therefore a sign of the expanding possibilities of communist history when in 1993 there appeared simultaneously biographies of Pollitt and R. Palme Dutt, the pairing of proletarian chalk and intellectual cheese that had symbolised for communists the party's transcendence in a single purpose of differences of temperament, education, function and social origin. In reality, the biographies showed that despite the close association between the two in the 1920s, Pollitt and Dutt had very different political instincts, in which, very crudely, Pollitt's labour movement instincts counterbalanced Dutt's adhesion to the international. Moreover, these differences were not internalised but can be discerned in a whole series of disputes and controversies whose frankness and even bitterness had not previously been suspected.²⁸ The same picture emerged in the case of J.T. Murphy, one of the very few defectors from the CPGB's inner leadership, whose journey through syndicalism to communism and beyond was chronicled by Ralph Darlington in 1998.²⁹ This new trend of biographical studies, also very much in evidence internationally, opened up much wider questions than just the *modus operandi* of the party leadership.³⁰ At the same time, the clearer differentiation which biography represented could not but contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the party as an institution, and a more rigorous and historicised approach to its internal evolution.

Nevertheless, we had to wait almost a decade after the opening of the Moscow archives before a full-length study of this type, by Andrew Thorpe, was devoted to the CPGB. Very much a contribution to the centre-periphery debate, Thorpe's focus was on the CPGB's relations with Moscow in the Comintern period, which he recounted with the skills of a practised historian of British political parties, alert to the sort of tensions and contingencies within the CPGB's mode of functioning which the practice of democratic centralism only partly succeeded in stifling. The archives now available for such a study are enormous – a thousand Moscow files on the CPGB, even disregarding its front organisations and the records of Comintern bodies – and Thorpe's achievement has been to extract from these materials a coherent chronological narrative replicating the complexities of the archival record and conforming to the canons of conventional historical scholarship rather than any particular *a priori* agenda.³¹ In some respects his account may be linked with Matthew Worley's more or less contemporaneous account of the famously sectarian Class Against Class period of the late 1920s and early 1930s.³² On the surface, this seems one of the most difficult periods to rescue

28 John Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt. A Study in British Stalinism* (London, 1993); Kevin Morgan, *Harry Pollitt* (Manchester, 1993).

29 Ralph Darlington, *The Political Trajectory of J.T. Murphy* (Liverpool, 1998).

30 For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Kevin Morgan, 'Parts of People and Communist Lives', in John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan and Alan Campbell (eds), *Party People, Communist Lives. Explorations in Biography* (London, 2001), 9–28.

31 Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow 1920–1943* (Manchester, 2000).

32 Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class. The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars* (London, 2002).

for an autonomist reading of the CPGB's history, for not only did the Comintern's interventions at this time reach their height of intrusiveness, but they did so to sectarian ends generally perceived as antithetical to the native temper of the British left. On the other hand, Worley does not argue for some absolute value of autonomy, but for a recognition of the constantly renewed tensions between centre and periphery. One may or may not be persuaded by his interpretation of the period, but like Thorpe's it is rational, evidence-based and subject to internal qualification and counterspeculation. Thorpe in particular has no obvious ideological axe to grind, and his earlier writings on the 1930s had generally been rather dismissive of the communists.³³ It is a measure of the secularisation of communist history, freed, as Studer and Unfried put it, 'from ideological fetters', that one can if one wishes dissent from these accounts on the basis of evidence presented by Worley and Thorpe themselves.

On the other hand, the fact that both accounts were framed in the context of the centre-periphery debate, and targeted a Moscow-centric interpretation which in Britain had fallen somewhat into desuetude, paradoxically served to provoke rebuttals on avowedly traditional lines. Beginning in the Trotskyist journal *Revolutionary History*, John McIlroy and Alan Campbell have produced a spate of overlapping articles, generally focusing on the Class Against Class period, and reasserting the cruder model of control advanced at different times by historians like Henry Pelling and Harvey Klehr in the US.³⁴ In marked contrast to Pelling, the language used is somewhat overblown, and the impression given of baleful deviations to be annihilated. What is therefore surprising is how narrow the underlying differences of interpretation now appear to be. Just as in Worley and Thorpe's accounts, there is no denial of the role of the Comintern, such as characterised histories produced from within the communist movement,³⁵ so their critics appear to have absorbed a good deal of what they call revisionism without even realising it. The resulting exchanges only seem to underline the exhaustion of the whole debate.

The South Wales miners' leader, Arthur Horner, may be taken as a case in point. In so-called revisionist histories, Horner has occupied a prominent place as by common consent the most important trade unionist in the CPGB's history who nevertheless carried out his union functions with a large degree of autonomy while remaining almost continuously a member of the party's leading bodies.³⁶ In 'traditional' accounts, by contrast, Horner had figured only as the object of heresy hunting and public calumny, personified as 'Hornerism', at the height of the

33 See e.g. Andrew Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s. The Deceptive Decade* (Oxford, 1992), 41–49.

34 John McIlroy, 'Rehabilitating Communist History', *Revolutionary History*, 8 (2001), 195–226; Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, 'Reflections on the Comintern's Third Period in Scotland. The Case of Willie Allan', *Scottish Labour History*, 35 (2000), 33–54; idem, 'Miner Heroes. Three Communist Trade Union Leaders' in McIlroy et al, *Party People*, 143–168; idem, 'The Heresy of Arthur Horner', *Llafur*, 8, 2 (2001), 105–118.

35 Classic examples are James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Volume 1: 1919–1924. Formation and Early Years* (London, 1968); *Volume 2: The General Strike 1925–1926* (London, 1969).

36 See for example Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, 134–142; Fishman, *The British Communist Party*, 38–39, 267–269.

Class Against Class period. It is fitting therefore that McIlroy and Campbell have devoted a recent article to this episode in which they rebut some of the details of Fishman's and Thorpe's accounts with ferocious energy. What is more remarkable is that the basic 'revisionist' premise, by which Horner is agreed to have spent most of his career pursuing trade union objectives with sometimes 'minimal regard' for formal party policy, is now tacitly taken for granted. An article by the same pairing on Horner's contemporaries in the Scottish coalfields makes the avowal more explicit still, as the different political histories and personalities of three communist miners are described as correcting 'simplified notions of generational unity, the uniformity of party cadres and the processes by which Comintern policies influenced trade unionism. The different paths they took as Communists and their different takes on the party's politics suggest diversity rather than monolithism', McIlroy and Campbell continue. 'This was a CPGB which pursued close control of its cadres, yet did not always attain it ... demonstrat[ing] the variability of values and experiences of CPGB activists and their shifting relations with their party'.³⁷ Coming from such a source, perhaps that perception may now be said to be universally held.

In any event, when peripheralists write whole books about the role of Moscow, and centrists take pains to emphasise diversity instead of monolithism, there seems nothing to prevent those who wish to from putting the whole centre-periphery debate on the back-burner. Though politically the issue may rumble on, it is not along such lines that the serious historical understanding of British communism is likely to develop.

New social history

A more fruitful approach has been to draw upon the richer methodologies of the 'new' social history to explore the indigenous roots of communism in its diverse social, cultural and political milieux. A pioneer of this approach in Britain was Stuart Macintyre, who in the single year of 1980 published the classic texts *A Proletarian Science*, on working-class intellectuals, and *Little Moscows*.³⁸ In one respect, such studies merely brought to bear upon the communist party methods and concerns which were already well-established in other areas of scholarship. As Geoff Eley put it in 1986, they represented 'the inevitable march of historiographical progress into previously recalcitrant fields of study'.³⁹ Even so, these approaches too became implicated in the issue of centre and periphery, for histories 'from below' inevitably subverted that substantial pre-existing literature in which all key lines of determination flowed from 'above'. Sometimes no doubt the old approach was just a little too

³⁷ Campbell and McIlroy, 'Miner Heroes', 160.

³⁸ Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows. Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-War Britain* (London, 1980); Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science. Marxism in Britain 1917-1933* (Cambridge, 1980).

³⁹ Geoff Eley, 'International Communism in the Heyday of Stalin', *New Left Review*, 157 (1986), 91. Conversely, it may be noted that McIlroy and Campbell have set their stall out more generally against a younger generation of historians and the changing agendas of labour history; see their 'Still Setting the Pace? Labour History, Industrial Relations and the History of Post-War Trade Unionism', *Labour History Review*, 64 (1999), 179-199.

neatly overturned. If 'Cold War' accounts tended to ignore any other effective agency than that of the party, the social historians at their most exuberant could appear far too blasé about institutional constraints of more than usual pertinacity. This was most often remarked upon in connection with younger American historians, and in a memorable paraphrase of Trevelyan, Eley described this approach as communist party history 'with the Communism left out.'⁴⁰

In the British literature, it was not really the case that the 'communism' was left out, though undoubtedly through increasing interest in its social and cultural aspects its meanings (plural) were extended and problematised. Nevertheless, what was more common than the sort of denial which Eley had in mind was the counterposition of activists and leaders in a rank-and-fileist view of party history, which celebrated the fighting spirit of the militants while rejecting the Stalinist practices of the CPGB's leading cadre. My own book *Against Fascism and War* is one account set in this rank-and-fileist mould, which understandably retains an appeal for anti-Stalinists of the left. Most recently, it can be found in a strong variant in James K. Hopkins's account of the British in the Spanish Civil War, *Into the Heart of the Fire*. This is one of the best recent works touching on the CPGB's history, using a social historian's tools to reconstruct the democratic cultures that gave rise to the Spanish volunteers, and drawing upon the Moscow archives to describe the perceived betrayal of these ideals by Stalinism. All that really mars the volume – and despite its excellence, it is not a minor consideration – is the stark dichotomy that, almost without qualification, is drawn between the two. As Tom Buchanan puts it: 'there is a danger of overdrawing the contrast between the honest, but politically naïve, volunteers and the "totalitarian" experience that awaited them in the International Brigades', and the danger is not really avoided. Fundamentally, the simpler versions of the betrayal thesis are just too easy.⁴¹

Internationally, it is therefore one of the most promising signs in the communist historiography of the 1990s that such dichotomies are increasingly being interrogated and rejected. As to the methods proposed in their place, there is not yet a consensus, nor likely to be one. Brigitte Studer and Berthold Unfried, in a review of the recent historiography for the *International Review of Social History*, have advocated the borrowing of concepts employed by post-totalitarian historians of Soviet communism with a view to integrating Comintern history into the general historiography of Stalinism. Fittingly, they have recently been working on the experiences of western communists in Stalin's Moscow.⁴² Meanwhile in France, Bernard Pudal and Claude Pennetier have invoked Erving Goffman's notion of a 'total institution' in their work on communist autobiography and the construction of party identities. Pudal is the author of one of the finest attempts at a historical sociology of a communist party, and in his writings with Pennetier has recognised that in countries like Britain and France commu-

⁴⁰ Eley, 'International communism', 92.

⁴¹ James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire. The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford, Cal., 1998); Buchanan, review of Hopkins, *Twentieth Century British History*, 10 (1999), 367.

⁴² Studer and Unfried, 'At the Beginning of History. Visions of the Comintern after the Opening of the Archives', *International Review of Social History*, 42 (1997), 439; Studer, 'Totalitarisme et Stalinisme' in Michel Dreyfus et al (eds), *Le siècle des communismes* (Paris, 2000), 27–46.

nist parties were necessarily 'open' total institutions, whose members cannot actually be regarded, in Goffman's sense, as 'inmates'.⁴³ Even so their approach, like Studer and Unfried's assimilation of communist parties to a 'unitary system', Stalinism, 'act[ing] in an integrative fashion world-wide', seem somewhat problematic in a British context. Though it is true that the CPGB had some of the generic characteristics of a religious sect, it is difficult to regard as a total institution an organisation which, even at its peak, was scattered across a population outnumbering it by a thousand to one, and which was proverbially incapable of retaining large numbers of its members. Possibly in these larger models, the specificities of small, struggling and pragmatic communist parties need to be recognised. In any event, the development of a post-transmission belt interpretation of the CPGB's history has tended to be, not so much in the direction of a total or unitary conception of Soviet derivation, but on the contrary towards trying to accommodate the sheer diversity and multiplicity of relationships in which British communists were involved.

Generally representative of that approach is a collection of papers from a conference held in Manchester in 1994 focusing on social and cultural approaches to the CPGB's history.⁴⁴ Published under the title *Opening the Books*, the scope of the papers was broad, ranging from the working-class activists of the party's inter-war 'heroic' period to the CPGB's relations with Zionism, the New Left, West African political activists and 1960s youth culture. In effect, it provided both a resume of developments in CPGB historiography since the 1970s and an indication of the renewed interest that was beginning to be taken in the subject. Among the established practitioners, one might particularly mention the contributions of Sue Bruley, who had written a pioneering study of women in the CPGB;⁴⁵ Richard Croucher, whose earlier monograph on engineers in the Second World War had been followed by a history of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement;⁴⁶ Alan Campbell, whose highly regarded work on the Scottish miners gave little sign of the impact of his later collaborations;⁴⁷ and Andy Croft, whose doctoral research on left-wing writers had been published a few years earlier.⁴⁸ One of the most outward-looking of the contributors was James Hinton, who in a series of books and articles had used the activities of the communists to open broader questions concerning the popular politics of the 1940s, and its supposed character as a decade marked by apathy.⁴⁹ Among the volume's younger contributors, a marked shift was notice-

43 Claude Pennetier and Bernard Pudal, 'Du parti bolchevik au parti stalinien' in Dreyfus, *Le siècle*, 333–340; see also Pudal, *Prendre parti* (Paris, 1989); Erving Goffmann, *Asylums. Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York, 1961).

44 Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman and Kevin Morgan (eds), *Opening the Books. Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London, 1995).

45 Published as Sue Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1920–1939* (New York, 1986).

46 Richard Croucher, *Engineers at War* (London, 1982); *We Refuse to Starve in Silence. A History of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement* (London, 1987).

47 See also Alan Campbell, *The Scottish Miners, 1874–1939. Volume 2: Trade unions and Politics* (Aldershot, 2000).

48 Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days* (London, 1990).

49 See for example James Hinton, 'Self-Help and Socialism. The Squatters' Movement of 1946', *History*

able from the disparate militancies of the old industrial Britain to intellectual and cultural issues, not necessarily confined to the much-revisited Comintern period. To some extent, this was also to be apparent in Croft's later collection on the CPGB's cultural activities, *A Weapon in the Struggle*, which combined occasionally somewhat combative pieces on the CPGB's literary endeavours with essays on music, film and pageant which – along with Croft's own contribution – offered generally more nuanced and critical perspectives.⁵⁰

Neither of these collections was structured around the party's relationship with Moscow. On the other hand, as Eley himself pointed out in a review of *Opening the Books*, nor did the contributors generally fall into the trap of presenting British communists with the communism left out.⁵¹ Nick Tiratsoo, reviewing the same volume, commented on the greater breadth and generosity of the contributions, both as regards the scope of communist activities and the relations of communists to other social and political groupings.⁵² A communist party history seemed to be emerging that was more mature and less embattled: one in which the complexities of the party's history were seen as irreducible to a single line of causation, but in which at the same time the line that led to Moscow was frankly acknowledged, neither exercising the taboo nor the fixation that once had divided the party's historians. Of course, the social history approach continues to develop along the lines of the *History Workshop*-type agendas exemplified by Raphael Samuel's brilliant articles on the CPGB's 'lost world' in the mid-1980s.⁵³ But at the same time, it is also beginning to be extended to issues which have hitherto been treated in 'descriptive-positivist' terms or even as a sort of sectarian ammunition dump. There is no reason, for example, why 'Moscow gold', the *deus ex machina* of conspiratorial interpretations of communism, cannot also be relativised and historicised, and in the process searching questions may be thrown up about the broader mythologies of British Labour.⁵⁴ The same may be said of the cloak-and-dagger affairs of clandestine agents, the ultra-conspiratorial International Lenin School, and the lives and sometimes deaths of those British communists – admittedly a rather small number compared with several other European countries – who uprooted themselves to Moscow.⁵⁵ Martin Malia has recently observed that attitudes to Russia across the centuries can tell us much about the changing societies that

Workshop 25 (1988), 100–126; James Hinton, *Shop Floor Citizens. Engineering Democracy in 1940s Britain* (Aldershot, 1994).

50 Andy Croft (ed.), *A Weapon in the Struggle. The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London, 1998).

51 Geoff Eley, 'From Cultures of Militancy to the Politics of Culture. Writing the History of British Communism', *Science & Society* 61 (1997), 119–131.

52 *New Times*, 8 August 1995.

53 Raphael Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism', parts 1–3, *New Left Review* 154, 156 and 165 (1985–1987).

54 Kevin Morgan, *Bolshevism and the British Left. Volume One: Making Sense of Moscow Gold* (London, forthcoming, 2003).

55 Kevin Morgan and Tauno Saarela, 'Northern Underground Revisited. Finnish Reds and the Origins of British Communism', *European History Quarterly*, 29 (1999), 179–215; Gidon Cohen and Kevin Morgan, 'Stalin's Sausage Machine. British Students at the International Lenin School 1926–1937', *Twentieth Century British History* (2002, forthcoming); Barry McLoughlin, 'Visitors and Victims. British Communists in Russia Between the Wars' in McIlroy et al, *Party People*, 210–230.

adopted those attitudes.⁵⁶ So too, in all their various activities and relationships can different patterns of communist implantation tell us a good deal about different societies, and in particular different national labour movements.

Comparativists and nationalists

It is therefore in the development of more comparative approaches to the CPGB that the most promising lines of future development seem to lie. As yet there has been remarkably little such work, and certainly nothing on the scale of the literature comparing the French and Italian communist parties, or the major collaborative project recently commenced on Nordic communism.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, an encouraging portent has been the holding in Britain of two major international conferences on communist history, in 1995 and 2001 respectively, and one may hope that such events will encourage a greater familiarity than hitherto displayed with both the substantive findings and methodological advances of historians of communism in other countries. Even if the results are not embodied in formal comparative studies, a genuine comparative awareness can provide a crucial context, discipline and sense of perspective for monographic studies. In respect of formal party strategies, the well-established synchronicity of the Comintern's national sections is unlikely to be disturbed by such a method. But with regard to their social character and actual political practice, on the other hand, a comparative approach may throw into perspective what in many respects may be distinctive mores and institutional arrangements. In a recent issue of this journal, Gunther Peck has commented on the paradox by which comparative agendas for American labour history have typically resulted in the reaffirmation of the national boundaries of US 'exceptionalism' and what Peck calls 'methodological nationalism'.⁵⁸ Whatever the issues of that particular debate, it is clear that a rigorous comparative methodology is not inherently assimilationist and must accommodate the possibility of difference as well as commonality. That is precisely why it throws up such challenging questions for historians of the Comintern.

But if we are to capture the complex interaction of the local and the centripetal, a comparative approach is required not just internationally but with regard to other social and political movements in Britain. We need to know both what distinguished British communists from other types of activist and what they had in common, and to use such comparisons to explore broader questions about the CPGB's potential constituencies and recruiting grounds. We need to ask bigger questions about patterns of recruitment to the party, and how far the party

56 Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes. From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000 edn).

57 See for example Marc Lazar, *Maisons Rouges. Les partis communistes français et italien de la Libération à nos jours* (Paris, 1996). One of the very few examples involving the CPGB is Kevin Morgan and Marco Aurelio Santana, 'A Limit to Everything. Communist Activists and "Bolshevik" Discipline in Britain and Brazil', *Scottish Labour History*, 34 (1999).

58 Gunther Peck, 'In Search of an American Working Class. National Fictions in the Making of Western Labor History', *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen*, 25 (2001), 29–30.

constituted a closed society, or 'total institution', or conversely how far communism was one of a number of possible allegiances and identities held concurrently or successively. We need to consider how far the experiences of British communists reveal to us a relatively tolerant society and ecumenical labour movement, comfortable with dissent, and how far the mixture of a liberal polity, totalitarian allegiances and a pluralistic associational culture shaped the values and activities of the communists themselves.

And we may want to return to the idea of 'labour with knobs on'. Through a large-scale prosopographical study just completed, it has been possible to use the unrivalled biographical sources for communists to explore rigorously and systematically the values, affiliations, social characteristics and recruitment patterns of the CPGB's membership over the whole period of its existence.⁵⁹ The study has thrown up numerous issues such as inter-generational influences in the formation of political identity, the relationship between mobility and radicalisation and the gendered construction of the political activist. But in some ways the most striking finding of all is of how densely interwoven the life histories of communists were with the broader cultures of labour and the radical left, whether this be through family and personal associations or shared values, aspirations and forms of activity. Generally speaking, there is little evidence in Britain of the social and spatial separation that sometimes defined the world of German communism; and while the distinctive attributes of communism are also abundantly evidenced, they are not so exaggerated as to negate the wider implications of such findings.

It is as a contribution to these wider debates, not necessarily taking the form of studies of the party itself, that the future of the CPGB's historiography would seem to lie after the present wave of interest has passed. Commenting on the great spillage of ink on its companion in marginality, British fascism, Julie Gottlieb has noted how this latter movement has consistently appealed to those interested in 'larger themes of political history and political ideologies, race, ethnicity, and immigration, centre-regional relations and the demographic pattern of political allegiances, the Secret State and methods of social control, political violence and the boundaries of civil society, and the patterns of membership and the psychological profile of joiners and political activists'.⁶⁰ Though one would not always guess it from its historians, the CPGB's history raises at least a comparable breadth of issues; and while the dust of old battles continues to settle, the historiography of the past two decades suggests that at least a beginning has been made in addressing them.

59 See Kevin Morgan, Andrew Flinn and Gidon Cohen, *People of a Special Mould? Communists and British Society 1920–1991* (London, forthcoming 2003).

60 *Twentieth century British History*, 12 (2001), 262.

