Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History

A review essay by Matthew Worley

The social structure and the state continually evolve out of the life-process of definite individuals, but individuals not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination but rather as they really are, that is, as they work, produce materially, and act under definite material limitations, presuppositions, and conditions independent of their will.

Karl Marx

We must stop talking hot air and build a body of Marxist ideas that mean something to the British working class. That implies studying our own working class movement and its history about which far too little is known.

John Saville

The historical legacy of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) has come under increased attention since the Party's disintegration in 1991. The cessation of the cold war, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the opening of relevant archives in both Russia and the UK, has enabled historians to formulate ever more incisive accounts of Communist and Communist Party experience. Consequently, our understanding of the inner workings of the Party, the relationship between the CPGB and the Communist International (Comintern), and the divergent 'grass roots' activity of Communists in various parts of Britain has undoubtedly benefited from the expanding historiography. In particular, the vibrant cultural life of the CPGB has at last been recognised, while the motivations and objectives that shaped Party policy at any given time are now more readily understood. Most importantly, recent research has uncovered a far more variable history of the CPGB than had hitherto been presented.

Prior to the unlocking of the CPGB and Comintern archives, and prior to the dissolution of cold-war orthodoxies, Communist Party history generally fell into four categories. First, there were Party histories written from a distinctly partisan perspective, such as the 'official' CPGB history written by James Klugmann and Noreen Branson, and Henry Pelling's hostile analysis of the Party from its formation in 1920 to its bruised post-Hungary existence in 1958. While the broad though somewhat selective accounts of Klugmann and Branson offer a valid introduction to the CPGB, Pelling's work now

2 Quoted by Peter Fryer in Widgery 1976.
3 In particular, the opening of the CPGB archive - housed at the Museum of Labour History in Manchester – and the Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Contemporary Historical Documents in Moscow, has benefited interested historians and scholars.
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reads as a relic of a bygone age, with its incredulous overtures to 'un-
English' reds under the bed. Second, CPGB history would unfurl in the
various memoirs (and the odd hagiography) of Party and ex-Party
members. These, too, fell into distinctly 'pro' and 'anti' camps, with
loyal comrades offering anecdotal or choice recollections of Party life;
and fallen ex-comrades ruing the error of their ways. Third, the
CPGB's history tended to be used against the Party by the non-CPGB
Left. These accounts generally sought political advantage rather than
historical integrity, and suffered as a consequence. Moreover, the broad
argument made in such critiques, that every move the CPGB made was
determined by Stalin or the USSR, is simply unsustainable, and such
analyses invariably failed to consider indigenous socio-economic
political forces.

Finally, independent 'left' historians (some of whom had had
contact with the CPGB) examined the role of the British Party in a far
broader context. L.J. Macfarlane reconsidered the Party's conception
and development to 1929; Roderick Martin looked at the CPGB and the
trade unions; Stuart MacIntyre chronicled the history of the British
proletarian autodidacts who formed the basis of the fledgling CPGB;
Hwyel Francis necessarily focused on the Party with regard to Welsh
miners in the Spanish Civil War and the South Wales Miners' Federation;
Richard Croucher detailed the history of the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement; Sue Bruley examined the
role of women in the CPGB; Raphael Samuel and Stephen Jones
unveiled the cultural and sporting world of British Communism; and
Kevin Morgan wrote arguably the finest CPGB history in relation to the
Party's struggle against 'fascism and war' between 1935 and 1941.

These more objective and thorough analyses of the CPGB did much
to address the deficiencies in Communist Party history delineated by
Eric Hobsbawm and Perry Anderson in 1969 and 1981 respectively.

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3 See Pelling 1958 and Wood 1959. For a recent restatement of Pelling's general
conclusions see Laybourn and Murphy 1999.

5 The following are only a selection of the numerous published memoirs. For the
'loyal' autobiography see Gallacher 1948, Hannington 1967, Horner 1960,
Hart 1956, Pollitt 1940 and Stewart 1967. For the 'rueful' see Darke 1952,
McCarty 1953, and Utley 1949. Three more balanced ex-Party accounts are
Hyde 1950, McShane 1978 and Murphy 1941. The recent publication of Molly
Murphy's autobiography gives us a rare glimpse of Communist activity from a
'rank-and-file' perspective. Molly's juxtaposition of 'grass roots' activity and
'insider' knowledge - her marriage to Jack Murphy allowed Molly to meet the
revolutionary élite (including Lenin), while her work in the Women's Social
and Political Union and in the Spanish Civil War placed Molly at the forefront of 'the
struggle' - constitutes a unique insight into the inter-war socialist movement that
is invaluable to any labour historian. See Murphy 1998.

7 See Black 1970, Woodhouse and Pearce 1975, Dewar 1976. Also Bornstein

8 Macfarlane 1966, Martin 1969, MacIntyre 1980, Francis 1984, Francis and
Publications such as History Workshop, Socialist History, and the North West
Labour History Group Bulletin also contributed significant articles and insights.

Johnstone and Peter Latham conducted a similar debate in the pages of the Party
journal, Our History. See Our History 3 and 4.