

Communism, democracy and the left

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What lessons on democracy and politics can we learn
from the history of communism?

There is currently a widespread sense of frustration with contemporary forms and practices of democracy, a sense that they are in crisis. Recently this frustration has most frequently found its expression in support for the populist right. Trump won the White House with appeals to people who have been marginalised and damaged by economic trends tied to globalisation: de-industrialisation, the decline of manufacturing, and jobs going overseas. As with the Brexit vote, these issues were articulated by the populist right to focus anxieties on immigration, and make a nativist and racialised appeal to a defensive sense of identity; and this was linked to the encouragement of a resentful belief that ‘the contract’ and ‘trust’ between the ‘political elite’ and ‘the people’ has been broken. Similar themes are also reshaping politics across Europe.

From other points on the spectrum there are different forms of disaffection with democracy and what it can deliver. Some of these are a direct reaction to the successes of the right: Trump only won because of the bizarre ‘electoral college’, say liberals and left-wingers outraged and frightened by the election result - Clinton actually won the popular vote. ‘Remainers’ remind us that Brexit campaigners promoted untruths. ‘Leave’ did not win ‘overwhelmingly’, as some now claim. And even if the binary ‘remain’/‘leave’ referendum produced a mandate - understandably disputed in Scotland and Northern Ireland - it is still not clear what the vote was for, or what it will actually lead to.

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Within and around political parties, there is frustration with established processes, practices and policies. One symptom of this was the election and re-election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, which suggested a potential for left populism in Britain that was surprising to many. There have also been calls to set up a 'progressive alliance' involving some or all of Labour, the Greens, Plaid Cymru and others, linked to another push for voting reform. Many progressive people now believe that any prospects for success depend on a reconfiguring of party politics and the current electoral system.

Some of these impulses draw on well-established scepticism about 'formal democracy' from progressive social movements. Since the 1990s, campaigners from anti-globalisation protests to Occupy have counter-posed direct action, 'horizontal' ways of organising and participatory, consensual processes to the arrogant, elitist, top-down behaviour they have defined as 'politics'. This trend was partly in reaction to the negative aspects and then the collapse of statist socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It was also an early expression of the feeling that 'the political class' were self-serving, and disconnected from ordinary people. Varied forms of identity politics have provided many people with an alternative to leaving our interests in the hands of 'representatives'.

There are also recurrent statements of concern about the ability of democracy to successfully address the interests of the majority of people. These are amplified in light of the apparent incapacity of democratic systems to address the foreseeable but dramatic challenges facing the planet today. Reflecting on anxieties about global warming, David Runciman commented that, 'given the reluctance of national electorates to face up to the scale of the challenge', one of the hard questions is whether we are 'going to have to find a way round democracy ... at any given moment, democracy looks more like part of the problem [of effectively tackling climate change] than part of the solution'.¹ In their remarkable 'view from the future' on what might bring about, and happen after, a twenty-first century ecological catastrophe, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway visualise that, 'as the devastating effects of the Great Collapse began to appear [from 2093], the nation states with democratic governments ... were at first unwilling and then unable to deal with the unfolding crisis. As food shortages and disease outbreaks spread and sea levels rose, these governments found themselves without the infrastructure and organisational ability to quarantine and relocate people'.²

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In the context of this growing and multi-layered crisis of liberal democracy, some left-wing theorists have explicitly opposed its values and ethics. Slavoj Žižek has defined ‘the emancipatory struggle’ as ‘the struggle against (liberal) democracy’: ‘what, today, prevents the radical questioning of capitalism itself is precisely the belief in the democratic form of struggle against capitalism’.³ Adopting a cooler tone, Jodi Dean argues that ‘liberal democracy secures [the capitalist] order through principles and processes designed to individualise, disperse, and displace class antagonism’.⁴ The implication is that no-one should seek to defend or recover the existing system as it faces the possibility of being destabilised and limited by the protectionist, nationalist themes articulated through Trump and the European far-right. Instead, the crisis could be an opportunity to push effective radical politics - but only if we dispense with sentimentalism around ‘democracy’.

Žižek and Dean promote arguments rooted in a selective reading of Marx and Lenin. More generally, various similarly selective versions of the Marxist tradition have over time shaped a number of left-wing suspicions about democracy. A particular source of the idea that democracy and socialism are incompatible, at least during the ‘transition’ period, is the view that a society centred on capitalist economics can never be truly democratic, because the system confirms and defends the decision-making ‘rights’ of the owners and controllers of capital. The limited space left for ‘politics’ can never really intrude on these sacrosanct ‘rights’, and so talk of democracy and formal equality tends to be a sham. This is a perspective that - to an extent understandably - fails to recognise the capacity of politics to bring about change in the economy - or indeed the concept of political economy itself: in many ways it self-defeatingly reproduces the capitalist-inspired separation of economics and politics.

Such an outlook built up amongst the revolutionary wings of European socialist parties during the 1880s and 1890s. And when the leaders of those parties, contrary to their previous protestations, in the main supported ‘their own’ national governments at the outbreak of the First World War, many of the revolutionaries followed Lenin’s Bolsheviks in breaking away from mainstream social democracy and setting up new radical left-wing parties around the world. For them, only a radical break with the system could produce socialism.

This clash between a belief in the possibility of reform within the existing system - predicated on the belief that it is susceptible to democratic change - and the idea of a revolutionary break has been a lasting theme of socialist politics for the last one

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hundred years, and the issue is likely to surface again during commemorations of the anniversary of the 1917 Russian revolution. (The anniversary is also likely to generate considerable interest in the many other questions raised by communism's foundational moment.) My interest here is to look back at the history of key moments within communism to see whether there are lessons to be learned for the left now, both in terms of the events of 1917 and the movement it established.

What we ask about history shapes what we find out: it determines whether or not we simply end up pointing to the differences between our own time and the past; and it defines the themes and issues we regard as offering some perspective on current challenges. My main aim here is to trace the relationship between democracy and communism in the last one hundred years.

The communist record

Inspiration can still be found in the communist movement's originating vision of a 'world transformed'. After the waste and barbarism of the First World War, there was a sense that decisive revolutions were needed to close one era and open another.

As well as overthrowing the old regime and setting up the first European state to be run by workers - however imperfectly - the new communist state's heady and determined ambition fed into massive programmes of social modernisation. From the early 1930s to the 1960s, Soviet industrialisation impressed many across the political spectrum: a substantial number of large-scale infrastructural projects were quickly realised, and the Soviet model of development was seen as providing models for other non-industrialised countries to follow. There was strong economic growth at a time when Western countries were suffering depression and crisis. Men and women from lowly backgrounds became managers and key workers in dynamic branches of industry. Working people enjoyed improving living standards, free health care and education, and heavily subsidised housing, food and transport. Scientific and technological successes were crowned by pioneering steps in space exploration: communists put up the first satellite and the first man into orbit. The Soviet government was attempting to develop a new way of life in a vast, economically backward, country. Communists presented the 'USSR in construction' as 'the exemplification of social engineering for human purposes - of the force of human hope for a better society'.⁵

In fact, though rapid progress was made on industrialisation, the Soviet planned

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economy was not as successful as the country's leaders proclaimed. This became a major problem, for some of communism's most important ambitions and claims lay in the idea that it could establish systems which superseded the profit motive and the market, and were superior to exploitative capitalism, where growth is limited and distorted by the interests of private investors.

This failure to establish viable economic systems was matched by perhaps an even more serious problem. The suppression of individual rights and freedoms became a structural feature of both the Soviet state and the satellite communist countries set up in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. Soviet 'Marxism-Leninism' was a very different philosophy from the ideas originated by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. Marx had envisaged socialism as achieving social conditions which would provide scope for creativity and initiative, and enable individuals to satisfy their real needs. Even such a resolutely critical analyst of Marxism as Leszek Kolakowski could allow that Marx's aims were not to 'deprive man of individuality or reduce personal aspirations and abilities to a dead level of mediocrity'. On the contrary, as Kolakowski acknowledged, Marx's view was that 'the powers of the individual can only flourish ... within a human community': he advocated a system in which 'human activity is freed from the constraint of physical need and the pressure of hunger and is thus truly creative'.⁶

Such humanistic aims were buried as Stalinism warped the instrumentalism of the Enlightenment and the determination of Bolshevism into a system which turned party members, workers and peasants into means to an end. From the late 1920s (partly because of the huge difficulty in developing 'socialism in one country', especially in a country as backward as Russia had been in 1917), Soviet culture began to be shaped by voluntarism: there was a belief that change could result from the will and direction of a political agent - the party. This led to individuals and groups being seen either as happy expressions of that pre-existing will, or as recalcitrant barriers to what was planned. When actual people didn't conform to the vision of what 'the people' were meant to do, it was so much the worse for them. Communism in its Soviet guise stopped meaning liberation and started to mean repression.

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The monstrous repressions of Stalinism, as well as the elitist arrogance that is still a feature of some conceptions of 'the vanguard party', provide evidence to those

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who say that communism was necessarily anti-democratic. The economic model recurrently attempted by communist governments - replacing market mechanisms with centralised state ownership and national planning - proved highly compatible with repressive rule, and inefficient bureaucracy. The resulting characterisation of communism as the antithesis of democracy is likely to be a prominent theme of 1917's anniversary - not only among its denigrators, but also among some pro-Bolshevik left-wingers who regard the practices and values of liberal democracy as irrelevant to - or as barriers to - a serious, transformative, revolutionary politics.

But there has always been a counter-current to the anti-democratic practices of Leninists past and present, beginning as far back as the Menshevik opposition to Bolshevik repression in the first heady days of the revolution. And there have also been recurrent examples of Marxist practice which showed the possibility of combining an ambition to supersede capitalism with a commitment to democratic principles. Through the Popular Front in the 1930s, to 1968's Prague Spring, and the Eurocommunism of the 1970s, the need for popular engagement and accountability as part of radical change is a theme that has kept on resurfacing. There have been many communists who have showed you could be radically left-wing at the same time as being democratic: including those in power in Czechoslovakia in 1968, with Alexander Dubcek; in opposition in Italy from the 1940s to the 1980s; in state structures in West Bengal from the late 1970s to 2011; in local government in France, where French communists have long been a strong and sustained presence; or in illegal underground operations in South Africa under apartheid and in many other repressive regimes.

The idea of democracy has a long history, but the shift of workers and peasants into the political life of nations from the end of the eighteenth century signalled the beginning of a new phase; and for the nascent socialist movement it was evident that the hard-won but gradual steps that were being made towards ordinary people becoming equal in legal and political terms would not be enough to meet their material needs, or to deal with economic inequalities and exploitation.

On this basis, socialist politics took shape in a complex interplay with the development of modern democracy. Neither had been established before the other: they emerged together. In some ways, democracy was socialism's achievement, as nineteenth-century radicals used this old idea to assert the need for working people to take part in political determination. In other ways, democracy was developed as a

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means of containment: it was used to name the limited representative structures put in place by the more astute guardians of the interests of the powerful, to blunt, limit and manage socialism's ambition. Ambivalences towards democracy in Marx's work reflect these contradictions and tensions.

Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels ended his life advocating electoral advance for the German left as the best route to socialism, in the particular circumstances of the 1890s. Over the next couple of decades, and even in autocratic Russia, socialists argued for democratic freedoms both as good things in themselves, and to create the contexts where they could argue their politics openly and build their support.

But after the failure of most social-democrats to protest against the warmongers of their respective national governments (on both sides) during the First World War, and with the success of the Bolshevik revolution, the newly set up Communist International judged that 'liberal democracy' was irrelevant: everything was seen as 'reformist' if it did not lead to the creation of an alternative power centre, and open up the possibility of a frontal clash with the state. But as recognition dawned that October 1917 was not going to be re-enacted in Berlin, Paris and London this position became less tenable.

There followed a period of sectarian in-fighting between social democrats and communists, but Hitler's accession to power in Germany, and the rise of fascism more widely, generated a comprehensive re-think. Communist theorists and activists began to revisit the question of alliances and tactics. In Italy, Gramsci's political writing in prison was an attempt to think about how to conduct a war of position, within the trenches of civil society, as opposed to a war of manoeuvre (i.e. a head-on battle with the coercive forces of the state).

The Comintern now adopted the politics of the Popular Front, an approach aimed at establishing alliances of 'all progressive forces' and jointly agreed programmes across them. These would not propose revolution or socialism in immediate terms, but instead would organise for limited and realisable workers' rights and would defend democracy against the threats it was facing. The new realisation was that the values, procedures and cultures of bourgeois democracy were a powerful and necessary tool in the struggle against what had now become the main enemy: the fascist, anti-democratic, form of capitalism. It was the hypocritical bourgeoisie who were showing themselves prepared to reject 'bourgeois legitimacy'. This created the potential for the left to take the banner. The formula was that

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communists were democrats, genuinely allied with other democrats, against the fascists. Communists now sought to harness commitment to democracy to a longer-term determination to replace capitalism, rather than seeing 'democracy' as a 'bourgeois diversion' from that goal.

In 1936, Franco's 'nationalist' rebels organised a military uprising against Spain's elected Popular Front government. In the subsequent civil war, communists outside Spain gained credibility and moral authority across the left and liberal spectrum through organising volunteers to fight in Spain and campaigning at home and internationally in support of the republic. Meanwhile the British and French governments adopted a 'non-interventionist' position, while the fascist European powers gave massive and effective support to Franco.

Through a range of anti-imperialist work, and in their crucial contribution to the defeat of Nazism, communists proved themselves highly effective fighters for the fundamental values which underpinned bourgeois democracy. However, their support for the Soviet state, which by then had, among other acts of repression, imprisoned and 'liquidated' many communist dissenters in a series of show trials, and which had formed a pact with Nazi Germany at the beginning of the war, made their position less clear-cut.

From the late 1940s, when the Cold War began, the democratic credentials of many communist activists were buried: through promoting dynamics of polarisation, the USA and 'western powers' worked hard to align the language of 'democracy' and 'freedom' with capitalism, 'the market' and individualist ideologies.

Khrushchev's 1956 revelations about Stalin, followed by the Soviet invasion of Hungary, as well as causing many to leave their communist parties, also paved the way for further rethinking for those who remained within the communist movement. From the late 1960s (especially after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia), the leaders of the Italian, Spanish and French communist parties promoted a new alignment that drew on themes which had been present in the movement for thirty years, but had to some extent become submerged during the Cold War.

In fact, the highpoint of this search for renewal had been in Czechoslovakia, where, at the beginning of 1968, a Communist Party in government, led by Alexander Dubcek, had initiated the beginnings of a more tolerant pluralism

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and a more liberal and democratic system. Dubcek's objective had not been to overturn the socialist system, or break links with the Soviet Union, but to reform existing socialism to make it less intolerant and less centralised. But the hopes the Prague Spring had brought for many were crushed when in August 1968 it was brutally halted by a Soviet invasion. Marxists who had hoped for reform in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union from within the prevailing order were horrified. The response of most non-ruling communist parties was to strongly criticise Moscow's action, and to rethink their own positions on political pluralism and democracy.

The 'Eurocommunists' who now came to the fore in Italy, France, Spain and elsewhere stated that they would respect democratic institutions and practices, and that the socialism they sought would consist precisely in the fullest possible extension and application of democratic methods and values. This involved developing nuanced understandings of how the state and politics worked in modern industrial societies (and here there was a renewed interest in Gramsci's work). Eurocommunist strategies suggested how to combine different forms and levels of political activity towards progressive ends. Political activity was much more than protest on the one hand and electoral politics on the other: it should involve the search for points of ruptural breaks and openings in which opportunities could be created to push through to new settlements; alliance-building and the promotion of relationships which respected democratic rules and understood the need to consolidate wide support - as evidenced through electoral success; and interaction between social movements, counter-cultural experiments and representative politics, with the aim of supporting radical attempts to pioneer healthy ways of living in the interstices of current settlements, so that instead of being confined within limits, or on the margins of society, they could help resource and reshape mainstream politics. During the heyday of Eurocommunism, some Marxists sought to develop a better understanding of the relationships between the economic, political and cultural 'levels' of capitalism, and began to see how change in one of these areas might be applied to the others. In this, they drew from, and contributed to, a wider set of attempts during the 1970s to establish more democratic forms of decision-making across society.⁷

Unfortunately, the Eurocommunist conviction that the movement needed to be consistently democratic emerged only in the decades when communism's vitality

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and promise as an economic system was becoming exhausted. This coincided with the decline of post-war social democracy and the rise of neoliberalism. Political strategies for renewal were advanced just as the working-class cultures of the 'red belt' around Paris and the Marxist municipalities of Italy were being disorganised and undermined. In this context, Italian communists were unable to realise the 'historic compromise' with Christian Democracy which they had proposed as a way of opening up new progressive routes. Meanwhile French communists lapsed back towards leftist workerism, and before long, Mitterrand's socialist party had displaced the PCF in attracting most working-class votes.

By the time of the most thorough-going reform attempt shaped by Eurocommunist themes, which reprised approaches from Prague in 1968, it was far too late. Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts in the Soviet Union from the mid-1980s to re-engage people, restructure industry, and open up political culture may well have been a 'brilliant remedy' for the ailing Soviet economy: but 'unfortunately, the patient died'.⁸

What is to be learned?

State communism's collapse after 1989 was part of a wider context of capitalist resurgence that has culminated in the current dominance of neoliberalism. As David Byrne highlighted recently in these pages, this has gone along with a hollowing out of democracy, and the rolling back of the claims of organised workers. A culture has been created in which all major political parties endorse the neoliberal consensus, and 'sell themselves primarily through marketing expertise, rather than as representing conflicting material interests'.⁹

There is currently much discussion of multiple revolts and reactions against 'the political class' which has promoted neoliberalism and globalisation over the last two decades. But the initial results of these revolts, at least, are hardly encouraging for the left. In these times of 'post-truth', and with a climate change denier in the White House, the importance of reason and evidenced argument needs promoting more than ever.

Nevertheless, there is also growing support for collectivist politics and movements of solidarity, which could help re-establish the promise of social progress. On the centenary of 1917, are there any aspects of communism's record

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which could inform the development of parties from Podemos and Syriza to Labour and the Greens, and those beginning to rebuild progressive politics in the United States?

Yes - as long as that record is not considered in abstract, idealist terms. Political approaches can be no more taken up and reapplied from Eurocommunist local government in the 1970s than from the events of 1917. But, reviewed in its concrete details, communist experience *can* illuminate important questions about how to democratically campaign for system change. Some of the areas where the history of communist politics can offer insights include: the question of how to relate and combine the immediacy of social movements with the necessary disciplines of organising in political parties; and of how to focus, hold and channel people's justified angers, and apply the resulting energy to programmes of social transformation; ways of meeting the challenge of being oppositional at the same time as agreeing compromises with others after elections which do not deliver victory; what to do when electoral victory does not deliver real power; ways in which people with different motivations, agendas and identities can assemble and work together for change which requires co-ordination and joint effort; ways of working in alliances on particular issues with people you strongly disagree with on other matters; the importance of engaging with people who are currently responding to social changes and threats in ways which are defensive, hurtful and divisive; and the need for forms of internationalism which can win and retain support 'at home' at the same time as achieving progressive outcomes in a complex and dangerous world.

Most of all, both negative and positive aspects of communism's record can remind us of the importance of achieving economic democracy, so that democratic decision-making extends and applies to the realm of decisions currently determined by private business owners and 'market forces', whether in neoliberal or mercantilist form. In order to reorganise production, manage our use of natural resources, and meet our real needs in a world which could survive, it is more democracy, and better democracy, that we need, not less.

Mike Makin-Waite was a delegate to the Communist Party of Great Britain's final congress in 1991, and seconded the motion to dissolve the organisation. His book on relationships between communism and democracy is forthcoming from Lawrence and Wishart.

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Notes

1. David Runciman, *London Review of Books*, 24.9.15.
2. Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilisation*, Columbia University Press 2014, p52. The dystopian authors suggest that its directive, authoritarian political system might enable China to 'weather disastrous climate change, [vindicating] the necessity of centralised government'.
3. Slavoj Zizek, *In Defence of Lost Causes*, Verso 2008, p183.
4. Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, Verso, 2016, pp251-2.
5. Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, Little, Brown, London 2011, p299. The magazine *USSR in Construction* was founded in 1931, its articles and photo-journalism celebrating Soviet industrial and economic achievements.
6. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* [from Volume One, first published 1976], W.W. Norton and company, New York, single volume edition 2004, p148.
7. See David Purdy, 'Keywords: Democracy', *Perspectives*, Democratic Left Scotland, autumn 2007.
8. Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The curve of American power', *New Left Review*, July-August 2006.
9. David Byrne, 'Beyond Mere Equality', *Soundings* 64, winter 2016-17. Byrne draws on Colin Crouch's concept of 'post-democracy'.

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