Kevin Morgan

Capitalism, Communism, and Democracy: Theory and Practice in European Communism, 1917–1956

Abstract

Communism claimed to stand for a higher form of democracy unleashed from capitalism's intrinsic inequalities and sources of oppression. This continuing validation of a democratic ideal informed communist campaigning practices in the capitalist world. It was simultaneously belied by regimes of "real socialism" seen as embodying the new social system destined to supersede capitalism. Democracy as critique and aspiration consequently proved a faultline that persisted through the history of European communism and contributing to its disintegration and collapse at the end of 1980s. In reviewing these basic disunities of theory and practice, this paper draws in particular on research on communism and its supporters in Britain including the Fabian socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

Keywords: *Communism, democracy, Fabian socialism, Communist Party of Great Britain, Sidney and Beatrice Webb.*

Democracy and Dictatorship

In the relations of communism to democracy, there were two decisive moments in the history of the Bolshevik revolution. The first was the seizure of power, which some call a coup, which the Bolsheviks carried out in the name of "bread, land and peace" on 7 November 1917. The second, less than two months later, was the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly elected by popular vote in the weeks immediately following the revolution. The Bolsheviks had obtained around a quarter of the vote; opponents of the new regime, enjoying overwhelming support among the peasantry, were in a clear majority. When the assembly convened on 5 January, it was immediately suppressed by the new regime, and a demonstration in its support fired on by troops. Maxim Gorky had been a supporter of the Bolsheviks and would be so again. He was nevertheless an outspoken critic at this stage who noted the parallel with the "Bloody Sunday" shootings of unarmed demonstrators by Tsarist troops in January 1905.

DOI: 10.46586/mts.67.2022.53-74 Moving the Social · 67 (2022) · p. 53–74
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> For almost a hundred years the finest Russians have lived by the idea of a Constituent Assembly, a political institution which would give the entire Russian democracy the opportunity freely to express its will. […] Rivers of blood have been spilled on the sacrificial altar of this sacred idea, and now the "People's Commissars" have given orders to shoot the democracy which demonstrated in honour of this idea.[1]

Seventy-two years later, in the spring of 1989, rolling student demonstrations became a familiar presence in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. It was here that forty years earlier Mao Zedong had proclaimed the People's Republic of China and the subsequently much enlarged square had ever since served as the symbolic centre of communist rule. Amongst the giant images of communist leaders and the official Monument to the People's Heroes, on 30 May the students erected their own impromptu figure of the Goddess of Democracy. Five days later, on 4 June 1989, it was crushed by tanks as troops dispersed the demonstrators, leaving several hundred dead.

No wonder that Stephen Smith describes the century's communist regimes as mutations of a single genus.[2] From start to finish of the short twentieth century, and in both major countries of the communist revolution, what united these episodes was the ready use of state violence to suppress rights of free assembly and collective action. Despite the variations of social structure, culture and economic development, Smith identifies the genus with monopoly control of the state and subordination to it of all independent agency and intellectual life. "And so we will fight with the means established by William Tell," an earlier generation of Russian revolutionaries had pledged, "until we achieve those free institutions which will make it possible to discuss without hindrance, in the press and in public meetings, all social and political problems, and solve them through free representatives of the people."[3] Whatever desires for human betterment were satisfied by communism, they evidently did not include this one.

Except as a form of negation, the coupling of communism and democracy has therefore been seen by many as either tenuous or fraudulent. There were many anti-communists whose democratic credentials were slighter still. There were also liberal and social-democratic critics, beginning with those disenfranchised by the Bolsheviks in 1918, for whom the antithesis of dictatorship and democracy would henceforth be-

1 Maxim Gorky, "January 9 – January 5," (published 22 Jan. 1918) in *Untimely Thoughts. Essays on revolution, culture and the Bolsheviks 1917–1918*, edited by Maxim Gorky (London: Yale University Press, 1968), 123–126.

2 Stephen A Smith, "Introduction: towards a global history of communism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, edited by Stephen A. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3–4.

3 The first draft of Narodnaia Volia programme cited Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution. A history of populist and socialist movements in nineteenth century Russia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1960), 649.

come a basic guiding principle. In the discussions of democracy that from the 1940s featured in the burgeoning discipline of western political science, communism served as a defining other excluded by definition from the field of enquiry. "Problems" of communism were studied either as a genus in its own right or else subsumed under the inimical rubric of totalitarianism—in a way that again was largely antithetical to democracy.[4] Communists by this time made their own forthright claims to the title, as in China's "new democracy" or the "people's democracies" of post-1945 eastern Europe. For the comparative political scientist, this was mere appropriation (or misappropriation) that one should not dignify by taking seriously. "No sensible person," wrote A.H. Birch in his *Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy*, "has ever been deceived by this into thinking that these states were democratically governed in the accepted sense of the term."[5]

Though this was the common sense that helped define the Cold War, its basic tenets were only reinforced by the revolutions of 1989 by which it seemed so obviously vindicated. Ernest Gellner pronounced that civil society had been "the central slogan in the dismantling of Marxist society."[6] From the new left perspective of Perry Anderson, capitalism's turning from nationalism to liberal democracy as its primary legitimation had since 1945 brutally exposed the contradictions of a communist world in which free association was denied.[7] "Experts of Communism have largely lost their 'subject,'" was the common-sense verdict of comparativist Hans Daalder. "Scholars who were mainly concerned with the study of the development and the working of democracies, on the other hand, stand before an entirely new universe."[8]

With the throwing open of communist archives, communism as a historical subject was in reality to flourish as never before. Nevertheless, the elusiveness of democracy as a theme seemingly corroborated the sensible person's view. In the *Oxford Handbook* that he edited, Smith notes that only in India may one trace a handful of democratically elected communist administrations. Among the volume's thematic essays none is devoted to communism and democracy. In the *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Communism*, subjects covered include bureaucracy, despotism, purges, totalitarianism, red terror, great terror, terrorism, martial law, killing fields, Holodomor and Gulag. There is no entry on democracy as such. Norman N. Naimark does contribute a discussion of people's democracy that is notably balanced and informative in its treatment. Nev-

4 A point developed further below.

5 Anthony H. Birch, *The Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2001), 72–73; Jack Lively, *Democracy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 33–34.

6 Ernst Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty. Civil Society and its Rivals* (London: Penguin, 1996), 53.

7 Perry Anderson, "Internationalism: a breviary," *New Left Review* 14 (2002): 22.

8 Hans Daalder, "The Development of the Study of Comparative Politics" in *Comparative Democratic Politics. A guide to contemporary theory and research*, edited by Hans Keman (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 29–30.

ertheless, Naimark again notes the dominant western view of the phenomenon as a mere sham and camouflage to "hornswoggle" unwary outsiders. "People's Democracy was not democracy at all, because the idea and reality of parliamentary government were completely unacceptable to the Soviets."[9]

Varieties of Democracy

The contention of this paper is that democracy as challenge, critique and aspiration was central to the collapse of European communism, not just as the unravelling of a Marxist teleology but as a basic faultline and ambivalence at the heart of communism itself. Belying the loose analogies so often drawn with fascism, an openness and vulnerability to democratic argument was the result of deep internal contradictions that are abundantly documented in contemporary sources. Against the "accepted sense" of the terms both communism and democracy, there have always been dissenting views and caveats. Fundamentally, these have usually boiled down to one or other of two critical insights. The first is that normative concepts of this type have no single self-evident meaning but are always historically constructed and "essentially contested." The second is that neither democracy nor communism were simply normative concepts, but on the contrary involved issues of agency and collective action which have been central to their historical meaning. It may be tempting to pose the relationship as one between communism as political practice and democracy as normative value. In seeking to take a more historicized approach, this paper will show how partial and narrowly ideological such an approach has often been.

Beginning with democracy, one might cite the Canadian C.B. Macpherson as one of the most influential exponents of the view that liberal democracy was only one possible variant of democratic government, and one inseparable from the capitalist economic order whose inequalities and restrictions of the freedoms of the majority it legitimized.[10] Developing these reflections from the 1960s, Macpherson, was acutely aware of the Cold War polarities which his synthesis of liberal and Marxist approaches sought to confront.[11] We shall nevertheless see that the idea of competing claims to democracy goes back long before 1917, in diverse articulations including those of the communists themselves. It was with a sense of these longer trajectories that David Held, while acknowledging his debt to Macpherson, would later delineate

9 Norman N. Naimark, "People's Democracy," in *A Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism*, edited by Silvio Pons and Robert Service (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 607–611.

10 C.B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

11 Macpherson, *Real World*, 65. For an overview, see Jules Townshend, *C.B. Macpherson and the Problem of Liberal Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), chapter 1.

competing "models of democracy." Among their established variants, Held primarily distinguished between a liberal or representative model and a "Marxist conception of direct democracy."[12] In reality, Marxism was just one component in a wider socialist challenge to established power relations ranging from technocratic elitism to the grass-roots democracy of syndicalists and guild socialists.[13]

That Marx and Engels loomed so large for Held was partly because his was avowedly of that literature that centred on ideas rather than movements and practices. Adopting a broader historical approach, Macpherson had recognized in democracy a ferment of social agency and expectation arising from below that was only afterwards accommodated by the liberal state in the form of liberal democracy.[14] When Thomas Carlyle in *The French Revolution* (1837) invoked the "new omnipotent Unknown of Democracy" whose crowning expression the revolution was, he did not so much mean a political programme as a social actor and standard of value that any nineteenth-century socialist might have recognized and identified with.[15] Even Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1840) was concerned with democracy as a social state and "that equality of conditions of which the sovereignty of the people was merely the political corollary."[16] Drawing on these traditions, communism in one aspect may be seen as a critique and often a denial of that conception of liberal democracy, also an appropriation, propounded instead as corollary to the market economy. Macpherson's contention was that it held the promise of a non-liberal but democratic order that addressed or avoided the denials of equal rights that were inherent in liberal capitalism.

Of course, it did not deliver on that promise. Panglossian even in the 1960s was Macpherson's view of "actually existing" socialism as a sacrifice of present freedoms to secure their fuller flowering in the future.[17] Gellner's colourful "Caesaro-Papism-Mammonism" at least captured the finally unresolvable tension between these regimes and any notion of a civil society. Entering the discussion in the 1980s Held was sceptical as to Marxism's promise of the "end of politics" and post-1989 he further stressed its underestimation of the "liberal preoccupation with how to secure freedom of criticism and action." Critical voices, like those of "western Marxism," were to be found only at the periphery of "Marxism-Leninism," if not beyond it; revived to such effect after the crisis of Stalinism in 1956, they were symptoms of the breakdown and

12 David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2006), 3–6.

13 For the richness of socialist thinking in a specific national context, see Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

14 Macpherson, *Real World*, chapter 1.

15 Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1871), 103.

16 André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Peter Halban, 1988), 203.

17 Macpherson, *The Real World*, 59.

internal fissuring that would culminate in 1989.[18] But there can be no appreciation of the longer history of these tensions unless communism is also understood as a political movement involving commitments and beliefs that were both intensely felt and fraught with contradictions.

Mao once characterized communism as a complete proletarian ideology and a new social system.[19] Crucially it was also one of the political movements that shaped the twentieth century and the only one of such international scope and cohesion. It is in this wider context that the notion of Caesaropapism is clearly inadequate. The Bolsheviks seized power, and two years later established the new Communist International (Comintern), in the expectation of a rapidly spreading world revolution. In the event, they had to fall back on a Leninist notion of uneven development to account for the indefinite thwarting of this prospect. One result was that Mao's new social system was never co-extensive with the communist movement itself. Another was that communist states and parties alike were drawn into various fronts and alliances through which to cultivate a broader democratic public through some notion of common interests and ideals. A third was that these common interests included the ability to function politically under conditions of "bourgeois" or non-socialist democracy. Marxism for western communists did not mean the end of politics with which Held identified it. It meant relentless civic activism, extending to the workplace, according to that other precept drawn from Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, "To struggle is to live."[20] Notwithstanding communism's culture of centralization and the inculcation of a common political identity, it is in its different existential relations with democracy and civil society that its conceptualization as a single genus is most severely stretched.

A striking exemplification of this was the "two branches" of Finnish communism: one in Soviet exile and sharing in the dominant political culture of Bolshevism, and the other, "Finnish" branch being under constant threat of proscription and centrally concerned with protecting workers" rights and liberties against the coercive apparatus of the state.[21] Communism, in other words, was a movement which embraced both societies in which the exercise of democratic rights was seen as threatening communist rule; and those in which, as in Finland itself, such rights were a basic condition of the communists' own effectiveness and even survival. It was also a movement, to complicate things further, that sought to reconcile conflicting pressures according to the same leading bodies, pronouncements and theoretical texts. Within a purely Soviet

18 Held, *Models*, 96–124, 172–179, 225–230.

19 "On new democracy" (Jan. 1940) in Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao-Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 360.

20 Which, for example, the British communist Ernie Benson took as the title of his autobiography.

21 Tauno Saarela, *Finnish Communism Visited* (Helsinki: Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura, 2015), 112.

context, David Priestland has noted how the persistent resort to democratic argument was a destabilizing internal factor contributing to the system's collapse.[22] When Stalin described the eponymous "Stalin" constitution of 1936 as the world's only thoroughly democratic one, it is easy to see it as an exercise in doublethink. Nevertheless, Orwell himself, the architect of doublethink, once wrote of the communists that it was "not altogether an advantage to a political party to sail under false colours"; for there was always the danger that on these grounds its own supporters might desert it—or at least, as in 1989, lose any self-belief or resolution in its defence.[23]

Internationally the contradictions were sharper still, and because of communism's transnational character risked percolating into those countries in which communists exercised their political monopoly. As liberal democracy between the wars ceded so much ground to the authoritarian right, communists did not just draw on those socialistic ideas of economic democracy which liberal polities had failed to satisfy. They were also at the forefront of campaigns around those traditional democratic rights to whose curtailment they were typically more exposed than almost any other political formation.

It is on this international aspect that the presentation here will focus. It draws in particular on examples from Britain, where communism was at once remote from ever exercising power and continuously able to function legally. This doubtless encouraged a susceptibility to wider democratic norms and practices, without quite the deep-seated antagonism that was at first so evident in Germany, for example, or even in France.[24] Nevertheless, the underlying tensions and ambiguities were not specific to any single national case. Birch maintained that communists at first dismissed democracy only to exploit it for their own purposes when experience showed that it was universally popular. In reality, communists at no point simply relinquished the language of democracy; and when in the 1930s they sought to mobilize around even its non-socialist variants, this was not because they were universally popular but because they were almost everywhere under threat. To have sought to reconcile such positions with Stalinist forms of rule was an anomaly that would in time generate a host of conflicts within the communist movement. Communism was deeply marked by its ambivalence as to whether it signified the exposure, transcendence, or fulfilment of wider

22 David Priestland, "Soviet Democracy, 1919–91," *European History Quarterly* 32 (2002): 111–30.

23 "Burnham's View of the Contemporary World Struggle" in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Volume 4: In Front of Your Nose, 1945–50* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 367. For the Stalin constitution, see below.

24 For which see for example Marc Lazar, "Fort et fragile, immuable et changeante … La culture politique communiste," in *Les cultures politiques en France*, edited by Serge Berstein (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 233.

democratic ideals. The later disputes that resulted from this are familiar. Focusing on the period prior to 1956, the object of the present paper is to show how deeply rooted they were in the years of Lenin and Stalin.

Who, whom?

Nikolai Bukharin is remembered as the relatively moderate and humane Bolshevik whose gradualist notions of socialist construction offered the one coherent alternative to Stalin's unleashing of unrestrained state violence. Despite this later reputation as a "rightist," in the revolution's earlier phases Bukharin had nevertheless been among the most zealous and outspoken of its leaders and one who scorned to dissimulate its single-minded commitment to its goals.[25]

Published in 1918, his *Communist Programme* is said to have been the first popular exposition of Bolshevism in power. To the question of why the Bolsheviks had so swiftly abandoned their commitment to democratic freedoms it gave a straightforward answer. Before the revolution the workers' party had called for a constituent assembly because it was not yet strong enough to storm the positions of the bourgeoisie. "It needed time to prepare, to gather strength, to enlighten the masses, to organize." It needed, in other words, rights of a free press, assembly and association, and in practice could formulate these demands only as broader democratic principles that would be enjoyed by all. Now, however, times had changed, and the achievement of Soviet power allowed the class-based freedoms of the workers alone. "When there is a question of the press, we first ask *which* press—the bourgeois or the workers' press; when there is a question of gatherings, we ask *what* gatherings—workers' or counter-revolutionary."[26] Although still awaiting its classic two-word formulation, the Bolshevik logic of "Who, whom?" was already inescapable.

The communist view of democracy, as of almost any general principle, was therefore historically contingent or positional. On the Comintern's launching in March 1919 Lenin drafted a set of theses on democracy and dictatorship designed to secure a definitive break with social democracy. For Lenin, the key division was that of the qualifying adjectives *bourgeois* democracy and *proletarian* dictatorship. Against social-democratic critics like Karl Kautsky, whom he had once revered as socialism's leading theoretician, Lenin insisted that there nowhere did or could exist "democracy in the abstract," and that to dream of a third way between the dictatorships of bour-

25 The standard account remains Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution. A Political Biography, 1888–1938* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

26 N. Bukharin, *Programme of the World Revolution* (1918) (Glasgow: Socialist Labour Press, 1920), 36–7. Widely translated, the pamphlet's title has been rendered in a variety of English versions.

geoisie and proletariat was a petty-bourgeois fantasy.[27] In *The ABC of Communism*, coauthored by Bukharin with Evgeny Preobrazhensky, the dismissal of bourgeois democracy as a fraud came with the further assurance that, even were it conveivable, "in comparison with the Soviet Power it would not be worth a cracked farthing."[28] In the "twenty-one conditions" of admission which the Comintern adopted at its second congress, there was an explicit assumption of "conditions of acute civil war" in which communists could have no confidence in "bourgeois legality." Certainly, they were not to be constrained by it.[29]

But even at this stage the Bolsheviks did not just abandon the language of democracy to their opponents. Democracy and dictatorship were not alternatives, but forms of class rule viewed from either side of the who-whom equation. What mattered was which class ruled; and because the who of the workers' dictatorship represented the toiling masses against their exploiters, that is the "overwhelming majority" against a minority, Lenin equated it with an ideal of "true democracy" realizable only through a revolutionary break with capitalism. Lenin was therefore not oblivious to the power of the idea of democracy as if of some universally recognized test of political value and the legitimacy of different class regimes. Communism's antagonist and antithesis was not democracy but capitalism, which undermined democracy through the restriction of meaningful rights of press and assembly to the propertied classes supported by the "bourgeois apparatus of power." Communism, conversely, heralded wider and deeper forms of democracy, through "continuous, unhampered, and decisive participation in the democratic administration of the State."

This was the "true" proletarian democracy which in due course would lead to Held's "end of politics" and the distantly dangling prospect of the withering away of the state. The most widely circulated rendering of these themes was Lenin's *State and Revolution*, written just prior to the revolution, with its promised sequel of a "*more* democratic state machine" which the great majority would direct and themselves administer. Though seemingly the most libertarian of Lenin's writings, it is easily dismissed as a utopian passing fancy having little bearing on the shaping of the future party state.[30]

27 "Theses on bourgeois democracy and proletarian dictatorship adopted by the first Comintern congress," in: Jane Degras, *The Communist International 1919–1943: Documents. Volume 1: 1919–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 7–16.

28 Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (1920) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 222–6.

29 Reproduced in Degras, *Communist International*, 166–72.

30 For sympathetic views see Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Visions and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 41–6; Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought. Volume 2: Theory and Practice in the Socialist Revolution* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), chapter 6; for the sharpest critical assessment, see A.J. Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics* (London: Methuen, 1984).

Nevertheless, thanks to its status as one of the Marxist-Leninist "classics" it did also provide a critical yardstick which circulated freely among communists themselves.

Lenin's object of a clean break with social democracy was, by and large, achieved. After all, speaking louder than any pamphlet was the suppression of the Constituent Assembly, and of the rival socialist parties represented within it. Dispensing with the distinctions of bourgeois and proletarian, Bolshevism's leading critics put democracy at the centre of their case against the new regime. Kautsky was one of the easier to target as a vacillating "centrist" who had already drawn Lenin's withering scorn. In his *Proletarian Revolution* (1918), described as the "first serious study in the West" to be dedicated to communism, he now affirmed his belief in democracy at the expense of any but the most platonic attachment to revolution. While formally Kautsky upheld the Marxian notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, he emptied it of any meaning or rationale that could have required so abrasive a term. As "servility to opportunism" and "unexampled theoretical vulgarization" this was simply grist to Lenin's mill. It was also in the course of his ferocious rebuttal that Lenin made the case for Soviet power as a "higher" form of democracy that he later distilled into the theses of the Comintern.[31]

Rosa Luxemburg, in contrast to Kautsky, could never have been traduced as a renegade. Murdered by the reactionary *Freikorps* in January 1919, she was, with her comrade Karl Liebknecht, one of the foremost martyrs of the European revolution. Because of the alleged complicity of social-democratic politicians in their murder, she also became a symbol of the new divisions on the left that cut so deeply in Germany.[32] Published only posthumously in 1922, her critique of Bolshevism was not in theory aimed at the principle of dictatorship itself. Rather than counterposing democracy and dictatorship, Luxemburg urged the exercising of dictatorial powers on the widest possible basis and through harnessing rather than extinguishing democracy. Practically speaking, the end result was nevertheless the same: defence of the Constituent Assembly and no long-term restrictions on rights of suffrage.

As the most important guarantees of the workers' own political activity Luxemburg identified the same rights of press, association and assembly as had the Russian revolutionaries of the *Narodnia volia* generation. She also saw quite lucidly and prophetically that the asphyxiating of political life could not but undermine the soviets themselves and the forms of class-based democracy they claimed to embody. Her arguments may to some extent be grouped with dissenting strands emerging within Bolshevism such

31 V. I. Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1935), 12 and passim; see also Bruno Naarden, *Socialist Europe and Revolutionary Russia: Perception and Prejudice, 1848–1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 302–21.

32 See Eric D. Weitz, "'Rosa Luxemburg belongs to us!' German communism and the Luxemburg legacy," *Central European History* 27 (1994): 27–64.

as the Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralists. Katerina Clark has even suggested that Luxemburg's differences with Lenin amounted to a "matter of degree of repression"; and it is certainly true that even the fiercest left-wing critics, like the anarchist Emma Goldman, tended to focus on those victims of the Bolsheviks who were above any suspicion of sympathy for the old ruling order.[33] Nevertheless, in questioning the very notion of single-party rule, Luxemburg gave vent to sentiments that any liberal might have cited, and many liberals later did. "Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party [...] is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently."[34]

Morris Hillquit had no such international standing as Kautsky or Luxemburg. A lawyer by profession prominent in the American Socialist Party, he had served as its prewar representative to the International but could speak with no such authority as the leaders of the mighty German social democracy. It was Hillquit, nevertheless, who in taking issue with Bukharin's rationalization of Bolshevik rule put his finger on the central contradiction this posed for communism internationally. Whatever the necessities of the successful workers' dictatorship, as he pointed out with considerable cogency, the rest of the world's socialists were still in Bukharin's pre-revolutionary, oppositional phase. It was obvious, according to Hillquit, that the two situations presented radically different practical tasks and that these presupposed the fullest liberty of propaganda, organization and political action wherever socialists did not exercise power.[35]

Hillquit saw how potentially damaging the suppression of these freedoms under Soviet power could prove to the case being made for socialism in the West. He also noted the "extraordinarily delicate" position of having "one or more parties in power amidst an organization of minority opposition-parties," and the difficulties of extricating international issues from those of state interest should these parties occupy the dominant position to which the Bolsheviks unabashedly laid claim.[36] Trotsky in his autobiography would scorn Hillquit as a "Babbitt of Babbitts," that is, as the epitome of American small-town philistinism and the ideal socialist leader for the well-to-do

33 Katerina Clark, "Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution'," *Studies in East European Thought* 70 (2018): 161; for Goldman, see Kevin Morgan, *Bolshevism, Syndicalism and the General Strike: The Lost Internationalist World of A.A. Purcell* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2013), chapter 4.

34 Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution (1922)" in *The Russian Revolution* and *Leninism or Marxism?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), chapters 5–6 and 8. For early Bolshevik oppositionists, see Barbara C. Allen, *Alexander Shlyapnikov 1885–1937. Life of an Old Bolshevik* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2015), chapter 7.

35 Morris Hillquit, *From Marx to Lenin* (New York: Hanford Press, 1921), chapters 11–12.

36 Hillquit, *From Marx*, 143–6.

petty-bourgeois.[37] Nevertheless, it was Trotsky who in the 1930s was impelled by this same basic contradiction into the formation of an ill-fated Fourth International. The Comintern, meanwhile, was by this time heading towards dissolution on the stated grounds of the "increasing complications in the internal and international relations" of different countries including "differences in their character and even contradictions in their social orders."[38] Hillquit had identified a fundamental anomaly which the Bolsheviks had believed it possible to overcome by mere force of will and organization.

Disunities of Theory and Practice

The watershed moment for both Trotsky and the Comintern was Hitler's accession to power in Germany in 1933. In his theses for the first Comintern congress Lenin had described the institutions of bourgeois parliamentarianism as progressive vis-à-vis the Middle Ages and ceasing to be so only in an epoch of proletarian revolution. This relativist understanding of the advantages of bourgeois democracy acquired renewed topical relevance as it became clear by the 1930s that the proletarian revolution was nowhere on the political agenda, while a return to the pre-democratic Middle Ages very much was. The illusory third way of social democracy was at first held responsible, and Trotsky would continue to adhere to a variant of this position. The parties of the Third International, on the other hand, effected a basic strategic shift towards the accommodation of such democratic parties, states and values as could contribute to the common struggle against fascism. In its various transmutations, democracy henceforth was to be one of the communist movement's central mobilizing slogans.

Two key texts symbolized this turn for an international public. The first was Georgi Dimitrov's address as secretary to the Comintern's seventh and final congress in mid-1935. Formalizing the turn to the popular front, Dimitrov acknowledged that the alternative to bourgeois democracy was no longer a workers' dictatorship but fascism. He therefore called for the defence and extension of the democratic rights which were both the fruits of working-class struggle and the best terms on which to continue to wage that struggle. Under socialism, meanwhile, the so-called Stalin constitution adopted the following year validated what might once have been dismissed as the fetishes of pure democracy. These provisions included the abolition of class-based political rights, the introduction of secret and universal suffrage and guaranteed freedoms of

37 Leon Trotsky, *My Life. An Attempt at Autobiography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 283–5.

38 See the English text of the resolution dissolving the Comintern, *World News and Views*, 29 May 1943, 169–70. For the prewar origins of the decision, see Serge Wolikow, *L'Internationale Communiste (1919–1943). Le Komintern ou le rêve déchu du parti mondial de la révolution* (Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier/Éditions Ouvrières, 2010), chapter 5.

speech, press and assembly. Conspicuously absent was any concept of an opposition or of competing political programmes. Nevertheless, the constitution was meant to win over democratic opinion in the West, and though inauspiciously synchronized with the launching of the show trials it did in some cases do so. In the words of the British novelist and playwright J. B. Priestley, it gave such scope to "human personality" as far exceeded countries like Britain and turned the dream of an ideal state into reality.[39]

In Birch's less impressionable reading, this signalled the communists' verbal adaptation to democratic norms in their more widely accepted sense. It was on this terrain, for example, that they would initially advance their claims in the reshaping of post-war politics in countries like Germany or Italy. In the former case, there was talk of completing the unfinished bourgeois revolution, while in Italy the shift was symbolized by the communists' strong and largely constructive commitment to the post-war Constituent Assembly.[40] Even the Italian communists, however, invoked a notion of "progressive" or "advanced" democracy whose social and participatory aspects marked a step in the direction of socialism. If this then proved compatible with support for the Stalinized regimes of eastern Europe, it was because of the persistence of themes of a form of democracy that in some sense corrected the deficiencies of the liberal model. Historians of the International Brigades have noted the big wink given by one of the British commissars when he said that they were to fight for bourgeois democracy. Nevertheless, the wink—like the Italian communists' later *dopiezza*—did not mean indifference to democracy itself so much as a commitment to what they now referred to as its "profound social content."[41]

These elements of continuity may be illustrated by two characteristic British productions displaying the "direct," "advanced" or "progressive" democratic ideas with which communism was so strongly identified in this period. The first and better known is *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?*—the monument to fellow-travelling published by the Fabian socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb in 1935. In most accounts, this is seen as confirming how little democracy mattered to either Stalin or the Webbs. When the latter travelled to the USSR in 1932, they had behind them forty years of joint activity as ultra-reformist socialists espousing the "inevitability of

39 J. B. Priestley, "Foreword," in *The Draft Soviet Constitution* (London: 1936), 5; David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mass Mobilization. Ideas, Power and Terror in Inter-War Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 280.

40 For the importance of democratic arguments, with a more generous view than most of their sincerity, see for example Wilfried Loth, *Stalin's Unwanted Child. The Soviet Union, the German Question and the Founding of the GDR* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), chapter 1.

41 Rémi Skoutelsky, *L'espoir guidait leurs pas. Les volontaires français dans les Brigades internationales 1936–1939* (Paris: Grasset, 1998), 184–9.

gradualness."[42] That they only now embraced communism in its Stalinized phase has usually been attributed to their deep-seated elitism and top-down conception of social change. At best, theirs was a "weak" version of democracy; at worst, as in Hal Draper's *Socialism from Below*, it was "managerial, technocratic, elitist, authoritarian" and the consummate expression anywhere of socialism-from-above.[43] This does at least serve as reminder that the communists were not alone in their ambivalence regarding democracy. As Stalin tightened his grip on power, the Webbs maybe pictured embarking for Russia with eager expectations and on the principle of like attracts like.

In reality, the sustained wishful thinking of *Soviet Communism* needs to be located within a longer tradition of socialist thinking about democracy that resists such easy dichotomies. In 1921, the Webbs had issued the long socialist blueprint they called *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain*. They were not at this stage among the socialists fascinated by the "hand of revolutionary authority" which the Bolsheviks exercised so firmly.[44] Instead, they depicted what at this stage was the alternative of a "manifold democracy" of citizens, producers, and consumers. The greater part of their writings had been devoted to pioneering studies of the co-operatives, trade unions and local government. It was on these "manifestations of Democracy," rather than the exercise of state power, that their socialist constitution principally depended. "This new conception of Democracy sprang […] from observation of the living tissue of society," they explained. While others debated the character of the state "in the sense of the political government," they believed that its sovereignty and moral authority were being silently undermined by the "growth of new forms of Democracy."[45] Though Lenin sought to "smash to atoms" what the Webbs would have silently undermined, one cannot miss a certain affinity with *The State and Revolution*—as indeed with certain anarchist writings like those of Kropotkin.[46] Birch referred slightingly to the Webbs' account of industrial democracy—which, incidentally, Lenin and Krupskaya translated—as if of a secondary matter not bearing on the central issue of government authority. But Eric Hobsbawm had a far better sense of its meaning

42 The discussion that follows draws in part on Kevin Morgan, *The Webbs and Soviet Communism: Bolshevism and the British Left, Part 2* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2006).

43 Hal Draper, *The Two Souls of Socialism* (New York: 1966), 14–17 and 21–30.

44 Eden and Cedar Paul cited Morgan, *Webbs*, 156–7; for similar such views see Morgan, *Webbs*, 152–3.

45 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1921), xiv–xviii; and *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1921), v.

46 Lenin, "The State and Revolution," in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1960–70), XXV, 477–8; On Kropotkin, see for example Jim Mac Laughlin, *Kropotkin and the Anarchist Intellectual Tradition* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), chapter 4.

in describing it as an "an entire theory of democracy, the state and the transition to socialism."[47]

By the time they wrote *Soviet Communism* the Webbs saw it as a realization of these longstanding ideals. In default as yet of any Stalin constitution, they devoted their first 450 pages to conjuring up what they also described as a constitution, but one whose chief characteristic was that of the "multiform" democracy which they detailed through long chapters on the citizen, producer, and consumer. There was also a new element not envisaged in their original constitution: the "creedocracy" or "vocation of leadership" which they identified with the communist party. As by this time was becoming almost mandatory, they concluded the discussion by posing the question "Dictatorship or democracy?" Though strongly veering towards the latter view, the Webbs' conception of a new civilisation was one they also described as rendering such dichotomies obsolete. The USSR did not comprise "a government and a people confronting each other, as all other great societies have hitherto been." Instead, it was a government "instrumented by the people" in a varied array of collectives extending from the narrow sphere of politics to the crucial democratic matter of wealth production. Here too was the end of politics, but one achieved through the unleashing of democracy rather than its temporary suspension.[48]

The Webbs were wilfully deceived, and this too was a paper constitution. Selling in tens of thousands, their Fabianised view of Soviet communism nevertheless exercised an important influence on their contemporaries. Even the communist Pat Sloan, whose *Soviet Democracy* was issued by the popular-frontist Left Book Club, leant heavily on the Webbs in explaining why democracy and dictatorship should not be seen as mutually exclusive. "The essential question […] is 'For whom is there democracy?' and 'Over whom is there a dictatorship?'"[49] The Stalin constitution figured only marginally, for the Webbs' imagined Soviet constitution not only predated it but had a greater resonance with readers. G.D.H. Cole was a younger Fabian socialist and formerly Britain's leading proponent of the group-based theories of guild socialism. As the Fabian Society's chairman during the Second World War, Cole repeatedly evoked an image of Soviet democracy that, despite its flaws, he held to be more active, real and "free" than Britain's and a participatory model it could learn from.[50] At the height of the USSR's wartime popularity, the images projected upon Stalinism by its British

47 Birch, *Concepts*, 72; Eric Hobsbawm, "The Fabians reconsidered," in *Labouring Men. Studies in the history of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968), 255.

48 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1935), 419–51.

49 Pat Sloan, *Soviet Democracy* (London: V. Gollancz, 1937), 12.

50 George D.H. Cole, *Fabian Socialism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943), chapter 6; Cole cited Jose Harris, "The Labour Party's Political Thought," in *Labour's First Century*, edited by Duncan Tanner et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 43.

admirers were driven by participatory ideals that both idealized the USSR and drew on the home-grown innovations of the so-called people's war. "It has not been a matter of voting in a Town Hall or a House of Commons what ought to be done by some other person," wrote the communist leader Harry Pollitt; "the people themselves have been doing the job." Indeed, none gave stronger voice than Pollitt to the "new conception of democracy" that carried the Marxian overtones of the "full participation of the people in the administration of things."[51]

It is Pollitt who provides our second text in the form of the essay he contributed to the quintessential popular-front collection *Why I am a Democrat* published in 1939. This therefore postdated the Stalin constitution and specifically cited Dimitrov's report to the seventh world congress. Nevertheless, Pollitt's class-based view of democracy was as little unaffected as the Webbs' by the niceties of formal constitutions. Squeezed between the Liberal Party leader and the Bishop of Liverpool, his essay drew on his command of the idioms and experiences of the organized worker to speak as if directly for those forms of collective agency that the Webbs described as democratic tissue. Pollitt did fleetingly allude to elections. Nevertheless, he neither held nor even much aspired to elected public office, and the emphasis throughout was on rights to strike, to organize, to free speech and opinion, to "have the right to protest and to back up our protests by action."[52] Democracy mattered because it was the condition for the free expression of class politics.

While focusing on the British context, Pollitt's essay did briefly invoke the Soviet democratic ideal in which protests were unknown "because the masses do not want them" and because they saw that the country's business must be carried on "without hindrance."[53] The only way to reconcile these contrarieties was through a flattening discourse of class. As Pollitt put it on another occasion: "All I was concerned about was that power was in the hands of lads like me, and whatever conception of politics had made that possible was the correct one for me." Disunity of theory and practice meant flagrant double standards according to a who-whom calculus premised on the inalienable primacy of Soviet power; for "whatever the policy of the Soviet Union it is always in the interests of its people and the working people of every other country of the world."[54]

51 James Hinton, *Shop Floor Citizens. Engineering Democracy in 1940s Britain* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1994), 10–11; Kevin Morgan, *Harry Pollitt* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 142–3.

52 Harry Pollitt in *Why I am a Democrat*, edited by Richard Acland (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1939), 135–50.

53 Harry Pollitt in *Why I am a Democrat*, 139, 148–9; Pollitt, *Looking Ahead* (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1947), 41–2.

54 Pollitt, *Looking Ahead*, 41–2.

Pollitt was one of those communists trapped forever in a world that was shattered by the Khrushchev speech in 1956. It is from this point that one can trace the new left in Britain that, as in E.P. Thompson's socialist humanism, denounced both the anti-democratic ideology of Stalinism and the "vile alchemy" of the who-whom denial of morality.[55] While this takes us beyond the scope of the present paper, what is relevant here is how the break with Stalinism was also seen as a way of recovering those positive ideals and traditions that Thompson at least maintained were the truest part of the communist experience. "In those countries where the purge could not reach," he wrote, "there has been constant conflict within the communist movements between forces of health and corruption."[56] If democracy as a programme was deeply corrupted, what remained healthy was a political practice of militant civic activism that was galvanized and dignified by the revolutionary end to which it theoretically led. We need not follow Thompson into the starker top-down, bottom-up dichotomy to which new leftists were understandably drawn. As any detailed study will show, considerations of brute party interest were not confined to "inner party bureaucracies" but continually intruded on the wider conception of the vanguard party. Nevertheless, it was just this sense of their leading role that means that communists not only advocated Pollitt's rights of speech, strike and assembly but continuously sought to make them real and effective.

An outstanding example in Britain was the communist-led National Unemployed Workers' Movement, which from local casework to the demonstrative advocacy of national hunger marches gave the unemployed a voice that was otherwise all too easily discounted in inter-war Britain. Austria was another country with a small communist party overshadowed by a dominant social-democratic one; and in reading Helmut Gruber's study of the socialist showpiece of Red Vienna it is striking how reactions to welfare provision from below are principally documented through communist newsletters making a good deal of the "lack of democracy."[57] There is no space here for a potted social history of communism. One may nevertheless note how limited the reach of liberal democracy really was, and how much stronger still was the democratic example of communists contesting colonial rule, the many examples of true capitalist dictatorship or such deeply fissured societies as the American South.[58]

Communists thus campaigned for democratic freedoms and frequently came to symbolize them for a wider democratic public. In 1948, for example, this was the theme of one of Salvador Allende's best known speeches when he denounced Chile's

55 E.P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," *New Reasoner* 1 (1957): 105–43, 116, 131.

56 Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 137.

57 Helmut Gruber, *Red Vienna. Experiment in Working-Class Culture, 1919–1934* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 64, 71.

58 See for example Robin G.D. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe. Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

Cold War "Law for the Permanent Defence of Democracy" on grounds that the "possibility of rebellion against injustice" was itself the essence of democracy.[59] In Britain, Pollitt maintained that in the 1930s there were "more arrests, fines, sentences of imprisonment of workers defending freedom of speech and of the Press and the right of demonstration than in the last 100 years put together."[60] It was a matter of pride for the communists that they were the main target of this activity; subjected to levels of surveillance and constraint unprecedented in British history, they became the focus of countless campaigns in which they did not blush to call upon a liberal public and the principles it claimed to uphold. A communist activist would wryly note the irony of having lost his copy of J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* in a police raid in 1940. Only a long time after might he have registered the further paradox of his own deep identification with a society in which supposedly the masses did not even want these liberties themselves.[61]

Totalitarian Democrats?

François Furet was another of the historians who broke with communism in 1956. His subsequent trajectory was nevertheless as different from Thompson's as it very well could be. Through his magnum opus *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) Thompson sought to recover the longer traditions of democratic contestation which even Stalinism had only partially stifled. Furet, by contrast, broke with communism far more comprehensively and without any lingering attachment to its healthier aspects. More than that, he did not seek out these healthier elements in the longer history of the left, but on the contrary rejected its notions of a people's history as firmly as he did those of people's democracy. Following the collapse of European communism, Furet offered his own valedictory on the experience in the shape of his book *Le Passé d'une illusion*. Again, in stark contrast to Thompson, one of its central arguments was that that the negative ideal of anti-fascism had come to count for so much by the 1940s because there existed no positive value that could unite the liberal democracies and Stalinist communism.[62]

59 Victor Figueroa Clark, *Salvador Allende. Revolutionary Democrat* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 48–50.

60 Harry Pollitt in: *Why I am a Democrat*, 143. For activities specifically directed at the NUWM, see K.D. Ewing and C.A. Gearty, *The Struggle for Civil Liberties. Political Freedom and the Rule of Law in Britain, 1914–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 214–74.

61 Author's interview with the late George Matthews.

62 François Furet, *Le Passé d'une illusion. Essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), 193.

This can hardly explain how democracy proved to be arguably the chief ideological battleground of the Cold War. Instead, it makes more sense to return to the idea of competing democratic ideals and how these now came to be articulated with a greater clarity than possibly they ever had between the wars. A common language of democracy had been crucial in cementing the alliance of *soi-disant* democratic states and political forces. Between its socialist and liberal-capitalist variants, there was moreover a distinct shift in favour of the former. In his book *Forging Democracy*, Geoff Eley describes the mid-1940s as a rare moment of radical openness and opportunity. Along with the remaking of democracy, its unifying themes were comprehensive social security, full employment through economic planning, and a moral renewal involving the purging of ruling elites.[63] Purge, plan and plenty, animated by democracy: the ingredients of the new civilisation were all there, and it was as communism made its strongest advances that Europe took its greatest steps to temper the market economy with notions of social justice and democratic entitlement. The wartime alliance nevertheless disintegrated, and the sense of radical openness passed. In the fortress politics of the Cold War, neither side could leave to the other what all concurred was the moral high ground of democracy.

It was in these circumstances that the first was heard of the seemingly oxymoronic concept of "totalitarian democracy." Abbott Gleason observes that totalitarianism in this period usually signified the polar opposite of "democratic," at least in its western sense.[64] This was certainly not E.H. Carr's intention when in 1946 he published *The Soviet Impact on the Western World*. Based on lectures delivered the previous autumn, this dealt first with the political impact which for Carr meant above all else the "new and more progressive form of democracy" which the USSR claimed to pioneer. In evaluating this claim, Carr traced two widely differing conceptions of democracy deriving respectively from the English and French revolutions. It was the second of these, running from Rousseau to Stalin, that he described as totalitarian democracy. It is nevertheless clear that this was intended in a descriptive and non-pejorative sense. If, according to Carr, the Soviets believed that "direct participation in the running of affairs is at least as essential an attribute of democracy as voting in occasional elections", it was hardly self-evident that they were wrong. He also echoed Cole and Pollitt in discerning a revival of this "primitive democracy" in the shelter committees and Home Guard so important in Britain's own ethos of a democratic people's war.[65] Already in his fifties, Carr himself had no personal history of left-wing associations and

63 Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy. The History of the Left in Europe 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 288–91.

64 Gleason, "Totalitarianism," 807; Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

65 Edward Hallett Carr, *The Soviet Impact on the Western World* (London: Macmillan, 1946), 1–19, 112–14.

was more a conservative by temperament than either a radical or a democrat. Fittingly or otherwise, it was at this point that he embarked on the monumental history of the USSR which, like the Webbs', achieved some notoriety for the credibility accorded forms of government which critics held bore scant relation to their substance.[66]

The concept's wider familiarity was due not so much to Carr as to J.L. Talmon's *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. Published in 1952, this was a book as symptomatic of its moment as Carr's was of the political porousness of the preceding period. Writing it while in London-based exile, Talmon accredited Carr with having followed its progression "at every stage" and helped with clarifying its guiding theme—which again was a dichotomous coupling of liberal and totalitarian democracy and the tracing of the latter from the age of Rousseau.[67]

The burden of his argument was nevertheless very different from Carr's. In assimilating Soviet democracy to the western political tradition, Carr had implicitly vindicated the "peaceful penetration" of the latter by ideas of Soviet derivation that helped address what he saw as an epoch-defining crisis of individualism. Talmon, by contrast, used teleology as a device by which radical movements far from power already prefigured those forms of rule which did not represent their betrayal but rather their logical sequel and fulfilment. In this sense at least, one may note a sort of parallel with the continuum between totalitarian movement and totalitarian state in Hannah Arendt's nearly contemporaneous *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Also published the same year was Maurice Duverger's notion of the totalitarian party that already exhibited its key defining features at the heart of the modern democratic state. In the USA, meanwhile, political scientists seeking to fathom the "appeals of communism" slipped easily into the language of neurosis and maladjustment. Here too there were parallels with Talmon's emphasis on the same neurotic "human element" that over the centuries accounted for revolutionary ideas and commitments and the "thrill of fulfilment experienced by the believers in a modern Messianic movement, which makes them experience submission as deliverance."[68]

We are thus back squarely in the Cold War ideological contest within which Macpherson located his own reflections on the character of democracy.[69] Like Thompson, however, and unlike Macpherson and Carr, we might nevertheless think that the

66 Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E.H. Carr, 1892–1982* (London: Verso, 1999), 108, 134.

67 J.L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1986), vii, 6, 258.

68 Talmon, *Origins*, 39–40; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: World Pub., 2004), 450–506; Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties. Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (London: Methuen, 1959), 116–24; Gabriel A. Almond, *The Appeals of Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), chapters 9–10.

69 Macpherson, *Real World*, 65.

practices of non-ruling communists offered the more convincing demonstration of the communist claim to a less “cramped and limited kind of democracy” than that prevailing under capitalism.[70] To this extent, we might turn Hillquit’s astute observation on its head: it was the ethos and practice of minority-opposition communism that were always potentially in a state of tension with the spuriously democratic practices of the eastern bloc.

That is why the political crisis of 1956 looms so large in any discussion of this question; for there were thousands who, like one of Thompson’s fellow historians in Britain, broke at last with communism “for the sake of the ideas which brought them into it.”[71] As another of the defectors later put it:

> How the hell can you carry on saying what a lot of bloody imperialist bastards people are, in Africa or somewhere they’re putting people in jail for nothing, when you’ve just had your people admitting they’ve put thousands of people in jail? What’s the basis of your argument?[72]

Even the unlamented Stalin constitution has been seen as planting the “first germ” of the civil society themes that were later taken up under Gorbachev. Even in the 1930s, rather as Orwell suggested, campaigns around the constitution are said to have stirred a consciousness of “political and civil rights” among those who might otherwise have been unaware of such concepts.[73] Communists in just the same way might turn to *The State and Revolution* to find the “direct opposite” to the “monstrous bureaucratic state” they had upheld in the name of democracy.[74] Had communism in its Stalinist phase signified the denial, subjection or annihilation of democracy and civil society? Or had it represented an especially combative and resolute variant of just those civil society activities that communists themselves suppressed once attaining the genus of state power? It is because the answer includes some element of both, that communism’s history continues to prove a fruitful source of debate around principles which are actually of much wider significance.

70 See the discussion in John Strachey, *The Theory and Practice of Socialism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936), chapter 13.

71 National Archives, London, KV 2 4299 /189, intercepted letter, Rodney Hilton to Edwin Payne 20 Nov. 1956.

72 Author’s interview with the late James Friell.

73 Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia. Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chapter 6.

74 See Kevin Morgan, “Stephen Edmund Frow (1906–97), communist, trade unionist and working-class historian and Ruth Frow (1922–2008), communist, peace activist and working-class historian” in Keith Gildart and David Howell, *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, XIV (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 110–31.

Kevin Morgan is Professor of Politics and Contemporary History at The University of Manchester and has published on the history of European communism and the labour movement in Britain including *The Webbs and Soviet Communism* (2006). His most recent book is *International Communism and the Cult of the Individual: Leaders, Tribunes and Martyrs under Lenin and Stalin* (2017).