

SECTION XI: DISCUSSIONS, DEBATES, HISTORICAL CONTROVERSIES

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Mid-Century Communisms: A Schematic Approach?

In this project presentation I will set out the fundamental discussion points raised in my paper “The Mexican Communist Party in Comparative Perspective: Towards a Schema for the Postwar Conjuncture”, delivered at the European Social Science History Conference in Glasgow in April 2012. I do so in order to invite comments and interventions relating to my central contention: that we cannot speak meaningfully of one ‘mid-century communism’, only of several (or perhaps even many) ‘mid-century communisms’. To challenge the partial revival of the monolithic conception of communism, I offer a tentative and non-exhaustive schematic of varying (and in some cases, contradictory) ‘types’ of mid-century communism.

The seed for the Glasgow paper was planted at last year’s ‘Local Communisms’ conference in Cardiff. This fascinating conference, organised by the University of Glamorgan and the journal *Twentieth Century Communism*, aimed “to address the extent to which national and sub-nation political, social and cultural traditions and developments, crises and continuities shaped the character of ‘world communism’”.¹ Given that aim, it came as a surprise to hear a prominent historian of communism suggest that such distinctions were, essentially, irrelevant, because the relationship between centre (in this case Moscow) and periphery (the local communists) always took precedence. While that precedence is often factually correct, it surely does not mean the existing distinctions cease to have significance. Furthermore, if this position can be reduced to *what Moscow says, goes*, it relates not to communism as a political ideology so much as to Soviet foreign policy.

Taking a wider view of the literature, there seems to have been a qualified return to the deployment of ‘communism’ as a universal, singularly-defined concept. This approach does not question the fact of local variance as did orthodox (original) monolithist conceptions of communism; instead, it dismisses such variance as irrelevant. Such a view characterises what I refer to as ‘neo-monolithism’.² The argument tends to run as follows: *communism*

¹ ‘Local Communisms’, 1917-89, History Research Unit, University of Glamorgan, URL: <<http://history.research.glam.ac.uk/communisms/>> [Last consulted: 04.07.2012]

² See, for example, H-Diplo posting 17.03.2012. Various postings from this conversation and its several replies are of relevance to this paper, and I ask that the reader forgives the unusual source material in this historiographical context; the discussion stemmed from a round table review of Thomas Christensen: *Worse than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011; URL: <<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-3-11.pdf>> [Last consulted 04.07.2012]

under Stalin was monolithic; of course, there was Trotskyism, but it was marginalised; of course, there was also Yugoslavia, but it was an exception; but not until the Sino-Soviet split was there a 'real' crack in the monolith. Such a position rests on two significant fallacies: first, there is an implication that the existence of Trotskyism and Titoism (let alone other minor currents) were irrelevant to the integrity of the monolith; and second, that Maoism-as-heresy sprung fully formed after the Korean War, prior to which it had merely been a Chinese Stalinism. Furthermore the relationship between national parties and 'global communism' (such as it was) was bi-directional. "Matters were complicated... by the aspirations and hopes of the non-Soviet CPs" argues Thompson, "which, however willingly subservient they might be to Stalin and the USSR, had agendas of their own which they would not readily forget, with all the enthusiasm and confidence they had gained as a result of the war."³

What I wish to present are the parameters of debate and key questions which might ascertain whether a genuine variety of distinct 'communisms' existed in the period immediately following the Second World War. This call for a multiple view of communisms is not a new proposition, though it usually applies to the period following the Sino-Soviet split. Julius Braunthal in his three-volume *History of the International* did much to illustrate the various tendencies – delineated by region and religion - which together constituted "world socialism"; for the Latin American case, Robert Alexander's *Communism in Latin America* and *Trotskyism in Latin America* provided early local detail. However, the prevalence in academia of 'monolithist' interpretations remains problematic with regard to global currents of communism (or global communisms).

While there was undoubtedly a chain-of-command between Moscow and the leaderships of most local communist parties, several variables may be identified which undermine the strength and consistency of such relationships. First, the degree to which the local party was dependent on Comintern instruction, as opposed to forging an independent path; second, the degree to which the local party was materially dependent on another; third, the degree of attention which was paid to the party by the Comintern (and, a variation on this, whether a non-communist local party was in fact favoured by Moscow, which is arguably the case with Mexico); and finally, perhaps most importantly, the individual feedback loops and sets of unintended and unknowable consequences which were set in motion in the initial forging of chains-of-command. Moscow relied on local operatives for knowledge, but simultaneously favoured operatives whose views fitted best with that of the Soviet conception of international communism. In some cases, dissenting views were able to survive, most spectacularly in the case of peasant-based communism. In others, all dissenting voices were silenced and local parties became extremely narrow Stalinist parodies. Most communist groupings, I suggest, fell somewhere in between.

The argument has three component parts: a typography of mid-century communisms; structural models of global communism(s); and lineages of historical communism(s). The three propositions regarding mid-century communisms are as follows:

1) That there was no 'global communism'; instead there were many types within the grouping of 'global communisms'. Over time, these 'types' sometimes merged to form specific admixtures, sometimes found themselves violently opposed to one another and in other cases simply existed alongside one another – domestically, internationally and sometimes even within single parties.

³ Willie Thompson: *The Communist Movement since 1945*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1998, p. 28.

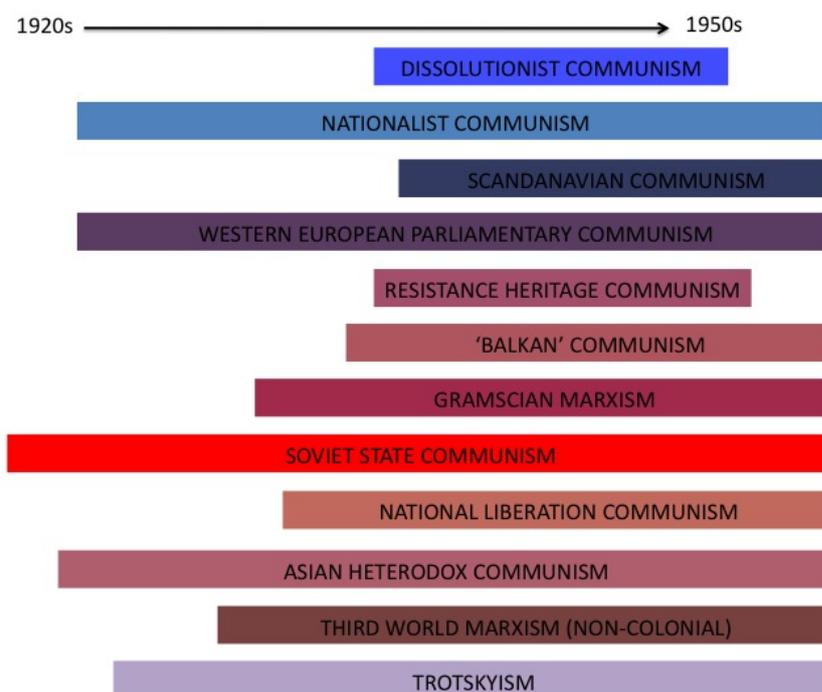


Figure 1. Some 'types' of mid-century communism(s).

II) That in place of the traditional conceptualisation of information and leadership flows as hierarchical and linear (or, in a more sophisticated sense, multilinear), the interaction of these 'global communisms' worked more like a series of inter-related cogs of varying sizes. Sometimes these cogs were driven from the centre, sometimes from the periphery, and sometimes a breakdown in the system would see a single cog (Yugoslavia, for example) or an entire sub-system (the Chinese-dominated variants of communism) spin off and form a new 'machine'. To extend the metaphor: sometimes external 'spanners' were thrown into the works; sometimes the cogs worked against one another; sometimes the teeth of the cogs simply wore down.

III) That the monolithic view of communism as a Soviet-controlled entity - at least as far as the Sino-Soviet split - obscures a rich variety of heterodox communisms which existed from the 1920s in parallel with Stalin's 'Socialism in One Country'. These include (but are not limited to) the peasant communisms which influenced by Manabendra Nath Roy and interacted with an increasingly idiosyncratic Maoism; Mariateguismo and other internationalist variants on 'local communism'; Gramscian Marxism; and Trotskyism.⁴

The twelve 'types' of mid-century communism which follow are not mutually exclusive nor is the list exhaustive; while *prima facie* there may appear to be a social scientist's method at work here, it is in fact more of a historian's madness. This list is simply intended to demonstrate the diversity of mid century communisms and to provoke further discussion of such taxonomy. These 'types' sometimes merged to form specific admixtures, sometimes found themselves violently opposed to one another and in other cases simply existed alongside one another – domestically, internationally and sometimes even within single parties. Some are regional currents, some national, some intellectual; all left a lasting

⁴ In the case of Latin America, two volumes amply illustrate this diversity: Sheldon B. Liss: *Marxist Thought in Latin America*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984; and Luis E. Aguilar (ed.): *Marxism in Latin America*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1978.

impression on political practice in some part of the world. The taxonomical suggestions are followed by notable examples in italics.⁵

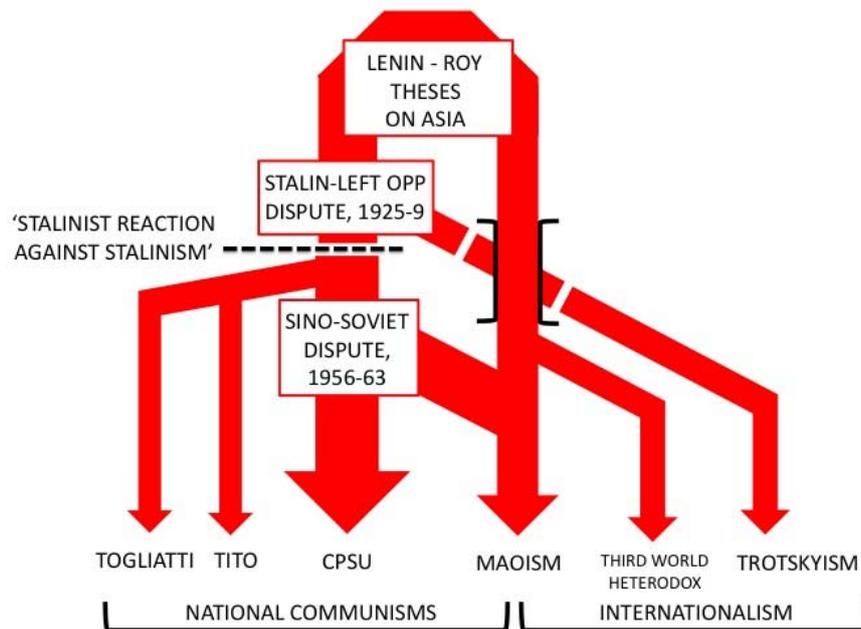


Figure 2. Some lineages of historical communism(s).⁶

1. Dissolutionist/Defeatist Communism – *United States, Mexico, Cuba*. The extreme tendency towards Browder-inspired ‘liquidationism’ and ‘revisionism’ was attacked in April 1945 by Jacques Duclos (with the approval of the Soviet government); subsequently communist parties throughout the Western Hemisphere began publically to re-evaluate their unconditional support of ‘progressive’ governments.⁷ But these ‘deviations’ had hardly been the organic phenomena implied by the designation of ‘Browderism’ as a heresy. The Soviet Union was keen to show that Browder had “exaggerated enormously his independence and importance”;⁸ and Carr argues that, for Mexico at least, “those aspects of Browderism which did take root were built on developments that were already well in place,” most importantly the amelioration of class conflict.⁹

2. Nationalist Communism – *Mexico, Turkey, United Kingdom, Cuba, Colombia, Brazil*. In countries where a hegemonic nationalist regime existed – particularly Mexico and Turkey – we find examples of communist parties which pegged their entire transformative strategy

⁵ Omitted here is any mention of council communism, which downplays the role of the party: the contextualisation of Mexican communism here is in relation to other Marxist parties.

⁶ Graphic derived from Isaac Deutscher: Three Currents in Communism. In: *New Left Review*, 1964, 1/23; Fred Halliday: *The Making of the Second Cold War*, London, Verso, 1983; and David Priestland: *The Red Flag. A History of Communism*, New York, Grove Press, 2009, p. 232.

⁷ Vernon van Dyke: *The Position and Prospects of the Communists in France*. In: *Political Science Quarterly* 63 (1948), 1, p. 58

⁸ James G. Ryan: *Earl Browder. The Failure of American Communism*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1997, p. 249.

⁹ Barry Carr: *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1992, pp. 134-140

upon the progressive nature of that regime and its good will towards the Marxist left. In both Mexico and Turkey this has been attributed to the fact that socially-transformative revolutions (or pseudo-revolutions) had occurred in recent memory. "Turkish Communism was stifled at birth by the prior success of Kemal Ataturk's independence movement", argues Ahmet Samim;¹⁰ similarly, Robert Alexander (and many others) claim that the precedence of the Mexican Revolution precluded a communist second.¹¹ Importantly, whether these claims are causally 'true' or not, this logic was internalised by the local communist parties (and in the Mexican case by most of the broader Marxist left). This also occurred to a lesser extent in nationalistic democracies including the United Kingdom where following the Second World War, the Communist Party of Great Britain strongly endorsed the Labour Party only to be attacked and marginalised thereafter. The lack of a resistance heritage in these communist parties was clumsily substituted with jingoistic support for militarism and a vociferous opposition to class conflict during wartime and shortly thereafter. In Brazil, the communist party struck a deal with Getulio Vargas and strongly supported him as the Second World War came to a close; in Colombia, the party vacillated between supporting conservative and liberal candidates in 1946, harking back to the 'social fascist' line to denounce Gaitan before (too late) rallying to his cause.

3. Scandinavian Communism – *Finland, Sweden, Norway*. Set against relatively liberal, moderate bourgeoisies, CPs in Scandinavia were able to negotiate in a politically receptive and secure context. The Finnish case has unique caveats: first, the right had allied with Nazi Germany and second, there were no 'buffer' states between Finland and the Soviet Union. Hostility to the Soviet Union was therefore avoided in the postwar period, allowing a degree of cooperation between the Finnish Communist Party – "a mass party proportionally as large as the French or Italian CP's" – and other more moderate parties.¹²

4. Western European Parliamentary Communism – *France, Italy, Finland*. Eurocommunism *avant la lettre*, this mass party variant of communism was largely urban and well-integrated, representing both the intelligentsia and the industrial proletariat. It is one of the most enduring forms of communism, and would split from the Soviet world in its later Eurocommunist metamorphosis. In its 1940s-1950s form, Deutscher characterises it as the right wing of global communism (along with Titoism); with the 'Salerno Turn', Togliatti had moved towards a non-revolutionary, parliamentary approach during the Second World War despite the enormous strength of the Partito Comunista Italiano. Abse suggests that this "paved the way for the PCI's relegation from a position of strength as the political representative of the vanguard of the armed anti-fascist struggle to a position of weakness as a marginalized opposition during the 1950s"; that is, a renunciation of the strength drawn from 'resistance heritage' (below) and a voluntary moderation of both demands and methods.¹³ Magri ascribes the following characteristics to the P.C.I., which also broadly apply to the French and (to a lesser extent) Finnish parties: "It sought to combine partial reforms, broad social and political alliances and a commitment to parliamentary action with resolute social struggles and an explicit, shared critique of capitalist society; to build a highly cohesive, militant party, rich in ideologically trained cadres but with a mass base; and to

¹⁰ Ahmet Samim: The Tragedy of the Turkish Left. In: *New Left Review* 1/126 (1981), p. 63.

¹¹ Robert J. Alexander: *Communism in Latin America*, New Brunswick-New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1957, p. 319.

¹² See Goran Therborn: Swedish Communism. End of an Interlude. In: *New Left Review* (1969), 1/58; and Pertti Hynynen: The Popular Front in Finland. In: *New Left Review* (1969), 1/57, p.3

¹³ Tobias Abse: Judging the PCI. In: *New Left Review* (1985), 1/153, p. 7.

uphold its affiliation to a world revolutionary camp, enduring the constraints that this implied but gaining for itself a relative autonomy.”¹⁴

5. Resistance Heritage Communism – *France, Italy, Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia, China, Indonesia, North Korea*. Where communists had played particularly prominent roles in resistance movements, an increased (sometimes spectacularly so) legitimacy was usually accorded to their political position. This led to strengthened bargaining positions in many cases, though in that of Greece it ensured the hostility of the British government and quickened the descent into civil war. While not a type of ideology, a resistance heritage was a structural characteristic which in most cases significantly changed the context in which communists operated, with a variety of results.

6. Balkan Communism – *Yugoslavia, Greece, Bulgaria, Albania*. The proposed creation of a communist union of Balkan states was met with consternation by Stalin whenever it was raised between 1945 and 1948. Yet for a brief period during the latter part of the Second World War, a coherent functional conception of Balkan federal communism existed. With the legitimacy garnered from resistance and in several cases a left plurality, communists hoped to create a regional bloc distinctly separate from the existing model provided by the Soviet Union. The federal aspect of this project (“a further break with small-nation nationalism that had so hampered these countries before the war”) recalls the integrationalist imperative present in the actions of many early communists hailing from the Caucasus region.¹⁵ Note further that the Yugoslavian communists aimed to forge direct links with Burmese, Indian and Chinese communist parties (i.e. not via the Soviet Union) in the period between the winding-up of the Comintern and the foundation of the Cominform.¹⁶

7. Gramscian Marxism – *Italy, some influence in Andes*. In some respects similar to Trotskyism in that it contained critiques of both Stalinism and fascism. A creative and militant version of Marxism which is often interpreted as being in conflict even with aspects of Leninism. It built upon and adapted Soviet Bolshevism for a Western European context, in some ways reflecting the ‘locally-adapted Marxism’ of Mariátegui. Italian communism was for many years engaged in tug-of-war (or perhaps an uneasy alliance) between the *realpolitik* of Togliattian leadership and the idealism of Gramsci’s legacy. Reflecting on the twin foundations of Leninism and Gramscianism in influencing the P.C.I., Magri attributes to the latter two key ‘themes’: first, the categorisation of the Risorgimento as “an ‘unfinished revolution’ (due to its omission of the agrarian question)”; and second, the “relative importance and autonomy of the superstructure”, a point which directly contradicted contemporary Stalinist doctrine.¹⁷ As David Harvey points out, Gramsci held a broad definition of the working class including both proletarian and semiproletarian elements, and he sought to reconcile the demands of both. Like Trotskyism and (later) Maoism, Gramscian Marxism was strongly internationalist.¹⁸

8. Soviet State Communism – *Soviet Union, Mongolia, Cambodia*. Socialism in one country, administered in rigidly hierarchical fashion and with a factional monopoly of ideology. A command economy model (or aspiration to such) administered in authoritarian fashion.

¹⁴ Lucio Magri: *The Tailor of Ulm*, London, Verso, 2011, pp. 12-13.

¹⁵ Tony Judt: *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, London, Pimlico, 2007, p.141.

¹⁶ See J. Čavoški: *Overstepping the Balkan Boundaries. The Lesser Known History of Yugoslavia's Early Relations with Asian Countries. New Evidence from Yugoslav/Serbian Archives*. In: *Cold War History* 11 (2011), 4.

¹⁷ Magri, *The Tailor of Ulm*, p. 40.

¹⁸ See Peter Thomas: *The Gramscian Moment*, London, Haymarket, 2011.

Inward-looking, security-focused and “poorly equipped to spread its influence in this newly radicalized world”, though attractive to parties in impoverished European states thanks to the model by which “planning was seen as a panacea”.¹⁹

9. National Liberation Communism – *Indochina, India*. This form of communism drew great popular support from what would become its ideological weakness: the tension between socialism and anti-imperialism as the primary political emphasis. As William J. Duiker describes Ho Chi Minh as “half Lenin, half Gandhi”, so ‘National Liberation Communism’ was an uncomfortable alliance of socialist revolutionaries and anti-imperialist nationalists. In India, the communist left was “crippled by its early failure to recognize the obvious, that Independence ushered in a form, however backward, of nationally based capitalism, and that the mode of class rule, however weak in comparison with the West, remained bourgeois-democratic since 1947”.²⁰ This applied to several cases where counterproductive alliances were made with bourgeois-democratic forces. In Vietnam, though, the tension was set aside during a long military campaign for national liberation (and subsequent capitalist development); in Cambodia the attempt to fuse anti-colonial nationalism and a radical new vision of society was manifested in grotesque fashion in the anti-modernism, autarky and extreme xenophobia of the Khmer Rouge.

10. Asian Heterodox Communism – *China, Iran, Indonesia*. I refer to this communism as heterodox since in each case traditional value sets were confidently integrated with Marxist ideology. In the Indonesian case, a strongly anti-capitalist (and arguably atavistic) communalism was allied with an imported variant of Marxism. This syncretic approach, which integrated an Islamic interpretation of socialism, survived until 1952 and the accession of Aidit as leader.²¹ In the Iranian case external events intervened and later the party was afflicted with the same dilemma as that of National Liberation Communism – whether to place political emphasis on socialism or anti-imperialism.

11. Third World Marxism (Non-Colonial) – *Peru, Bolivia, Colombia*. Mariátegui argued that Marxism should be adapted to a local context in a parallel manner to Gramsci. Such ‘locally-adapted Marxism’ in the Peruvian context meant a conditional alliance with what was identified as a progressive section of the bourgeoisie, but the severance of this alliance when it became clear that such an alliance was used as a means of control over the working class rather than as a tool of emancipation. This led in other cases to a somewhat eccentric policy with regard to support for non-communist candidates. A strong measure of (occasionally atavistic) anti-capitalism also existed in this variant of communism.

12. Early Trotskyism – *Bolivia, Sri Lanka*. Following the first postwar congress of the Fourth International in 1946, the decision was made not only to develop the existing Trotskyist parties but also – where possible – to infiltrate and attempt to win over sections of “reformist, centrist and Stalinist organizations”.²² In both Bolivia and what was then Ceylon, the larger section of the communist left was Trotskyist during the early Cold War.

¹⁹ See Priestland, *The Red Flag*, p.232; and Archie Brown: *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, New York, Ecco, 2009, p.148.

²⁰ Achin Vanaik: *The Indian Left*. In: *New Left Review* (1986), 1/159, p. 49.

²¹ Julius Braunthal: *History of the International*. Volume III: *World Socialism 1943-1968*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1980, p. 302.

²² Robert J. Alexander: *Trotskyism in Latin America*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1973, p. 14.

Returning to my own research, I will conclude by setting the main currents of Mexican communism into the provisional global schema outlined here. The Partido Comunista Mexicano (P.C.M.) certainly had phases of extreme dissolutionism and nationalism - the latter being more characteristic over time - but both tendencies worked in tandem for long periods. It was an anti-revolutionary party in practical terms, supporting the *oficialista* line that Mexico had already had its 'real' social revolution and the job of all progressive elements was to support its institutional embodiment, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (P.R.I.). Similarly, the Partido Popular (P.P.) pursued something akin to a classic popular front. It played down its socialist ideology (at times removing it altogether) and urged the amelioration of class conflict in the wider struggle against fascism and imperialism, neither of which posed an existential threat to Mexico in the 1940s or 1950s.²³ The independent left (some of whom later formed the Partido Obrero-Campesino Mexicano, or P.O.C.M.) harboured communist currents similar to *Mariateguista* Andean Marxism while often evoking national liberation and anti-colonialism when Mexico was characterised as "semi-feudal" or "semi-dependent". The small number of Trotskyists, meanwhile, were ensconced in their own global communist tradition.

I invite constructive dialogue on any of the points raised here, though I am particularly keen to hear of case studies of mid-century communisms which display characteristics that are fundamentally at odds with other contemporary examples and those which attempted to bypass the Soviet 'metropolis'.

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²³ Interestingly, the reconstituted left of the 1970s would be compared by Barry Carr to the Eurocommunist parties across the Atlantic. See Barry Carr: Mexican Communism 1968-1981. Eurocommunism in the Americas? In: *Journal of Latin American Studies* 17 (1985), 1, pp. 201-228.