

A Maoist organization in 1970s Britain

The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, 'Oh save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!' (Virginia Woolf, The Waves, 1931)

The limits to friendship imposed by revolutionary commitment¹

“We have friends all over the world,” so went one of the Maoist songs of the 1960s/70s. And, commenting on this, a situationist/anarchist wrote around that time –not entirely unfairly –“but you don’t know the people who live next door.”

Well, we couldn’t, could we? After all, we were the vanguard of the revolutionary movement, and living under the capitalist system, we had to be clandestine, since we were a threat to its stability and continued existence. Did we have to be clandestine? Were we really clandestine? Some of us seemed to be, looking out from the inside. But maybe even those in the leadership had neighbours who knew them –probably not their political roles, but who knows? They had brothers and sisters and other relatives and current or former work acquaintances, people who knew them from school or university, and so on. But going out to sell newspapers and give out leaflets in the streets made you a fairly identifiable figure, didn’t it?

At one stage, on a trip down to London, our unit leader explained that each of us had to have a pseudonym for the meeting we were going to, and for all future meetings. I think I chose the name “Fred” –or was that another name I had used on another occasion? However, I was also called “Robert” in the factory where I was working. Imagine forgetting the rule at a meeting and calling out to one of your local comrades in their real name –“Pauline, Pauline!” or “John, John!” –and Pauline or John not responding, and you insisting and she or he ignoring you and then you suddenly realizing and everyone realizing what had happened, and how embarrassed you would be! ...Especially if the hierarchs were present and were watching all this and, however discreetly, scrutinizing you...

I remember meeting a comrade at one of those meetings in London in the 1970s, someone from a different unit to mine who I only met that once and whose name I don’t think I ever knew. He seemed a decent person and friendly, but we only talked briefly about some aspect of Marxism or something. Then, a couple of weeks later, I was visiting London and for some reason or other went to the London School of Economics, where I saw him again standing in wait by a door. I greeted him and he ignored me. Perhaps he had not heard me –so I greeted him again, and he turned away... I could never understand those attitudes; but that particular experience was emblematic.² I asked a leader why it had happened and he said that probably that person was on a mission and was not allowed to “know you.” What was happening was that Britain, in the thrall of parliamentary democracy, for all its social inequality, was being treated by us *as if* it were under a fascist dictatorship. We had convinced ourselves that there was no difference between it and fascism (at least for certain purposes), and this was actually quite easy to do. It was quite easy to become hermetic too, thanks to the imbibing of Marxism-Leninism, the revolutionary discipline that went with it, and the umbrella-like role of the Party.

¹ The theme will be repeated throughout this account, based mainly on personal experience. This is a first draft, an attempt to recall and start to analyse. Thus, what follows consists of some brief sketches covering a number of interconnected aspects, which will hopefully raise some questions.

² However, I should point out that in my first year in the organization I did exactly that to someone who had supposedly been “disgraced” for accepting that his mother bailed him out of prison after he was arrested on a demonstration.

Maoist groups

Where did all the Maoist groups come from? The monolithic communist parties went into a process of fragmentation after World War II, especially after Nikita Khrushchev's so-called "secret speech" and the Hungarian uprising in 1956, which for many former supporters undermined Stalin's reputation. Then, first Albania and then China split from the Soviet Union, denouncing it as "revisionist". Thus were born the Maoist organizations that had their heyday in the 1960s and 1970s.³

Here, while I can only speak with any kind of authority about my own experience –and this was with only one such Maoist group amid a myriad of others (ours cut off from all of theirs; theirs maybe cut off from one another and maybe not⁴) –I think it is not too much of a heroic step to generalize on that experience, given that the history of the Marxist-Leninist movement –its recurring splits and in-fighting –was hardly conducive to any sort of permanent friendship between adherents. What I do not know is whether any of these other groups had such a charismatic leader as the "Party" (see below).

The Chinese used to say of sport (table tennis, in particular): friendship first, competition second. I wonder if that were ever really true, because in everyday M-L politics, while the word "competition" was a dirty one, one sensed that competition did exist within –discreetly –not to mention the rivalry between the groups. Whether or not today you think the narrative of the Maoist-Stalinist organizations was absurd⁵, it had some effect –clearly on certain young people in the 1960s. So at this point I ask myself two questions: 1) who were leading these parties and groups; and 2) who was likely to support such parties and groups?⁶

I actually know very little about the medley of groups, so tied was I to the one I had chosen –and I think most of us were like that: tied in. I just remember some of the names and odd fragments, although I have been trying to piece things together for the past few years. In Britain at the time (the '60s-'70s period) there were three or four major groups, the largest being a split-off from the CPGB called the CPB (ML), headed by two men at the time, Reg Birch and Bill Ash (referred to by the likes of us as the "Birch-Ash clique"). It had a following in the unions, the AUEW (engineers union) in particular, as Birch sat on its executive, giving the CPB (M-L) prestige in representing the all-hallowed Proletariat. Then there was the Communist Federation of Britain (M-L), which, as its name suggests, was made up of a lot of different groups, mainly drop-outs from the CPGB, I think (its history went back to the "original split" led by old Etonian Michael McCreery in the early 1960s⁷).

Lastly, there was "the Party"⁸, a group that apparently came from nowhere. When I entered its ranks it was called the M-L Movement, then later on, after a founding meeting, it started calling itself the M-L Party. Based in Britain, it was however, the brainchild of a Punjabi, Comrade B., a microbiologist who lived in North America, and who also established and headed the M-L Party in Canada and several other M-L parties (including one in Ireland). In fact, Indian Marxist-Leninists (opposing one another) were quite plentiful in Britain at the time, immigrants due to the historical connection originally established by British colonialism and the difficulty of surviving in India where such organizations were generally proscribed.

In those days, "gurus" were very important –they were evident in all the main left-wing organizations.⁹ Thus it was with Cde. B., touted as a great intellectual and extremely militant¹⁰, sort of larger than life. He had studied in Canada and learned how to influence other students by practising a type of syncretism with

³ I sensed a resurgence of these groups from the beginning of the 21st century.

⁴ Given that most traced their origins back to the CPGB, they probably knew each other, including each other's histories; we did not.

⁵ We shall refer to this narrative later.

⁶ Ditto.

⁷ McCreery, son of a famous English general, died in 1965 at the age of 36.

⁸ I shall refer to it in this way, as well as the M-L Party.

⁹ The Situationiste Internationale in France had its anti-guru in Guy Debord, still treated as a guru by devotees.

¹⁰ To give an idea of the child-like innocence of the young people who supported him, one of them told me when I first got involved how impressed he was by Comrade B.'s militancy: Comrade B. didn't go to bed, he told me, but sat up all night reading Mao's writings.

existentialist literature, using its language to push Marxism-Leninism –the reason would have been clear a few years earlier when Jean-Paul Sartre et al were popular among young people. But this syncretism was surely a throwback to Marx’s metamorphosis of Hegel, in which Marx turned the latter’s thesis “upside-down”, while retaining Hegelian terminology. In his manifesto, the Punjabi used the terms “going-out” and “going-in” to describe the fruitless wanderings of the petit-bourgeois individual, terms taken originally from Heidegger, one of Sartre’s philosophical mentors. Then there is the term, “anti-consciousness-beyond-itself-in-itself”, a term emblematic of his manifesto, and obscure enough to be incomprehensible to most but still alluring to some, regardless of whether they could make head or tail of it –one of his theatrical props, no doubt.

Like the other forces on the left –and like the “revisionists” of Eastern Europe –he denounced the Soviet leaders and their ilk.¹¹ One can see that the political narratives going around at the time were legion – confusingly they used the same words for different phenomena. People like me, who empathized with the rebellions that were going on and needed a handy guide, were likely to fall into one or other of them, fearing that we would be left wandering in circles for ever, which is what happened anyway, but within a narrower circle, though thanks to our ideological armouring, we believed we were making progress.

Changing the World

When I started writing this, I tried to put it into an aims and achievements framework. Thus I wrote: Were the Party ever to write its own history, I think it would have to focus on the matter of achievements; of course there can be no achievements without goals. Its overall goals may have been clear enough: to change the world by overthrowing the existing system of capitalism and establishing a socialist system modelled on the Soviet Union (in Lenin’s and Stalin’s times) and on China (this was before Mao’s death). It would be hard to answer such a broad question as to whether we made any progress in changing the world, so I needed to be more specific:

Did we raise people’s consciousness in Britain about the class nature of society? Did our actions expose as exploitative the nature of the existing system? How did we contribute towards the overall goal of establishing socialism? Did we inspire the workers to fight for their rights? Did we actually win any battles to do with pay and conditions, or the rights of minority groups, among other things? And were people less inclined to support parliamentary politics and take revolutionary actions as a result of our work?

And on the sectarian front:

Did more and more people see through the “bankrupt views” of other organizations on the left, such as the Trotskyists and Anarchists? Did we prove that the other Maoist organizations were “neo-revisionists” and not serious about changing the world?

Moreover:

Did we “enlighten” people as to the true nature of the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin? In particular, did people see that Stalin had been the “great leader” and not the “terrible tyrant” he was portrayed as in “bourgeois propaganda”? And so on...

I realized that I was in no position to answer this jumble of questions. The sectarian questions, divisive ways of turning people away from other organizations on the left and pulling a few of them into the Party, were something we revelled in in those days,¹² and so easy at the time (we weren’t the only ones who did it). I doubt whether any progress was made here, although the latter-day Stalinists seem more sophisticated. On

¹¹ We’ll look at this terminology later.

¹² The M-L groups kept this up among themselves, as did the Trotskyist groups among themselves, and so on ad infinitum.

the other fronts, it seems possible the Party made some progress, in a fragmentary way, perhaps, but I have no record to refer to.

Abandoning the aims and achievements format, though, what *seems* important was that in each struggle the Party participated in, it sought to draw attention to these longer- and shorter-term goals by manifesting what it believed to be the superiority of its ideas and analysis and its commitment to its programme through its members' bold and organized actions. Thus a trade union's fight to improve conditions at work would not only be supported to expose the modus operandi of capitalism and its lackeys in the trade union movement, but also the need for great change beyond this, while demonstrating the courage of those who held true to the Party's line. Given the approach, it was not so much a matter of winning battles, but engaging in them in a most committed way, being present in them as a sincere and active force, not trying to wheedle out better pay and conditions from the bosses –if these were won, so much the better, but they were not what this was all about. This was how, in our youthful altruism, we sought but to change the world.

What should have been revealed by our actions: pursuing these day-to-day struggles –against the bosses, against the police, and against capitalist power generally –meant sacrificing one's self, even to the point of losing one's life. People were surely impressed by this and inspired by the militancy and commitment displayed by members of the Party. However, many on the left, and probably some people in and around the Party, questioned the value of our sacrifices. Did this militancy and commitment really lead in any way towards the resolution of specific struggles, and to what extent did it open the road towards the long-term goal of establishing socialism? Did that militancy –the upholding of principles, as the Party would say – actually achieve anything more than could be gained in its absence –in fact, might not the presence of the Party in these struggles have played at times (even generally) into the hands of the authorities? Were its effects retrogressive? And this was paralleled by the view that our narrative about the state of the world, i.e. that it was the betrayal of Marxism-Leninism by the communist parties, not the failure of Marxism-Leninism that was the problem, so that the world was now in the hands of two super-powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, was not something unquestionable.

It was evident, however, that whether or not specific battles were actually won, zeal and acts of self-sacrifice did play a role beyond the individual supporter's desire to show the courage of her/his convictions, for it was hoped –and this was not simply the hope of the individual member –that if others were inspired by acts of bravery, they would look to the Party for some kind of lead. And this was demonstrably the case.

Thus, the Party's inner circle calculated, leaders would be born –and heroes would be possible. People would then be led back again on to the correct path, led by leaders, leaders trained by and dependent upon the inner circle. The Party, the inner circle, could humbly take the credit for this. So people came around the Party in response to the direction it upheld and the commitment it exhibited, the actions of its cadres –I certainly saw this happen, and could happily forget through which battles and thanks to what outcomes.

The Party periodically grew in size and although people came and went, like the waves of the sea, the general trend (including what some left behind when they left) seemed to be growth. Its own internal life became central to everything –the outside world of politics gave opportunities for its growth, but that was all until another outrage occurred, such as the government's plan in 1984-5 to close Britain's coalmines and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's war against Argentina in the Malvinas in 1982. Whether or not a particular struggle was actually resolved, leaders would be born.

Meanwhile, by engaging in particular struggles when other organizations were absent, the Party must have achieved some of its intended effects locally, inspiring individuals and, for a time, communities to stand up for their rights. But it also had unintended effects: by encouraging people to take more daring positions, and then leaving them on their own to pick up the pieces, the Party, with its very limited resources, left a trail of unfinished confrontations behind it, left behind people to face the police, employers, unemployment, the courts and prison, and so on. Covering its tracks, the Party moved on to some other struggle. As a

result, people –including members –were alienated. They were later disoriented by its changing political line and by its secrecy. The Party's utmost aim of preserving itself –its inner circle –revealed a lack of responsibility and a disdain towards people –as we shall see, this included its own people.

However, I find it extremely difficult to think about this as I deliberately blotted out so much of what happened from my mind when I was involved.¹³ Someone leaves your local unit; you don't know why; you don't ask why; you make no notes¹⁴ and you forget. I did not want to be critical of the Party's *raison d'être* and face the moralizing onslaught that would inevitably have been launched against me. To do so would have meant standing up to be counted –alone –to be challenged and daring to steer without a rudder. To have suggested that these comrades were being unfriendly would merely have brought down a barrage of scorn and sarcastic laughter –“comrades come first, friends second”.

It became increasingly hard to think critically, because one found one's self within a bubble where influences beyond the “Great Leaders”¹⁵ could not intrude. I know (and I knew) that I was not a leader, never really wanted to be one, but was content to follow. But 40-odd years later it is absolutely clear that we were going nowhere –in a tediously repetitive way, following a path that had already proven deceptive and counter-productive in various parts of the world (Stalin, Mao, Hoxha, to give the most obvious examples). Certainly, attempts were made to steer off that course by others, but they came to nothing substantial (as far as we could see). It's not so much that I cannot think of any struggles that we won when I was an active member; it's that I can think of the course of hardly any of these struggles. I cannot put my finger on the historical direction that actually defined our praxis and our contribution; we just seemed to spiral around.

To be honest, this spiralling went down as well as up, and also sideways –“at least”, supporters would say, “we maintained our presence as we awaited the ‘inevitable’, the revolution”. One zealot, a few years ago hailing a revolutionary musical composer in the Party, said something to the effect that: *his music was always in step* [emphasis] *with the revolutionary movement*. Asked to give examples of this *in-stepness*, I doubt whether anything substantial could have been said. It was a statement aimed at the captive minds of supporters¹⁶ who never doubted that the revolutionary movement could only go one way, forward, ignoring the possibility that it could also move negatively or just sideways. “No! In the last resort,¹⁷ it always made progress...” Marxism-Leninism always uses the language of *ideals*; by definition, it always moves ahead, axiomatically the proletariat is always revolutionary, even if its expressions on Earth¹⁸ are sometimes backward. We lived in a sort of ahistorical time, a resting place our minds found quite comfortable.

Using the criterion of growth, it may be argued that the Party made progress, as it did grow during the early 1970s –in quantity and, we shall assume, in quality too. Whether this was a reflection of its ideological strength is very questionable though, as much of this growth in numbers was due to certain particularities, e.g. the way it attracted students, especially of African and Asian origins who found themselves in a hostile environment and identified with an organization headed by a Punjabi. As far as workers were concerned its growth was less certain. Factories were certainly focused on and some low-paid employees, such as nurses. Obviously, key struggles were supported on that front, but the organization also (as mentioned above) pursued its own localized struggles. A few cadres were groomed to get skilled jobs, to lie low and establish roots among the workers.

¹³ As we shall see, my account can only be fragmentary as a result of this –relying on my memory reveals my own focus on things and this should be clear from one of the Party actions I refer to below.

¹⁴ This is an important point –note-taking, journal writing and so on were pretty well banned within the Party, further debilitating recall.

¹⁵ I mean Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao.

¹⁶ And any eager minds that might have been listening –who might latch on and admire this obscure group of people, who seemed to know something unknown to most, and hope...

¹⁷ As Leszek Kolakowski notes, this term is used throughout the Marxist-Leninist lexicon.

¹⁸ Paralleling the relationship Marxism establishes between “value” and “price”, viz., value is labour power embodied in commodities; price, its materialization on Earth, deviates in many ways from it.

At a more general level, the miners' strike of 1984-85 was an important event for the left in general. But it was a monumental disaster for the workers, and perhaps it symbolized the trail of disaster certain segments of the Left grew accustomed to leaving behind on its travels. I cannot say to what extent the Party made any gains out of this, though, through the experience, it does seem to have moved closer to the mainstream left than it had been before.

Certainly, though the Party's critical view of society, its cultivation of the historical works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin spread beyond its own confines –people who joined and later abandoned the Party were less blind to the iniquities of the society they lived in. Indeed, the critical eye was unleashed (it is possible that this was turned by some on Marxism-Leninism and on the Organization itself, whether openly or from afar, although I have no record of such).

I go in

So who was likely to fall under the spell of the Maoist groups? Again, I can only speak with any kind of authority about my own experience, because I simply didn't know my comrades that well. Looking back at my life I see how I was headed on a middle-class trajectory thanks to my parents, a trajectory that was also shaped by *their* own experiences, but shaped by mine in that I had attended a predominantly working-class school.

My parents in their early years aspired towards careers on the stage. The War intervened, afterwards they married and I was their first child. My father, unsuccessful in finding work as an actor, is forced to find work elsewhere –he ends up in publishing, while my mother becomes a full-time housewife. Their relative poverty, thanks to their initial career choices plus the War, leads them to live, now with two small boys, on a working-class estate. I play with the other children and pick up a working-class accent from them –my parents do not like this. With a full-time job, my father decides around 1953 to move to a more up-market area, further from London, and we live in a middle-class road and play with middle-class children.

But five years later he loses his job and, to cap this, the rent on the house we are living in is raised.

Fortunately, his father (my paternal grandfather) has a small property on the south coast to which we move. No more grass verges and woods to play in, just grey pavements and houses; we never get to know any of our neighbours. The school I am sent to is a rough boys' school with a working-class catchment area. My parents move again, far away from my school, which I continue to attend, but far away from the community it serves, reducing the chances of playing with children there and picking up a working-class accent again. I grow up thoroughly isolated, doing well at school but not acquiring all the social skills needed to get me through adolescence.

The English poet John Betjeman wrote that he loved his father unconditionally until he was about 11, after which he did not. Something similar happened to me; my relations with my parents became uncomfortable, probably in part because their values differed so much from those of the boys in my class at school. This does not happen to such an extent to my brother, who attends the right sort of school. At the end of my school days, my rebellion against my parents takes the form of a desire to go to art school. They don't want me to repeat the mistake my father had made of going into the arts, so when I fail there after two years, I am marched off to work at a bank, where I stay for less than a year, rebelling against the staid atmosphere I find there. Feeling alienated, I walk out of the bank one day, but later manage to get back into art school in London. There, I come for the first time to hear people my own age talking about politics, which had always bored me –put off entirely by what I sensed was the old-fashioned authoritarian tone of the newspapers my parents read. In fact, before this, when I was a little boy, I saw the way politicians were caricatured in newspaper cartoons and found it extremely cruel. I asked my mother how people could stand to be

pictured like that and she told me they were quite used to it. I thought then and there that I would *never* want to be a politician.

But then, back at art school, at the age of 21, I got to know some anarchists and self-styled leftists, probably identifying with them unconsciously because they came from humble backgrounds, whereas many other students had been privately educated. This was the generation of '68, and like my class at school, it was typically rebellious. I later split with the anarchists and went into the "Marxist-Leninist Party".¹⁹

Most of the young people who joined the Party in those days were from middle-class homes, though they tended not to come from families as marginalized as mine and had attended private schools²⁰. And some of them came from very privileged families; the father of one was a well-known political figure in his home country and his son seemed well connected. Several of the early Party members were sons and daughters of professionals, the father of one I remember was an officer in the Navy, the parents of others were in the arts or academia, and some were in business.

This is not to say that there were no young people from the working class, but they tended to be a minority at the beginning. I believe that part of the Party's allure for me was the presence of young people who had received a privileged education, and who legitimized for me the beliefs of the organization.

Going in and going out²¹

The Party was committed to doing hard political work among the workers, students, and other groups, such as minority ethnic groups, displaying that courage and commitment referred to above. You did not have much spare time, going out in the mornings before going to work to sell papers or give out leaflets, organizing at the place of work or at your college, giving out leaflets and selling papers before and after work, writing reports on your activities among the masses, organizing public meetings, taking part in unit meetings, and so on. One stood a good chance, too, of being arrested at demonstrations or on picket lines and then having to go to court, writing your defence and even going to prison –getting beaten up into the bargain, of course, all of which contributed to the reputation of the Party as an organization that led. One's whole life was swept up in the turmoil of struggle, with little free time to read or think, and not much beyond in the way of entertainment, but you knew what was going on in politics at the national, local and street levels.²² This shaped you. The question of friendship became merged into all of this –one's comrades came first, often to the exclusion (loss) of previous friends or to the exclusion of making new friends –and to the exclusion of one's parents and family. And comradeship, which for many stood in for friendship, could only last as long as one stayed the pace, giving one's years to the Party.

To grow up in such a sect and to find one's self suddenly alone –I mean abandoned by it –was a deeply distressing threat. While alienating many people around us with our denunciations of reactionaries, we (I) still held on to the hope that some time (soon) many others would join us and we would change the world. It is an experience that not a few people went through. I suppose that the kind of alienation it led to is a sign of our times. I don't believe the Maoists were the only ones on the left who suffered it –another British organization comes to mind here, the Trotskyist Socialist Labour League (also Leninist-oriented, of course), which was notorious for the high turnover of its members –and I imagine it affecting people well beyond the

¹⁹ The details of this shift may be interesting, but I leave them out of this account for reasons of brevity.

²⁰ Paradoxically, in Britain "public schools" and "private schools" mean basically the same thing –schools for which parents had to pay fees, as opposed to State schools which are free. However, I seem to recall that we used to think of private schools as day schools and public schools as boarding schools.

²¹ I use these terms in a different sense to that mentioned in respect to the manifesto; I refer to entering and leaving the Party.

²² You also knew what was happening internationally –always framed by the Party narrative.

political sphere.²³ While ideology played its cryptic role, as well as its other roles, the way people were kept busy clearly helped to maintain the mindless support demanded by the leadership.²⁴

This Party was certainly sect-like. It wasn't simply the ideology that made it so. But the fact that we had displaced ourselves—many of us had studied in higher education and, as mentioned above, came from middle-class families, and we should normally have been doing professional jobs. But we had largely dropped out—there I was, for example, working as a factory “hand”. This factory drew its work force from all over the city where I was living. There were those who lived in a nearby community, but I was not among them. I lived in a bedsit several miles away, a spatial reason for not associating with the workers after work, and an interesting coincidence with my isolated school-time experience, but the same was true for many of the workers who lived in communities far from work and nowhere near where I lived. Nevertheless, I would not have wanted to spend time after working hours with them (nor they with me) because we really had little in common—7am to 4pm Monday to Friday was quite enough.²⁵ But I also saw myself starting to fit into what I recognized much later in Hannah Arndt's description of the typical communist (or fascist) militant²⁶: a person without a will of their own, isolated from the society in which they lived—that is to say, while not associating with the factory workers socially, nor did I associate with anyone else—all I had was the Party, and that was becoming a rather distant affair, suffering dislocations in the 1970s—as far as I could make out, living as I was in one of England's provinces far from London.

Other political organizations on the left managed to maintain their connection with people of a similar culture. Many got professional jobs as university lecturers, teachers, or public servants, and this made them less sect-like, despite the ideology. This did eventually happen in the Party I belonged to, and my own isolation (of which I was quite aware) pushed me towards becoming a student again, trying to get a place at university. I managed to do this and 5 years later emerged with an M.A. in Economics.

However, truth generally suffered great discontinuity (exclusiveness) over the years. The organization had started with the slogan “Seek truth from facts to serve the people.” But as the years went by—if one stayed—one discovered that centralization and clandestinity meant one was not privy to much of what went on within the organization and when scandals broke—as they inevitably did—one discovered that the cover-ups were no less evident than in the commercialized world we had not ventured into or had stepped out of. The case histories in the next section illustrate this, but other events showed how constrained the search for truth had become—or rather, always was, given the kind of ideological formation we belonged to. This is where some of those within start to see their resemblance to those without, and maybe wonder why they have chosen to live in such a constricted space.

The people who led the Maoist groups (some of which later treated Mao as a “revisionist” and chose Albania and Enver Hoxha as their emblems) must have added something into the old CP mix to gain the sort of adherence to Marxism-Leninism they sought. But what did they add? Was it that they imposed a more severe discipline on their adherents than the old CPs had done? This would have included a narrowing of the prescribed texts and with it the breadth of knowledge and critical thinking that would have been permitted. Also, the attitude towards intellectuals in the old parties was used to explain the failures of these organizations and their descent into “revisionism”. All this was used to justify a more Spartan atmosphere. The strategy seems to have been to keep people engaged at every hour in “work among the people”, driven by catastrophic views about the state of the world—every second counts now, no room for relaxing one's grip, everything for the Party, etc. Everything else was subordinated to this, and the leaders were expected to devote their lives to organizing things. Study was therefore to be slotted in for the supporters. But it was to be dominated by the Marxist-Leninist “classics” as everything else was open to criticism and to be avoided, lest it derange one's thinking.

²³ It is worth mentioning that this Trotskyist group which attracted some quite well known people became caught up in an internal sex-scandal centred on its leader and split up.

²⁴ The Punjabi leader actually went through a phase of calling on members to “mindlessly do mass-work to support the Party.”

²⁵ I used to arrive each day with a copy of the Financial Times, and clung to economic data as a poet might have clung to metaphors.

²⁶ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, second edition 1958.

Case histories

*What's become of Waring
Since he gave us all the slip...²⁷*

As the 1970s drew to a close, it wasn't too difficult to see from within the tightly sealed Maoist –later ex-Maoist –sect that one was becoming or had already become increasingly sectarian²⁸, that one's local comrades and friends were becoming countable on less than ten fingers. This alone became stifling. One still had that anchor, but what conclusions could one draw from the narrowing of our circle –we used to have friends all over the world, didn't we?

I therefore belonged to a sect that proclaimed itself the Party of the Proletariat and whose membership was supposed to be growing. But, as this happened, the older members dropped away or were thrown out, never to be seen again in most cases²⁹ –one went along with the sectarianism, but feared it too. People who had been militant and zealous were now out of it –some of them getting decent jobs, some going who knows where. I want to give three or four brief case-studies to illustrate this.

I shall refer to the person in my first case-study as Michael –it was not his real name. He was from Africa, where his father was a well-known and highly respected doctor and political figure. It was Michael who was leading the organization in England when I stepped into it –the Movement (ML) –in 1969. He was about my age. He was a very charming person –physically and intellectually strong. I thought I had made a good friend. He could be very supportive, but also very hard, very intolerant –he was also able to make a sharp separation between his Party life and his personal life. I remember him often ridiculing others who had dropped out of the organization (“he has decided to get married”), usually people he had joined the organization with a couple of years before I came along, when they were students together. When I committed the unspeakable crime of criticizing and challenging another leader, also from his student days, he came down on me like a ton of bricks, and I was forever disgraced, not just by him, but by the inner circle and those close to them –well, there was more to it than just that.

And yet, despite his great fortitude one day he just disappeared –not in the Latin American sense. No, on a dull rainy English day, I and one or two others were taken by car to a certain city to attend a conference. On the way we stopped behind some shops and were told we could go and see him –we were not even told we were saying goodbye. There he was standing outside on the pavement looking rather cold and miserable. We shook hands and he greeted us with his usual smile –we didn't know what this was all about, and after that he was never heard of again. I supposed at the time that he had been sent or decided to go back to Africa to organize the revolution, but I suspected he had gone back to get married, and I never heard any more about him –a strong personality, rather too proud and intolerant, someone whom I had once thought of as a friend.

In fact, most of the people who had, alongside Michael, represented the first wave of Party members had dropped out by the mid-1970s –these were people who had collaborated with Cde. B. in *The Internationalists*. It surely tells us something about the organization's success referred to above. The leadership/Cde. B clearly did not care a hoot about the people who joined them –if they were students to begin with their continued existence in the Party's ranks could become a liability as the organization moved deeper into the working class. Hordes of people –especially from the Canadian chapter –were thrown out,

²⁷ Robert Browning, 1842.

²⁸ It should be noted that in its propaganda the Party denounced sectarianism, just as it denounced liberalism, revisionism, communalism, and a host of other “isms”.

²⁹ No physical death was involved here –ex-members simply moved out of reach. As one leader told me, with a glint in his eyes, they were “neutralized”, which is what he wanted to do to me.

ostensibly for following “wrong lines”, and the organization cleansed by this, celebrating Lenin’s slogan “better few but better”, marched on to its final destination.³⁰

Then there was the case of the man who fought the leader of the Irish M-L Party. I got on well with him – we’ll call him Sean. I got to know Sean on a campaign when we were sent to stir up the students in one of Britain’s northern universities. It was there that he told me about how unbearable his leader and her close group of supporters were. I expressed my support for him, but heard no more, until I was informed that his “attempted coup” had been an utter flop and that I had something to answer for. It was one of those situations where everyone had agreed to stand up when the leaders asked who supported him, and when it came to this only Sean stood up. He was denounced and exposed as a reactionary, revisionist, fascist etc., and that was the end of him. Many years later I tried contacting him as he lectures on business culture. But although he was pleased to hear from me to begin with, I never heard from him afterwards.

Michael was replaced as leader by a woman; we’ll call her Comrade Catherine; she was English, upper middle class and also about my age.³¹ She was never a friend of mine, but I still defended her as the leader of the organization, believed in her and tried to like her. However, she was arrogant and spiteful towards me because I had opposed her in the past –with Sean. Believing others did not see her the way I did, I therefore convinced myself that she must be right and I must be wrong. But I had been right to oppose her: she was indeed an arrogant person, believing herself to be superior to others, and it seems other Party members from top to bottom of the organization had reached the same conclusion as I had.

Anyway, one day she also had to go, and again there was plenty of secrecy over her departure. The Central Committee never mentioned her arrogant ways, although individual members admitted to me that she was well known for that. No, the supposed reason for “letting her go”³² was that she had clung on to Maoism after the split with Albania –in fact I never knew the “official” reason. Several other factors can be said to have played their part, one of which may have been the following.

This was the case of the “fascist infiltrator”, “Marjory”, which illustrates the point made above about the limits to truth in a sectarian organization. Cde. Catherine had befriended a young woman who had entered the Party. I had met this person briefly and had a very poor impression of her –she seemed extremely presumptuous and conceited. Apparently –and if the story is to be believed –Cde. Catherine lived with her. They seemed to suit each other, although Cde. Catherine was careful to maintain her superiority over Marjory in public.

One day I was told that this young woman had been exposed as a fascist infiltrator. But the story is not at all as simple as it was made to sound to me at the time. Nevertheless, I fell for it hook, line and sinker and continued to believe it (with lingering questions) even after contradictory evidence emerged. Another story that only reached my ears later was that she had been working for Britain’s internal intelligence organization MI5. I do not think either of these stories really hit the nail on the head. Certainly, she had been working in the fascist organizations and was undoubtedly sent by it into the Party as a spy. It also seems certain that she had some connections with State intelligence. However, the key to her case was to be found elsewhere. It was surely highly embarrassing for the Party leadership, especially for Cde. Catherine, famed for denouncing “liberals”.³³ What Marjory had done was pretty breathtaking, especially given her open friendship, simultaneously, with well-known fascists at one of London’s universities. Perhaps the Party

³⁰ In Canada, an alternative M-L grouping occurred partly (or entirely) due to these expulsions; in Britain this does not seem to have occurred, except in a very small way which we shall briefly refer to below.

³¹ She managed to head the Party in Ireland simultaneously.

³² Much later I was informed that she was told to “just go!”

³³ I assume that Cde. Catherine herself was genuine in this respect. Not only is it unnecessary to assume that she herself was a conscious State asset to explain what happened, but also unhelpful, simplistic and certainly non-provable based on what I know. What is essential here is to try to know what the players themselves did, thought, justified and believed.

called her a fascist infiltrator or an MI5 agent to protect her from reprisals. The full truth of this matter was, I believe, never explained to the Party beyond its inner circle of adherents.³⁴

I include this case because it illustrates the naivety and recklessness that characterized the Party –its isolation from what was going on, thanks to its sect-like existence –and played into the hands of those who wanted to know how it functioned, what sort of connections it had, who were its leading people, where its weaknesses and strengths lay, and so on. I do not think this was the only example of a successful infiltration and suspect that those groups (other Maoists, Trotskyists, the Labour Party, and so on) who wanted to get an idea of what it was all about, from the inside, customarily sent spies in to find out. I knew one such person who came from the largest Trotskyist party and stayed in the Party for about a year or two –his true identity was never made known, but he told me himself that it was that the SLL mentioned above that he supported.³⁵

The Party had no psychologists

Unless the reader has already concluded that anyone joining this sort of organization had to be mad, which I clearly would not accept (!), it is worth mentioning that the incidence of mental illness among members appears to have been quite high –this is obviously anecdotal as I have no data on it. I heard of several cases of Party supporters who came to suffer from mental/emotional problems.

One quite extreme case was that of a young woman who worked tirelessly for the party and became one of its sectarian fanatics. After several years of this, she began to see visions of Christ and ended up in a mental hospital, where fortunately she managed to cure herself³⁶. Over-committed, over-zealous and over-worked –these are the explanations I heard for her descent into mental illness. Her case was unpublicized and the leadership seems to have ignored her plight completely.

Another case was made very public –indeed, the reader may have heard of it here as it was in the news in 2013. This was the person at the centre of the notorious Brixton Maoist kidnapping case, an ex-patriot Malay Indian called Aravindan Balakrishnan who had been a member of the Party’s Central Committee before he split with it in the mid-1970s. There is no doubt in my mind that he was suffering mentally long before this story emerged in the British press³⁷. However, rather than being the isolated victim of his ideology and situation, he made others his victims and is now languishing in jail. I do not know whether he has received any treatment, but I imagine he would be an extremely difficult patient to treat, given his intelligence. However, apparently believing himself to be God, and that the Chinese had taken over the world and are today using a satellite to control our minds, it is clear that he has gone a long way since his days as a member of the Party.

I remember several more cases of emotional or psychological disturbance occurring within the Party, often associated with affairs of the heart. Around 1972, two young comrades were given a Party marriage, their revolutionary ardour standing in for mutual “bourgeois” love. After moving to another city to set up a new unit, the revolutionary husband had an affair with another comrade. Discovering this, the revolutionary wife, who incidentally had been one of the Party’s most fanatically sectarian assets since the end of the 1960s, left the unit and the Party, taking the petty cash with her, never to be seen again. I remember her

³⁴ It is not implausible that Cde. Catherine knew this infiltrator’s true identity from the start, as she had maybe “explained” herself to Cde. Catherine –who perhaps saw her as a way of spying on the ultra right. However, having been seen openly cavorting with fascists by an innocent Party supporter or member (who reported this to his/her unit leader) Marjory had had to be ejected.

³⁵ Naturally, I reported this to the Party, which never sent a word back about it.

³⁶ I was told this by a former comrade –the woman discovered that focusing on a simple task like peeling an apple or knitting a sweater enabled her to overcome her hallucinations eventually.

³⁷ When he split from the Party, and specifically from Cde. Catherine, back around 1974, she let us know that he had previously been picked up in the street at night shouting wildly. My limited knowledge of him was of a highly intelligent and well-informed, yet unbalanced and habitually hysterical man –a hysteria justified in his view by the world situation, although English racism surely had something to do with it.

telling me some time before this that the leader of the Party in Ireland had said to her that if she did not continue to support the Party she would go mad, something she took very seriously. However, with her marriage wrecked and with Michael (see above) now gone, perhaps she felt less fearful about the prospect of throwing up everything and leaving.

The “other woman” did no better, because on discovering what had happened, the Party leadership, in the figure of Cde. Catherine, recalled the husband and sent him to serve elsewhere, as he was one of their/her best assets. Thus, the unit collapsed. The “other woman” had previously had a similarly disastrous experience with another “comrade”, who had been pulled out of her area, probably at Cde. B.’s promptings, and sent off to serve the Party elsewhere. It was no wonder, therefore, that she suffered a nervous breakdown.

Apart from Balakrishnan, who had actually split, the others were victims of the organization, and were ignored and left to their own devices. It was the same for people who had been arrested on demonstrations and jailed –as far as I know, the leadership never visited them, indeed hardly even communicated with them –for reasons of security in order not to compromise their positions as leaders...

Political definitions

One of the lacunae in 1970s Maoism –let’s say, in Stalinist Marxism-Leninism, given that Maoism was a brand of Marxism that was itself dumped after the death of Mao –was its inability to explain really what had happened in the Soviet bloc and to point to groups like the Western Maoists that were also fighting revisionism in places like Poland, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, countries that were basically written off by the Maoists as “revisionist” –a few dissident groups were located, but hardly anything was known about them by us, and certainly not by me, despite the fact that dissidence was a growing phenomenon during those times. Mao was actually popular in some of the Soviet-bloc countries for some time –Romania under Nicolae Ceausescu, which moved somewhat beyond the Soviet orbit, comes to mind³⁸, but the opposition to Soviet domination in the Bloc also gave rise to support for Mao in other countries. However, I recall no interaction with groups that adopted Maoism in those places. Had I taken the trouble to really study the works of the well-known dissidents (Polish intellectuals, for example, like Czeslaw Milosz³⁹ and Leszek Kolakowski⁴⁰, who had experienced the invasions of their country by both the Nazis and the Soviets), I might have completely changed my attitude, but I’m day-dreaming... The Poles (et al) knew that the problem did not start with Khrushchev, but with Stalin –an offshoot of Lenin, who was an offshoot of Marx. Today, reading Leszek Kolakowski, I see how far we were/I was from the truth. Here the terminology gets confusing. We called the whole Soviet bloc “revisionist” but, as I learned later from Kolakowski, the parties in power were using that word to describe the opposition within their ranks, including Kolakowski himself –we had no word for them, and didn’t care about them anyway. And Kolakowski was happy to accept that title⁴¹, which meant that the bearer of it still believed in Marxism-Leninism (at least, to begin with). Clearly, some believed Stalin had betrayed Marxism-Leninism –not simply made some mistakes that were not “of principle”⁴² –while others believed that Lenin and the Leninist parties had betrayed Marxism. We, meanwhile, thought the Soviet bloc CPs and their adherents around the world had all betrayed Marxism-Leninism, but that Stalin and Mao had upheld it. Later, of course, Kolakowski and others abandoned Marxism altogether, and Kolakowski ended up embracing Catholicism and becoming a friend of Pope John Paul II –writing some things that I frankly cannot get my head around.

³⁸ Not to forget Ceausescu’s cosy relationship with ultra-rightists from Europe and Argentina (the head of the fascistic Propaganda Due, Licio Gelli, seems to have been close); some Maoist groups in Western Europe in the 1970s actually allied with fascists and/or were manipulated by the ultra right and State intelligence operations (see various essays on this by Jeffrey M Bale). Meanwhile, some young people in the Soviet Bloc countries were gravitating towards fascism –in opposition to their communist-led States.

³⁹ *The Captive Mind*, 1953.

⁴⁰ *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1978.

⁴¹ As was Eduard Bernstein some 60 years earlier.

⁴² The phrase “he made no mistakes of principle” was habitually used by Comrade B. to fob off questions about Stalin.

Some critical thoughts on Marxism-Leninism

Loyalty vied with the critical view. Leading people were of two main kinds: those whose brave loyalty counted most and those whose theoretical grasp stood out. While loyalty dominated the organization at its lower levels, we can assume that the upper echelons combined this with a stronger grasp of theory. And while there were always many people in the Party avid to know what was really going on in the world, the words of Marx could be thrown back at them: "Before me, the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it." This became vulgarized to mean: "I don't want to *understand* the world; I want to *change* it!" If the ordinary member showed too much of a desire for theory and understanding, this was seen as a waste of resources, when he or she could be outside preaching the line laid down by the Party, this being represented as his/her *role* –a cog or wheel in the revolutionary machine.

This brutishness was evident in a statement I heard voiced by some members in the early 1970s to the effect that peasant musicians in China were proud of their gnarled fingers because the plodding music they played would reflect the hearts of the working people whereas the delicately cultivated fingers of concert musicians could only please the bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie.

The Party leadership talked a lot about combining action with analysis, but always put the propagandistic emphasis on action, and its student members were derided by other students in the early days for their lack of imagination. How any creative work ever emerged from its ranks was always a mystery to me –I for one was unable to carry on doing work in that sphere. The blunt-headed was cultivated over the sharp-minded, which was reserved for the Party elite who, with a few exceptions (and their output was greatly limited by their Party duties), made little if any contribution to the creative arts. Nevertheless, creativity from the mid-1970s was allowed to grow (given its usefulness in attracting innocent souls) to a certain extent among a group of musicians who associated themselves with the Party. The battles they and other creative artists within the Party engaged in against the Party hierarchy cannot be gone into here. However, some of it has been revealed.⁴³

Really, though, the trajectory of the M-L party should have been questioned from the start –to present the "consciousness" of a certain stratum of society (the working class) from outside that stratum now seems specious, a mechanical relationship between human beings. People noticed that theatre played a role within all this, but those who stayed seemed unable to see that this was because the whole project was of a theatrical nature.

Over *there*, you have the working class and over *here*, *yes here*, is their consciousness. The Party of the Proletariat, from outside its ranks, suggests a weakness on the part of the proletariat, seemingly incapable of developing its *own* (correct) consciousness –needful of the intelligentsia to philosophize and give it, the proletariat, its true "consciousness". Somewhere, Marx talks about the proletariat as the unconscious *material mass* that the advanced philosophers would activate to change the world.

"It is evident that the weapons of criticism cannot take the place of criticism of weapons; material force can only be overcome by material force, but theory becomes itself transformed into material force once it penetrates the masses. . . . Revolutions need a passive element, a material basis. A theory is realized in a people only in so far as it is the realization of the needs of that people. . . . It is not enough for thought to seek realization, but reality itself must seek the thought... Just as philosophy finds in the proletariat its material weapons, the proletariat finds in philosophy its intellectual weapons."⁴⁴

⁴³ See John Tilbury: Cornelius Cardew, a life unfinished (2008).

⁴⁴ From M.E.G.A. (*Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe: I 1 i*), taken from H.B. Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch*, 1955.

Stalinist bureaucracies are notorious for “discovering” and adopting today as theirs what they rejected yesterday as revisionist, anti-Marxist, etc. A notorious example would be Stalin’s agricultural collectivisation policy in the 1930s, which Trotsky et al had championed in the 1920s⁴⁵, and I suspect similar changes have occurred in the Marxist-Leninist stance since the 1970s –it can no longer be a simple matter of the revolutionary philosophers or “advanced intellectuals”⁴⁶ going out to and putting themselves at the service of and/or leading “the masses”, the “working class” –if it ever was. Up to a point, the Party was aware of a change of orientation in society during the 1970s, but it (or rather, its leadership, in particular the leading figure himself) did not follow this through, preferring to become the leader of the “intelligentsia”, the professional class and so on, *on behalf of* the proletariat.⁴⁷ Now look at Marx’s statement above and substitute the words “masses” and “proletariat” with “professionals and intelligentsia”. It now looks inept, yet this was the way the Party went about things –not exclusively towards the professionals and intelligentsia, but in search of Marx’s material basis, which had been adopted after him by Lenin, Stalin, Mao et al. The same can be said of Cde. B’s Party: his Party cadres wanting to *serve* the people, served the Party, becoming the leadership’s *instrument* to make the “material mass” its ultimate instrument. Unconsciously – even consciously –the committed were part of the design for the society. And unconsciousness played a far greater role than the Party was prepared to admit, whatever it may have said about practice nourishing political consciousness.⁴⁸

In his critical study of Marxism-Leninism, among other things, the English philosopher, H.B. Acton⁴⁹ notes that the Marxist materialist argument that mind is the highest form of matter is in no way equivalent to the Marxist model of society in which the economy is treated as the base on which the cultural superstructure is said to rest. While there are those who argue that mind is present in all matter, this can be ignored for present purposes because it is clear that the economic base has mental attributes, consisting as it does of productive forces, which include inventions and human ingenuity, and productive relations⁵⁰, which are the ways human beings relate to each other in production. Perhaps today’s Marxist-Leninists have discovered this, too, though if so they would also have to stop calling themselves Marxist-Leninists.

Who and what Marxism-Leninism includes and excludes may seem straight forward, but this is not always the case. The Soviet Union under Stalin, for example, embraced the philosopher Ernst Bloch, who took shelter there during the Nazi period in Germany. And yet his theories –elegantly seductive as they are – seem far from Marxism.⁵¹ Maybe, the same criteria were applied to the pragmatic loosening up on religion that helped the Soviet Union unite people against the Nazis in World War II. On the moral front, too, it is often thought that Stalin’s Russia was Puritanical. However, the existence of the Soviet Erotic Alphabet casts doubt on this.⁵²

The posthumous direction taken by the organization

What became of the organization I joined in 1969? I was an active adherent from that year until the mid-1970s. In the background were the doings of the Marxist-Leninist powers. These had been heralded by China denouncing the Soviet Union as “revisionist” in 1961, a short while after Khrushchev’s 1956 “secret speech” and the Hungarian uprising of the same year. The Cultural Revolution in China accompanied the growth of Maoism in the West and everywhere else (India, for example), actually representing a power struggle in the People’s Republic, during which a small minority within the Communist Party had supported

⁴⁵ This is not to say that what Stalin did to the Russian peasantry was right or that what Trotsky had proposed was exactly the same or that it was right either.

⁴⁶ Or, more likely, their followers.

⁴⁷ Others on the left were clearly conscious of this change –for instance the English communist historian, Eric Hobsbawm who began as a Stalinist in the CPGB, but in his later life referred to the intellectuals as a “demographic phenomenon”.

⁴⁸ See note 24.

⁴⁹ Ibid. note 44.

⁵⁰ Once this is noted, I suppose there will be those who argue that all this can be traced back to matter –the primary sector.

⁵¹ See Kolakowski on this.

⁵² A book of erotic illustrations by Sergei Merkurov, published around 1931 –a mixture of orgiastic scenes in which both heterosexual and homosexual acts are depicted.

Liu Shao-Chi (now written as Liu Shaoqi). Lin Piao's death, during his supposed flight from China, occurred in September 1971, and suggested another power struggle. The last great international split in the M-L movement was in 1978, when the Chinese and Albanians denounced each other. On each occasion, the Marxist-Leninist parties took one side or the other, or went their own way, which included disintegrating completely as organizations. Finally, with the death of Enver Hoxha, Albania went into a period of turmoil and eventually abandoned its Stalinist road.

At each stage, then, as the splits occurred the various organizations that had associated themselves with the M-L parties in power took one or another side. When China split from the Soviet Union a large number of organizations took China's side. New entrants then, such as me, were largely unaware that people had been splitting from the Soviet side for some time before that –of course, we were informed about the split Trotsky had led, and the Trotskyists were our deadly enemies. But we knew hardly anything about the way CPGB members had reacted to Khrushchev's 1956 revelations or Hungary, and less about previous and later splits from the CPGB. In fact, none of this mattered to us –we had a neatly-formed version of world history which was now dominated by the two super-powers, the United States and the Soviet Union –everything could be explained by that and by China's great leadership under Mao Tsetung (since those days, Zedong). We were innocent, very headstrong and in great need of sturdy anchors.⁵³

In the second big international split the party I was in proudly took Albania's side, leaving the Maoists to find their own way in life; the Party also changed its name at that time. I was less involved by then, but continued to be dominated by the ideology right through the 1980s and into the 1990s. I went down to a meeting in London one Sunday, and all of a sudden the people who had been faithful followers of Mao weeks before were singing songs ridiculing China's revisionism, as exposed by Albania's Enver Hoxha. There was no attempt at explaining why this had happened –for that we relied entirely on what Albania had to say. The Party just switched from Mao to Hoxha, claiming that we had "always" been Marxist-Leninists, never Maoists, that Stalin was the great "continuator" of Lenin and Hoxha the great "continuator" of Stalin, and so on.

When the Party changed its name it entered a period of robust struggle, in which the fight against fascism became a key part of its agenda. And heroes would be born –it was during this period that three young people, including a leader of the Party, were killed. Their deaths were certainly suspicious, but foul play was never proved, and the Party (as was its wont) soon lost interest in investigating them because the "struggle for socialism must continue".

I had left Britain by the time the East Europeans were in full-scale revolt against Soviet domination, and it never occurred to me that Albania would follow the same route as the others. But it did –and it shocked me, having believed that Albania was impregnable –wasn't it the "bold land of eagles"? Something really must have changed this time, I thought. And a pattern started to impose itself on my mind, very belatedly: Stalin dies, the Soviet Union is taken over by "revisionists"; Mao dies, China is taken over by "revisionists" (except that Enver Hoxha told us Mao was always a "revisionist"); and now Enver Hoxha dies and Albania is taken over by revisionists. Clearly, we had been missing something!

But what did the Party do? No longer living in Britain, I could see very little of what happened. I saw some steps being taken in the direction of Cuba –a new world anchor for Marxist-Leninists? Despite having described Fidel Castro as just another "revisionist" since the 1960s (and see more on this below), the big leader met with him and praised him. Cuba was added to the list headed "possible".

Footloose but far from fancy free, in the end the Party found its final anchor: North Korea. And it, alongside several of the other M-L formations and well-wishers in Britain, have stuck with Kim Jong-un ever since.

⁵³ Few if any of us had travelled much. I met a sinologist, a very kind person, whom I had known at college a decade before, by chance one day at a bus-stop in London but I realized I was in no position to argue with him about the Cultural Revolution (which the Party supported at the time). Experience sometimes transcends doctrine! The doctrinaire is left to murmur, "Well, maybe" and "Let's see".

An internationalist

The big leader of the Party, as noted above, was Comrade B., who died in 1997, a tall, heavily-built man with glinting brown eyes shaded by heavy dark eyebrows. My memory of him is primarily one of smouldering rage, dark eyebrows jutting out above angry eyes, wisps of shiny black hair falling across his face, as he denounces U.S. imperialism, the British colonialists, the Indian ruling class, the revisionists and neo-revisionists, or some member who had gone astray. That image of him has been largely removed from public consumption.

You came to expect an unexpected retort to any question or comment you might dare ask the Punjabi volcano. His laugh was typically reproachful –of course, he didn't always laugh like that, but this was what I remember of it. Above all, he was theatrical: he knew how and when to switch moods, how to capture attention, how to make an idea stick. Of course, all this influenced me, entering my psyche, becoming part of me. I might try to dispel it now, but such personalities ruled our world.

A lot could be said about him, but much of his life is a mystery –an intentional one, of course. Some might remember his gentle manner. I remember his bullying ways, including the chauvinism he could turn on against women. These attitudes were never far from the surface. Of course, his political anger was justified by the terrible history of British colonialism in India, the cruelty it inflicted systematically on the Indian people, the betrayal of the Soviet revisionists. ...Among so much else...

My knowledge of how he began his M-L party in Britain is very fragmentary and is based on conversations I had in the early 1970s with some of the people who had been involved. It is also possible to access a few of the documents they left behind them. These are a reminder of the anger that existed among students in the 1960s at the atrocities going on worldwide in the name of democracy, emblematic of which was the U.S. war against Vietnam. The documents also give us an inkling of the way this anger was channelled politically and ideologically.

One of the characteristics of those who called themselves *The Internationalists* was the denunciation as reactionaries and fascists of the well-known unaligned liberal and leftist intellectuals of those days. For example, they launched an angry campaign in Canada against the literary critic, Northrop Frye. A Christian, he was labelled as a "fascist intellectual"⁵⁴, despite being involved in several progressive or democratic movements, such as opposing the Vietnam War and South African apartheid. Another "fascist" intellectual was Marshall McLuhan. Noam Chomsky was loaded on to the same cart.⁵⁵ Hans Eysenck, a particularly controversial psychologist, came under attack later. Undoubtedly, in his belief that intelligence could be correlated somehow with race, he deserved to be denounced; the Party thought this should include hitting him in the face at a meeting in the LSE. Although I was present at the meeting where he was attacked, I only remember a woman from the Party hitting him, but one account I have read recently refers to him being set upon by several people. I think I blocked this out from my memory, although I do remember quite a lot more about what happened. The scene took place in the presence of several hundred students, many of whom were visibly shocked at such behaviour. And although I had gone down to the event with a group of comrades (among whom were the very ones who had hit him), I stayed in the audience between the devil and the deep blue sea.

What was the point of all this? Academia was being shaken up, but Party leaders sometimes mentioned to supporters the Party's need for hegemony. They sought notoriety among the angry by denouncing the

⁵⁴ One factor pointing to such a judgement could have been his support for a cyclical theory of history, as expressed by the German historian Oswald Spengler and the Italian sociologist/economist Vilfredo Pareto.

⁵⁵ This is not to say the Internationals, precursors to the Party, were the only group operating in this way. There was also its misplaced mockers in the Situationiste Internationale, who had infamously denounced Charlie Chaplin at a press conference in Paris.

popular voices, including those of opposition or dissent. For them, the movement against imperialism was correct, but the voices people pinned their hopes on were mainly wrong. The corollary to this was that the movement should simply turn around and follow the Party and its leader. It is not surprising that some people saw the Party as a divisive instrument of Power, directed by the CIA or MI5. Accusations of this kind were, of course, thrown back by the Party at anyone else who got in its way –alongside the “fascist intellectuals”.⁵⁶

A statement from one of their journals illustrates the sectarian spirit applied to academia:

The role of scholarship in the moulding of history has become an acute issue. The counter-revolutionary activities of the Cultural Congress held in Havana at the beginning of 1968 and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China represent the expert-line and the mass-line.⁵⁷

Bear in mind here that the Congress referred to was held in Cuba, ruled by the Party of Che and Fidel. And this was a Congress that called for anti-imperialist unity, saluting the struggles of the U.S. black population against its oppressors and condemning all forms of racism. It also stated that intellectuals should refuse to cooperate with or to accept invitations or financial assistance from the U.S. government and its official agencies, calling on them to support the struggles of the Third World, especially that of the Vietnamese people, among other things. Nevertheless, years later, having denounced China’s Proletarian Cultural Revolution as “revisionist”, Cde. B. met Fidel Guevara and praised him (as mentioned above).

Cde. B. used the same technique to draw attention to himself and his organizations –when a large leftist conference was held, he put on his counter-conference and denounced the first, as bourgeois, social-fascist or whatever, hoping to draw people away from the other conference. Otherwise, he might send some people along to disrupt the first conference. The same tactic was, of course, widely used by others. But I doubt whether many other organizations would have stooped to some of the depths Cde. B. went. On one occasion, in the second half of the 1980s, his Indian group in Britain wanted to pack a meeting at the Albert Hall in London, and reduce the influence of its rivals. So they got some of their English comrades to pose as Special Branch officers to go into the hall and pull out the unwanted Indians.

Cde. B. and some fellow academics had established a discussion group at the university he taught at in the 1960s, and this became a rallying point for students interested in understanding and doing something about the world many of them were just starting to see as a highly problematic and oppressive place. But the possibilities the group had opened up began to slip away as differences opened up between the academics.⁵⁸ But as the liberal and left-leaning academics fell out with one another, Cde. B. built his support among the students, explaining to them why this situation had arisen –essentially denigrating the political positions of his peers. He would unite with one of the academics to bring down the rest, and one by one the rest left the group, until the one he had last united with would eventually go, leaving him in possession of a reasonably sized group of young innocents. Together they formed a new group, committed to Marxism-Leninism and to Mao –the other points of view slipped from their memories.

When young people who could not have known much about politics or history denounced well-known leftist or liberal academics, they committed themselves to Cde. B. and to his Party, i.e. to those who had themselves already burned their boats in the same way long ago in their youth or childhood.

⁵⁶ This is not to say that all of these denunciations were wrong-headed... The dead Irish poet, W.B. Yeats, who was also denounced, had been a self-professed fascist, and if at the time people were unaware of this (something that is well-known today), his exposure as such was surely beneficial.

⁵⁷ *Objective Idealism is Fascism –a denunciation of Northrop Frye’s “Literary Criticism”* from “Ideological Forum” No. 3, (undated, probably 1968)

⁵⁸ I am piecing this together from what I knew and while I was not involved and cannot give details of the process, I think I have some idea of the method that was applied.

Later on, the Party would call for “Unity” among the left to fight imperialism, which anyone could see meant “unity around us (me, the leader)”. The strategy was always about achieving hegemony in the struggles, but this never happened, nor could it.

The confidence Cde. B. exuded affected enough of these young people, who would discover that their confidence in the ideas they embraced exceeded that of all the other groups, as the left had been plunged, generally speaking, into great doubt –following the events on the world stage mentioned earlier. Thus the new group –sometimes referred to as a “new-type party” –seemed to have a chance of *storming* its way to power within the left. However, after less than ten years, the narrative (revisionism, the two superpowers, etc.) was not standing up as well as it had in the early days and other groups were doing their own storming, thus diluting the Party’s effect. Splits among the Trotskyist groups led to the creation of other doctrinaire organizations like the “Revolutionary Communist Group”, noteworthy for its strong focus on Marx’s critique of political economy, which challenged the left’s intellectual status quo largely made up of ex-members of the CPGB at such forums as the “Socialist Register” and elsewhere.

Just as the leader’s life was cloaked in mystery, so was the history of the movement he built up. This wasn’t simply to satisfy a theatrical modus operandi, which it certainly did, but to conceal and reveal past events in such a way that history could be written to glorify the Party. Its “mistakes” could be expunged from the record as being the result of mere “youthful enthusiasm” or not “our” doing. It could be asserted that “we” fought against all sorts of wrong lines, as if the wrong lines always emanated from “others”, most of whom had been thrown out or had left the organization.⁵⁹ The Party was pure, just like the Proletariat, the ideal conception of the working class.

Thus, Cde. B. talked about defending the “Purity” of Marxism-Leninism, which presumably meant ridding it of its critics, its “developers” and “simulators”, and returning to Stalin. This idea of “Purity” figured large in his vocabulary. In another instance, he was keen to show the purity of his people in their struggle against imperialism, but in so doing he strayed a long way from the truth. Punjabis, far from having shown consistently bold independence against the colonialists, which he sought to prove, came to occupy a leading position in the British Indian Army. I suppose this was because they saw it as the best way of defending their own territory from other regional groups in India who threatened it. Praises for the people who suffered under the British cannot, however, be justified if they rely on untruths to idolize them, to theatricalise them.

One of the leader’s stated aims towards the end of his life was to unite the greatest possible number of people to change the world. The result, however, as I have striven to show, was precisely the opposite: what he actually created was a network that divided people into as many pieces as possible –very effectively –finally unwilling and unable to communicate with one another. Yet another world turned upside-down.

⁵⁹ Heading elsewhere, usually far from left-wing politics –into business, universities, and other professions, for example.

I go out

I began to feel crippled by the Party I supported long before I left Britain in 1985. I have so far alluded only briefly to my own discontent, and I shall not go into this in any detail. However, the constraints on and hindrances to friendship it caused were absolutely central. No one is perfect, and I wasn't when I moved into the Party, when I was in it, or after. I was still following the rebelliousness I had absorbed at school and learned more about at art school from the anarchists who were operating (within a culture of libertinism and male chauvinism). As I already noted, I had been isolated at school, and had no close friends, and found it hard to make any. It made me a prey to some who wanted to make use of others for their own instrumental ends.

After I had joined the Party (in fact, I do not remember whether I was ever enrolled as a member), I made the mistake of thinking I could criticize one of the leaders as I had seen them criticize others. In doing that and then passively supporting an attempt to oust her, I earned her eternal hatred and felt continually crushed by her and her inner circle. I had been able to remain in the organization really by a form of self-abasement known as "self-criticism". Every opportunity she had she used to belittle me afterwards, through which she hoped to make others firmer in their practice, unsympathetic towards one whose militancy had faltered, and fearful lest they themselves should commit that error. They would, of course, commit that error, and would therefore fall into the hands of the Party and its leader more irrevocably. Lacking any alternative to the ideas we absorbed and promoted among everyone else, like me, they would have no defence. Although far from being as harsh as Stalin's trials and arbitrary mass executions, the fact that I buckled under the weight of "authentic" opinion spread wide can be explained in the same way as those who said that the only way they could now serve the Bolshevik Party (after the "crimes" they had committed against the Revolution) was by supporting their own executions and by being shot by its soldiers.

I can wish that I had acted otherwise, but I did not, and nor did others. It is a terrible feeling when after much hard work and loyalty to the cause, one error of judgement ends in your expulsion, cancelling out everything you did before it –when you were praised. Maybe only those who have experienced it can understand. But we shall probably see the experience duplicated in every type of sect, including the openly esoteric ones. It could be worse than being thrown out of your family, because in the Party you imbibed the idea that you would not be able to find anything else in the rest of the world, except rubbish. I hung on therefore, but the course of things after the 1970s gave increasing grounds for scepticism, including Cde. Catherine's own ousting by members of her inner circle, the Albania-China split, and finally the so-called "Embassies Crisis" in Albania, which brought things full-circle, so to speak.

I do not know if anyone exists whose political education has been a smooth upward ride. As you can probably discern, mine has not. It would be inaccurate to say, however, that everything in the Party was wrong; if that were so it would be hard to see how I could have learned anything and also hard to see how I could have stayed in it for so long.⁶⁰ One of its more compelling factors was the emphasis Cde. B. put on the peripheral capitalist countries, including his own place of birth, India. The vast differences between life in highly urbanized states like Britain and the United States compared with most of the countries of Africa, Asia, Oceania and Latin America had to be included in our view of the world somehow if we were to understand and change anything –Euro-centrism would not do. The effect that underdevelopment (in the active Gunder Frank sense of the term) has had on the political and cultural spheres became evident to me through my trajectory in the 1970s. However, living in one of those peripheral capitalist countries I have come to appreciate to a greater extent the depth of the problem.

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⁶⁰ Perhaps the most difficult thing for me intellectually has been the way a disciplinary commitment to Marxism-Leninism has hindered me in learning other ways of grasping and appreciating the world, that is to say philosophy.

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