

Marxism in Britain

Dissent, Decline and
Re-emergence 1945-c.2000

Keith Laybourn



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Marxism in Britain has declined, almost to the point of oblivion, since the Second World War. The Communist Party of Great Britain had more than 50,000 members in the early 1940s, but fewer than 5,000 when it disbanded in 1991. Dissenting and Trotskyite organisations experienced a very similar decline, although there has been a late flowering of Marxism in Scotland.

Based on the Communist Party archives at Manchester, *Marxism in Britain* examines the decline over the last sixty years. The book deals with the impact of the Cold War upon British Marxism, looking at how international events such as the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia affected the Communist Party of Great Britain. The issues of Marxism and Britain's withdrawal from the Empire are also addressed, as are the Marxist influence upon British industrial relations and its involvement in the feminist movement. Keith Laybourn focuses very much on the current debate in British Marxist history which divides historians over the influence of Moscow and Stalinism on the Communist Party, and he explores the ways in which this undermined Marxism in Britain.

Keith Laybourn is Professor of History at the University of Huddersfield. He has written extensively on British labour history, British social policy and women in twentieth-century Britain.

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Abbreviations

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AITUC	All-India Trades Union Congress
ASLEF	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
ASSET	Association of Supervisory Staffs and Executive Technicians
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CPB	Communist Party of Britain
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CWU	Communication Workers' Union
DL	Democratic Left
DLS	Democratic Left Scotland
EC	Executive Committee (of the Communist Party of Great Britain)
ESA	English Socialist Alliance
ETU	Electrical Trade Union
GLA	Greater London Authority
GLC	Great London Council
ICBH	Institute for Contemporary British History
IG	International Group
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IMG	International Marxist Group
IPDC	Inner Party Democracy Commission
IS	International Socialists
ISFI	International Secretariat of the Fourth International
LCDTU	Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions
LPYS	Labour Party Young Socialists
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Finance union
MSP	Member of the Scottish Parliament
MT	Militant Tendency
NALGO	National and Local Government Officers Association
NATFHE	National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCB	National Court Board

NCP	New Communist Party
NEC	National Executive Committee (of Labour Party)
NHS	National Health Service
NIRC	National Industrial Relations Court
NPN	New Politics Network
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
NUS	National Union of Seamen
NUT	National Union of Teachers
OWAAD	Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent
PCE	Spanish Communist Party
PCF	French Communist Party
PCI	Italian Communist Party
PPPS	People's Press Printing Society
RCP	Revolutionary Communist Party
RCPB (ML)	Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist)
RMT	(National Union of) Rail, Maritime and Transport workers
RSL	Revolutionary Socialist League
RWP	Revolutionary Workers' Party
SLL	Socialist Labour League
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SNP	Scottish National Party
SOGAT	Society of Graphical and Allied Trades
SPGB	Socialist Party of Great Britain
SRSM	Scottish Republican Socialist Movement
SRSP	Scottish Republican Socialist Party
SSA	Scottish Socialist Alliance
SSP	Scottish Socialist Party
SWP	Socialist Workers' Party
TASS	Telegrafnoe Agentsvo Sovietskovo Soyuz – Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UDM	Union of Democratic Mineworkers
WAPC	Women Against Pit Closures
WIL	Workers' International League
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement
WRP	Workers' Revolutionary Party
WSA	Welsh Socialist Alliance
YCL	Young Communist League

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Introduction to British Marxism since 1945

Marxism in Britain has declined rapidly since the Second World War. Indeed, the membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), the largest Marxist organisation in Britain, fell from a wartime peak of 56,000 in 1942 to 45,000 in 1945, and further, to a mere 4,750 by the time of its dissolution in November 1991. Also, many of those groups who splintered from it in the post-war years, along with the numerous 'Trotskyite' organisations, experienced a similar fate.

The prime aim of this book is to examine, record and explain this post-war decline of British Marxism, in all its various forms, through a study of its interaction with the national and international politics of the period. However, one must be mindful that since the late 1990s there has been a revival and re-emergence of Marxism, although there is little evidence of this late flowering achieving even the modest glories of the past except perhaps in Scotland where the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) has emerged to win seats in the Scottish Parliament on behalf of the Socialist Alliance movement.

The post-war decline of Marxism in Britain may have been inevitable. Its main growth was achieved in the late 1930s and during the Second World War, particularly after the CPGB declared its opposition to Hitler in 1941, after Stalin's entry into the war against Germany, which earned the CPGB unprecedented popularity. Yet, it declined in the post-war years for a variety of reasons, not least because of the international political situation, the Cold War and the continuing influence of Moscow, at least until the late 1970s or early 1980s. Indeed, the continued post-war decline of the CPGB, and British Marxism more generally, has helped to provoke a wide-ranging and heated debate about the extent of the influence Moscow wielded over the CPGB. Was it, or was it not, Stalinism and Bolshevism which prevented the CPGB flourishing in Britain, imposing as it often did, the need to follow its exigent policies?

There is no doubt that Stalinism and the domination of Moscow were impediments to Party growth up to the 1970s even before it turned in upon itself with the wrangling over Eurocommunism. Neither the influence from without, nor the conflict within the Party helped to maintain a consistent and effective presence in the post-war years, either before or after the late 1970s. As a result, membership generally continued to decline, the CPGB's policies on women and trade unions, in particular, languished, and its influence in other spheres diminished. With the decline in Soviet and Eastern European Communism, and the international context within which the

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CPGB continued to operate even in the 1980s, the Party's eventual demise was almost inevitable by the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet, it is likely that British Marxism would have declined in any case, having never established a strong base within the British political system when it was reshaped during and after the First World War. The short-time factors were mere political eddies operating in a system which made it difficult for Marxism to operate at a mass level. The associational and structural links in society may well have, as Ross McKibbin suggests in his article 'Why was there no Marxism in Britain?', made it impossible for Marxism to thrive in Britain.¹

International politics, Eurocommunism, empire, trade unionism and women

The international politics of Marxism has indeed been vital in producing many points of conflict and change along the route of the overall decline of Stalinism and British Marxism since the Second World War. The events in Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, China's Great Leap Forward in 1958 and the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 all produced division, dissent and fragmentation. In most cases the CPGB lost support but regrouped and, in the wake of Hungary, even recaptured some of its lost membership. However, the most serious challenges to British Marxism began to occur in the 1970s and 1980s. There were particularly serious tensions within the CPGB as Eurocommunism, which rejected the idea of basing Marxism upon the old Stalinist and Soviet models and stressed the need to work within the political, social and economic climate of Britain, began to emerge. These ideas were encouraged by the writings of Santiago Carrillo, most obviously in his book *Eurocommunism and the State*, and F. Claudin, in *Eurocommunism and Socialism*.² This led to the secession of a number of organisations from the CPGB, some described as old 'Stalinist' organisations, and, most obviously, the New Communist Party (NCP) in 1977. By the mid-1980s, when the Eurocommunists became the dominant force in British Marxism, the CPGB was deeply divided and expelled many of the more pre-Moscow members who fought against change and allied themselves to the Communist Campaign Group. The splintering of the CPGB and British Marxism continued in the 1980s and culminated in the collapse of the CPGB in 1991, although the partial collapse of international Marxism at this time determined its demise. Thereafter the Democratic Left (DL) emerged as a replacement for the CPGB, although it ceased in 1999, and was then re-formed as the New Politics Network (NPN), which now openly rejects its Marxist tradition on its websites.³

The DL records are now deposited in the John Rylands Labour Archive and Study Centre, Manchester, along with those of the CPGB which were deposited earlier in the 1990s. The CPGB records now allow us to view the extent of Moscow's influence as against that of the individuals who made up the CPGB, and can be viewed alongside the records in the Moscow archives which were also opened up in the 1990s. In contrast, the majority of the records of the DL are not yet open to public gaze. The trail of their failure will have to be examined by a future generation of historians who use the Manchester archives.

Yet, despite the decline of the DL, other Marxist organisations have proliferated. Scottish dissidents published their own bulletin entitled *Alert Scotland*. Stan Kelsey of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) stood for Bethnal Green in the 1992 general election, whilst Mark Fischer represented the organisation in London North East during the 1994 European Election. Fischer was in fact, at the time, the National Organiser of the CPB and was a regular contributor to its organ *The Weekly Worker*. This organisation claimed to be the real heir of the CPGB. In opposition, the International Communist Party of the Fourth International, a Trotskyite organisation, which has suggested that it is Stalinism, not Marxism, which collapsed in the Soviet Union in 1991, re-emerged when Anthony Hyland contested for the seat of London North East in the European Election of 1994. In other words, Marxism in all its forms, remained active in the 1990s, despite its much-reduced influence. More recently, the SSP, formed in 1998 from the Scottish Socialist Alliance (SSA) in 1996, has had significant success in the Scottish Parliament, although the English and Welsh Socialist alliances have made only limited progress. Whether or not such developments could lead to the formation of a viable British Marxist movement is still doubtful if open to question.

Clearly the decline and partial re-emergence of Marxism in Britain has much to do with international politics. The actions of Moscow dictated many of British Marxism's conflicts and the dissolving of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s may have sealed the CPGB's fate in the early 1990s. However, British Marxism was also interested in other international issues as well, which reflected its peculiar interests combined with its concerns for creating new, independent, possibly even Marxist, states. This was most evident in the case of India.

Given the influence of Rajani Palme Dutt in the CPGB, the issue of Indian independence and the partition of the Indian sub-continent in the late 1940s was very important during the Cold War isolation of British Marxism and the Soviet Union. The CPGB and other Marxist groups were particularly concerned about the independence of nations that were part of the British Empire and issues such as the partition of India in the late 1940s. As a result, Empire was an important element in British Marxist thinking as indicated in the CPGB's Empire Conference in 1947 where there was a concern to maintain the unity of India, the newly emerging independent Commonwealth states and the colonial independence movements.

The marginal importance of all forms of Marxism in Britain since the Second World War, and its almost continuous decline, raises particular issues about its relationship with the trade unions. It has been argued that the CPGB was 'nearly in control of the trade union movement in 1945'.⁴ Indeed, it has also been suggested that, of the seventeen largest trade unions, the CPGB had control of four unions and significant influence over six others.⁵ More recently, Nina Fishman has made much the same claim for the influence of the CPGB.⁶ If this was the case in 1945, it was certainly not so in the 1960s, and for good reasons.

The Labour Party and Labour Governments fought against the way in which communists used trade unions towards their own political ends, largely on the grounds that this was their domain. They attacked Communist influence during the Dock Strike of 1951, the Electrical Trade Union's ballot-rigging activities in the

early 1960s and the Seamen's strike of 1966. The Labour Party has also sought to keep the CPGB and Marxist influences at bay, from the days when Morgan Phillips kept his 'Lost Sheep' files in the 1930s and 1940s to Labour's fight against entrism in the 1970s and the 1980s.

Marxist decline has also to be set against its effectiveness in developing a relationship with women's groups. The CPGB was deeply involved in the activities of the National Assembly of Women, founded by the International Women's Day Committee, in the early 1950s, the national conferences of Communist women, the first of which was held in 1951, and the Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC) miners' wives groups in the mid-1980s, where there was conflict between the CPGB and the WAPC about the way in which the movement was 'hijacked' by Ann Scargill and Betty Heathfield. Indeed, women's groups became increasingly influential Marxist organisations. The National Women's Advisory Committee of the CPGB produced *Women in Action* leaflets between 1965 and 1969, dealing with issues such as peace in Vietnam, rents, prices, and moves towards 'second-wave feminism', with attempts to change the position of women within society, is evident in *Link*, a more substantial publication. *Link* produced 44 issues between 1973 and 1984, including articles from a wide variety of socialist writers. However, the CPGB's women's section never fully came to terms with the 'third-wave feminism' of the 1980s with its emphasis upon the diversity of experiences of women and its fate was largely sealed by the declining fortunes of the CPGB.

The influence of Moscow

Inevitably, the decline of Marxism raises the vital and contentious issue of the relationship between the Soviet Union and the CPGB. A recent article, entitled 'A Peripheral Vision', written by John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, and to be published in *American Communist Review*, offers a timely and much needed critical summative review of the recent debate that has consumed the writing of some historians of British Communist history most bitterly, through the pages of *Labour History Review*.⁷ It presents a powerful argument for reuniting the role of the Russian leadership, and Stalinism, with work on the British party leadership and the rank-and-file activists within any future histories of British Communism. The vital point of the McIlroy and Campbell article is that the new revisionist history which has emerged in Britain since the 1980s has sought to remove, or at least play down greatly, the Stalinism and the Russian leadership as one of the factors, and the primary one, in the evolution and development of the CPGB.⁸ Although there may be many forces shaping the revisionist, grass-roots approach to the history of the CPGB, it is partly rooted in the fact that one of its leading exponents, Nina Fishman, was associated with the Eurocommunist section of the Party and its successors, who have emphasised the break with Moscow.

The revisionist writers have rejected the Communist history writings of Henry Pelling, Walter Kendall and L. J. Macfarlane, who are criticised for believing that the CPGB was almost robotic in its acceptance of the doctrines and influence of Moscow.⁹ In contrast, McIlroy and Campbell are adamant that only a re-instatement of the

importance of Bolshevism and Stalinism for the history of the CPGB until the 1970s, or even the 1980s, will allow a full and accurate picture to be presented. Indeed, they conclude by suggesting that the political and Soviet dimensions are not peripheral matters: 'They go to the root of the experience of Communism and they remain fundamental to its history.'¹⁰

They present three, interrelated, points. First, they imply that neither the traditionalist approach nor the new revisionist approaches are sufficient in themselves for a full and accurate picture of events to emerge. Second, they indicate that the revisionist approach, which has been influenced by the study of American Communism, has been used to neglect, suppress and distort events. Third, and consequently, they suggest that only a full account of events re-incorporating a study of the Russian influence alongside the activism of the CPGB will allow the historical record to be complete and that then, and only then, can genuine historical interpretation take place. They place their hope and faith in a younger, or newer, generation of historians, such as David Renton and James Eadon, to do this work.¹¹

Although the issues and tensions raised by McIlroy and Campbell are well rooted in the long-standing conflict between British Communism and British Trotskyism, it is only in the last 5 or 6 years that the debate has become particularly heated. McIlroy and Campbell began to distil their particular approach in 1999, but the catalyst for the heightening of this debate was Nina Fishman's article on 'Essentialists and realists' in *Communist History Network Newsletter*, published in 2001.¹² In this, she suggested that 'essentialists' who believed in the domination of the Russian leadership were wrong, and that the 'realists', including herself, were right in maintaining that the CPGB relied upon their 'individual judgements' and that in this respect 'there simply was no bolshevisation of the CPGB'.¹³ This had been prompted by her earlier adoption of this nomenclature at the April 2001 conference in Manchester, 'People of a Special Mould?', organised by Kevin Morgan, partly in response to the challenges of McIlroy and Campbell.¹⁴

Fishman's 'Essentialist and realist' article appeared at a time when McIlroy and Campbell had gained acceptance of the idea of producing a Special Issue of *Labour History Review* on International Communism. In the autumn of 2001, Fishman swept in to an ill-attended Advisory Editorial Board of *Labour History Review* held in Manchester, and attempted to prevent the publication of the Special Issue of *Labour History Review*, which McIlroy and Campbell were editing, on the grounds that 'they [the editors and the contributors] are all essentialists'. Her efforts were deflected with the offer of a right of reply. A few months later, in February 2002, a conference on communism held by the Institute of Contemporary British History saw Fishman press forward with her 'essentialist' and 'realist' ideas in, what proved to be a contentious conference which McIlroy and Campbell did not attend, the report of which was to lead to further debate.

Fishman's action in opposing the Special Issue was unsuccessful, but the tensions it produced were evident at the next meeting of the Advisory Editorial Board of *Labour History Review*, also held at Manchester, in the spring of 2002. Nevertheless, the Special Issue in International Communism was published a year later, in April 2003,

and McIlroy and Campbell, in their editorial on 'New Directions in International Communist Historiography' explained their position:

While our views were far from uniform, we were all uncomfortable with the 'history from below' paradigm which obscured, neglected or marginalized the typically decisive influence of what were centralist parties, sections of a centralized world party whose politics were finally forged in Moscow, on their members. We all questioned an approach which focussed on the activities of Communists in industry and the community; but which often failed to relate them to disturbing factors such as espionage, Moscow gold and the tyrannical turn of society and politics in the Soviet Union, the political and spiritual home of these activists.¹⁵

Their own particular contribution was an examination of the development of the historiography on British communism, with an appeal for a more balanced approach to the study than what the 'history from below' approach had produced in recent years. In response to Fishman's terminology they wrote that '... we do not subscribe to the crude essentialism which asserts that Bolshevism automatically led to Stalinism. Rather, we see Bolshevism as a complex politics which held the potential for different political paths. Stalinism constituted only one such path'.¹⁶

In the meantime, as mentioned, a conference had been held at the Institute of Contemporary British History, Institute of Historical Research, on 20 February 2002. It provided the basis for further conflict and confusion about the 'essentialist' and 'realist' positions. Harriet Jones produced a report of this meeting for *Labour History Review* in December 2002.¹⁷ In effect, the report presented the 'realist' side of the debate and rejected the 'essentialist' position. According to Jones:

Fishman's own characterization of the divide was unrepentant. In her words, 'the essentialists... are the people who consider everything the British Party did was determined by Moscow full stop... the realists are the people who say "of course Moscow is important, but you also need to look at what is happening on the ground"'.¹⁸

Jones adds, in connection with the comments of Donald Sassoon on Italian communism, that 'Scholars by definition tend to fall into the realist camp...'.¹⁹ This statement seems to have been broadened out and applied to the larger debate.

The Jones report earned a vigorous riposte from McIlroy and Campbell in the December 2003 issue of *Labour History Review* and it may be that even more detailed discussion will be published.²⁰ What McIlroy and Jones revealed was the absurdity of Fishman's division in a section entitled 'You're *really* an essentialist, No I'm *essentially* a realist', which points to the almost meaningless nature of Fishman's division. Indeed, if one examines the conference report being criticised, as well as the condemnation of it by Campbell and McIlroy, it becomes clear that Eric Hobsbawm and Willie Thompson, both apparently linked to the 'realist' camp accept, the primary determinant of the CPGB's policy was the Russian party. As Thompson said,

'...if Moscow wanted something done it was done, however reluctantly'.²¹ The discussion at the Institute for Contemporary British History (ICBH) conference was then more about areas of Moscow intervention – whether or not Moscow felt the need to intervene with a small party it felt was unlikely ever to be a mass party, the fluctuating attitudes of the Comintern, and the conservatism of the CPGB in the post-Comintern period – but this was still within the confines of Moscow's gift.

The debate continues and grows with recent articles in the German journal *Mitteilungsblatt* and in forthcoming issues of *Labour History Review* and *American Communist Review*.²² Undoubtedly new angles will develop.

Much of this recent debate has, however, been fought over the events of 1920–45 and little has been said of the history of the CPGB since the Second World War. Nevertheless, the debate is relevant to any discussion of the policies of the CPGB and particularly to events of worldwide importance, such as the position of the CPGB on Tito's Yugoslavia and to the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1956 and 1968, respectively. The remarkable loyalty shown to the Soviet Union by many of the CPGB members calls into question the relationship between the CPGB and the Soviet Union, for even when they gained some freedom from the demands of Moscow, Stalinism and Bolshevism, they were often conservative in the way that they used their independence. One is reminded of this by Brian Behan, a member of the Executive Committee (EC) of the CPGB in the early and mid 1950s, who, having written of Pollitt's refusal to accept the Stalin–Hitler Pact of 1939 in *Labour History Review*, and with a view to the future, asked:

Why then did Party virtually vanish? When I sat on the EC it was a powerful body with most of the trade union general secretaries sitting with me. Why is the Communist Party the largest ex-party in England? Tens of thousands of people leaving through disappointment. It could have been so different. If only Pollitt had said to hell with democratic centralism. Let us be a truly democratic. Let us adopt the Swiss system of referendum with everything. Democratic centralism gave us the same structure as the Catholic Church complete with Pope Stalin. Submission of the lower to the higher meant stifling thought. [He gives two examples and writes the following on the second.] Again when the Russians invaded Hungary I moved another resolution demanding the withdrawal of the troops. Vote thirty-three to one. So we missed another opportunity and broke the heart of thousands of devoted comrades.²³

It is true that Behan was an isolated member of the EC, but his views were supported by many in the Party – 7,000 or so of the 33,000 Party members taking the very extreme measure of resigning – and are reflected in *The Reasoner* debate of 1956, which is discussed in the next chapter. In the same volume of *Labour History Review*, Monty Johnstone, also in a letter to the editors, stresses the problems of James Klugmann, a leading Communist historian, dealing with the possible fudging of the Cetnik/Partisan activity in Yugoslavia and his change of attitude on the position of Yugoslavia after its split with the Soviet Union. Apparently Klugmann deeply regretted the fact that he allowed his faith in the Soviet leadership to obscure his