

After Communism

The last few weeks have witnessed an extraordinary disintegration of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Only Romania remains untouched. Without any doubt, it marks the end of the communist system. But what else? As we move into the 90s, *Marxism Today* investigates what the crisis of communism actually means. We publish a slightly edited version of the speech given by Martin Jacques to the Communist Party congress in November, followed by a roundtable discussion with key figures from the European Left. Finally, we take a closer look at the dramatic events in Czechoslovakia



Martin Jacques is the editor of *Marxism Today*. This speech was given as the opening address to the 41st Congress of the CPGB in early November

“ We live in quite extraordinary times. Everything seems to be in a state of flux. Change is the order of the day. If you miss out on a week, you are liable to be seriously out of touch. It is as if we are living at this enormous historical junction, where a number of different eras draw to a close: 1917 and the era of the Russian Revolution; 1945 and the era of the cold war; the late-19th century and the era of organised capitalism. I could go on. It is that kind of moment.

Let's start at home. In 1987, the Tories had just won their third general election

in a row, the Left was deeply demoralised, and it looked as if Thatcherism would go on and on. How things can change. Just two years on the Tories are struggling. They are well behind Labour in the opinion polls. Labour looks like a more serious alternative than at any time since 1979, its fortunes having been through an impressive transformation under Neil Kinnock's leadership. But most importantly of all, Thatcherism is without doubt facing its greatest crisis in a decade.

Central to the Thatcherite appeal has been its claim to economic competence. It got us through the recession at the beginning of the 80s, and then, so the argument goes, it presided over the economic miracle, the rebirth of Britain as a

modern, competitive economic power. That argument now lies in shreds. Britain faces its biggest balance-of-payments deficit ever. Inflation and interest rates are among the highest in the Western world. The economic situation is so serious that the Tories may well have considerable difficulty in engineering a pre-election economic boom.

But it isn't just the economy. This most ideological of governments has allowed its ideology to lead its policies into areas where it has little popular support. Privatisation of gas and Telecom, despite what they'd have us believe, were never that popular; but in comparison, water and electricity are deeply unpopular. Ever since the 1983 election campaign, the Tories have been on the defensive on the NHS. Now they are trying to reform it without even an election manifesto mandate. Then, of course, there is the poll tax, which enjoys hardly any popular support and which will be the subject of a mounting public campaign between now and its introduction in England and Wales in April: a campaign which can learn much from Scotland.

What each of these in their different ways suggests, is the enduring strength of certain kinds of collectivist values. The limits of the Thatcherite assault on the welfare-state society are becoming clearer. They thought they could change everything, and now it is evident they can't, they have overreached themselves.

But perhaps the most telling area of all is the inability of the Thatcherites to come to terms with the newly-emergent political agenda of the 90s. There is no way that the environmental crisis can be solved in terms of a free-market approach. The revolution in international relations driven, above all, by Gorbachev is tearing down the old cold-war divisions and replacing conflict by the imperative of co-operation. We should not forget Thatcherism was born, like Reaganism, in the era of the second cold war at the end of the 70s.

On these issues, Thatcherism is running against the grain. Likewise on Europe. The pace of European integration has accelerated enormously over the last few years. It has become increasingly obvious to a wide spectrum of opinion, stretching from left to right, that Britain's future lies in an integrated Europe. Yet in the face of all this, Thatcher reveals herself to be a true little-Englander at heart.

The point about these issues is that they concern the future, the new political agenda. In the mid-80s it was precisely Thatcherism's capacity to feel 'of the moment', to generate a sense that it had some idea of the future that it was about tomorrow and that the Left and socialism was about yesterday which gave it such enormous confidence and made it seem at times almost invincible. We too probably exaggerated the hegemony of Thatcherism, though at least we understood it, which is more than can be said

for too many on the left. And the mistake we made was not to distinguish sufficiently between Thatcherism and what we have called 'new times'.

A wedge has now been driven between Thatcherism and new times. This is partly because of Thatcherism's profoundly limited world view, which rests on little more than the market. It is also because the Left has moved on, has begun to respond to the new environment, has started to live at least partially in the new world. Feminism, the peace movement, and the green movement, of course, did this a long time ago, indeed in some ways they are emblematic of new times. But now the Labour Party is moving. It has travelled a long way since the early-80s, its recent policy review has the feel of the new world about it. Similarly the unions, which were at the very centre of the Thatcherite assault on the old order, are beginning to find their feet on the new ground, to use secret ballots, to address new sections of workers, to win over public opinion.

But Thatcherism's growing estrangement from the changing times is also because the new world keeps on moving and acquiring new features. Once, not so long ago, new times seemed a mainly national phenomenon, the decline of manufacturing, the growing importance of diversity and the individual. Now we can be in no doubt, it is also an international phenomenon. And it is the internationalisation of new times the breakdown of the cold war, the crisis in the East, European integration, the environmental crisis, the groundswell in South Africa which, perhaps above all, has served to underline the limitations and parochialism of Thatcherism.

The next two and a half years will be increasingly dominated by the prospect of a general election. And compared with the situation at the beginning of the year, Labour now looks as if it could defeat the Tories without electoral deals. But it will need to broaden its support still further. And one way of doing that would be to abandon its present conservative and blinkered position on electoral reform.

But even if we were to see the election of a Labour government, we should be clear that enormous problems lie ahead. For while it is now evident that new times do not belong to the radical Right, it has for long been clear that they certainly do not belong to the Left. Indeed the Left's response to them has been far more adaptive and pragmatic than that of the Right. The latter has set the tone of the response, has left its imprint on the new society, creating an inhuman set of divisions and a deeply-entrenched inequality.

The Thatcherite settlement for new times is about the two-thirds/one-third society, in which a substantial minority find themselves shut out from the benefits of prosperity, from the mainstream of society the unemployed, single-parent families, old people dependent

on the state pension, low-paid workers in the NHS, those who work in the private service sector. New times are not politically neutral. There are real political choices to be made. But if the Left is to offer a real choice rather than simply a humane version of Thatcherism, then it must have its own project for new times, and that requires an understanding of what new times are. Herein lies the weakness of Labour's policy review. While containing some excellent ideas, it has no conception of what new times are and therefore what strategically to do in and with them. The old vision of 1945, of the Keynesian welfare society, is no longer sustainable, because the society on which it rested is no more. But what to put in its place?

New times offer a profound challenge to the Left. It is one thing to pragmatically adapt to them. It is another altogether to be part of them, and offer a progressive perspective for them. That will require an enormous political and cultural shift. There are six key challenges that we face which together constitute the essential components of new times.

First, the old world of mass production for mass markets has increasingly given way to something far more diverse and heterogeneous. There has been the long-run shift from manufacturing to services. There has been the long-run entry of women into the paid labour force, which is subverting the traditional distinction between production as something done by men, and consumption as something done by women. More recently, there has been the rise of a more flexible system of production for a more segmented, differentiated market; what is known as post-Fordism. It is the latter which is now at the leading edge of change, orchestrating profound changes in the organisation of production and work. Each of these changes has a different timescale, but together they have wrought a revolution in our culture.

The new working class is very different from the white, male, full-time, predominantly manufacturing class of the 50s and early-60s. It is full-time and part-time, it is men and women, black and white. It is not only a producing class, but also a consuming class, more and more aware of its consuming identity. And in the Thatcherite world, it is divided between those who are relatively well-paid, highly-skilled, secure and generally male, and those who work on the periphery, in unskilled, insecure, often part-time jobs, who are frequently women and disproportionately black.

The old centres of the labour movement are in decline: the new growth points of the economy are elsewhere, along the M4 corridor into the south west, on the M11 into East Anglia. Many of the old forms of collective identity are fragmenting, from traditional communities to masculinist forms of union culture. All that is solid melts into air,

said Marx when describing the revolutionary character of capitalism. Truly this describes the last decade.

It is not that somehow capitalism is no more. After all, the world of post-Fordism may be characterised by more flexible and decentralised forms of production, but it is also characterised by a growing, unabated concentration of capital. International firms are giving way to global companies. Likewise it is not that class has ceased to be a central player in society and politics. But class is not an abstraction, it lives in and through real people and real forms, it changes, it is reproduced. And the violent social changes I have been describing have weakened and undermined many of the old solidaristic forms while the new still remain weak and underdeveloped. At the same time other bonds, other identities, based on gender, ethnicity or sexuality, for example, are of ever-growing importance. The old social blocs are dead. We live in an era of shifting identities.

The second profound change is the new division of labour between the national and the international. In the postwar years, much of national life, be it economic or cultural, was truly national. Now it isn't. Of course, this change has been a long-run process. Multinational companies emerged as powerful economic players in the 50s. But this process has accelerated over the last decade or so and taken quite new forms. National markets have given way to international markets. Financial markets are no longer national but global.

The impact for a medium-sized European country like Britain is enormous. What government could once control, it often no longer can. The era of Keynesianism in one country is dead. We increasingly have to think European, if not global.

But the meaning of globalisation is not only economic, it is also environmental. It is becoming increasingly clear that if humanity is to avoid ecological catastrophe, then it will require global action and global co-operation. The same goes for the avoidance of nuclear war, and a new international order to replace the old bipolar system. We are moving into the era of interdependence.

The consequences of globalisation are far-reaching. They will literally redefine everything. Suddenly the world is so much smaller: where once different cultures rarely rubbed shoulders, now they must coexist. The Rushdie affair is one example and a harbinger of the future. The presence of people from the Third World in virtually every major European city is another example. And globalisation is set to transform the scale of migration.

At the same time it is also provoking a new search for identity, for a new sense of belonging, be it national or ethnic or regional. The corollary of globalisation is localisation. And caught in this pincer movement is the old nation-state. The



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latter, especially in the European context, is in remorseless decline. We can see it in Britain, where an unreformed, antiquated state system, a positively *ancien regime*, is besieged by Europeanisation on the one hand and a growing sense of national consciousness in Scotland and to a lesser extent Wales. Yet it is not just a crisis of the nation-state, it is also a crisis of Britishness. Take the example of black people. They may identify with being English, for example, but they also see themselves as Caribbean, or Asian or African. These are global times indeed.

All this has major implications for socialism. Our tradition and thinking is profoundly national. The communist tradition is deeply influenced by the notion of socialism in one country and the idea of national roads to socialism. The postwar social-democratic model rests on the idea of Keynesianism. But changes in the real world no longer allow us to think in these terms any more. That mindset is too insular, too narrow, too parochial, and we on the British Left have suffered from this disease more than anywhere else in Western Europe. We are now required to think at a number of different levels, all at the same time; global, European, national and local.

Let me put the European aspect of this in the following way. Day by day we can feel European matters impinging on us more and more. But it is still true that we think in terms of British politics with a European dimension. My guess is that in 10 years' time the locus of our economic and political decisions will have shifted to Brussels and Strasbourg: Britain will of course still be a sovereign state, but its relationship to the EC will increasingly assume the characteristics of a region. Budding politicians will elect to go to Strasbourg rather than Westminster.

The third component of new times is the crisis of communism. This has moved with extraordinary speed and geographical reach. Gorbachev is seeking a new anti-stalinist, democratic road in the USSR. China has lurched into authoritarianism. Eastern Europe is no longer a bloc, the outcome of its present crisis will certainly be pluralistic. What can one say about all this? Firstly, it is the end of the road for the communist system as we have known it: the central plan, the authoritarian state, the single-party system, the subjugated civil society. Stalinism is dead, and leninism - its theory of the state, its concept of the party, the absence of civil society, its notion of revolution - has also had its day.

But it is more than that. What we are witnessing is the defeat of socialism in one country and indeed one bloc. It has been undermined by its inflexibility, its lack of a democratic mandate, and ultimately, by the global market. Socialism in one bloc could not compete. In that sense we are seeing the end of the era of

separate development, of autarchy, of the epoch of opposites.

The tradition of the Russian Revolution became the tradition of socialism and capitalism as separate worlds, as entirely estranged civilisations. That era is at an end. From now on, with gathering pace, there will be an interpenetration of the two systems. The Soviet Union, over time, will acquire markets, international firms will operate there, the rouble will become convertible, Soviet tourists will be a common sight in London.

A very important part of our communist tradition is thereby drawing to an end. Much socialist thought has conceived of socialism in separatist terms, politically and intellectually. From now on, that cannot be the case. We are moving into a far more complex world in which the distinction between American capitalism, Swedish social-democracy and Soviet socialism will be more of a continuum than a qualitative break. And that has enormous implications for a marxist-based politics in Western countries. It requires us to rethink what we mean by capitalism and socialism, what we mean by socialist and capitalist countries. The Berlin wall must come down in our own minds.

We can view these events with a sense of defeat. And in a sense they *are* a defeat, because for an historical epoch our movement has been identified with these things, notwithstanding the crescendo of our own reservations and growing condemnation. But we must surely see them also as a great opportunity. The old communist bloc represented no way forward for the Left. It was a blind alley, and while it survived it cast a long shadow over prospects for the Left throughout the world.

What we are witnessing now, with the opening of the Berlin Wall, is nothing less than the reunification of Europe, and with the closing of the cold war, the beginnings of the reunification of the world. We are also seeing the beginning of the reunification of the socialist movement which has been divided since 1914 into its rival socialist and communist traditions.

The international communist movement is now surely at an end. That does not mean that independent communist parties will not survive, but they will no longer enjoy the same kind of common purpose and they will no longer exist as quite separate organisms from the social-democratic tradition. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) is a classic case. It now sees itself as the dominant social-democratic party in Italy, it will probably seek membership of the Socialist International and, most dramatically of all, is likely to change its name to emphasise its distance from the Eastern tradition and its proximity to the Western tradition of socialism.

Fourthly; we come to the environmental crisis. Humanity is now faced with a global challenge on a par with the threat

of nuclear war, if not more serious. We simply cannot any longer go on living in the same old way. Increasingly the future of the planet must be the first priority. It means conservation rather than production, using technologies for energy which are less exhaustive and more environmentally-friendly. It requires quite new forms of global co-operation. It raises the issue of global justice and equality, including the right of Third-World countries to achieve a standard of living akin to the West's.

What is abundantly clear is that the ecological challenge has done profound damage to the free-market crusade. For there is no way that the Thatcherite ideology of the market and narrow individualism gives humanity any hope of long-term survival in the face of the environmental threat.

But that threat also poses a far greater challenge to the Left than has so far been acknowledged. The ecological challenge can only be met by a combination of national and international action together with a change in personal habits and lifestyles. The stress on the latter is not traditional on the left. It asserts the importance of individual behaviour and choice in social change in a way that is relatively alien to the modern Labour and communist tradition, though not the social movements, nor to an older William Morris tradition of socialism.

Secondly, there is no getting away from the fact that the marxist tradition is productionist at its heart: the conquest of nature, the forces of production, the commitment to economic growth. Greenery obliges us to rethink all these things. The idea of economic and social progress must be subject to a new criterion - its impact on nature - and that criterion could well become the determining factor in many instances. Hence the notion of sustainable development, one that does not exhaust, that takes the long-term view, that places the relationship between humanity and nature at its core.

The fifth point concerns the redefinition of the sexual division of labour. The post-war settlement rested on a patriarchal deal between labour and capital resulting in the reassertion of a strict division of labour between men and women, with the latter doing the unpaid domestic work and the former responsible for paid work. The vast influx of women into paid work over the last 30 years has profoundly disrupted the previous division of paid labour, but with little impact so far on the division of domestic labour.

But the inequality between men and women goes much further than that. Our culture remains deeply masculine, public life is still dominated by men. The insight of feminism has been to uncover the nature of male power and thereby provide a different conception of power itself, as something which operates everywhere, not just out there. In short, the personal is political. One of the central themes of our era is the



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imperative of sexual equality, the attack on male power and privilege, the feminising of society.

Herein lies a profound challenge to the traditional conceptions of the Left because the socialist tradition is deeply masculinist. It is about production not consumption, paid work not domestic work, the power of capital not the power of men. And these preoccupations are reflected in the deeply masculine culture of the labour movement itself.

My sixth and final point about new times concerns the changing relationship between the state and civil society. In the postwar period there has been a veritable transformation in the size, scope and importance of civil society. Think of the enormous membership of environmental groups, or the range of cultural activity, or the massively-enhanced role of the media. We live in a society which is increasingly driven by civil society rather than the state.

This doesn't mean that the state is now unimportant. On the contrary. A decade of Thatcherism has shown how important it remains. But in many areas the state's role is increasingly being obliged to change: to be more fluid, more decentralised, to exist in partnership with civil society. The state cannot be regarded any longer as the repository of all wisdom, as having all the answers and potentially all the power, as somehow being above society. This change has been a source of crisis for the Left, which has always seen the state as the centrepiece of political change, representing politics in a concentrated form. But the state can no longer play that role or be seen like that.

And there is yet another problem. The centrality awarded to the state has nurtured a particular conception of politics, defined in terms of traditional political processes and political parties. Parties are politics. Think of the Labour Party. It is sectarian towards other movements above all because it doesn't see them as part of the political process. It doesn't understand the new political culture.

What then of our own Communist Party's future? The events of recent weeks in Eastern Europe have added a new urgency to what has already been a major subject of debate. We are facing the most profound crisis which quite simply means that if we carry on in the old way we will be dead and buried, to all intents and purposes, in the not very distant future. But one of the reasons why we have been going down and down, is that we never discuss ourselves, everyone else but not ourselves, not in a serious way anyway. It is one of the last vestiges of Stalinism, of the notion that we are born to exist, that we are above politics, that we have an historical mission. It lies deeply buried in our culture and therefore in the individual psyche of every one of us. Banish it, think, say what you think, because otherwise we will die.

The CP is a paradox. No other organisa-

tion on the traditional left has moved with such intellectual speed and flexibility in response to the changes of the last decade. We recognised Thatcherism before anyone else. We faced up to the decline of the labour movement before anyone else. Now we discuss new times before the Labour Party recognises their existence. We have been an impressive cultural force, making waves for every other section of the Left. But we must recognise that much of this ideological movement was also unravelling ourselves, undermining much of our previous *raison d'etre*, our distinct identity. We had to do it, we couldn't stand still, because that would have been worse.

But there is the other side of the coin. We may have moved intellectually, but we haven't moved when it comes to our own organisation, its culture, habits, sense of hierarchy and sheer conservatism. They have remained determinedly stuck in history. The contrast between our intellectual momentum and our cultural paralysis has become a yawning chasm.

We need the most open discussion, no holds barred, no forbidden territory, no heresies. From this moment on let's have a continuing public discussion and consider all the options, including merger, a name change, abandoning democratic centralism, modernisation, having different forms of membership, thinking in terms of a looser association rather than a party, and so on. I am not saying I support all of these, but rather I am suggesting what type of discussion we need, because actually we have to learn how to discuss them, we don't even have a language at the moment. What I will say is that we have no future as we are.

Whatever we opt to do it has to be radical. Moreover, it must be worked out with those outside of ourselves. That will mean compromise. It will also mean asking much wider questions about ourselves than even our most heated internal debates have so far suggested.

The six processes of new times that I have described are reshaping the world before our very eyes. They are epochal changes. Arguably they constitute the most important changes not just since 1945 but for a century, since the emergence of the modern phase of capitalist society. They clearly have the most profound implications for the Left. The class form which generated the modern Left is at an end. The concept of nation which is characteristic of all modern forms of socialism is in rapid decline. The socialist form of society as manifest in the communist world has run its course. The environmental crisis questions many of the assumptions which have previously informed the socialist idea of progress. The emergence of women as part of the mainstream of society, as subjects rather than subjugated, requires a different view of what equality and emancipation actually



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mean. And the state, which has been the pivotal institution for socialists, can no longer be seen in such a way.

There is no doubt that together these changes constitute a crisis for modern socialism. Market forms are expanding, East and West. The traditional notions of planning are largely in retreat. Social ownership hasn't delivered the goods. It would be wrong to say that all the old concepts of collectivism are in decline, but many certainly are. Is this the end of socialism? This is what Mrs Thatcher and Mr Fukuyama would have us believe.

But if we look closely, it isn't like this. Certainly many of the old forms of socialism are in terminal decline. But at its heart socialism isn't about forms or policies. For an era, opposition to incomes policy and the EEC were regarded by many as touchstones of socialism. What a nonsense! We must think of socialism, in its crisis, in a different, more fundamental way not as this policy or that institution, but in terms of overall aims and values. Socialism is about interdependence, solidarity, co-operation, equality. Looked at like this, new times appear quite differently.

Just when it seemed as if the market and individualism had triumphed, what do we see? The most extraordinary reassertion of collectivism in a quite new form at both national and global levels. For that is exactly what the green imperative means. It requires a new form of human solidarity, a new sense of global interdependence. Indeed, it at once raises collectivism in a deeper and broader way. It is talking about universal human values and goals. And it forces us to think about equality in a global way, it raises the North-South issue in a new and more dramatic form which nobody can ignore. Likewise, the collapse of the cold war requires us to think of new forms of global co-operation and organisation.

In other words, as many traditional collectivist forms find themselves beleaguered at a national level, at a broader, global level we find a growing reassertion of collectivism in new forms. What we are witnessing is the crisis of socialism in its national, Fordist form. And the rebirth of collectivism and socialism on a broader plane around new imperatives which will demand new forms and institutions, both nationally and globally. One tradition which belonged to a particular epoch may be exhausted, but that doesn't mean that socialism itself is over. Rather, it must be redefined in terms of the new circumstances and aspirations.

But finally, it would be wrong to think of all of this simply in terms of socialism. No longer does this sum up all of our aspirations and ambitions. We believe in a feminist future and a green future. Socialism can only describe part of what we want. It is one tradition among several which must be central to making new times better times.