

The End Of The Affair

A Roundtable Discussion

The crisis in Eastern Europe marks the end of communism. But what does it mean for the future of the Left in Western Europe?

The participants in the roundtable discussion are: **Beatrix Campbell**, feminist and communist; **Eric Hobsbawm**, historian and communist; **John Lloyd**, East European editor of the *Financial Times* and member of the Labour Party; and **Mario Telo**, writer on politics and a non-aligned Italian socialist close to the PCI. It is chaired by **Martin Jacques**, editor of *Marxism Today*.



Eric:
'The era of the October Revolution is at an end'

Over the past few weeks, in a breathtakingly short space of time, we've seen the extraordinary collapse of now what seems to be virtually all the old East European regimes, and at the same time there's clearly a very unresolved crisis in the Soviet Union. Would you say this represents the end of the communist system as we have known it?

John Although the movements in Eastern Europe are extremely different in every country, one of the common factors, it seems to me, is that the population of all of these countries could be roused very easily - given the opening that Gorbachev represented - against a communist party and a system which was regarded as an occupying force. Valtr Komarek, the economist who's emerged in Prague as a central opposition figure, said that in Czechoslovakia you had a curious system where 300,000 or so of the *nomenclature!* of the party apparatus counterposed themselves against a nation of 15m.

I think with significant differences that was true of all the countries, and remains true of those who have not yet had a liberation, like Romania. And therefore once Gorbachev had withdrawn the guarantee of support, an aroused population very quickly, and in Czechoslovakia it took a mere two weeks, threw off and was able to deflate this apparatus which they regarded as a form of imposition.

But the consequences are more far-reaching than that, aren't they? Historically?

Eric Yes, I think so. I think what we see is the end of the era dominated by the

October Revolution. To that extent, the effects are obviously much more long-term than John suggests.

Bea I think it's the end of the Bolshevik genre of revolutionary struggle and it therefore has to be the end of something called marxism-leninism. That doesn't mean the end of marxism, the two are not one and the same. Whether it's the end of communism with a little 'c', and the kind of revolutionary spirit or revolutionary cultures that preceded Bolshevism, is another discussion. Similarly the relationship between an older revolutionary culture and, say, social democracy, and what we now call the new social forces, is still to be defined.

Eric In one sense what is happening in Eastern Europe is liberation from intolerable dictatorial regimes, not very efficient economies, and generally, other than the Soviet Union, illegitimate and unpopular regimes. And yet the alternative is not simply to throw your hat in the air, when the alternative is, for instance, the revival of nationalism, very strong xenophobic and reactionary trends in a large number of these countries, not to mention the risk of the liquidation of the things that were positive achievements in these countries over 40-50 years, with the substitution of nobody quite knows what. We know it's all going to come right, we know it isn't all going to come right just by abolishing the centrally-planned economy. So for that reason, while we all hail what has happened, particularly in Czechoslovakia and the GDR (I am not quite so sure that I hail what has been happening in Hungary with equal lack of reservations), the future is by no

means without very serious problems. **Marie** In terms of the implementation of the values of the October Revolution, we don't find very much evidence of it in the Soviet empire, especially after the 1920s. And none of the governments in Eastern Europe had any democratic support. Probably the only exception was Czechoslovakia in 1948. Now apart from this, and apart from the attempt at renewal in Hungary in 1956, and in 1968 with the Prague Spring, we are not confronted with a story which has anything to do with the October Revolution as a value, as a revolution for freedom and social transformation. What is in crisis today is a dictatorial system and a failed economic organisation based on state ownership.

John On Eric's point that we are going into uncharted waters, well, of course we are, as always, but I don't know, nor can any of us claim to know, how far this lifting of the stone, as it were, which of course kept many things including human freedom underneath it, but also kept many nasty things underneath it, will lead inevitably to the latter, to nationalism, xenophobia and so on. We must not forget that many parties, including perhaps most obviously the Polish CP, adopted anti-semitism when it suited them, and used it as a way of internal party purging and so forth. However, it is a perfectly good question now, when formations like the Hungarian Democratic Forum seem at least to have a wing which is anti-semitic.

I put this myself to people in the Liberal Party, in Hungary, which is known popularly there as the 'Jewish Party' because of the preponderance of Jewish intellectuals. One Jewish member said: 'Of course there remains anti-semitism in society, indeed one can see posters of candidates from this party with 'Jew' scrawled over them in the centre of Budapest,' but he said, and I don't know how representative he is, 'This is in society, but in a sense, so what? It will not again become a matter of an organised fascist force. It remains there, it has to be dealt with, it's unpleasant, but it will not again become what we knew before and during the war.'

And one has to note that the anti-semitic speech made by the primate of Poland was instantly countered by the Solidarity-led government whose prime minister is a Catholic intellectual, it was countered by Lech Walesa and so on. In other words, it seems to me that many of the forces which have themselves identified with liberation are conscious of the need to maintain and to affirm strongly a position which is against the reactionary tendencies which have been present in their own society. And therefore it seems to me at least open to doubt, open to question, whether or not, having lifted the stone, 40-year old feelings come out, as it were, pristine, preserved in aspic, and not in the least changed.

The question I would pose is how far was the line of political development in Marx himself severable from the kind

of party which Lenin created. In other words, is there a marxism, a political marxism, which does not push you into a party which bases itself on the dictatorship of the proletariat and all that follows therefrom, or at least all that has followed therefrom?

Bea There is a vocabulary in marxism which lends itself to the kind of wrenching politics that we associate with leninism, and that's in a sense what I find so thrilling about this moment, which is that marxism itself is problematised by all these developments, but what's interesting about that is that it already was. All sorts of political formations which many of us have been associated with for the last 20 years represent a very direct challenge to marxism itself from the Left, and it's not for nothing that what it's identified is that marxism, if you like, happens after the fact of a number of very important struggles within the emerging working class - in Britain for instance - that produce a labour movement and a form of capitalist organisation which is then what marxism is attending to.

But there's something that comes before the marxist moment which you shouldn't be sentimental about, but which is important because there's a sense in which marxism repudiated it, and it's some of the culture of socialism and communism before marxism which is important to many of us, precisely because it's a culture of politics which is not simply about institutions and state power. It's not simply about class struggle, but it's about how human beings make their lives, their world, their cultures, from birth to death. That's the culture of politics and a relationship to production and the world of reproduction which is characterised by a different gender relationship than the one that Marx is preoccupied by.

Eric, you said right at the beginning that this was the end of the era of the October Revolution. What do you mean by that?

Eric This really takes me back to what John says, and I think what's wrong with John on marxism and marxism-leninism is he's unilinear, excessively unilinear. He assumes that one thing and only one thing was implicit in marxism. This is plainly not the case. You might as well say that German social democracy was implicit in what Marx said. It's quite clear that Lenin's interpretation of marxism - which occurred in particular countries in which there was (a) a revolutionary situation, or potentially a revolutionary situation, (b) which were pretty backward, and (c) in which there was no possibility of building up a mass movement such as the one that Marx actually had in mind - produced the specific version of marxism, the vanguard party and all the rest of it, which indeed in these countries had enormous effect. Though even in those countries it wasn't the only version of marxism. After all, the Mensheviks took a different view, and you can make a perfectly good case for saying the Men-

sheviks were as good interpreters of the thought of Marx as Lenin was.

Otherwise, before 1914, the classical view of marxism was exactly the opposite, that it was leading to things like German social democracy. That believed, as Marx did, in the evolution of the social contradictions in capitalism which would eventually, in some way, lead to the supersession of the system, but it did not believe in the kind of revolutionary tactics, and still less in the kind of revolutionary organisation which Lenin pioneered. Now I'm not saying that wasn't marxist either, because this was also a perfectly legitimate derivation from it. What I'm saying is that you cannot say marxism and marxism-leninism are the same thing and the one implies the other and nothing but the other.

As for the leninist version of marxism, that undoubtedly is in crisis, and indeed probably at an end for the time being, for the reason that I said at the beginning, the era of the October Revolution is, I think, at an end. Insofar as we envisage a change in the nature of capitalism, it will not, within the foreseeable future, be through a basic catastrophic crisis of the capitalist system, out of which the only thing that can be saved is by revolutionary means.

Whether Lenin was right or wrong is another matter, but there is very little doubt that between 1914 and the early 1950s, world capitalism was in a period of catastrophic crisis. Nobody, not even the United States, was immune, especially in the 1930s. Nobody was certain that the damn system was going to last and how it was going to last. If you think of the first half of the 30s, there was a sort of political tourism, not only by the Left but by liberals and conservatives, to Moscow to see what it was that made the system tick, even though it was as inefficient as we know it now, more so in fact. The point is everybody was into planning. Everybody stayed into planning, even in the capitalist world, until the 1950s. When the United States wanted to give aid to Latin American countries, they insisted they had to have a plan.

Now, don't kid yourself that the idea was just a diversion that came through Lenin. There were 40 years or so, when in a sense the instability and crisis of capitalism and, on the other side, the working class feeling that the only thing to do was absolutely make a sharp break, these, as it were, played in with each other.

We now know that this hasn't happened. And certainly from the 50s on it's been quite clear that, for instance, the argument that capitalism is not viable economically disappeared. It's more than viable.

It seems to me quite clear that the initial significance for the Left of the disintegration of the system in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe is that the split in the labour movement which was introduced after the 1917 revolution no longer has any justification. The

movement was split, the International was split on the assumption that only a world revolutionary movement would be adequate, and that actually fell by the wayside pretty soon, it was fairly clear from within a year or two that hadn't happened. Nevertheless, you could still argue you'd need a revolutionary type of labour movement based on parties of the military type, which is essentially what democratic centralism was.

This wasn't altogether wrong, the major historic achievement of leninism was the defeat of fascism, and without the Soviet Union on the one hand and the kind of resistance movements and partisan movements which the Communists were the backbone of, fascism wouldn't have ended up being defeated, we wouldn't be talking today about living in the developed countries in a liberal democracy, we'd be living under varieties of right-wing dictatorship and right-wing authoritarianism.

Now it's quite clear that this is no longer so, and therefore the case for the split between the communist and the social democratic movements I believe falls by the wayside. Reunification of these movements in one form or another is on the agenda. Whether this takes the form of a party like the Italian Communist Party in effect trying to reunify with the Socialist Party, because that's the core, I think, of the new initiative, or whether it takes the form of, in effect, everybody working through the, say, Labour Party in this country which, de facto, everybody's been doing anyway, is another matter. There may be separate parties for a while, but the perspective is, I think, reunification.

Let's begin to move now from East to West. Mario, do you see things like Eric's just presented them, the end of the old division between the Second and Third International, and the beginnings of some kind of new synthesis?

Mario The end of the split in the labour movement is on the agenda. Already for some time, the CPs which have mass representation have been in dialogue with some of the socialist parties in Europe in the name of a common renewal. The socialist parties which are interested in this dialogue are exactly those parties concerned with the same kind of questions, the meaning of socialism at the end of the 20th century. The meeting point is not Kautsky and Hilferding, but the real problems of modern society.

Now on Eric's point about anti-fascism, it is absolutely true that CPs were central to this issue. It was an important achievement of the 30s, 40s and 50s, maybe also the 60s if we include the progress of the CPs in Spain and Portugal. But after the 70s this issue was, no longer able to provide mass representation, because fascism in Europe was a defeated strategy.

One of the things that struck me about the events around the bringing down of the Berlin Wall was that while this could clearly



**Bea:
'Leipzig was the moment when I began to feel excited by what was happening in Eastern Europe'**

be interpreted as the defeat of one system by another, I was surprised how little triumphalism of this kind there actually was. The voice of the ideological Right was almost silent. Does that tell us something about the nature of this moment, that we are moving into a completely new situation, that the prospects for the Left are in some ways encouraging?

Bea Leipzig was the first point at which I began to feel excited by what was happening in Eastern Europe. I felt there was an historical inevitability about the collapse of the communist parties in the rest of Eastern Europe, and I thought to myself they are appalling, they are a disgrace, they have disarmed and disabled the societies they are now responsible for. I am glad that moment is over. But that brought no joy because they are countries in ruins and they are people who have lost heart and have lost initiative. But at least you can say that process belongs to them, which is as it should be.

But Leipzig engendered something else, partly because I suppose there was something about socialism in Leipzig. The thing that really thrilled me about what was happening in East Germany was something that goes beyond the reunification of the Second and Third Internationals, the reunification of, if you like, what's worth saving in the communist tradition and in social democracy. It challenged the idea that what's at stake now is the collapse of communism into social democracy, and that social democracy is alive and well in the shape of our labour and socialist parties in Europe, which is palpably not true.

What seems to me to be magical about what has happened in East Germany is first of all, that you have a challenge to the very idea of party organisation, a challenge that is expressed not in chaos but in something that is extraordinarily serene, calm, grown-up but absolutely resolute. For me it's represented in this picture of people clocking off work on Monday and knowing where they are going together on a Monday night in streets that presumably they have all lived in but not found each other in, and that just grew and grew and became in a certain sense irresistible. And so part of the triumph of Leipzig is anti-party politics. It was all done without parties. A new political form is very suggestively exemplified in what happened in East Germany. It is a form of politics which is not exhausted by the party, and that is a lesson that most socialist parties in Europe have yet to learn.

For me what changed everything was Leipzig and Dresden, because what we saw previous to this was the disintegration of autocratic communist societies and communist traditions which appeared to say, the experience of socialism has been so dreadful, so humiliating for these people that they wouldn't touch it. Whereas in East Germany they were saying this experience of socialism has been awful in many respects but there are things about socialism that we have learned that we

want to protect and expand, and there are things about socialism that we are yet to live, and we want that, we want to be part of that process of self-discovery and socialist discovery.

John, do you see the impact of the wall going down, and the rise of forum politics in the GDR and Czechoslovakia, as having some kind of positive effect on the Western Left?

John I half agree and half disagree with Bea. It seems to me that the Neues Forum brand of politics will have its work very much cut out, because being in East Berlin on the days after the Wall was opened, was to see essentially a flight to the West, and an evening or two evenings later a flight back again of East Germans loaded with consumer durables. The plastic bag was if you like the emblem of what happened there as much as the Leipzig banners, perhaps more so since the going over to West Berlin and the coming back with the consumer durables, actively involved more people than the extremely large Leipzig demonstrations did.

This brings me to my other point. The ghost at our feast as it very often is when socialists discuss things, is what is happening in capitalism. The successful internationalisation of capital, the enormously growing power of multinational companies, means that the socialist world, the Comecon world, is surrounded by people who are poised and who are everywhere asking each other: 'What do we get, how dear is it, where do we invest, how good is the labour force, how cheap is it and so on?' And indeed are met by the likes of Lech Walesa, who is going around the world talking to people saying 80% of Polish industry is for sale. The same will be true elsewhere, perhaps not quite as true in Czechoslovakia and East Germany where there is a stronger base, but the liberation movements in a sense have nowhere else to go. Neues Forum raises the old question: is there a third way? For the moment I cannot see it. I cannot see what its material base is. I cannot see where they are going to get the capital from.

The second point I just want to take up is Mario's. I think there is a certain number of false equivalencies. He speaks from the middle of a dialogue which the PCI started some years ago, especially with the West German SPD, so his experience is much richer of course and I speak as a member of perhaps the most insular socialist party, I won't say the world has ever known, but certainly that Europe presently knows. So I am conscious of a weak position! But it seems to me that to say that the communist-social democratic dialogue meets on a new position which is not that of Kautsky but is one where the two have pooled an enterprise - and this again picks up on something that Bea says which talks about social democracy in crisis - then one has to say: the crisis of communism is much, much deeper than the crisis of social demo-



John:
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cracy, even if it were possible to speak of social democracy as a single movement.

So that a dialogue even between a party which is as inventive, as courageous in its support of East European dissidents as the PCI, which has in a sense been a social democratic party for some time, then the very fact that it meets the German SPD as a communist party seems to me to be a source of weakness. The crisis of social democracy, in its various forms, say in its French form, is much more a theoretical one. Why does it call itself socialist? Why do parties like the Spanish call themselves socialist when the restructuring they have effected in Spanish society has been essentially Thatcherite, and the same with the New Zealand and the Australians. Now in Gonzalez's case of course, he has actually given sustenance to democracy. Democracy now seems to be almost beyond question in Spain, and it was not when he took power. However, his approach to the crisis, like that of Hawke and of New Zealand's Lange, and Mitterrand, and even now the sacred Swedish social democrats, is one where they pick up common features which we call Thatcherite but which are now common to many of the developed capitalist countries of the world. And that is, if you like, the theoretical crisis of socialist governments in power. But there is little question that the terrain on which a socialist-communist dialogue meets is in broad terms the social democratic terrain, albeit one which is being irrigated by new streams, feminist, ecological and so forth. But these streams are not themselves communist of course, they have been picked up by communists and socialists alike.

Eric I agree with John that there is no comfort for Western socialists in what is happening in Eastern Europe. The net effect is going to be an enormous retreat and that goes for social democrats too. But I think we should leave the East to face its problems and concentrate on our own. It seems to me perfectly clear that there has been a crisis of social democracy and quite a profound one because for social democracy, like communism, its policies and its structures are the result of the experience of a particular historical period. Essentially everything that even social democratic parties think about how economies ought to be run or not run is a result of the experiences between 1918 and 1945-6. And consequently the basic Keynesian approach for instance, which worked very well and was indeed necessary, again ran up in the early 70s against problems which they can't face either.

Now my point is simply this. The restructuring which is taking place all over the place is not necessarily a permanent restructuring. The belief that the world has entered a Thatcherite era - a period of privatisation and the dismantling of public controls and public enterprise - is an illusion. For 10-15 years this was undoubtedly so, and especially in the 70s and early 80s. My guess is that by

the time we get to the mid-90s people will talk about this as a particular phase. It will have lasted considerably less than the Keynesian phase, which lasted about 40 years, and while there will not be a going back, a great deal of it indeed will have been taken on board, we shall no longer be in a Thatcherite phase in the West. And this is one of the things that left-wing movements in the West have to start getting used to: we will no longer need to be on the defensive. Indeed, we are moving into a new phase where major reforms are going to be on the agenda, and those are the situations in which the Left is at its historical best. On a world scale, we will be on the defensive, because the loss of the large sector of what wasn't socialism but was called real existing socialism, is undoubtedly a setback. And it's a setback for social democracy because what is going to take over there isn't any kind of social democracy, it's neo-colonialism.

Mario I would like to say a number of things about Germany, because I think it is extremely important. I am probably more pessimistic than Eric in my assessment of the era of the Soviet revolution, but I am more optimistic than him about what is happening today, and I share Bea's point of view about what is happening in East Germany. I think we can speak about a democratic peaceful revolution, which is of especial importance because it is happening in Germany. It is the first time this century that Germany has given to the world and

to Europe a message of peace, of democratic participation, of a mass movement wanting more freedom and more social rights. I think it is really something historical.

The Eastern countries are in terrible crisis, but not through an open victory by right-wing Western capitalists. It is much more complicated. It is something absolutely unexpected, not only Leipzig but everywhere in Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia GDR etc.

I am optimistic about the future, about the possibility of the European Left not being weakened by the process taking place in Eastern Europe.

Why? Because the evolution in the Eastern countries is the result of detente, not the cold war. Because instead of the passivity of the masses, you have a fantastic, unexpected mass participation, a democratisation of society. And finally, in this kind of mass movement, there are new socialist streams. They play an important role in some countries - less in Poland, Poland is probably the son of the old cold-war era. But in the GDR, Hungary and Czechoslovakia we have a movement where the Left - Bea said democratic socialist values - can play a very important role.

So on the one hand we can speak about a very pessimistic breakdown of the communist party in office, but on the other hand we can see the new streams - former communists, social democracy, greens, new democratic movements - and I think that is a very important

opportunity for the Western European Left. That is my conclusion about East Germany. The danger of course is a wider colonisation of Eastern Europe. As one of the key figures in Neues Forum put it, 'We don't want to become the Sicily of Western Germany!' That is a real possibility.

Finally, I agree with John that the dialogue between the PCI and the German SPD and others doesn't mean that somehow they meet in the middle - that is not true. The condition for that is a long process of self-criticism by the PCI, an attempt to find an independent way out of the world of the Third International, the recognition of the universal value of democracy, and so on. We can say this belongs to the social democratic tradition, I think.

Eric And also to the marxist tradition!
Mario Yes, of course. But during the time of the strain between the two Internationals, Berlinguer belonged more to the social-democratic tradition. I don't think there is a third way between social democracy and communism. That is not on the agenda. The problem is to build up a new strategy for and development of the European Left in the new conditions, where social democracy will play a major role. But the question is which social democracy? I would say social democracy linked to mass organisation and with deeper social roots in the society, unlike in Spain and France where basically the socialist parties are opinion parties. •



**Mario:
'I don't think there is a third way between social democracy and communism'**

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