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The same mould or different moulds? Reflections on a prosopography of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB)

Kevin Morgan

Ernie Benson might be described as one of British communism's 'Leninist' generation. Born in Leeds in 1906, he joined the CPGB in his early twenties as an unemployed engineering worker; and though, unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not attend the Comintern's Lenin School in Moscow, the CPGB itself provided him with an intensive induction into the same canonical body of approved texts and formulas. He also wrote a two-volume autobiography, *To Struggle is to Live*, which gives us an insight into how Benson both internalised and adapted these official discourses.¹ Doubtless, his very title, like his description of a mundane spell of party employment as that of a 'professional revolutionary', shows how Benson's sense of identity was bound up with the tropes and catch phrases of the movement in which he spent his entire adult life. On the other hand, this was mixed with a sort of militant vernacular and common-sense which could refashion what it absorbed in the very process of absorption. In one passage, Benson expressed disgust at the sort of middle-class or petty-bourgeois communist that became quite prominent in the CPGB after the popular front. He did so in the form of an adage which every good cadre could recite, but with a decidedly unofficial sting in the tail: 'Stalin once said that Communists were people of a special mould', he grumbled, 'which someone later said didn't mean the same mould.'² He gave no indication of who this 'someone' was, nor of whether this was a regular party in-joke or just a particular phrase that stuck in his mind. Nevertheless, the additional caveat seems to me at least as helpful as the original formula in trying to make sense of these putative people of a special mould.

I mention it here as a starting point for some reflections deriving from my work on the CPGB Biographical Project at the University of Manchester, which itself drew on ideas and research data collected over some twenty years' interest in the subject.³ More specifically, I want to elaborate on some of the precepts and arguments presented in the book *Communists in British Society* which I have written with two other members of the project, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn.⁴ A central concern of the book is precisely the relationship between this ambition of a 'special' party and party cadre, one which in Thorez's words would be 'not like the others', and the CPGB's competition with these 'others' in respect of its main fields of recruitment, political activity and essentially voluntary forms of adhesion. In the spirit of Benson's little anecdote, we regarded the official discourse of party activism as normative and prescriptive rather than straightforwardly descriptive. Communism was nothing if not a political formation of international scope, and its forms of leadership, organisation and political identity were shaped accordingly. Nevertheless, the influence of these diverse sources of recruitment and fields of activity was not simply negated by the act of joining the party; rather these helped determine both patterns of adhesion and

¹ Ernie Benson, *To Struggle is to Live: a working-class autobiography. Volume two: starve or rebel 1927-1971*, Newcastle: People's Publications, 1980.

² Benson, *To Struggle is to Live*, p. 224.

³ ESRC award no R000 237924.

⁴ Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists in British Society 1920-1991*, London: Rivers Oram Press, 2006. I should nevertheless stress that the presentation here is entirely my own responsibility.

defection and the character of the ‘complex transaction’ between the party and party cadre which membership represented.⁵ Our object was to historicise this relationship in which the balance between different issues of social and political identity was subject to incalculable variations, in each case shifting over time.

Though we did not adopt it to the exclusion of other ways of understanding communism, a prosopographical approach does offer particular insights into issues of commitment, identity and the forms of activity to which these gave rise. Tony Judt, in his book on socialism in Provence, expressed perfectly a sort of realist case for studying such movements’ supporters in view of the potential dissonances that existed between the formal and the informal. This, he added by way of caution:

involves a proper investigation of just who those supporters *really* were, rather than prior assumptions about who they ought to have been, in the light of the investigator’s prejudices, received ideas, or even the party’s own self-image. Nor can we rely on the nature of the party’s published propaganda to give us an indication of the *likely* source of its support ...⁶

Few researchers, one imagines, would claim such certainty in their own prior assumptions as to contest such a position. Nevertheless, in the field of communist history, more even perhaps than his own, the approach that Judt recommended cuts across many of the conceptions prevailing at the time that he was writing in 1979. In a much-cited aphorism, Sigmund Neumann once referred to the communist party as a ‘party of absolutist integration’, and ideas of a ‘total’ or ‘absolute’ identification between the individual and a single, all-embracing collective have remained more resilient in this connection than in relation to almost any other sort of voluntary organisation. The notion of a less regulated space, in which communists ‘really’ conducted themselves in different ways from what was, after all, a self-image of monolithicity, were correspondingly much diminished. A partial consequence of this was the neglect of a serious biographical dimension, whether individual or collective, in the older critical historiography of communism, and a disregard for the complexity of individual life histories even in studies which were expressly concerned with communist ‘people’.⁷ What mattered was the mould, and the extent to which different groups of party member were subjected to it.

Examples to be discussed in due course include the work of Annie Kriegel, Gabriel Almond and Harvey Klehr. This was not, however, a simple distinction between ‘social’ and ‘political’ approaches to communism, or the writing of its history respectively from ‘above’ or ‘below’. In Britain, one of the most penetrating historical commentators on the CPGB was Raphael Samuel, a founder of the *History Workshop* movement and possibly the most inspirational of the ‘new’ social and cultural historians of the 1960s and 1970s. Himself the product of a ‘party’ family – he left the CPGB after Hungary and was prominent in the early New Left – Samuel combined the radical sympathies of his upbringing with a distrust of grand narrative and a genius for spotting hidden connections and analogies. Nevertheless, Samuel too, in his justly renowned *New Left Review* articles on the CPGB, described British

⁵ A phrase I borrow from Claude Pénnetier and Bernard Pudal.

⁶ Tony Judt, *Socialism in Provence 1871-1914. A study in the origins of the modern French left*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 295.

⁷ For further thoughts see Kevin Morgan, ‘Parts of people and communist lives’ in John Mellroy, Kevin Morgan and Alan Campbell, eds, *Party People, Communist Lives*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2001.

communism a 'a complete social identity ... which transcended the limits of class, gender and nationality' and which within the confines of an 'organisation under siege' maintained the 'simulacrum of a complete society, insulated from alien influences, belligerent towards outsiders'.⁸

Though seemingly unambiguous, the extent to which this notion of 'completeness' can be reconciled with the recognition of other forms of identity in Samuel's work on individual communists is quite another matter. Indeed, his evident inconsistency on this point merely underlines the value of biography in problematising such large assumptions as that of a single, all-encompassing form of identity. One might, for example, instance a work like Arthur Exell's *The Politics of the Production Line: autobiography of an Oxford carworker*, an account largely deriving from interviews recorded by Samuel and published on his initiative.⁹ If Exell's very title suggests the incompleteness of a communist identity alone, so too do the several specificities he describes, of place, ethnicity, experiences of migration, above all of union and occupational identity. A migrant from the South Wales coalfield, Exell joined the CPGB and his union, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), more or less simultaneously in 1935. He nevertheless gave the latter a sort of pride of place by including as his frontispiece a photograph of AEU veterans being awarded the union's Award of Merit by a former union leader – who was also, as it happens, a renegade communist. The symbolism was unmistakable. The AEU badge was not only prominently employed in the book as a visual device, but a foreword by another non-communist union officer gave Exell's story a sort of official imprimatur.

Samuel, of course, must have played a major role in all this. Nevertheless, the very fact of such a collaboration, between academic defector and staunch party loyalist, suggests either a degree of belligerency to outsiders that is easily exaggerated, or else a definition of who belonged that was more elastic and not simply coterminous with the party.¹⁰ In any case, the notion of the 'trade union' or 'industrial' comrade was a familiar one, abundantly attested in both contemporary and oral sources and representing far more than just a descriptive qualifier.¹¹ 'Complete' social identities, to the extent that communism managed to fashion them, depended either on the suppression of competing articulations of identity under 'actually existing socialism', or their incorporation elsewhere into a communist 'world' with its own clearly marked boundaries, rituals, calendar and hierarchy of allegiances.¹² In Britain, however, not even the defining commitments of the industrial militant were comprehensively subordinated in the way that is sometimes suggested.

This does not mean that the *idea* of a single overriding commitment did not have a tremendous significance for communists, nor that the *practice* of such a commitment could not be taken to extraordinary levels of intensity. The theoretician R. Palme Dutt, perhaps the most authoritative British expositor of such a commitment, described it in the early 1930s as a comprehensive 'life-outlook':

⁸ Raphael Samuel, 'The lost world of British communism', *New Left Review*, 154, 1985, pp. 11-12 and 156, 1986, pp. 68-9.

⁹ London: History Workshop Journal publications, 1981.

¹⁰ Here I should declare an interest. As a (non-communist) student in the early 1980s I called on Exell and got to know him well. He was one of the least belligerent people I have ever met.

¹¹ This in fact was a major theme in the third of Samuel's essays, 'Class politics: the lost world of British communism, part three', *New Left Review*, 165, 1987, pp. 52-91.

¹² On this, see for example Claude Pénnetier and Bernard Pudal, 'Du parti bolchevik au parti stalinien' in Michel Dreyfus et al, eds, *Le siècle des communismes*, Paris: Les Editions de l'Atelier, pp. 338-9.

Communism is a complete world conception covering every aspect of life, and transforming all our thinking and activity; the comradeship of Communism draws us into a great collective movement, in which all can find their realisation, and in which the old distinctions of politics and life, of political activity and private life, disappear and lose their meaning.¹³

Such a passage serves not only to juxtapose the formal with the informal in our understanding of communist allegiances, but to remind us how varied these allegiances could be. Dutt himself, a brilliant Oxford graduate moved irrevocably by the example of the Russian Revolution, subordinated intellect, conscience and career prospects alike to the party, the international and – with less prevarication than was often the case – the USSR. Sometimes, as in recent debates on German communism, the concept of the ‘milieu’ has been counterposed to leadership, ideology and apparatus, as one might counterpose the local to the national, or spatial constructions of identity to its institutional parameters. Communism itself, however, was also a milieu, or a set of milieux; and whether through his childless marriage to the Comintern agent Salme Murrik, or the twelve years they spent living in Brussels, who Dutt ‘really’ was is inexplicable outside of this milieu of the international .

If Exell and Dutt provide obviously contrasting types, our object, in a study embracing both of them, was a method of research and data collection by which such differences of context and commitment could be recognised, recorded and their relative significance evaluated. We hoped that such an exercise might contribute something to the comparative understanding of communism. In addressing the interconnections between communism and British society, we also believed that it could tell us a good deal about broader issues of political radicalisation and the forms of activism to which it gave rise. Within the compass of the space allowed, I want to use the rest of the paper to sketch out some of the implications of the approach we adopted in respect of research method. They are summarised here under the four headings of open research methods; problems of sampling; power relationships within the party; and the significance of generation.

Open research methods

The case for open research methods must seem no less self-evident than the avoidance of predetermined judgements. Within a communist historiographical context it is nevertheless precisely the validity of routine principles of academic enquiry that repeatedly requires reaffirmation. Ironically, one of the commonest habits of *a priori* reasoning based on received ideas and images has, again, been a conception of the ‘real’ party militant, but in the very different sense from Judt’s of an essential quality and authenticity that excludes many ‘real’ party members in Judt’s more literal sense. Such a line of reasoning dates from the early years of serious academic research into the subject. In Almond’s classic *The Appeals of Communism*, focusing on Britain, the USA, Italy and France, precisely this distinction was drawn between merely ‘exoteric’ communists and an ‘esoteric’ inner core of ‘full initiates’. For Almond and his colleagues, communism was an ‘exclusive and implicit’ model of allegiance and identity, in relation to which all other values and associations were purely instrumental. Its specificity therefore demanded its own rules of study. As a committed pluralist, Almond upheld a broader notion of political identity fashioned

¹³ R. Palme Dutt papers, British Library, CP 1262 K4, message to communist students’ conference, 26 September 1933.

from competing 'roles, associations and ideals', whose reconciliation by the individual demanded inventiveness and a choice between conflicting demands. These, moreover, were the sorts of environment from which western communists were recruited, and Almond conceded that for 'a very large percentage, if not the great majority' of communists, the exclusive and implicit model was simply inappropriate. 'Perhaps for most of the rank and file of the Communist movement ... exposure to the esoteric model is quite superficial, and in this sense they are not true Communist militants', he noted. The 'true' communist militants in Judt's more empirical sense quite extensively comprised 'unstable party elements, which may defect under circumstances in which party practice impinges on non-party loyalties and values'.¹⁴

To this extent, Almond's treatment clearly diverged from the 'totalitarian' model then being advanced largely on the basis of its French exemplar by Maurice Duverger.¹⁵ If it was nevertheless the 'esoteric' cadre which was held to represent the 'true' or essential communist and a sort of telos of party activism, this was not, *contra* Judt, derived from 'real' examples at all. Rather, in *The Appeals of Communism*, it was constructed through the 'quantitative' content analysis of a tiny selection of Leninist-Stalinist 'classics' such as Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*¹⁶ Shorn of its quantitative pretensions, there is a parallel here with Samuel's use of texts like *****'s *How To Be a Good Communist*, and this confusion between description and normative type has been extraordinarily prevalent in communist historiography.¹⁷ In fairness to Almond, it should however be added that the academic and political climate of the 1950s was anything but conducive to a more searching analysis, not least in respect of the attitudes to 'open research methods' of communists themselves. With the image of the 'good communist' dominating even the communist press, the development of more sophisticated readings was to prove largely dependent on the wider availability of first oral and then archival sources.

Very much a product of its time, the emphasis in *The Appeals of Communism* on emotional conflict and maladjustment dates it as faithfully as the rings in a tree trunk.¹⁸ On the other hand, the conception upheld there of the 'true' communist militant, constituting both ideal type and epitome, has continued to inform an extensive academic literature. An important example, based, as it seemed, on a more systematic collection of data, was Harvey Klehr's study of the American communist elite.¹⁹ Though Klehr was unimpressed by Almond's limited US sample and specifically discountenanced neurosis as a form of explanation, the very conception of his project was vitiated by the same aprioristic notion of what he too characterised as the 'real' party cadre.²⁰ Not only did this justify a sole focus on the central committee 'elite' – a point to which I return – but it was held to justify Klehr's narrow research criteria of 'standard biographical data' and 'party-career data'. Inevitably, Soviet connections were singled out; more importantly, Almond's diverse roles and

¹⁴ Almond, *Appeals*, p. 67.

¹⁵ Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties. Their organization and activity in the modern state*, second English edn, London: Methuen, 1959, pp. 116-24.

¹⁶ Gabriel A. Almond, *The Appeals of Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. ix-x, 376.

¹⁷ ***** Samuel; Studer?

¹⁸ For the limitations of this literature, see for example Cris Shore, *The Italian Communist Party. The escape from Leninism*, London: Pluto, 1990.

¹⁹ Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre. The social background of the American Communist Party elite*, Stanford, Cal.: Hoover Institution Press, 1976.

²⁰ Klehr, *Communist Cadre*, pp. 4-7, 9, 115.

associations were simply disregarded as a category of analysis.²¹ In the absence of any such information, the construction of the ‘total’ party member was hence virtually predetermined; and where Almond proposed an ‘assimilated’ communist lacking any ‘non-party loyalties and values’, Klehr confirmed it by simply failing to register such categories of information as might have disturbed it. Where potentially he might have addressed such issues, for example in chapters on the leadership’s Black and Jewish cohorts, he deployed neither qualitative nor quantitative evidence to explore or even establish his basic model. Klehr’s account provides many helpful insights and should not simply be dismissed. Nevertheless, where the research method is exclusive and implicit, conclusions can hardly be otherwise.

We therefore tried a different approach. Conscious that the mere distinction between the ‘esoteric’ and the ‘exoteric’ requires information as to the countervailing loyalties held to characterise the latter, we constructed a structured qualitative database which, as far as our sources permitted, recognised all ‘roles, associations and ideals’ of actual or potential significance. In other words, where such roles and associations were confined to the communist milieu, this was indicated by the absence of information to the contrary, not the inability to record it. Where such roles and associations were entered into only instrumentally, this might be indicated either by qualitative data to that effect or information as to the character and date of entry into such associations – such as I have already noted with regard to Exell.²² As well as ‘party-career data’, we therefore included information as to personal, religious, political, cultural or industrial associations, maintained either before, after or concurrently with communist party membership. Concerned that no quantitative method could capture the multiple, interacting roles and relationships we found attested in some of individual activists’ histories, we set no restriction on the range and depth of qualitative information recorded. Data extracted from our own unstructured project interviews, or from sometimes in excess of twenty different sources, could thus amount to as much as five thousand words of summary and transcription for particular individuals; and in something over a thousand cases at least two hundred words of free text was added, in addition to the basic descriptive details of work, residence and organisational affiliation.

If we preferred such an ‘open’, qualitative research strategy in preference to circular definitions of the real, the formative and the significant, this doubtless reflected our own interests both in the possible variety, contestedness and mutability of communist identities as well as the powerful codes of unity, discipline and self-abnegation with which these were so often in tension. Rather than denying the ‘closed’ or ‘true’ elements of the communist experience, such an approach seemed necessary precisely to demonstrate and differentiate these elements, and provide a convincing account of how these people of a special mould were produced from circumstances not obviously different from those of thousands around them. Definitions of the ‘real’ communist tell us little if they generate circular lines of argument by which the ill-fitting is disregarded or automatically assigned a secondary significance. Notions of communist allegiances as a sort of rebirth or ‘existential

²¹ See for example Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre. The social background of the American Communist Party elite*, Stanford, Cal.: Hoover Institution Press, 1976, pp. 4-7, 16-17, 86, 116.

²² For example, the evidence of communist ‘infiltration’ of most trade unions is extremely weak; the CPGB’s engineering cadre hence predominantly but exclusively comprised metalworkers who became communists, not the reverse. On the other hand, in the case of certain smaller unions one can trace a clear process by which committed communists entered into these unions and took on leadership positions. A key issue for us was to be able to make such distinctions.

watershed', or of a Kremlin-like belligerence toward the outside world, also need where appropriate to accommodate evidence of continuities or competing forms of association.²³ There was no pre-existing population of British communists, and we soon became aware of the significance of transitions and trajectories in the political life history, and of the need in complex societies for a multi-contextual approach to human relationships, focused on patterns of conflict and interaction at several levels. Famously in *The Making of the English Working Class*, Edward Thompson insisted that class was not a 'thing' but a relationship occurring historically.²⁴ In our own research, we took the same approach, not only to gender, generation and other social relationships, but to party membership itself, and tried to convey not just the fluidity but the synchronicity and interdependence of these relationships. As a corollary, we also drew on the broadest possible range of sources, not to give the illusion of completeness, but to compare the diverse forms and languages in which communist lives were constructed in different periods and for different purposes. Moreover, the extremely uneven availability of these different types of source meant that the use of the particular types of insight they provided was difficult to combine with a focus on any one category of party members. That was one, but only one, of the reasons why we did not attempt to construct a representative sample.

The problem of a representative sample

With any such project there are problems of identifying a subpopulation on which claims of a faithful representation of the larger body might be based. Even had we had possessed the sort of prefiltered census data that might have allowed us to identify a quota sample – and this, of course, did not exist – multidimensional lines of differentiation meant that there were no simple criteria by which we could have constructed it. Klehr's exclusive focus on the CPUSA central committee suggested one way, as he put it, to 'by-pass' the problem.²⁵ We, on the other hand, did not want to focus merely on a party elite, however defined, but aimed to encompass the different levels of communist activity over time and trace the interconnections between them. Doubtless, whether the 'cadre' as Klehr defines it represented the communist party's 'distinguishing characteristic' depends on the questions one is asking, and it is our particular concern with the interaction between communism and British society that requires the adoption of a wider perspective.²⁶ On the other hand, many of the issues discussed by Klehr – for example, the character of Jewish, Black and female leadership cohorts – suggest no obvious rationale for focusing on the party elite. Even with respect to the party cadre, the claim that the central committee provided a 'representative cross section' was simple assertion; as Klehr himself conceded, it drew disproportionately on 'national' party cadres, who were also often functionaries, and whose advancement involved a range of social and political filters,

²³ On communism as a second birth, see for example Sandro Ballassai, 'The party as schools and the schools of party. The partito comunista italiano 1947-1956', *Paedagogica Historica*, 35, 1, 1999, pp. 93-4; Pennetier and Pudal, 'Du parti', pp. 338-9; Samuel, 'Lost world', p. 43. Though we also found evidence of such notions of a 'second life', in the British case conversion narratives are easily counterbalanced by what we called 'continuity narratives', even extending to the published autobiography of the party's general secretary, Harry Pollitt.

²⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: Gollancz, 1963, pp. 9-11.

²⁵ Klehr, *Communist Cadre*, p. 11.

²⁶ Klehr, *Communist Cadre*, pp. 6-7.

several of them identified by Klehr, which one might have thought central to the study if the elite itself.²⁷

We also bypassed the problem, but by a rather different strategy. Although we worked up basic data for certain discrete subpopulations, including members of the central/executive committee, we decided against any attempt to construct a representative sample of British communists. Potentially, we therefore recorded information for any individual identified as having been a member of the CPGB at any point during its seventy-one year existence. This is a large and unmanageable population, certainly comprising upwards of a hundred thousand individuals. By the time we completed our book, we had recorded some basic information for around 4500 of them.

Unlike Klehr, we were therefore interested in those who went ‘through’ the CPGB as well as ‘into’ it, at different levels and in different spheres of activity. Perhaps this, indeed, was a ‘distinguishing characteristic’. If a Jacobin was ‘two years of a bourgeois’ life’, then the British communist was in many cases two, ten, or twenty, years of a socialist’s, or trade unionist’s life.²⁸ Moreover, these few years were typically experienced at a politically formative age; their influence, for example, is clearly traceable in the trade union leaders of the 1960s and 1970s who had passed through the CPGB or YCL as younger militants.²⁹ Nevertheless, though we did not consciously discriminate according to the length of membership, our sources predictably did provide such a bias, so that our density of coverage for any given year is usually greater than the global figure suggests. This ranges from around a seventh of the CPGB’s members for the membership nadir of 1930-1, to around 6 per cent with rising membership by the time of the war and 2-3 per cent for the peak membership years of the 1940s.³⁰

Because of the source-based nature of our research, the information in many cases is fragmentary, sometimes relating to a single aspect of an individual’s life. Fuller profiles – including some basic details of work, residence and political activities – existed for just over half of the total; with a corresponding density of coverage falling from over a tenth for 1930-1, to just under 5 per cent in 1939 to a low point of 1.7 per cent in 1942. Quite apart from issues of density, however, the lack of a representative sample, along with the potential for extreme forms of bias due to missing and skewed data, means that the raw data we collected is deeply problematic from a quantitative point of view. Hence, the account we produced is essentially a qualitative one. We were mindful of Luisa Passerini’s observation that what appears unique in personal accounts often throws most light on shared values and cultural stereotypes, and it is this qualitative approach that most obviously distinguishes ours from a study like Klehr’s.³¹ At the same time, the sheer range of information, and the opportunity to group and compare it according to complex search criteria, meant that qualitative assessments could be disciplined and corroborated by the mixed-methods approach dimension allowed by the database. Indeed, in many respects the problems

²⁷ Klehr, *Communist Cadre*, pp. 10-12.

²⁸ Cited by Gwyn Williams, foreword to Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscovs. Communism and working-class militancy in inter-war Britain*, London: Croom Helm, 1980, p. 6.

²⁹ For example Lawrence Daly, Clive Jenkins, Jack Jones, Len Murray, Hugh Scanlon, Arthur Scargill. Jones claimed never to have been a CPGB member; he fought in Spain and was at the least a close fellow-traveller.

³⁰ The sources and their use are described in a separate note in our *Communists and British Society*, pp. 276-82.

³¹ Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory. The cultural experience of the Turin working class*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 8.

of skewed data and the lack of a representative sample are far from unique and in disciplines like medicine a range of techniques have been developed for the quantitative examination of problematic data. On specific issues such as the comparative recruitment to the CPGB of men and women, or the effects on party careers of experiences like attendance at the Lenin School, my colleague Gidon Cohen successfully adapted such techniques and provided a rigorous quantitative dimension to the research.³²

Power relationships and concentric rings

Extending to these wider categories of party membership, a study like ours might hopefully be seen as complementary to those adopting a narrower focus with denser coverage. Particularly, in the period of continuous Comintern oversight, a communist leadership cadre was clearly and explicitly marked out and at some level this usually involved interaction with the Comintern and/or its international ancillaries. If the apparatus itself provided a sort of milieu, then the rationale for an approach like Klehr's, not as a by-pass but as a study in its own right, is clear. One of the most ambitious collective biographies to have been realised to date focuses on the *Kominterniens* of the Francophone (or part-Francophone) countries of north-west Europe and provides particularly rich documentation of their relations with the Comintern.³³ In this instance, the terms of reference are expressly intended to complement existing national studies, and the contributors have provided a body of literature on communist biography and prosopography which we found richer and more stimulating than almost anything available in English.³⁴ There is neither logic nor purpose in setting one approach against another. If communism as a movement needs to be understood at different levels as well as in different contexts, then it also needs serious scholarship addressed to these different levels.

The extent to which a communist elite can automatically be correlated with these party functions and responsibilities is another matter. In theory, it is true, there was no clearer map of internal power relationships than that of democratic centralism. This indeed, as Klehr suggests, was like a codification of Michelsian oligarchy, pyramidal in form and peaking in the secretariat, both nationally and internationally. Alternatively, one may imagine the party, as Annie Kriegel did, as a series of concentric rings, with an 'inner circle' of cadres corresponding to the 'real' or 'true' conception of the communist. Citing the Leninist ideal of 'individuals fashioned from a single pattern ... eradicat[ing] from their original natures whatever was no longer suitable', Kriegel even suggested that their homogeneity meant that there was no real point in detailing their biographies, though she did concede its advantages for communists in the outer ring.³⁵ Ironically, given her concern with the communist 'people', Kriegel's larger claims about them were largely expounded at a general level, or through the construction of ideal types, though her own later biography of Eugen Fried showed its great value even for her innermost ring.³⁶

³² See Gidon Cohen, 'Missing, biased and unrepresentative: the quantitative analysis of multi-source biographical data', *Historical Methods*, 35, 4, 2002, 166-76.

³³ José Gotovitch and Mikail Narinski, *Komintern. L'histoire et les hommes*, Paris: Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2001.

³⁴ Gotovitch and Narinski, 'Avant-propos' in idem., *Komintern*, pp. 11-14.

³⁵ Annie Kriegel, *The French Communists. Profile of a people*, University of Chicago Press, 1972, pp. xxi, 29, 46.

³⁶ Stéphane Courtois and Annie Kriegel, *Eugen Fried*, Paris : Seuil, 1997.

The issue which concerns me here, however, is the positing of an inner ring or elite on the basis of a formal hierarchy of political functions. Specifically in relation to the PCF, Kriegel likened advancement within the party to ‘the upward movement of the elite in a mobile society’, like a non-ruling equivalent to Djilas’s new class. In a broader context, Claude Pannetier and Bernard Pudal have also characterised the Stalinist party in terms of a ‘system of privileges proportionate to the degree of subordination’.³⁷ To the extent that the party disposed of such privileges, there is no reason at all to doubt it. In the Soviet context, for example, Evan Mawdsley and Stephen White have made precisely such a case for their study of the Soviet political elite, and it is difficult to imagine who would want to challenge it.³⁸

The CPGB, however, was not the CPSU. Even compared with its counterparts in Weimar Germany or post-war France and Italy, it was characterised by a relatively weak institutional presence, limited sanctions over members and the insufficiency of its means of patronage. So sweeping a statement requires immediate qualification and periodisation. In the party’s early years, codes of democratic centralism were backed up, not only by Comintern-funded positions and the prestige of the ‘professional revolutionary’, but by unemployment and victimisation in the core sectors from which the party recruited its leading personnel.³⁹ In 1922, an organisation commission report mainly drafted by Dutt and Harry Pollitt referred mordantly to the ‘grotesque disproportion’ between paying members and functionaries. By the end of the decade, the pyramid was once again no less top-heavy, while the training for leadership roles of a Lenin School cadre – possibly larger, in relation to the CPGB’s membership, than in any other legal party – underpinned discipline and dependency by flooding the market for professional revolutionaries. The result, as communist veteran Willie Gallacher pointed out, was a characteristic variation on the communist bugbear of opportunism: ‘not opportunism in relation to the masses, but opportunism of the Party in relation to the CI [Comintern]’.

Even at this stage, individuals can be identified preferring to work outside the apparatus, either as a more effective sphere of work or out of straightforward considerations of financial security. This was also true of international functions, and until 1927-8 Pollitt himself did no obvious harm to his party career prospects, let alone to the other careers available to him, by his slackness in attending to Comintern or Profintern responsibilities in Moscow.⁴⁰ However, it was with the more concerted drive towards work in non-party controlled environments in the 1930s that larger discrepancies between the CPGB’s formal and informal power relations began to reappear. This was exemplified by its work in industry. By common consent this was the CPGB’s most effective sphere of activity, and yet the party controlled few unions, no national union confederation, and therefore measured its influence according to another set of rings entirely. Even in France and Italy, where communist-aligned union confederations provided a sort of nomenklatura, a focus on activity within them

³⁷ Claude Pannetier and Bernard Pudal, ‘Du parti bolchevik au parti stalinien’ in Dreyfus, *Le siècle des communismes*, pp. 338-9.

³⁸ Evan Mawdsley and Stephen White, *The Soviet Elite from Lenin to Gorbachev: the central committee and its members 1917-1991*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, ‘Preface’ and passim.

³⁹ Material here draws on Morgan, *Labour Legends and Russian Gold*, chs 2 and 7.

⁴⁰ In 1924 and again in 1928, Pollitt resisted pressure from the Profintern chief Losovsky to attend its third and fourth world congresses, though Pollitt was the organisation’s British secretary. Also in 1928, he declined to attend both the ninth ECCI plenum in his capacity as ‘an ECCI member’ and the sixth world congress of the Comintern itself. Conversely, he did not miss a conference of the Trades Union Congress or Labour Party, except involuntarily when in prison. Details can be found in my *Labour Legends and Russian Gold*, ch. 7.

has been identified with possible ‘critical distance’.⁴¹ Indeed, Almond himself recognised that the ‘dual position’ of communist leaders in unions and front organisations depended on how far party controls were enforceable within them. Rightly, he ascribed the ability of these communists to bargain with the party, even to the point of defection, as a choice between competing loyalties, which also involved issues of status, career and real or symbolic authority.⁴² Unfortunately, Almond did not sufficiently consider how far the greater reliance on such cadres of a party like the CPGB cut across the greater sectarianism which he took to be almost inherent in the smaller communist parties.

The best-known case in Britain is that of the South Wales miner, Arthur Horner. A former syndicalist of considerable independent-mindedness, Horner’s perceived opportunism, not towards the Comintern but the ‘masses’, led in 1931 to his denunciation for ‘Hornerism’ and near-expulsion from the party. That he was not expelled suggests the practical constraints upon party discipline even at its deviation-hunting climax of Class Against Class. As disciplines were then relaxed, at least as regards industrial work, Horner by the end of the decade established himself as one of Britain’s most influential communists through the careful adjustment of his party and union commitments, but seldom to the disadvantage of the latter. In 1935, having as the CPGB’s hitherto most successful parliamentary candidate on his home territory of the Rhondda, Horner not only made way for Pollitt to stand there, but conspicuously failed to use his own unrivalled local influence to help him get elected. The same year, though he regained his position on the party’s central committee, this was not the source of his authority; but a means of appropriating it for the party while seeking to bind Horner closer to its national and district leadership. As such, it was only partly successful. Never an assiduous participant in such bodies, the bargained nature of Horner’s involvement was confirmed in the early part of the war, when he not only missed the key central committee debates over the Comintern’s ‘imperialist war’ line but failed seriously to expound or act upon it in his capacity as president of the South Wales Miners.⁴³

During the war and post-war years, the arrival of full employment and the extension of the CPGB’s trade union influence combined with the high prestige the party accorded industrial work to consolidate, not to say institutionalise, the phenomenon of the trade union comrade. Coinciding with decline of the party’s own apparatus, particularly at subnational levels, this meant that greater influence, security, income and prestige were often enjoyed by these industrial cadres. According to the party’s London district cadres organiser, a ‘diversionary multitude of activities and possibilities for personal advancement’ was, already in 1950, ‘sapping away many of our promising comrades’.⁴⁴ If these offered more attractive career paths, among intellectuals too we found that it was those who declined to become party workers – Eric Hobsbawm is an example – who came to enjoy the greatest authority and professional recognition.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Claude Pannetier and Bernard Pudal, ‘Deux générations de militants communistes français (1931-1951) en proie à des procès d’épurations internes’ in José Gotovitch and Anne Morelli, eds, *Militantisme et militants*, Brussels, 2000, 128-33.

⁴² Almond, *Appeals of Communism*, p. 390.

⁴³ See Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War. Ruptures and continuities in British communist politics 1935-41*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989, pp. 134-46.

⁴⁴ CPGB archives CP/Cent/Pers/8/4, Lazar Zaidman to John Mahon, 15 January 1951.

⁴⁵ Shortly after obtaining his PhD, Hobsbawm noted diplomatically in his party autobiography that he had ‘considered full-time work, but don’t think I’m good enough at organising to take the idea seriously’. The wider world of historical scholarship was certainly the beneficiary.

The CPGB apparatus therefore developed into unusual bureaucracy in which emoluments and even status often accrued to those escaping the party's employment, and frequently provided a motive for effecting such an escape. Deferring to the formal hierarchy of 'upper' and 'lower' party bodies, a study like Klehr's not only fails to acknowledge the possibility of alternative sources of political capital but does not include the sorts of data by which these might be identified.⁴⁶ He even constructs a 'rank-order of important party leaders' correlating what he calls their 'relative power' with longevity and the number of committees on which they sat. Such purely bureaucratic definitions of influence and authority take little account of the relative power of the bureaucracy itself. Though possibly justifiable from the point of view of overall policy and strategic direction, even here overly simplistic distinctions between policy 'formulation' and 'implentation' have been strongly challenged in recent public policy literatures and the arguments are no less relevant to a communist party context.⁴⁷ Horner, no doubt betraying his syndicalist roots, was quite outspoken in his view that those who got onto committees and Moscow delegations were often precisely those who were most dispensable to the tasks of actual political leadership in Britain. Relative power within the communist movement needs the same sensitivity to the double meanings of the 'real' and the actual, with recognition of its marked variations according to both time, place and context.

The importance of generations

Among the more obvious difficulties with Klehr's ranking is the specification of a single order of ranking covering the period from 1921 to 1961. Earl Browder himself, as a consequence, only gets in at number four. In a memorable *bon mot* addressed to social historians, Geoff Eley warned against a communist history with the communism left out. Perhaps the case should also be made for communist history with the history left in. The great advantage of a prosopographical approach, at least potentially, is the insight it can provide into the continuously changing character of the communist movement over time. Klehr himself, for example, though he often neglects this dimension, provides some fascinating data as to the changing ethnic composition of the CPUSA central committee.

To obtain this longitudinal perspective, on the Manchester project we attempted some sort of coverage of the CPGB's entire history. This was less for reasons of comprehensiveness, for our coverage was highly uneven,⁴⁸ than as a safeguard against overly static or teleological lines of thought. Looking back at Kriegel's model of the homogenous political community, Sudhir Hazareesingh observed that the exposure of deep divisions within the PCF in the 1970s seemed inexplicable within its purely monolithic framework and that its 'functional traditions, affective symbols, and foundational values' could not 'suddenly have imploded' in the way that Kriegel was driven to argue.⁴⁹ Of course, that is a very different thing

⁴⁶ Almost in passing, Klehr notes the number of Jewish union activists who served on the CPUSA's central committee, but neither commentary nor data is provided as to who these were, what these dual attachments involved or how their character and frequency changed over time.

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⁴⁸ The CPGB's collection of members' biographies, on which we drew extensively, declined dramatically after 1956 and ceased in the 1960s. Our programme of interviews also concentrated on recruits from the earlier decades. While many of these remained longstanding members of the party, our coverage of new recruits from the later period was very weak.

⁴⁹ Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Intellectuals and the French Communist Party. Disillusion and decline*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 126-32.

from simply projecting back these differences. Nevertheless, in exploring communist lives through a number of prisms, including social class, gender, national, transnational and ethnic identities, we found that in each case adopting a longitudinal perspective added depth to our understanding of the specificities of the Bolshevik/Stalinist period(s).

If any one theme seemed to link the others, it was that of generation. Overlapping, indeterminate and continuously interactive, generation not only provides a clue to difference within the communist party, but helps locate it within a number of competing historical narratives. At one level it conveys the sense of a distinct generational experience, or set of experiences, defined by the ideological and organisational imperatives of Bolshevism and the positing of a fundamental political cleavage arising from the Russian revolution. At an institutional level, it thus reinforces the 'before' and 'after' of the individual conversion narrative with a larger generational barrier separating the communist movement from its predecessors and successors, as well as the alternative traditions, ongoing or 'suppressed', sometimes held to have seamlessly linked them. On the other hand, generation conceived of prosopographically also allows a sense of the cohort after cohort which negotiated their terms of entry into this narrative in the most varied circumstances, and at different stages in their own diverse life histories. Probably no significant fissure in the party's history was not in part a question of generational differences, whether explicitly articulated or revealed in shifting languages and priorities acquired at different moments of engagement.

Perhaps a single, simplified line of differentiation may be isolated as having particular significance. Very crudely, this was the line demarcating the peak years of communist recruitment, from the early-to-mid 1930s to the onset of the Cold War, which not only provided a first real experience of sustained party building but a political cadre and organisational presence on which the CPGB drew into the 1970s and beyond. Evidently, there is a paradox here that goes to the heart of the CPGB's predicament. It is universally recognised that the greatest obstacle to the party's growth was the prior existence of a powerful labour movement, largely untroubled by ethnic, confessional or political divisions and thus by any serious possibility of a split at the time of the Comintern's formation. This was not just because the Labour Party was organically grounded in the support of the trade unions – though this was the point that Lenin stressed in supporting the case for the CPGB's affiliation to it – but because it accommodated the most disparate left-wing views, including those militant or pro-Soviet ones that might otherwise have found an outlet in the communist party.⁵⁰ One might therefore have imagined that the only real prospect of a viable communist party was in the clearest differentiation of the CPGB's own political programme and functions, as a revolutionary alternative to this veritable morass of assorted liberal, Fabian and syndicalistic tendencies. This, for example, is how the argument of political space has been used in relation to the Weimar-era KPD, which, whatever its calamitous political strategy, did at least establish a support base through, on in spite of, its third-period sectarianism.⁵¹ The CPGB, on the other hand, was unquestionably most effective in the period when it was not only hardest to distinguish from the Labour left but least of all concerned to make this distinction.

It is here that a prosopographical analysis offers insight. Although it is true, as Andrew Thorpe has shown, that the CPGB from the early 1930s gradually broadened

⁵⁰ I discuss these issues in the introduction to *Labour Legends and Moscow Gold*.

⁵¹ See e.g. Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism 1890-1990: from popular protest to socialist state*, Princeton University Press, 1997.

its appeal across different social groupings, this was anything but a random permeation of British society.⁵² Instead, we combined a broad conception of mobility with the idea of political space to show how the CPGB's revival of membership was due not only to its adoption of a more plausible political strategy and rhetoric, but to its extension into 'new' political spaces which were not yet dominated by the mainstream labour movement. Among them were the unemployed; the youth and student movement; the emerging white-collar or non-industrial unions; and the new manufacturing areas of the English south and midlands, where communists like Exell helped build up trade union and political organisation almost from scratch. Compared with the party's relative stagnation in many of the heavy industrial regions and occupations which were also Labour's heartlands, communist recruitment in all these areas was – by British standards – impressive.

The danger with political space is that of exaggerating environmental factors at the expense of agency. This, however, is where we found the idea of mobility helpful in providing for the relocation and redefinition of broader radical or socialist values acquired in work, family or community environments where these had already exercised a formative influence. Rather than the spontaneous generation of radicalism within penetrable political spaces, we repeatedly found evidence of a prior socialisation into the older cultures of the left, combined with a process of disassociation that was typically social or geographical in character as well as political. In France, where the transmission of left-wing values through family networks has also been widely noted, this has been associated with strong local or regional patterns of support for the left over a long historical period as well as in the radicalism of new industrial districts like the Paris red belt. In Britain, the implantation of communism was closer to the latter, but always subject to the constraints of Labour's prior political hegemony.

The significance of generation and differentiation over time suggests a strong case for bringing a diachronic approach to the comparative study of communist party memberships. Of course, in respect of the central processes of decision-making, strategic direction, political communications and cadre selection, the essential dynamic of the Comintern-Cominform period, with all its fits and starts, is one of synchronicity. In Britain, for example, this was exemplified by the adoption of the Class Against Class policy at the cost of extreme party failure, cushioned only by Comintern subsidies.⁵³ Prosopographically, on the other hand, the essentially unforced nature of communist commitment was reflected in the failure of potential adherents to join or remain in the communist party in any significant numbers. As in France or the USA, the adoption of a better-adapted strategy was thus the precondition of the larger membership cohorts that followed, not their fortuitous accompaniment. Compared with Germany or even Switzerland, on the other hand, perhaps the most obvious distinguishing feature of the CPGB membership was how largely it comprised what we might call – in the broadest sense of the term – popular front enrolments.⁵⁴ As Christophe Charle has recently observed, in Britain a 'mass communism of the continental type' only proved possible by 'abandoning the fundamentals of the party's

⁵² Andrew Thorpe, 'The membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *Historical Journal*, 43, 3, 2000, pp. 777-800.

⁵³ This however is not the only possible view. For a nuanced and more sympathetic reading, see Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class. The Communist Party in Britain between the wars*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002.

⁵⁴ For the stagnation of the PCS, see Brigitte Studer, *Un parti sous influence. Le parti communistes suisse, une section du Komintern 1931 à 1939*, Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1994.

initial revolutionary programme', not only for what Charle calls 'an ecumenical humanism of the left', but for an adaptation to those more limited roles which the existing dispositions of the British labour movement allowed it.⁵⁵ It may be, too, that the high membership losses of the British and US parties in 1956-7 also reflected these generational factors, and in Britain at least were almost entirely confined to recruits from after 1933.

Any general periodisation of communist history has to be sophisticated enough to accommodate such variations. In his essay in the *Komintern* biographical dictionary, Serge Wolikow notes the widening divergence between experiences at the centre and periphery which characterised the paradox (but not the oxymoron) that was popular front Stalinism.⁵⁶ These were also, of course, sometimes literally existential distinctions between the experiences of different communist parties. Viewed from this comparative perspective, a prosopographical study of the CPGB not only adds another national strand to the overall picture but distinctive perspective on issues such as a Stalinisation narrative heavily dependent on the German case, and hence reaching its most significant point of closure at the very moment when the CPGB was at last about to get off the ground.

⁵⁵ Christophe Charle, *La Crise des Sociétés Impériales. Allemagne, France, Grand-Bretagne 1900-1940. Essai d'histoire sociale comparée*, Paris: Seuil, 2001, p. 449.

⁵⁶ Serge Wolikow, **** in Gotovitch and Narinski, *Komintern*