The political dynamism of "Eurocommunism", once hailed by sections of the left as a means of maintaining the relevance of marxism to industrial democracies, seems to have faded. Has it been sabotaged? Betrayed? Or just run out of steam?

International

• Upper: PCI members and supporters at Rome railway station wave off migrant workers who take a train to go back home to southern Italy to vote in the June 1976 election.
• Lower: Elated PCI members after election results in 1976 show that the party has won an additional 82 seats in parliament with 33.8% of the vote.
The excitement and high hopes roused by the spread of Eurocommunism in the '70s have passed. Far from being "the spectre that haunts Europe" as was claimed at the time, the talk now is about the "crisis of Eurocommunism".

In the mid-seventies, there appeared to be real prospects of several Eurocommunist parties, specifically the Italian, French and Spanish Communist Parties, entering the governments of their respective countries. The United States exerted heavy pressure on its European allies to prevent this from happening. The Americans were especially concerned that the influential Italian Communist Party should not enter the government of that country. Henry Kissinger openly declared in April 1976 that the establishment of communist governments in Western Europe would lead to the collapse of the Western alliance and to the isolation of the United States. The entry into government by the communist parties of Western Europe, he warned, would lead to a fundamental change in all American politics (see "Kissinger sees Nato end if Europe elects Reds", New York Times, 7.4.1976).

Behind the scenes and away from public scrutiny, all possible means were used to block such a possibility. The killing of Aldo Moro in May 1978 by the Red Brigades is claimed to be connected with these efforts, as Moro was the leading Christian Democrat figure in Italy who favoured the entry of the Italian communists into the government. So far, the forces which are striving to prevent this have been successful.

Although the French communists have since entered the government of their country, they are playing a subordinate role to the Socialist Party. For years, the strategic thrust of the French Communist Party was aimed to avoid the very situation in which they now find themselves — as a junior partner to the socialists.

In the last elections in 1981, the Communist Party dropped from 22.8 to 16.6 percent, thus losing a quarter of their voters. The Socialist Party, on the other hand, increased its vote from 22.8 percent in 1978 to 36.6 percent in 1981.

The Spanish Communist Party likewise did not realise its optimistic expectations. After achieving legality in 1977 it was unable to extend its electoral support beyond 10 percent. It had hoped to do much better. Since then, the Spanish Communist Party has declined both in membership and electoral support. Moreover, it has suffered from serious internal divisions and, as a result, has lost some of its most experienced leaders.

There has certainly been a decline of Eurocommunism going beyond the three main countries which, together, form the core of what might be called the strategic aspect of Eurocommunism. In order to evaluate the
nature and reasons for this serious problem one has to separate two aspects of what has come to be known as Eurocommunism — the ideological and the strategic aspect. While these two aspects are closely connected and interact, they are nevertheless distinct.

The crisis of Eurocommunism is essentially a crisis of its strategic aspects.

The term "Eurocommunism" arose in 1975. But its roots and the ideas and views underlying it go back further into the post-war years.

The major impetus for its development, however, was the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. The revelations of the crimes of the Stalin era sent shock waves throughout the communist movement. It led to a more critical examination of the Soviet model, and independent thought began to develop in some communist parties. The Soviet-Chinese conflict of 1959-61 and the subsequent break-up of the monolith added a further spur to these developments. The Italian communists were the first to respond to the 20th Congress. They conducted open and critical discussions on the implications of the Khrushchov revelations throughout their party and invited others on the left to participate in these discussions. As a result, the Italian Communist Party did not suffer the same exodus of significant groups of intellectuals as occurred in other communist parties, notably the French Communist Party. The Australian party, which clamped down on open and critical discussions, similarly lost a large number of intellectuals from its ranks.

Nevertheless, the impact of the revelations of the 20th Congress continued to reverberate throughout the communist movement. In Australia it led to the growth of independent trends in the Communist Party, to a Charter of Democratic Rights being proposed, for example. It reached its high point at the Party Congress in June 1967.

The Prague Spring and the subsequent events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 were the next major catalysts for the development of Eurocommunist views in a growing number of advanced industrialised countries with democratic traditions. It developed at different paces and in specific ways in individual countries. These included some non-European countries such as Japan, Mexico and Venezuela.

Despite significant differences and peculiarities, and with these reservations, one can nevertheless broadly identify these common features of Eurocommunism:

**Independence.** The Eurocommunists stand for the complete autonomy of each party. They reject any notion of a world centre, or direction of the party by an outside body. They insist on the inalienable right of each communist party to determine its own policy on the basis of the economic, political and social conditions and cultural traditions of its own country, and to do this freely, without any outside interference or pressure.

They lay particular emphasis on cooperation with the socialist and progressive forces of their own country.

**Democratic Commitment.** This involves a conception of a democratic road to socialism on the basis of the existing democratic institutions and their extension. It means a full and unequivocal acceptance of pluralism, that is, the free and unfettered operation of all political parties and groupings and regular free elections. It includes a clear and firm undertaking to accept freely the verdict of popular elections, if their outcome means the replacement of an existing government. The Eurocommunists see the road to socialism based on and depending on winning majority support, as against insurrection and minority rule. Their abandonment of the aim of a Dictatorship of the Proletariat is part of their democratic commitment. This commitment includes freedom of conscience and religion, the right to speak, publish, print and distribute material freely, freedom of association, freedom of movement and travel, both within a country and abroad, freedom and independence of trade unions, the right to strike, the notion that members of a political party should not enjoy privileges over other citizens, and the separation of state organs and political parties.

**Policy for a broad alliance and without claim for a "leading role" for the Communist Party.** The Eurocommunist parties see the road to socialism as based on a broad alliance of diverse political, social and cultural forces seeking far-reaching changes to existing social structures, which can lead in a socialist direction.

They reject the traditional view that the communist parties should have a "leading role" in such an alliance because their adherence to Marx-Leninism assures them a deeper insight into the "correct" path to pursue. The concept of a "leading role" logically places the other partners in an alliance in a subordinate position, and this is in fact officially enshrined in some East European countries.

The Eurocommunists have abandoned such a claim, and regard their parties as equal partners in alliances with other parties, movements and organisations.

**Against dogmatism.** The Eurocommunists reject — albeit with different degrees of clarity and consistency — the dogmatic view of Marxism which prevails in the Soviet bloc, with its associated claim for a single "correct" view about society, nature and human thought which is applicable everywhere.

They have discarded such a dogmatic and absolutist interpretation of Marxism. Instead of "marxism-leninism" they speak of "scientific socialism" — a concept which was originally used by Marx and Engels.

The Eurocommunists advance a different model of socialism than that of the existing socialist countries.

While there are some differences in the model envisaged, they all project a pluralistic, democratic, free and open society which guarantees to maintain existing democratic rights and to extend them fundamentally in the area...
These include the complex problems of the economic life and in the workplace. There is an increasing emphasis on self-management and decentralisation of power, with democratic control of all areas of social life.

The Eurocommunists are — in varying degrees — critical of the denial of some human rights in the existing socialist countries. They are also critical of the exaggerated centralisation of power and the bureaucratisation of the economic and political structure in these countries. They have, again in varying degrees and with varying consistency, moved away from the leninist party structures. These are based on the principles of what is called “democratic centralism”. In practice, this has often meant almost unlimited power for the leadership of the party, without any real say by the membership, strict discipline and the operation of the so-called “transmission belt system”, which subordinated other organisations to the communist party.

There has been a general democratisation of these parties, but with significant variation in degree. There is an ongoing discussion on the role of political parties, their relations with other organisations, and the problem of rank-and-file involvement. These changes within the Eurocommunist type parties are still evolving, and vary widely from country to country. But their impact extends well beyond these parties in several directions. They affect some of the remaining non-Eurocommunist parties in advanced industrial countries and other socialist forces. Their ideas also have an impact on some people in the existing socialist countries.

In that sense it can be said that the ideas, concepts and policies of the Eurocommunists are still advancing, spreading and evolving, despite the fact that these parties along with other socialist forces face serious problems and have suffered setbacks. They are also grappling with new questions and issues which are thrown up today. These include the complex problems of self-management, the relations to social movements, especially the women’s movement and the environmental movement, and the role of political parties as such, which is being questioned by a growing number of people in Western countries.

The strategic aspect of Eurocommunism was that of a West European model of socialism based on the coordinated efforts of the communist and socialist forces in Italy, France and Spain. In the ‘seventies this was not an unrealistic or utopian perspective. The communist parties of these countries were growing in influence, as were other socialist forces. Broadly based governments with a popular mandate and a common perspective to reshape their societies in a socialist direction seemed a possible, even a likely development.

There was growing co-operation in this period between the three main West European Eurocommunist parties. In July 1975, the Italian and Spanish communist leaders met and issued a Spanish-Italian Communist Parties Declaration. This was followed in November 1977 by a meeting between the leaderships of the French and Italian communists, leading to a joint declaration in which the two strongest West European communist parties declared their commitment to a democratic road to socialism. This marked the belated adherence of the Eurocommunist type parties to one or the fundamental concepts of Eurocommunism, and was seen as a hopeful sign that the main Eurocommunist parties were forging ahead in unity.

The high point in the development of Eurocommunism was the marxist meeting in March 1977 of the three leaders of the Italian, French and Spanish communist parties. But events soon developed differently. By the end of 1977 it became clear that the expectations of Eurocommunists to soon enter the West European governments were not being fulfilled. The Spanish communist vote of 9.4 percent in the first free elections in Spain since the ‘30s was considerably less than they had expected. In the important election in France in March ‘78, the Union of the Left failed to achieve the hoped-for majority. It was weakened by the preceding attacks of the French Communist Party on the Socialist Party. The Communist Party received 20.5 percent of the votes, and the Socialist Party 22.2 percent. It was a serious setback for the left. It was also the first time in post-war France that the socialist vote surpassed that of the communists.

In the parliamentary election in Italy in June ‘79, the communist vote declined from 34.4 percent in 1976 to 30.4 percent. It was the first time in post-war Italy that the P.C.I. vote fell. Until then it had been rising steadily in each successive national parliamentary election.

By then, significant political differences had arisen also between the French and Italian communists. The Eurocommunist dream of a common breakthrough in France, Italy and Spain was clearly fading. The impasse is continuing.

What went wrong?

All communist parties in advanced industrial Western countries face the problem of how to adapt to present-day realities. Their countries are undergoing significant changes in the economic and social structures, and consequent shifts in public attitudes, values and behaviour. Generally, these parties have been slow, even resistant in some cases, to grasp the

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Because of their origin and history they still tend to be associated in the public perception with undemocratic practices. Negative events in Eastern Europe wash off on all communist parties, even those which are publicly critical of those events. Afghanistan and the events in Poland reacted on the whole communist movement.
There remains in the public mind a degree of suspicion about the genuine nature of democratic commitment given by communist parties about the character of their relationship to the Soviet Union and about the ultimate certainty of their independence.

There is a fear, based on experience in the history of the communist movement that, once in power, they may try to make sure that they remain in power, despite the commitments to pluralism that they may have now.

The revival of the cold war towards the end of the '70s added fuel to all these reservations and fears.

In this situation, the socialist parties were able to present themselves as an attractive, credible, democratic and socialist alternative to the communist parties, and mostly overtake them in popular support.

The response of the communist parties to these problems and the challenges they present differs from country to country. Those parties which have established firm roots in their country face these problems differently from those which have remained small and which are battling to maintain their relevance in political and social life.

But even between the larger parties the situation differs widely from one country to another.

The French communists are in a contradictory and difficult situation. Although, after more than 35 years, they are now in the government, they could not have achieved that in more adverse circumstances. The party which had emerged as the strongest West European communist party after the Second World War, with a vote of 26.1 percent in the '40s, declined to 16.6 percent in the Mitterrand election victory in 1981. Moreover, it lost nearly a quarter of its votes in the space of one election (from 20.5 percent to 16.6 percent).

The P.C.F. has shown a reluctance, even a fear, of making changes, a fear of new ideas and new initiatives. Its policies, both internally and externally, have been contradictory and characterised by zig-zags. The sharpness of the P.C.F. attacks on the Socialist Party after 1977 had the opposite effect from the one intended. Far from reducing support for the Socialist Party, it was the Communist Party which lost support. Rather than enter into broad alliances, the P.C.F. tended to withdraw to the "safety" of its own traditional base, the blue-collar workers' trade unions. It is suspicious of the new social movements, and has manoeuvred itself into a ghetto, policies and developments in the country.

The Spanish communists gained well-deserved prestige for their heroic struggle against the Franco regime. Their serious internal problems arose around the personality and method of work of the former secretary, Santiago Carrillo. A long-standing leader who made an impressive contribution to the elaboration of some of the theoretical tenets of Eurocommunism, he was nevertheless rigid and unbending in an old-style leninist conception of democratic centralism. This contradicted in practice some of the theories he expounded and led to a rigid, stifling style of leadership which left little room for open discussion and a democratic party life. It prevented controversial questions from being debated in a free atmosphere, undermined morale, led to the loss of some valuable leaders, a membership decline, and reduced public support.

The Italian communists are in the most favourable situation. They recognised the problems of adapting their party to meet the new conditions earlier than others. They have worked on their transformation consistently and over a long period, taking great care to take their members and supporters with them. They are removing, one by one, those aspects of their past, ideological and organisational, which are fetters on their growth.

Nevertheless, even they are not free from the problems which affect all communist parties. In the last election they significantly reduced the gap between themselves and the Christian Democrats. The D.C. vote declined from 38.3 percent in 1979 to 32.9 percent in 1983. But the communist vote also declined in this period (from 30.4 percent to 29.9 percent).

They continue to face the problem of how to make further advances. They remain as far from government as they were before the election. Their attempts to develop a viable strategy in co-operation with other socialist forces on a European scale will take time.

The problems which face the communist movement are complex and world-wide. Some parties confront them more seriously than others. What is certain is that those parties which refuse to take up the challenges confronting them face an inevitable historical decline.

Bernie Taft is a member of the national executive committee of the communist party.