Writing the History of a C.P.

NO HISTORY CAN BE WRITTEN without a conscious or unconscious philosophy or world-view underlying it, because it is the philosophy of the author which will determine what he understands by a historical fact; how he will order these historical facts in a pattern; and, finally, how he will give more importance to some facts than to others to establish a pattern or hierarchy which enables him to discover what is significant and deserves the most emphasis in his work. This generalisation applies to the writing of the history of communism as much as to any other sphere of history.

The adequacy of a historical work is determined first by the validity of its philosophical base and then by its "facts", for what are "facts" and what is "correct" is something which can only be established in philosophical terms. It may be that in time there will be general agreement that there is only one valid philosophical criterion to decide the adequacy of "facts", but at present there are at least three philosophical positions of major importance in historical scholarship whose theories of knowledge differ so much that there can never be agreement between them as to what constitutes a "correct fact". The truthfulness of this proposition is more evident in disputes over macrocosmic facts like a revolution than microcosmic facts like what is understood by the notion of a date, but it holds for all "facts".

Alastair Davidson is a lecturer in Political Science at Monash University, and a member of the Editorial Board of ALR. He is author of the book The Communist Party of Australia, a Short History, published this year.
The three major philosophical schools which rule in historical scholarship today (not that the historical practitioners are always conscious of it) are the idealist school, the empirical or positivist school, and the historicist school. The first have a theory of knowledge which maintains that facts are the product of men’s minds; that knowledge or understanding is antecedent to the facts; that consciousness precedes material and sometimes, that God made the world. The second group maintains the contrary: that material precedes consciousness; that the concept of the fact lies in the fact itself, and that facts produce men’s minds. The third school maintains that material and consciousness are two faces of the one coin, neither being precedent to the other, both being inconceivable without the other, and that the development of knowledge is not by production but by a dialectical process.

The first two are fundamentalist schools who merely reverse each other’s propositions, and the third a historicist school. The first two have ideological origins and not historical origins. The idealist school maintains that the validity of ideas (and ideas are the most tricky of “facts”) can be determined according to a criterion outside history, outside the ideas themselves, a revealed or transcendent criterion (e.g. God, the Bible, intuition). The second do exactly the same by returning to First Causes, though in their case they claim the ultima ratio for material rather than God. For them dispute is solved by returning to the “facts”, understanding facts in a crude raw sense, and failing to distinguish between facts and the concept of facts, assuming the unknowable, the existence of the facts independent of men’s consciousness of them. Only the third school starts from the existing historically structured environment instead of looking for first causes, and accepts the presence of the individual consciousness and the environment of facts as the conditions precedent for establishing the theory of knowledge, and that ideas can be tested for their validity by the application of human rationality which can compare them against the real.

The three philosophies emerged in a succession and developed from each other; they constitute a progress in understanding. The first we can find already present in the writings of the Church fathers; the second was the vogue from the eighteenth century onwards and had its heyday late in the nineteenth century and the third was a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All have exponents among contemporary historians. We can place Butterfield and Manning Clark among the first school, Lewis Namier and Ian Turner in the second, and Benedetto Croce and Antonio Gramsci in the third. Not a single notable Anglo-Saxon historian, much less an Australian, comes to mind as an exponent of the third philosophical method — the only one which is not obsolete.
In the Anglo-Saxon world we are faced with an atrophy of historical research in its ideological stage. We are faced with pre-historicist history.

This lag of historical practice is not inevitable, as it is not present in European historical research, where, as I have pointed out, major historians have a historicist philosophical base, either in theory, as with Croce, or in theory and practice, as with Gramsci, but it is explicable in terms of Anglo-Saxon failure to keep up with philosophical developments made “in foreign parts”.

Within the insularity of Anglo-Saxon historical scholarship (Australian scholarship belongs within this too), the idealists are regarded as old-hat, if not as nuts. The ruling vogue is the pragmatic empiricism of the positivist group, who periodically savage the idealists (usually mistaking historicists for idealists because they know nothing of non Anglo-Saxon developments). Recently we were treated to an example of this in the attack on Manning Clark’s history in Australia, but a running battle has been conducted for many years in England against Toynbee and Butterfield by the pupils of Namier. The Namier school of history epitomises the style of Anglo-Saxon historical scholarship. Carrying one side of Ranke’s teaching to a ridiculous conclusion, they claim to have eliminated great theories and philosophy from history by going back to the facts. Massive detail is used to demolish attempts to understand. What none of this school seems to understand is that they too belong to a philosophical tradition; they are not writing objective history but positivist history. They cannot attack the idealists without attacking themselves as their position is merely idealism stood on its head.

I can almost hear a sigh of relief from marxist historians at the mention of Namier, who was nothing if not an enemy of marxism. I reply, most Anglo-Saxon and Australian marxist historians also belong with him through their positivist understanding of marxism. An economic determinist who believes in writing history in which institutional developments are always explicable in terms of economic and social developments has more in common with Namier than with marxism because he shares the same philosophy which is not only passe but ideological in its origins.

We can get no guidance for writing a communist history from Anglo-Saxon historical scholarship and the criteria it uses, as it is almost without exception, marxist or non-marxist, positivist in its orientation and therefore both out-of-date and ideological. Its theory of knowledge and world-view is inadequate to its own object. To understand how to write any history we should look at European historical scholarship in the historicist tradition, as here we have a methodology adequate to its object.
The practical differences in approach of the Anglo-Saxon school and the Continental school, which is so much in advance of it philosophically, can be gauged by the recent criticism of Paolo Spriano’s massive three-volume *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, recognised generally as the best history of a communist party ever written. Spriano is a communist, an activist and a scholar, and one of Italy’s leading historians. Essentially, his history is a history of the leading groups of the party, their relationship with the Comintern and the policies thrashed out on the dialectic of that relationship.

International critics were asked three questions:

1. This history of the PCI is essentially the history of a national section of the Communist International. As such, how far is it indicative of a general process?

2. As Gramsci asked himself, is it possible to write the history of a political party? To what extent must it also be the history of a country? The problem is particularly difficult, because it is a question of a Party which is part of a centralised international movement and because it lived almost from its inception in conditions of illegality.

3. Spriano seems to share the thesis that the history of a party is in the first place the history of its directive groups. Is this method correct and what novelty does it introduce?

Giuseppe Berti (leading historian of PCI, non-communist) pointed out that anti-communists were critical of Spriano’s history because it emphasised too much the positive aspects of the leadership but “in this world it is really difficult to make everyone happy”. Berti went on to say that the harshest criticism had come from communist leaders. He replied to the first question in the affirmative:

Without committing the sin of patriotism, we could even say that from this point of view the PCI’s history offers an optimum positive quality and can therefore be told with least difficulty by a militant. What there is in it which is negative is owed (not completely, but prevalingly) to the coefficient of subordination of the policies of the PCI to those of Moscow . . .

In reply to the second question Berti said:

To me there seems no foundation to the objection (that it is insufficiently inserted into the history of the country) and that this seems a false problem from a historiographical point of view. The history of a country can be written from various perspectives, as economic history, as diplomatic history, as the history of political parties and religious communities (think of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation) and so on, and, in modern history, the horizon has a tendency to extend to problems of European and world history. Moreover, this characteristic is particularly evident in the history of a movement like the communist movement which is internationalist. Thus there arises the suspicion that he who insists a great deal that greater stress should be laid on general developments of Italian history, has
no great desire to go deeper into and discuss the burning questions (national
and international) of the communist movement in its totality, and would
prefer to drown everything in a wave of historical happenings. Today the
writer of the history of communism in reality faces a more difficult task
than that presented to historians of the nineteenth century, when they tried
to write the history of Jacobinism which was the history of France from the
Enlightenment to the Revolution, but which was also the history of some­
thing else . . . as the historians who tackled this question from different
points of view from Barruel to Albert Sorel, from Mathiez to more recent
historians: realised the history of a country and of the movement of European
ideas.

In response to the third reproach, Berti said that it was banal:

Let us take for example a subject which is a little less heatedly contested:
the history of the Action Party in the Risorgimento. I belong in fact to
the group of historians which sought patiently (and above all) to bring to
light the class links of that leading group with the substratum of young
intellectuals and workers which foretold the working class, of the peasants
whom in certain cases the Action Party tried to lean on certain movements.
What came from it? Enriched, certainly by new facts (or rather facts which
were known in more detail and position) what came from it was precisely
the history of the directive group. And it should be noted that the enrich­
ment itself was possible not in one of the first reconstructions of historical
scholarship, but in the latest in order of time, a century after the first
attempts to write a history of the Action Party.

Milos Hajek (Czech historian of the Comintern) said that linking
a party's history with that of the country was much less important
in the case of a propagandist party than a strong ruling party. In
the case of parties related to the Comintern, the Comintern was
probably much more important than anything that went on in the
country of origin. He pointed out furthermore that the study of
communist parties was in its initial stage and that in the case of of­
ficial histories tracing connection of party and the masses, they
started from a falsified and a priori view of history of the country.
He agreed entirely that the CPI and he added the Soviet, French,
Polish, Czech and German parties should be studied above all at the
directive level. “A history of a Communist Party would be vulgarly
deformed if it did not single out the real development of its policies,
and how far they were determined by its leaders (as well as by the
Comintern).”

Robert Paris (French militant intellectual):

Certainly the choice of Spriamo . . . without doubt will seem embarrassing
to those who would like to find, in the evolution of an organism like that
of the PCI, the equivalent of that 'history of the subaltern classes' which
Gramsci hoped for, or, to cite Jaures, 'a fresco of a whole immense multitude
of men who are finally coming into the light': to those, in sum, who would
like a substitution of the history of the class struggle for that of ruling groups
or classes. But it is certain that the history of a communist party of the
classical type like the PCI, cannot be wedded, or at best in an extremely
indirect and mediated way, into what we call social history.
Paris went on to say that the history of communist parties belongs in the history of sociology of organisations. Paris agreed too that if the scenario was Italian the direction was elsewhere, in the Comintern and the international movement.

**Eric Hobsbawm** (guess what, we know him!), the only Anglo-Saxon marxist and economic determinist to boot, was the only dis­senter. He said:

In general, no peculiar aspect and no institution of any country can be separated from their context without some deformation or lack. Life cannot be divided up without losing life.

We can criticise Spriano for not having emphasised the (national) context adequately.

He went on:

As to the history of a party seen in terms of its directive groups, it is evidently insufficient, because it neglects the activity, the attitudes etc. of the masses which — often for reasons different from those admitted by the leadership — support it . . . It is to be hoped that in the third of Spriano’s volumes, the history of the communist party will be written from below as well as from on top.

The clear opposition between the Anglo-Saxon and Continental critics, the first claiming that history is a totality whose parts cannot be considered separately and the second asserting the contrary and indeed claiming that more is lost than gained by the global approach is explicable only in terms of their philosophical positions. Although all are marxists, and I stress here that being a marxist is not all-important in understanding history, (what is crucial is what sort of a marxist you are), Hobsbawm still subscribes to the pre-humanist economic determinist variety of marxism in both his theory and his practice, where two of the others, Berti and Paris are “humanist” marxists. (I am not able to comment on Hajek beyond noting that in his practice he is the “humanist” variety of marxist too).

The positivist version of marxism espoused and maintained by Hobsbawm accepts the notion of production and therefore the notion that superstructural phenomena like political parties are caused by conditions in certain social classes whose existence is owed to a certain division of labour stemming from the prevailing mode of production within the society. Thus one is not explicable without the other. A communist party and its history cannot be studied independent of the conditions within which it arises, these conditions being stated a **priori** according to a positivist view of marxism, to be matters like the economic and social history of the society. In turn, because Hobsbawm understands the progress of history in the positivist way, Theory (marxism) itself becomes an expression of the working class; the study of revolution and how to make it becomes the study of the progression of common sense
among the masses to a refined level, something viewed as an automa-
tic process in which no mediation of an extraneous sort is present. The practical preoccupations of Hobsbawm testify to this assertion. He is interested in the history of Gramscian “common sense”, not as a part of history, but as History. In doing so he, of course, ignores what is implicit in Leninism, that is the notion of the party as something extraneous to the masses which brings Theory from the outside and whose history is not history of the masses though it may be related to it.

The humanist marxist, because he does not subscribe to the notion of the establishment of any institution according to a theory of production, is prepared at least to accept the Gramscian proposition that:

We do not consider sufficiently that many political acts are owed to internal organisational needs, tied to the need to give coherence to a party, a group, a society. This, for example, is clear from the history of the Catholic Church. We would not succeed if we attempted to find the immediate explanation for every ideological struggle inside the Church in the developments in the base: many economic and political novels have been written on these lines. Indeed, it is clear that the greater part of these struggles are for organisational and sectarian needs. In the discussion between Rome and Byzantium on the nature of the Holy Ghost it would be ridiculous to seek the cause of the claim that the Holy Ghost derives from the Father only, in the economic base of Eastern Europe, and in the economic base of the West the cause of the claim that the Holy Ghost derives from the Father and the Son. The two churches, whose existence and influence depend on the economic base and on history, have adopted positions which provide distinct principles and internal organisational cohesion for each, but each could have chosen the position adopted by the other; the distinct principles and conflict would have been maintained just the same, and it is this problem of distinct principles and conflict which constitutes the real historical problem, not the arbitrarily chosen flag of each of the parties.

Instead, accepting the historicist philosophy according to which the will of men and rationality, understood as a dialectical result of application of the consciousness to the material, are responsible for the creation of the “superstructure” in all its manifestations, he admits that there is not an a priori relationship between political parties and base. This is not the same as denying that there may be a relationship if the evidence shows that there is. This brings me to some issues facing an author of a history of the Communist Party of Australia.

III

When I completed the substance of my History of the Communist Party of Australia in 1966 (the bulk was written in 1965) I certainly did not know much about the developments in historical methodology in the European countries and I had a noli me tangere respect for the practitioners of history in this country and the Anglo-Saxon world
generally. The intellectual hegemony exerted by the Canberra school of labour historians over me was great and difficult to escape. However, even before embarking on the doctoral research which was the base of the part of the book from the CPA's beginnings to the end of the Second World War, I had rejected in my practice, even if not on a formed theoretical level, the notion that marxism was economic determinism. I will not single out by name the men who insisted from the ivory towers that labour history was marxist history (a populist distortion) and that the explanation for practically all political developments were to be found in the base. I do remember rejecting out of hand the value of this notion as it did not conform to my experience of reality, which unlike theirs consisted of a considerable period working in the working class in a highly class-conscious society. Not surprisingly in an environment like that of "marxist" scholars in Australia, this led to their believing that I was not a marxist. Unlike them I believe that there is some relation between theory and practice and that it is real experience which determines the validity of a theory.

In the *Short History* of the CPA I continued what was then a heretical viewpoint for marxists in Australia, a belief that the raw material would dictate what was significant. I note here that this is not the same as the positivist method and that an unconscious philosophy is not necessarily less coherent than a conscious one. Indeed, the true philosophy can most often be found in the practice. The net result was, that after reading everything which I had listed in my bibliography and more (it is not necessary to throw Namier out the window as his methodological canons are as relevant to marxist historians as elsewhere) I came to the conclusion that the central theme in CPA history was the dialogue between local exigencies and central orders. I did not assume a rigid theoretical schema according to which there must be some connection with the developments in the working class and the economic base and torture my facts to suit my theory. To borrow from Freud, on occasion the economic situation provided the same environment as illness or tiredness does for slips of the tongue, but it did not explain the slip of the tongue. Even in the great depression men's rationality and their wills decided what would be done; the economic base decided nothing, it never does; it produced nothing, it never does.

Naturally, because I am as intellectually lonely as anyone who makes his way against the mainstream (it is no consolation that I believe the mainstream to be ideological in its origins and to have dubious populist overtones whose nature could be best discovered by comparative studies of the national-socialist roots of fascism) I have been overjoyed to discover: 1) that the most advanced schools of marxism are anti economic determinist and refuse to admit the
arrant totalitarian nonsense that an institution must be examined in a social and economic context before it can be explained and, 2) that the most acclaimed history of a communist party, while infinitely superior to my stop-gap effort, also took the same partial approach (history is a totality only in the non-imperative sense) which has been applauded as the only way to study a communist party.

I have this to say to those who wish to write a definitive history to follow my “stopgap” history. First; the history should not automatically be a history of the “rank and file” or the working class masses as Doug White demanded for this would be to lapse into the old populist error which confused the history of revolution with the history of common-sense. Critics of his ilk have learnt nothing from the Leninist distinction between spontaneity and consciousness. I believe the Arena group has accepted bastard theories to shore up its own petty-bourgeois romanticism (neither White nor any of the supposed supporters of Mao Tse-tung’s theories or those of Althusser are either Maoists or Althusserians). Second; the history should not automatically be set against the socio-economic background, as this is the practice of a economic determinist (pace Rex Mortimer who made several other valid criticisms of my book). Third; the author should prepare himself by boning up on the latest marxist philosophy and its historical practitioners and this means leaving Anglo-Saxon shores and going to Europe. I have only this to say in conclusion to those horrified by their lack of tools enabling them to do this. If Louis Althusser decided that he had to learn German before he could study Marx, surely a few years learning Western European languages is a condition precedent for keeping up with contemporary marxist philosophy? And if Althusser considered his ignorance of what went on over the mountains a disgraceful chauvinism, surely Australian marxists are just as offending and had best look at their own theoretical paraphernalia before they embark on either writing or criticism. Finally, one warning about short-cuts: Those who popularise a contemporary marxist sociology like that of Althusser on the basis of the Allen Lane translation of less than half his preliminary work do a disservice to Althusser, to themselves, and to the working-class movement. The same moral applies to those who wish to write a history of the CPA.