

The Communist Party and the New Party

Andrew Thorpe

Notes on contributor: Andrew Thorpe is Professor of Modern British History at the University of Exeter. Correspondence to: Professor Andrew Thorpe, Department of History, University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4RJ. E-mail: a.j.thorpe@ex.ac.uk

The New party was never at the centre of the concerns of the Communist party of Great Britain (CPGB). However, the CPGB had to take a line on the new organisation when it was formed, and tried to use it to smear Labour and ILP politicians as enemies of the working class. As the 1931 political crisis unfolded, the New party became increasingly an irrelevance at the side of the much more tangible threat of the National government, although Communists did campaign against Mosley in late 1931. Ultimately, the New party was significant for the Communists because it seemed to offer some vindication of the 'class against class' line; because it suggested that the CPGB was not always wrong in its analysis; because it led to increased attention to the party's youth movement; and because it led to the leading left-wing polemicist of the 1930s, John Strachey, working with the CPGB for almost a decade.

Key words: British Communists; British Fascists; New Party; Oswald Mosley; John Strachey; 1931 crisis.

It would seem justifiable to write a paper about the history of either the New party or the Communist party of Great Britain (CPGB). But a paper on the relationship between the two might be thought to court ridicule. As *The Times's* editorial put it in reviewing the October 1931 general election results, 'the New Party shared with the Communist Party the fate of providing a certain comic relief by polling a bare handful of votes wherever they put forward a candidate'.¹ Rather like multiplying fractions, the end result of looking at the two parties together might be thought likely to result in a sum less than the original amounts. This verdict would appear to be supported by the fact that virtually all the standard texts on the CPGB ignore the New party,² a neglect which repeats that found in the memoirs of leading Communists.³ In fact, however, the New party was not without significance in the development of the Communist party.

The CPGB had been formed as the British section of the Moscow-based Communist International (Comintern) in August 1920. It had been intended to supercede the 'reformist' Labour party and ultimately to lead a British revolution, but its first decade had brought little but disappointment, and membership prior to 1926 rarely reached

5,000.⁴ In 1926, the General Strike and mining lockout brought a boost, and membership reached 12,000 that October; but the new members fell away once the coal dispute ended, and by January 1928 the figure was back down to 5,000. By that time, too, the party's 'united front' strategy of trying to work through the Labour party and the trade unions was paying fewer and fewer dividends. In Moscow, meanwhile, the emphasis was turning towards a much harsher line against social democrats. This deemed that, far from being potential allies in the fight against capitalism, social democrats were now to be seen as enemies, not potential allies. Capitalism, it was believed, was moving into a new stage of crisis, which would see social democrats siding with the capitalists, thus revealing themselves as 'social fascists'. The workers' only true friend, therefore, was the Communist party. The adoption of this new 'class against class' line by the British party was a protracted and contested affair, but by 1929 it was firmly in place.

Ostensibly, the context for the new line could hardly have been better. The British economy moved into severe recession in late 1929, suggesting to Communists that capitalism was, indeed, in headlong decline. In theory, capitalists would seek measures to sustain profits, such as wage cuts, tariffs and rationalisation, with increasing desperation. This would, first, immiserate, and so radicalise, the workers; and, secondly, lead to heightened international tension, and an increased risk of war, especially against the Soviet Union. In this crisis, the analysis continued, the social democratic leaders would gradually peel away from the workers' movement, sooner or later siding with the capitalists as the crisis intensified. In the final analysis, so far as the workers were concerned, Labour politicians were no better than Conservatives or Liberals, since they all stood to sustain capitalism. Leftist social democrats, or 'sham lefts', were seen as particularly treacherous because their language was similar to the Communists' and so harder to 'expose'. In the British context, the 'sham lefts' were especially identified with people like James Maxton on the left wing of the

Independent Labour party (ILP), who were moving increasingly towards open conflict with the leadership of the Labour party (to which the ILP was still formally affiliated). At the May 1929 general election the Communists were unable to run more than a handful of candidates, and advised their supporters who did not have a Communist to vote for to abstain, because Labour was no better than its opponents: '[o]n questions of principle there [was] *no difference* between the three [main] parties'.⁵ In fact, however, the election of the second Labour government was, in theory at least, a boost to the new line, because Labour in office would be forced to make hard choices and struggle to balance conflicting interests in the face of the 'economic blizzard'. Indeed its support for industrial rationalisation ought to have played into the Communists' analysis very neatly.⁶

As usual, however, events failed to fit the Communists' finely-tuned theories. Unemployment rose dramatically in 1930, but worker militancy did not. CPGB membership, far from rising, fell to an all-time low of 2,350 that August; Comintern officials despaired.⁷ Ultra-leftism in relation to the 'reformist' trade unions had led to largely abortive efforts to create 'red' unions on the German model, while *Daily Worker* circulation was 'stagnant'.⁸ It was with commendable understatement that William Gallacher told the party's ruling political bureau (PB) at the start of 1931 that 'it was clear [they] were in a very difficult situation'.⁹ On the other hand, as the party's general secretary, Harry Pollitt, told the PB on 12 February 1931, the party had hit 'rock bottom' and could hardly fall lower.¹⁰

This, for the Communists, was the context in which the formation of the New party was announced. They could hardly ignore the new development. Mosley had been the most sensational figure of British politics in 1930, and the 'pampered aristocrat of Labour' was very much in Communist sights by the time the New party was being formed; the Communists were not so out of touch that they failed to notice him

marching around the British political stage with what Rajani Palme Dutt, the party's chief theoretician, later described as 'the complacency of an infant peacock'.¹¹

Another leading Communist, J. T. Murphy, had offered a characteristically forthright view of Mosley's performance at the 1930 Labour party conference at Llandudno, arguing that he had 'swept the Conference off its feet' 'along the Fascist path' with his calls for 'action' and tariffs. Murphy also suggested that other leading Labour figures, especially the Transport and General Workers' Union leader Ernest Bevin, agreed with Mosley's prescriptions:

In the midst of the Social Fascist Labour Party, naked Fascism has raised its head and bids for leadership, gathering around the personalities of Mosley and Bevin. The Labour Party is a party in process of disintegration. This is the historical significance of the Llandudno Conference.¹²

Murphy followed this analysis a couple of months later by attacking the 'aristocratic condescension [sic]' of the Mosley Manifesto, the 'unmistakable Fascist character' of whose proposals had 'nothing to do with Socialism'. Crucially, as well, Murphy said that the ILP was, to all intents and purposes, in agreement with the Manifesto, and that it was therefore the Communists' job to 'unmask the Mosleys and the Maxtons'.¹³ However, the new departure was far from dominating the CPGB's concerns, and it was quite possible for Communists to communicate at length with each other in this period without even mentioning it.¹⁴

Communists did take a good look at the new body, all the same. It was axiomatic to the 'class against class' analysis that, in Murphy's words, 'as the crisis deepens Social-Fascism swiftly evolves to pure Fascism'.¹⁵ They hoped to see proof of this in the New party, and it was this hope that informed their analysis. When they came to discuss the matter on 26 February, three days after news of the party's launch had been reported in the press, PB members could hardly contain themselves. Pollitt claimed that intensifying capitalist crisis was causing "Lefts" and Mosley to make

new manoeuvres to win leftward moving workers', and spoke of Mosley's 'drives towards fascism'. Murphy stressed that Mosley had 'given a tremendous impetus to fascist development', while William Rust, editor of the Communist *Daily Worker*, also characterised Mosley as a fascist. In this context, it was agreed that the party must not only counter Mosley, but that it should also expose the ILP left and fight against Arthur Horner, the Communist South Wales miners' leader, who had fallen out of favour with the party leadership over his alleged failure to promote the Communist cause in an industrial dispute in his coalfield.¹⁶

These discussions were carried on in more detail at the party central committee (CC) meeting that followed in mid-March. There, Mosley's open break with Labour was used to taint an even wider group of other people, Pollitt claiming that, because both the ILP and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) general council also supported various forms of industrial rationalisation, they were in some way complicit in the New party venture which, while not 'a full-blown Mussolini group', was 'the first concrete form of Fascism in embryo we have had in this country'. As well as 'the most drastic application of capitalist rationalisation', the new party was defined as fascist because of the 'five dictators' outlined in the Mosley Manifesto, Mosley's dismissal of socialism as "a catchword", and the fact that a Conservative MP Bill Allen, who according to Pollitt was 'known to be an out-and-out Fascist', had joined. The end result, if Mosley had his way, would be 'full-blown fascism in this country'. J. R. Campbell, one of Pollitt's closest colleagues, stated that Mosley represented 'a very serious danger at the present moment', because, in abandoning socialist language, 'Mosleyism' had turned from 'Social Fascism' into 'incipient Fascism'. This point was supported by Aitken Ferguson, who claimed that some ILPers were themselves talking about leaving the Labour party and forming 'a new party' – in effect, smearing the ILP by rumour, innuendo and largely unsubstantiated association. Pollitt was careful, however, to wind up the discussion with a warning against seeing the New party as 'a

fully fledged fascist group', repeating that it was 'the embryo form of fascism, and not ... fully fledged fascism'.¹⁷

These fine distinctions between fascisms that were 'social', 'incipient', 'fully fledged' and 'embryo' might all seem to be the worst kind of exercise in Comintern theology. But they were, in fact, of central importance to the CPGB's strategy. The formation of the New party was important to the Communists. It 'proved' that social democracy was breaking up, and that some of those who had appeared among its most radical elements were moving towards overt fascism, or 'exposing themselves', in Comintern-speak, as class traitors. However, even the most optimistic Communists could not look at the New party and convince themselves that, in and of itself, it was likely to make a massive difference to British politics: it was only significant if it could be used to tar larger and more significant bodies with the same brush. Its function, in Communist eyes, was to help discredit the 'sham lefts' of the ILP and the other 'social fascists' in the Labour party more generally (hence the attempts to bring Bevin and the TUC general council into the equation). But this would only work effectively while Mosley could still be portrayed as having some kind of ongoing relationship with the Labour movement. Once he moved to 'fully-fledged' fascism, that link would be lost. It would not matter that this was the case if other 'sham lefts' then began similar moves towards 'incipient fascism', but if they did not, then the notion of an ongoing process of differentiation within the left would itself be discredited. In short, Mosley could best serve the Communist party's 'third period' analysis and purposes if he could be shown to be on the cusp between 'embryo' and 'fully-fledged' fascism.

As the CC's resolution put it:

The Labour Party, Trades Union Congress and ILP leaders are the forces of Social Fascism, and the Mosley group is the continuation of this process, which today, reveals itself as the first embryo Fascist Party that has the

greatest significance and dangers for the working class, because it has developed out of the “Left Wing” section of the Labour Government.

The New party was ‘a disorganising force employed by capitalism to head off and divert the growing discontent in the Labour Party and all parts of the population, and draw it to the policy of capitalism under deceitful, high-sounding phrases’.¹⁸ For the CPGB, ‘social fascism’ remained the main target. On 9 April, the Scottish district party committee (DPC) passed a resolution repeating the assertion that the ILP, Labour and the TUC were ‘forces of Social Fascism preparing the way for Fascism’, and that ‘[o]ut of their ranks comes the Mosley Party driving towards the creation of a mass Fascist Party in Great Britain’.¹⁹ In late April 1931, Pollitt was reheating yesterday’s leftovers in suggesting that the ILP, the general council and the New party might all come together to form an ‘Independent Socialist Party’, while it said much for the depth of contempt in which some leading Communists held Horner in the summer of 1931 that they spread rumours that he was on the verge of joining the New party.²⁰ Suggestions that the party leadership should take a closer look at the New party, especially in the light of the development of the Nazis in Germany, ‘because we can see in the New Party something which is going to learn a great deal from the Nazis’, came to little.²¹

This was, in part, because the New party appeared to be doing the CPGB little direct damage. There were some clashes at the Ashton by-election in April and May 1931, where the Communists ran a propaganda campaign but no candidate as such; but Labour remained the Communists’ main target.²² Additionally, it does not seem that the New party ate seriously into the CPGB’s membership, although Jack Jones, the New party propagandist at Ashton, was assisted by two erstwhile Communists who had been leaders of the unemployed movement in nearby Manchester: ‘[a] pair of rough handfuls they were, who had hunger-marched and protested their way even into prison more than once’.²³ Margaret McCarthy was to claim that, in north-western

England more broadly, most Communists were 'of poor quality', and that the few able ones left for the New party at this stage.²⁴ But it is hard to be certain of how far this was the case, and Lancashire's identification as one of the party's four strongest areas in 1932 would tend to suggest a degree of exaggeration on her part.

As it became increasingly obvious in the summer of 1931 that its formation was not going to be followed by an early ILP breakaway, the New party fell further down the CPGB's list of priorities. In March 1931, the Comintern had defined the party's chief immediate tasks as being to build up a revolutionary trade union opposition through the ongoing campaign for the 'workers' charter'; to intensify its work within the reformist unions; to stabilise the party's membership level, as the first step towards increasing it significantly; to expand the scope and influence of the *Daily Worker*, and to effect a 'tremendous' increase its anti-colonial work.²⁵ For a small party also aiming to 'expose' Labour and the ILP, and a leadership increasingly embroiled in the struggle against 'Hornerism', this left very little time or space for serious campaigning against a New party whose limited potential was exposed by the result of the Ashton by-election. Indeed, the New party was ignored in CPGB discussions of both fascism and 'social fascism' in May 1931.²⁶

The events of August-October 1931 did not lead to any dramatic change in Communist views of the New party. Writing in the *Communist Review* about the situation following the Labour government's collapse, Murphy did not find space in eight pages for even the briefest of mentions, and did not make good the omission in a piece of similar length in the following month's edition.²⁷ For many Communists, Mosley's 'incipient fascism' looked incipient, not to say insipid, indeed at the side of a National government whose immediate programme was defined by a cut in unemployment benefits: a typical argument came from Gallacher, who argued three days after the new government was formed that it was 'the first stage in the

development towards a fascist dictatorship, the open unification of the forces of the capitalist class against the working class'.²⁸ This view was endorsed in the 'open letter' sent to CPGB members the following day, which, in five closely-typed pages, referred not once to Mosley or his party.²⁹ A month later, an even longer communication to members was similarly barren of references.³⁰

On 20 September, while winding up the CC's discussion of the planned general election campaign, Pollitt remarked that, at their next meeting in November or December, they 'may be able to record the biggest victories in the history of the Party and reap the reward of the work of the Party members of the last two years'.³¹ For neither the first nor the last time, he was to be proved wrong by quite some margin. The party came nowhere near winning a single seat; 21 of its 26 candidates lost their deposits. Pollitt himself came a poor third in the London East End constituency of Whitechapel and St George's. Of course, Labour's crushing defeat, following on from the collapse of the Labour government, could be seen as a vindication of the class against class line, and brought satisfaction to many Communists. However, the reality of the National government's parliamentary dominance militated strongly against much rejoicing.³² The CPGB had polled better than the New party (the average poll share of Communist candidates was 8.2 per cent, as opposed to the New party's 4.1 per cent), and this fact did accurately represent the relative strength of the two organisations.³³ But it was scant – if any – comfort to the Communists. The New party had not been particularly targeted in the CPGB's overall campaign. Indeed, it was not even mentioned in its general election manifesto.³⁴ Where Communists did mention it, it was usually done with a view to discrediting the ILP by former association.³⁵ Pollitt himself faced a New party opponent, the boxer 'Kid' Lewis, at Whitechapel, but focussed his main attacks on Labour and the 'the National Starvation Government'; if Lewis got a mention, it was usually as the third and least significant element of an unholy trinity.³⁶

However, the general election was not a total non-event for the Communists. First, it saw a further increase in membership, which had been rising even before the campaign thanks to the party's hostility to the National government's expenditure cuts: it rose from 2,724 in May 1931 to 3,927 in September, 6,279 in November, and peaked at 9,000 in January 1932. Secondly, and more to the point in the context of this paper, the election saw grassroots political violence in a number of places.³⁷ This was by no means all organised by the Communists, and by no means all of it was targeted at Mosley and the New party. But there was sufficient evidence of a cross-over between the two to suit the purposes of both the Communists, and of Mosley himself (in moving closer to a fascist approach to meetings). At the very least, the presence of New party candidates gave some grassroots Communists something to do (see below).

In most senses, the limited interface between the Communists and the New party ended with the 1931 general election. As the New party 'died on'³⁸ Mosley, most Communists did not even feign an interest in it. Key polemical tracts ranging over the post-election political situation found no reason to mention Mosley or his party. The CPGB faced real challenges in the months that followed, such as trying to retain recent recruits, implementing the 'January resolution' of 1932, which urged Communists back into the 'reformist' unions and reorganised the party on the basis of four 'concentration districts'; industrial disputes in the midlands and Lancashire; the controversial departure of Murphy; the emergence of a definite Trotskyite opposition in the form of the 'Balham Group'; and the preparations for the first party congress for three years in November 1932, an event that would mark Pollitt's confirmation as the party's pre-eminent leader (by which time Mosley would have formed the BUF).³⁹ By early 1932, Mosley's main purpose, so far as the Communists were concerned, was as a stick with which to try to beat the ILP, James Shields

stressing to the political bureau that they must 'bring out the fact [sic] that Mosley came from the "left" wing of the ILP', and Gallacher arguing that the ILP had 'provided a jumping-off ground for Mosley'.⁴⁰ Neither assertion bore much relation to historical accuracy, but, then again, the establishment of scholarly verisimilitude was not the primary purpose of the discussion. By the end of 1932, with the BUF formed, Communists had largely forgotten about the New party. By that time, so far as they were concerned, Mosley had been a fascist all along, and they had been proved correct in their estimation of him. If Mosley and the New party warranted so little discussion in Communists' memoirs and books on the party, it is surely because the whole New party episode appeared both irrelevant and unproblematic to the Communists' own development.

However, to leave matters there is to miss a great deal. The first point to note is that the Communists could present Mosley's political journey from Labour to fascism as evidence of their own prescience, and as justification of the 'class against class' analysis. They took considerable pride in having diagnosed Mosley's fascism so early, at a time when 'Left Labour politicians rallied to his support and assisted his campaign', as Dutt put it in characteristically tendentious terms in 1934.⁴¹ It is true, as Francis Beckett has pointed out, that the achievement was 'not as remarkable as it sounds', because '[i]f you call everyone a fascist you must hit a winner eventually'.⁴² But, even so, this early identification of Mosley with fascism did help the Communists to gain some moral advantage in the anti-fascist campaigns of the mid-1930s.

Secondly, the development of the New party did force the CPGB to pay more attention to its youth work. It is in some ways ironic that although the shift to the left in the late 1920s had owed much to youthful Communists – Nina Fishman's 'young turks' – the Young Communist League (YCL) had fallen into increasing decrepitude.⁴³ By early 1931, the party leadership was recognising the fact.⁴⁴ However, it was in

discussions of Mosley's 'incipient fascism' that the point really began to make an impact. As Pollitt put it, the appeal of Mosley and people like him was 'always directed to the youth of the country', and so the Communists must work to counter such influences by building up the YCL, as well as by trying to infiltrate existing youth organisations.⁴⁵ Increasing emphasis was placed on speaking to young people in language they could understand, rather than in what Pollitt referred to as 'inprecise language'.⁴⁶ As Campbell put it, the YCL must make 'a more popular, a more youthful approach to youth', because at present it was 'worse than listening to Einstein to listen to young comrades'.⁴⁷ All this led to a new steer to the party at large to be more tolerant of, and helpful towards, the YCL, and attempts were made to build on some promising openings in the field of sporting activity.⁴⁸ This paid some early dividends, and YCL membership did increase.⁴⁹ It does not seem implausible to argue that this new attention to youth was also a factor in helping party membership in general to increase later in the year. Of course, many of those new recruits then fell away rapidly, and the party would continue to moan about its youth work and the young people involved in it.⁵⁰ But it does seem that the launch of the New party helped to focus Communist minds on the subject, at least for a while.

A third consideration is political violence: how far did the CPGB encourage the use of political violence against Mosley and the New party? Communist leaders were often to be dismissive of such action in the early years of the BUF, believing that it would damage the CPGB's credibility.⁵¹ It may be, however, that in the first months of the New party's existence things were different. British Communists returned from visits to Germany in 1931 greatly enthused by what they saw of 'the method of revolutionary competition', believing it was bringing positive results for the KPD.⁵² Pollitt was exhilarated by the way in which the German party used 'every available means of approach and contact and every conceivable form of attracting the Young Workers', and in the context of early 1931 he would have been well aware that 'every

conceivable form' included the use of violence.⁵³ On the fall of the Labour government, party members were entreated to take concrete action, rather than just come out with floods of rhetoric, and at least some Communists would have seen this as a green light to disrupt meetings and the like.⁵⁴ During the October 1931 general election campaign, the party leadership was critical of members who were seen as acting too peaceably in demonstrations. Glasgow Communists who had agreed to give up their 'weapons' (which were actually, as Peter Kerrigan later explained rather deflatingly, 'sticks') at a large demonstration of the unemployed were strongly criticised by the political bureau.⁵⁵ The fact that Communists were being organised to heckle at every ILP meeting in that city was taken as a source of pride.⁵⁶ From a number of parts of Britain there were also reports of Communist violence against Labour supporters.⁵⁷ Naturally, it suited Mosley to be able to claim, at the time and afterwards, that his meetings were being disrupted by Communists, because it allowed him to portray himself as the guarantor of 'English' free speech against the 'foreign' methods of the Communists, while also justifying the creation of an armed and uniformed force of stewards to 'keep order'.⁵⁸ But that is not to say that the notion was entirely fictitious. We know that his meetings were disrupted;⁵⁹ we know that Communists were looking to disrupt their opponents' meetings; and we know that most CPGB members, being unemployed, had time on their hands in which to plan and execute such disruption.⁶⁰ Even at this stage, though, there was Communist criticism of what Gallacher called 'irresponsible' behaviour.⁶¹ It is very difficult to imagine many members of the political bureau approving of the conduct of one branch secretary in Nottinghamshire who, after calling on workers to join an unemployed demonstration that October, allegedly added 'I am not telling you to bring your six-shooters, but I will have mine'.⁶² However, the leadership of the German Communist party (KPD) made a major shift in November 1931 when, under the guidance of the Comintern, it 'began to qualify its approval of fighting back' against the Nazis.⁶³ The resolution that the KPD central committee passed on the

subject would certainly have become known very rapidly to the British party leadership, and its steer against 'individual violence' undoubtedly helps to explain the CPGB's approach between 1932 and mid-1934. Overall, then, it would seem that Communists on the ground were involved in anti-Mosley action, sometimes of a violent nature; but the New party was not unique in receiving such treatment, although the experiences gained by Communists at this time would prove valuable once large-scale Communist campaigning against the BUF began.

There is a final and important point. The New party episode also brought the Communist party a very valuable windfall, in the shape of John Strachey. Strachey had become Mosley's closest collaborator in the mid-1920s, and was elected Labour MP for Birmingham Aston in 1929. He went on to play a major role in drafting both the Mosley Memorandum and the Mosley Manifesto, followed Mosley into the New party and, along with Lady Cynthia Mosley, addressed its inaugural meeting when Mosley himself was too ill to do so. He did not resign from the party until July 1931. He fought that October's general election as an independent with Communist support, but was heavily defeated. Thereafter he gravitated towards the CPGB. His major publication of 1932, *The Coming Struggle for Power*, was essentially a detailed vindication of third period analysis, and, as is well known, Strachey requested and incorporated Dutt's comments and amendments when the book was in draft. Although he appears never formally to have joined the party, this was mainly because it suited the party better to be able to claim that he was an independent intellectual who had come to agree with the Communist line through force of intellect rather than party discipline. He was to continue sending drafts of his work to Dutt and other leading Communists, like Pollitt and Emile Burns, for comment.⁶⁴ His subsequent works – *The Menace of Fascism* (1933), *The Nature of Capitalist Crisis* (1935), *The Theory and Practice of Socialism* (1936), *What Are We To Do?* (1938) and the pamphlet *Why You Should be a Socialist* (1938) – were all very influential,

far more so than any other British Communist writing of the decade. *Why You Should be a Socialist*, in particular, sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and is generally reckoned to have been hugely influential, especially on young people. He was also (along with Victor Gollancz and Harold Laski) one of the three selectors for the Left Book Club, set up in 1936. His recruitment, in short, was a major coup for the CPGB.

In some ways Strachey's adherence to the Communist party could be seen as having little directly to do with his earlier involvement with the New party. His motives have been investigated in detail in three good biographies, after all, and seem in many ways perfectly logical.⁶⁵ Conviction was important – he does appear to have believed for a time that radical change was not only necessary, but inevitable, and that, given that the only alternatives really were fascism or communism, he had to choose the latter. Career considerations also played a part – having given up on Labour and decided that the New party was not for him, it made sense to go towards the Communists, not least because they were interested in helping him at Aston and in working with him thereafter.

There was, however, a further factor, which helps to explain, not only the initial adherence to the CPGB, but also its subsequent longevity, and the nature of his eventual breach with it in 1940. And this was the New party. Strachey was a very complex personality. Mosley's infamous epithet that he was 'governed above the waist by Marx, below the waist by Freud, but no part of [him] by Strachey' was very unkind, but captured a certain essential oddness.⁶⁶ Following the break with Mosley, Strachey feared that the latter might try to have him assassinated, and bought a revolver with which to protect himself, while in the autumn of 1932 he had a nervous breakdown. He went for therapy thrice-weekly for the next three years.⁶⁷

It does not appear entirely fanciful to suggest that Strachey's behaviour in the 1930s was motivated, in part, by a somewhat feverish desire to be seen to have expunged any possible taint of his earlier links with Mosley. This became more and more imperative as Mosley moved towards an open embrace of fascism. Strachey himself had not been a fascist. But he had been very close to Mosley. He had also stayed with Mosley in the New party longer than seemed wise in retrospect. The CPGB had condemned the New party's 'incipient fascism' some months before Strachey broke with it in July 1931. In retrospect, of course, Strachey developed a narrative that suggested a process of revelation: indeed, *The Menace of Fascism* functioned in part as the finalisation of that narrative. There, in an eerie parallel of much Communist memoir writing, we see Strachey realising increasingly that something needed to be done politically, but casting around in some desperation, unable to find a cure and latching on to all kinds of false prophets and panaceas. In Communist autobiographies, people like Gallacher, Murphy and Tom Bell portrayed themselves as earnest but misguided working-class militants who found 'truth' in Communism, in all three cases finalised by a meeting with Lenin.⁶⁸ Strachey did not, of course, meet Lenin, but he did meet Raji Dutt and Harry Pollitt.

In Strachey's final narrative, Mosley returned from his illness in early 1931 a changed man, already dubious about the New party's potential. For Strachey, the moment when inchoate fears crystallised into an 'I meet Lenin' moment of revelation came that May, at the declaration of the by-election result at Ashton Town Hall, in Mosley's notorious reaction to the roars of the 'violently hostile' crowd ("That is the crowd that has prevented anyone doing anything in England since the war"). 'At that moment,' Strachey continued, 'British Fascism was born.'⁶⁹ Thereafter, 'Mosley began more and more to use the word Fascism in private'.⁷⁰ By this time, Strachey recounted, he and Allen Young were increasingly concerned, and following a clash over the future of the 'youth movement', they engineered a breach with Mosley. Strachey's choice of

issue was not made at random. It was, as he described it in 1933, 'that touchstone of the modern world, our attitude to Soviet Russia'.⁷¹

The details of the dispute are not important here. What matters is that Strachey cannot have failed to realise that to break with Mosley on this issue would help to ease his way into the Communist party's good books. It was also the best way in which he could prove that he had no truck with fascism. But purging himself of the fascist taint would take more than that, as he realised. This helps to explain why he stayed with the Communists for so long, indeed long after the prospect of the Manichean future depicted in *The Coming Struggle for Power* had apparently begun to recede. By the mid-1930s, Strachey would be looking with increasing interest at attempts to improve the lot of the workers *within* capitalism, with reformist social democracy using the fruits of a prospering – albeit far more regulated – capitalism to bring about improved living standards en route to socialism. Both Roosevelt's New Deal and Keynes's ideas, at least as filtered through Douglas Jay and Evan Durbin, were to be very significant influences on him.⁷² Intellectually, he was, in effect, breaking with communism, and moving back closer to the ideas of *Revolution by Reason* and the Mosley Memorandum, albeit updated. However, the need for atonement for his earlier association with Mosley kept him within the party's orbit so long as there seemed to be no really pressing reason to make a break: the longer he stayed, the more he would be able to satisfy others, and perhaps most of all himself, that he was no fascist. (Indeed, by 1934 he was already being described by a pro-Communist writer as the only leading British intellectual who had taken 'the side of the proletariat with complete sincerity and complete loyalty'.)⁷³ He was helped to square the circle by the CPGB's own move rightwards in 1934-35, and he could present his ideas as the basis of a popular front economics, as in *What Are We To Do?* (1938). By then, he had absolutely no desire to return to Marxian fundamentalism. The events of 1939-40 gave him the perfect opportunity to break

with the Communists. When the breach finally came in April 1940, he could argue plausibly that, in supporting the British war effort, he was in effect far more anti-fascist than the Communists who were by now arguing that the war was a struggle of rival imperialisms whose outcome was of no significance to the working class. In 1942 Strachey rejoined the Labour party, and went on to a ministerial career once re-elected to parliament in 1945. When looked at as a whole, the period in Strachey's political thought that appears aberrant is the early-to-mid 1930s. The aberration is best explained by his desire to distance himself from memories of the New party. The end product for the CPGB was very positive: for almost a decade, it had at its disposal the primary socialist intellectual in Britain. In delivering Strachey to the CPGB bound, but certainly not gagged, the New party inadvertently did the cause of British communism a good turn.

Taken as a whole, the New party interlude did not have a massive impact on the development of the British Communist party. A subject of some attention around the time of its formation, it soon retreated in significance, as other issues took priority. Nevertheless, it was not entirely unimportant. Initially at least, it appeared to suggest that 'class against class' analyses of social democrats as social fascists had some basis in reality. Secondly, Mosley's subsequent shift to 'fully-fledged' fascism seemed to vindicate Communist assertions that he was a fascist even before the New party was formed: for once, they appeared to have analysed a situation correctly. Thirdly, the formation of the New party did lead the CPGB to pay more attention to its youth organisation, and may have increased Communists' use of political violence, which in turn helped recruitment, although not always of the kind of members the party leadership wanted. Finally, Strachey's rather-too-long dalliance with the New party pushed him to seek to prove his left-wing, anti-fascist credentials by an association with the Communists that was lengthier than it might otherwise have been. And, if for

no other reason than that, the New party's brief existence did ultimately profit the Communist party of Great Britain.

References

- Beckett, Francis. *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*. London: John Murray, 1995.
- Beech, Matt and Kevin Hickson. *Labour's Thinkers: The Intellectual Roots of Labour from Tawney to Gordon Brown*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2007.
- Bell, Thomas. *Pioneering Days*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1941.
- Branson, Noreen. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985.
- Callaghan, John. *Rajani Palme Dutt: A Study in British Stalinism*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993.
- Collini, Stefan. *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Dutt, R. P. *Fascism and Social Revolution*. London: Lawrence, 1934).
- Eaden, James, and David Renton. *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.
- Fishman, Nina. *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933-1945*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995.
- '. 'Horner and Hornerism', in John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan and Alan Campbell (eds), *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in Biography*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2001.
- Gallacher, William. *Last Memoirs*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1966.
- '. *Revolt on the Clyde*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1936.
- Groves, Reg. *The Balham Group: How British Trotskyism Began*. London: Pluto Press, 1974.
- Jones, Jack. *Unfinished Journey*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938.
- Laybourn, Keith, and Dylan Murphy. *Under the Red Flag: A History of Communism in Britain, c. 1849-1991*. Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1999.

- Martin, Roderick. *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-1933: A Study of the National Minority Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- McCarthy, Margaret. *Generation in Revolt*. London: Heinemann, 1953).
- McIlroy, John, and Alan Campbell. 'The heresy of Arthur Horner', *Llafur*, 8 (2001): 105-18.
- Mirsky, Dimitri. *The Intelligentsia of Great Britain*. London: Gollancz, 1935 (first published in Russian, 1934).
- Morgan, Kevin. *Harry Pollitt*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.
- Mosley, Oswald. *My Life*. London: Nelson, 1968.
- Murphy, J. T. *New Horizons*. London: John Lane, 1941.
- Newman, Michael. *John Strachey*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.
- Nicolson, Harold. *Diaries and Letters, 1930-39*, ed. Nigel Nicolson. London: Fontana, 1969.
- Pelling, Henry. *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile*. London: A. & C. Black, 1958.
- Rosenhaft, Eve. *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929-1933*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Strachey, John. *The Menace of Fascism*. London: Gollancz, 1933.
- Thomas, Hugh. *John Strachey*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1973.
- Thompson, Noel. *John Strachey: An Intellectual Biography*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993.
- Thorpe, Andrew. *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- . *The British General Election of 1931*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- . 'The industrial meaning of "gradualism": the Labour party and industry, 1918-31'. *Journal of British Studies*, 35 (1996): 84-113.

-----'. 'The membership of the Communist party of Great Britain, 1920-1945'.

Historical Journal, 43 (2000): 777-800.

Worley, Matthew. *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain between the Wars*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2002

-
- ¹ *The Times*, 29 Oct. 1931.
- ² See, e.g., Pelling, *The British Communist Party*; Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941*; Laybourn and Murphy, *Under the Red Flag*; Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43*; Eaden and Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920*. For an exception, see Worley, *Class Against Class*, 274.
- ³ See e.g. Gallacher, *Last Memoirs*; Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester (hereafter LHASC), Cox papers, CP/IND/MISC/2/3, Idris Cox, 'Reflections' (unpublished autobiography).
- ⁴ All membership figures taken from Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, 284.
- ⁵ *Communist Review*, 5, 2, June 1929.
- ⁶ J. R. Campbell, 'The outlook', *Communist Review*, 1, 11, Nov. 1929; Thorpe, 'The industrial meaning of "gradualism"'.
- ⁷ Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, 166.
- ⁸ LHASC, CPGB political bureau (hereafter PB) minutes, 5 Feb. 1931.
- ⁹ PB minutes, 8 Jan. 1931.
- ¹⁰ Enlarged PB minutes, 12 Feb. 1931.
- ¹¹ J. T. Murphy, 'Editorial', *Communist Review*, 3, 2, Feb. 1931; Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*, 202.
- ¹² J. T. Murphy, 'Significance of the Llandudno conference', *Communist Review*, 2, 11, Nov. 1930.
- ¹³ J. T. Murphy, 'Editorial', *Communist Review*, 3, 1, Jan. 1931.
- ¹⁴ See e.g. LHASC, Dutt papers, CP/IND/DUTT/29/02, Dutt to CPGB central committee (hereafter CC), 11 Mar. 1931. Dutt lived in Brussels between 1924 and 1936, and these – lengthy – letters were his normal mode of participation in the affairs of the central committee in that period.

-
- ¹⁵ J. T. Murphy, 'The growth of Social-Fascism in Britain', *Communist Review*, 2, 1, Jan. 1930.
- ¹⁶ PB minutes, 26 Feb. 1931. For Horner and 'Hornerism', see Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, 175-9; Fishman, 'Horner and Hornerism', 122-42; McIlroy and Campbell, 'The heresy of Arthur Horner', 105-18.
- ¹⁷ LHASC, CC minutes, 14-15 Mar. 1931.
- ¹⁸ Dutt papers, CP/IND/DUTT/29/02, CC resolution, 'The political situation and the tasks for the party', 20 Mar. 1931.
- ¹⁹ Scottish DPC resolution, 'The political situation and the tasks of the party', in PB minutes, 9 Apr. 1931.
- ²⁰ PB minutes, 30 Apr. 1931; Fishman, 'Horner and Hornerism'.
- ²¹ PB minutes, 30 Apr. 1931.
- ²² PB minutes, 9 Apr. 1931.
- ²³ Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, 255-6.
- ²⁴ McCarthy, *Generation in Revolt*, 16, quoted in Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-1933*, 142.
- ²⁵ PB minutes, 16 Apr. 1931.
- ²⁶ See e.g. CC minutes, 30 May 1931; CP/IND/DUTT/29/02, Dutt to CC, 26 May 1931; PB minutes, 18 June, 9 July 1931; 'Editorial', *Communist Review*, 3, 7, July 1931.
- ²⁷ J. T. Murphy, 'Editorial', *Communist Review*, 3, 9, Sep. 1931; 3, 10, Oct. 1931.
- ²⁸ Enlarged PB minutes, 27 Aug. 1931.
- ²⁹ LHASC, Communist party papers, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/03, circular, 'An open letter to member of the party', 28 Aug. 1931.
- ³⁰ CP/CENT/CIRC/70/03, circular, 'To be read and discussed at all district and local party committees', 23 Sep. 1931.

-
- ³¹ CC minutes, 19-20 Sep. 1931.
- ³² For more on this, see Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, 181-3.
- ³³ Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931*, 270.
- ³⁴ Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow (RGASPI), 495/4/142, fos. 1-9, minutes of political commission of ECCI political secretariat, 28 Sep. 1931; CPGB, general election manifesto, in *Communist Review*, 3, 11, Nov. 1931.
- ³⁵ See e.g. J. Shields, 'The ILP – the enemy of the workers', *Communist Review*, 3, 11, Nov. 1931.
- ³⁶ Pollitt papers, CP/IND/POLL/10/2, Pollitt, election address, Whitechapel and St George's, 1931; *ibid.*, *Whitechapel and St George's Division Election Special*, [Oct.] 1931.
- ³⁷ See e.g. PB minutes 12 Oct. 1931; *The Times*, 20, 27 Oct. 1931; Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, 269.
- ³⁸ CP/CENT/CONG/04/02, London DPC leaflet, 'Nobody loved him except Hitler and Mussolini so he became a fascist: Mosley's record', n.d. [Feb. 1937].
- ³⁹ For all this, see Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, 184-201; and, for Trotskyism, see Groves, *The Balham Group*.
- ⁴⁰ PB minutes, 26 Nov. 1931.
- ⁴¹ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*, 266.
- ⁴² Beckett, *Enemy Within*, 44.
- ⁴³ Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933-1945*, 7 and *passim*.
- ⁴⁴ See e.g. PB minutes, 5 Mar. 1931.
- ⁴⁵ CC minutes, 14-15 Mar. 1931.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.* *Inprecorr* – the *International Press Correspondence* – was the official newspaper of the Comintern.

-
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.; CC resolution., 'The political situation and the tasks of the party', 20 Mar. 1931.
- 49 For an early example, see Scottish DPC resolution, 'Resolution on party organisation', in PB minutes, 9 Apr. 1931.
- 50 See e.g. CP/CENT/CIRC/70/03, circulars, 'Youth recruiting campaign', 24 July 1935; 'Work amongst youth', 29 Nov. 1935.
- 51 See e.g. Morgan, *Harry Pollitt*, 84; Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt*, 145; Laybourn and D. Murphy, *Under the Red Flag*, 90-1.
- 52 See e.g. PB minutes 5 Mar., 4 June 1931.
- 53 CC minutes, 14-15 Mar. 1931.
- 54 Circular, 'An open letter to member of the party', 28 Aug. 1931.
- 55 PB minutes, 12 Oct. 1931.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Thorpe, *British General Election of 1931*, 190-2.
- 58 Mosley, *My Life*, 293-4.
- 59 See e.g. Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters, 1930-39*, 88-9, 21 Sep. 1931; Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, 269; *The Times*, 20 Oct. 1931.
- 60 PB minutes, 27 July 1931, show that between 50 and 60 per cent of members then unemployed. CC minutes, 19-20 Sep. 1931, show that the percentage of recent recruits who were unemployed in London, Sheffield and Tyneside were 58, 66 and 75 per cent respectively.
- 61 PB minutes, 12 Oct. 1931.
- 62 *The Times*, 27 Oct. 1931.
- 63 Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists?*, 26, 79-84.
- 64 Thomas, *John Strachey*, 120, 136; Thompson, *John Strachey*, 108.

-
- ⁶⁵ Thomas, *John Strachey*; Thompson, *John Strachey*; Newman, *John Strachey*. A useful recent study of Strachey's thought appears in Beech and Hickson, *Labour's Thinkers*, 100-17.
- ⁶⁶ Mosley, *My Life*, 330.
- ⁶⁷ Thomas, *John Strachey*, 121-2, 127.
- ⁶⁸ Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*, 248-69, esp. 251-3; Murphy, *New Horizons*, 123-4; Bell, *Pioneering Days*, 213-26.
- ⁶⁹ Strachey, *The Menace of Fascism*, 161.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 164.
- ⁷² Thompson, *John Strachey*, 170; Beech and Hickson, *Labour's Thinkers*, 105-6.
- ⁷³ Mirsky, *The Intelligentsia of Great Britain*, 20-1, quoted in Collini, *Absent Minds*, 128.