

The Dilemmas of ‘Post-Communism’:

Elizabeth Wilson’s *The Lost Time Café*

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Since its origins in the 1950s, the European Union has been shadowed by the left-wing blueprints for continental unity which began to emerge in the nineteenth century. As far back as 1848, Engels spoke of how ‘the “European brotherhood of peoples” will come to pass not through mere phrases and pious wishes but only as a result of thorough revolutions’.¹ The cosmopolitan ideal of pan-European revolution was advanced at the First and Second Internationals and later informed both Lenin’s belief that ‘socialism in a single country is [...] impossible’ and the Comintern’s consideration of a Soviet-led ‘United States of Europe’.² The ideal may have retreated under Stalin (who saw himself as ‘no European but a Russified Georgian-Asian’), but persisted in Trotsky’s desire for a radical federation of nations that would ensure political harmony, establish a single market and recognise common cultural traditions, with class solidarity erasing differences in ethnicity, language and tradition.³ Although similarities exist between left-wing and liberal-democratic models of European unity, both are relational and exclusionary. Regarding the notions of Europeanness dominant in the West, Jeremy MacClancy is insistent that ‘by defining what “being European” is they necessarily and simultaneously create, by opposition, a definition of [...] “what is not European”’, one of the most evident features of which is left-wingism, either in its reformist or revolutionary mode.⁴ As this essay will examine in the British context, however, the Europe

initiated by the Treaty of Rome (1957), which always lacked a collectivist agenda, is for many a less logical arrangement than the 'socialist rationale of Europeanism'.⁵

The conflict between capital and labour defined twentieth-century Europe. While the labour movement has its roots the early nineteenth century, it fully established itself after the Russian Revolution, which was followed by a rapid growth of left-wing parties in industrial and industrialising societies and by a wave of political unrest in Spain, Hungary and Germany. Although the 1917 Revolution soon betrayed its libertarian origins, the success of Soviet participation in World War Two vastly extended Moscow's prestige and influence. Alongside its strengthening grip on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and the Caucasus, the installation of Soviet-backed regimes in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, and the partisan victories in Yugoslavia and Albania, meant that a 'line dividing East from West, Left from Right, was carved deep into European cultural and political life'.⁶ Despite the strict divisions of the Cold War, the left also advanced across western Europe. Between 1945 and 1949, social-democratic parties became the major force in many governments and even communist parties gained a sizable share of the vote, particularly in France and Italy. Inevitably, the slavish devotion of communist parties to the USSR led to the loss of popular support, particularly after the Soviet crackdown in Hungary in 1956, which came in the same year as Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress and caused the so-called 'membership haemorrhage of 1956-7'.⁷ Nevertheless, most western countries, determined to avoid social tensions, retained a mixed economy, with limited nationalisation, legislation for full employment and provision for health, old age and education. Although ground was lost to the right in the 1950s, social democracy revived in the 1960s and 1970s, as did a reformist Marxism in the shape of the New Left in Britain and the Eurocommunists in Italy, France and Spain, which now sought to distance themselves from Moscow. Those who still believed in the historical inevitability of revolution, however, soon

faced the greatest setback of them all. The collapse of the communist bloc between 1989 and 1991 encouraged a shift to the right across the continent. With its worst urges unchecked by a powerful left, neoliberalism entered a new, triumphalist phrase, one exemplified by François Furet's claim that 'Communism is completely contained within its past', as though leftist alternatives to 'actually existing socialism' were neither possible nor desirable.⁸ As Alastair Bonnett remarks, '[i]t is a savage irony that the achievements of the democratic left in creating more humane and fair societies in many different countries should be overshadowed by totalitarian communism'.⁹

The ideological conflict of the Cold War had a profound impact on modern European literature. The labour movement was frequently addressed both by eastern European authors, whether through support or dissent, and by western European authors, whose customary backing of containment harmonised with the cultural battle for hearts and minds waged against Soviet-led Zhdanovism by the US Congress of Cultural Freedom. Yet western Europe also produced a steady stream of left-wing fiction of an aesthetic quality and intellectual range largely ignored in mainstream criticism.¹⁰ If it is the case, as Dubravka Ugrešić argues, that 'in the course of literary history the European East and European West have jointly authored a single cultural text, something like an epistolary novel', then radicalism has been one of the topics of correspondence, as it has been between Europe and the rest of the world.¹¹ The novels of Victor Serge, Jiří Weil, Alfred Andersch, Leslie Kaplan, Kjartan Fløgstad, Romain Rolland, Doris Lessing, Nanni Balestrini, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Halldór Laxness and Maj Sjöwall offered some of the most incisive commentaries on post-1945 Europe, as did those of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Sembène Ousmane, Peter Abrahams and Alex La Guma in the (former) colonies. In a celebration of the left-wing contribution, Andy Croft extends the focus to cultural production as a whole:

Communism may have become a prison for some artists and a barracks for many more, but it was [...] the distant shining city of the future for many others. Aragon, Anand, Becher, Bierman, Brecht, Breton, Calvino, Ehrenberg, Eisler, Eluard, Fast, Gorki, Guillen, Guthrie, Hughes, Hikmet, Kastner, Koestler, Leger, Lukacs, Mayakovsky, Neruda, Picasso, Pritchard, Reed, Rivera, Robeson, Sartre, Seghers, Shostakovitch, Sholokov, Silone, Tikhonov, Tzara, Wolf, Wright, Yevtushenko – despite its own instinctive suspicion of the world of the imagination, the international Communist movement enjoyed, however briefly, the energy and commitment of most major European and American twentieth-century writers and artists.¹²

Adorned by caveats and questionable claims, and concluding with a needless generalisation, Croft's survey still yields an important truth: that twentieth-century culture was so suffused with leftist sentiment that no cultural history of the century can ignore it. In Britain, the left's impact on national culture extended from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and Notting Hill Carnival to film, television, theatre and fiction. In the 1930s, left-wing novelists included Sylvia Townsend Warner, Lewis Jones, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Robert Briffault, Graham Greene and such a host of others that George Orwell believed 'the central stream of English literature was more or less directly under Communist control'.¹³ During the Cold War, left-wing fiction continued with Jack Lindsay's *Rising Tide* (1953), Margot Heinemann's *The Adventurers* (1959), Raymond Williams's *Border Country* (1960), John Berger's *G.* (1972), William McIlvanney's *Docherty* (1975) and Gillian Slovo's *Morbid Symptoms* (1984). Admittedly, such fiction had lost the revolutionary optimism of the 1930s, a trend exacerbated by 1989 in leftist literature throughout Europe. The ideological despair of a character in Simone de Beauvoir's *Les mandarins* (The Mandarins, 1954), who wonders whether "'socialist Europe [...] isn't just a utopian dream'", pales in comparison to that of a character in Bahaa Taher's *Al-Hubb fi-l-manfa* (Love in Exile, 1995), who assumes "'that the left has died in Europe and

in the world”’.¹⁴ The apparent victory of global capital raised an inevitable question about the future course of left-wing writing. The question has been made more urgent by the outpourings of a literary right which, as Dubravka Juraga and Keith Booker contend, is ‘continu[ing] to kick the dead horse of socialism, partly on the off chance that the horse isn’t really dead and partly to provide a demonic alternative [to] the considerable evils of capitalism’.¹⁵

The dilemmas of left-wing literature reflect those of the wider socialist movement, currently facing the so-called ‘ban on Utopia’ or ‘exhaustion of utopian energies’.¹⁶ Not only has the left lost its former influence in mainstream politics, but is also struggling to counter the continent-wide denial of left-wing history, which in its eastern European manifestation is deemed either a monstrosity (‘an alien imposition, an ephemeral excrescence’) or a deviation from the proper business of government (‘a cul-de-sac, an awful mistake’).¹⁷ In the 1990s, the incumbent EU states, released from Cold War fears of a resurgent left, wasted no time in eradicating any residual commitment to full employment and slashing expenditure on welfare, education and health care. At the same time, the EU rushed the former eastern bloc into the global market through enforced privatisation and deregulation, a form of ‘shock therapy’ that lost millions of east Europeans their jobs and access to welfare, as the GDP of all transition economies sank to below that of the late 1980s.¹⁸ Driving the EU’s eastern expansion has been the fear of a relapse into communism, with Brussels and Washington pumping money into non-socialist parties in Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and the former Yugoslavia in an effort to ‘export democracy’. As one US advisor admitted, ‘[w]e taught them what to say, how to say it, and even what to wear when saying it’.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the neoliberal ‘United States of Europe’ dreamt up by financiers and business leaders has not entirely shaken off its political adversary, which remains insistent that ‘[t]he failure of Soviet socialism does not reflect on the possibility of other kinds of socialism’.²⁰ In eastern Europe, the transition has left many feeling exiled from their own life experiences and regretting the ban on further political experiment.

In 1989, Stefan Heym, Volker Braun and Christa Wolf were already calling for a rejuvenated socialism, a sort of ‘third way’ socialism or revival of Dubček’s ‘socialism with a human face’.²¹ The call was echoed by many in the West, who saw the loss of the command economies not as a repudiation of progressive politics, but as a chance to revive the true spirit of collective agency. This may entail a return to revolutionary Marxism, viewed as the libertarian heritage of Marx, Trotsky, Luxemburg and Gramsci rather than as the degenerate, oligarchical centralism of the Soviet Union. Alternatively, it may entail the social-democratic practice of ameliorating the worst excesses of a market economy, a practice Adam Michnik termed ‘the market with a human face’ and Iris Murdoch termed ‘welfare capitalism’.²² Either way, many would agree with Alex Callinicos’s belief ‘that the East European revolutions should be seen not primarily as a crisis for the left, but as an opportunity finally to free socialism from the incubus of Stalinism’.²³

This essay will examine the crisis of the European left through a study of Elizabeth Wilson’s *The Lost Time Café* (1993), a British dystopian thriller set towards the millennium’s end. This was published in the same year as the Treaty of Maastricht which, through its reduction of social spending and deregulation of the labour market, announced that ‘cradle to grave security’ would now be less important for Europe than price stability. To question the assumptions of Maastricht, the novel reflects on the little known history of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Founded in 1920 and dissolved in 1991, the year of the Soviet collapse, the CPGB had marginal relevance to political life, gaining only a few parliamentary seats in the 1930s and 1940s, but retained a huge symbolic resonance: in the words of Beatrix Campbell, a former member, the Party was ‘a condensation of all the crises and collisions within the labour movement’.²⁴ In examining Wilson’s treatment of the subject, the essay will draw on Charity’s Scribner’s *Requiem for Communism* (2005), one of the few critical studies ‘directed toward the aesthetic response to the socialist crisis’.²⁵ Scribner analyses the multiple

ways in which the epochal changes of 1989-91 are treated in left-wing novels, films, artworks and museum exhibitions of socialist material culture, finding varying degrees of disavowal, melancholia and mourning for an idealised past, as exemplified by German *Ostalgie*, or 'nostalgia for the East'. The response has not been solely nostalgic, however. Mirroring Walter Benjamin's belief that 'real historical memory sustains emancipatory potentials', Scribner argues that left-wing cultural production also captures the vestiges of the socialist past which remain in the collective memory and, through them, suggests methods of future resistance: 'The literature and art that recalls the socialist collective', she writes, 'does not simply indulge in melancholia for an idealized communist or welfare state of the past [but] heightens the awareness that something is missing from the present'.²⁶ Wilson's *The Lost Time Café*, written during the apparent death throes of socialism, examines this sense of the 'missing' in order to counter the negative capacities of 'left-wing melancholy' and to insist on the enduring relevance of revolutionary tradition in the new integrationist Europe.²⁷

The novel charts the political progress of the first-person narrator, Justine Unwin, who is drawn back from an expatriate life in California after the death of her father, a key figure in the CPGB. For some years, Justine has enjoyed a hedonistic lifestyle, marrying a man she doesn't love to gain US citizenship and conducting a series of lesbian affairs, a pursuit of private pleasure that is partly a rebellion against the austerity of her left-wing upbringing. Yet the Britain that she finds upon her return shatters her complacency. On the surface of things, the capital city has a futuristic, even space-age glamour: the corporate architecture of 'silver towers' and 'black glass' clusters around 'a building like a flying saucer', the cars resemble '[t]ime capsules' driven by 'robotic traveller[s]' and the streets are filled with parrots and palm trees, a result of global warming.²⁸ Beneath the glittering surface, however, is evidence of what Paul Gilroy has called 'turbo capitalism's merciless destruction of Europe's once-proud welfare states'.²⁹ With unemployment aggravated by long-term recession, and publicly

subsidised housing long since scrapped, citizens are forced into derelict squats and multi-occupation tenancies lacking running water or rubbish collection, competing against each other for survival, often through crime and prostitution (““You’d have thought they’d help each other””, one of Justine’s friends remarks, ““But no”” (50)). So atomised is the community that the National Coalition government, a tyrannical, right-wing administration, has scaled down its periodic bouts of repression, leaving it free to focus on its real interests: privatisation, financial speculation and real estate deals.³⁰ For Justine, the country is clearly set on ‘a slow, slithery descent towards a new Dark Ages’ (15).

Wilson’s Britain is stark portrait of the consequences of Thatcherism, which had decimated the country’s welfare state during the 1980s. Yet the country also functions as a metonym for a post-welfarist European Union, with its commitment to marketisation and security, its cutbacks in public spending and its culturalist plans for ensuring mass loyalty. As the most overt example, the capital is now called ‘Kakania’, a non-English locution that recalls Robert Musil’s pejorative for the disintegrating Austria-Hungary.³¹ At the same time, the currency is the ‘écu’, the main entertainment complex is ‘the European Institute’, the news is dominated by ‘negotiations in Europe’ and the politician tipped for future leadership is a ‘Brussels-nurtured *bon vivant*’ (48, 91, 36, 257). Culturally, Kakanian society is almost entirely defined by generic imports from the EU. The more fortunate residents live in Spanish or Swedish-style housing, shop in French-sounding ‘boulevards’ and ‘plazas’ and dine out in ‘Polish patisseries’ or ‘tapas bars’, where they consume ‘Italian cheesecake’, cappuccinos, croquettes and ristrettos.³² So ubiquitous are the imports that traditional Britishness seems reduced to residual racism (‘in Kakania hatred of Russians surpassed even hatred of blacks’) and restaurant adverts for ““roast beef and all the trimmings”” (‘a dish no one ate any more’) (74, 165, 165). For some citizens, the erosion of cultural specificity is linked to a surrender of political sovereignty. This is the message of the Patriotic Party, a new alliance of ‘anti-Federal

Europeans' which is convinced 'that Europe was destroying democracy' and which soon spawns a terrorist wing, 'New Albion', whose nationalist agenda of "'Home Rule for the Albion Nation'" is advanced via a bombing campaign on the capital (76, 76, 128, 77). The attacks help to justify the National Coalition's increase in policing powers, which in turn serve to protect its economic plans from left-wing agitation. It is within this atmosphere of violence and coercion, one 'that wasn't quite fascism but had ceased to be democracy', that Justine is forced to take a political stand (78). The discovery that her father's lodger, a student called Anna Musgrove, has been brutally murdered in the family home starts her on an investigation that leads to the dark heart of post-Maastricht Europe.

The base that Justine chooses for her investigation is The Lost Time Café, a favourite haunt before her departure to the States. Situated on prime real estate near the bay, the café is a thriving enterprise that typifies the Europeanisation of British society. Arranged around its 'salons' and 'parterres' is an eclectic array of Czech mirrors, Italian chairs and Victorian *chaise-longues*, where the 'clientele' or 'habitués' enjoy French breakfasts, Polish pastries and Italian wines, served to them by east Europeans who are "'work[ed] like slaves'" (161, 10, 10, 127, 11). While illustrating the homogenising effects of EU membership, the café also symbolises the historic decline of working-class politics. In the days before the waterfront development, when the city still had a functioning port, the café was a public house for dockers, then developed as a meeting place for leftist radicals seeking to associate with the proletariat, and later still attracted a young bohemian set, which felt the 'hint of radicalism was giving the place tremendous cachet' (12). Although some radicals still occupy a table, the owner, Adam, prefers to cater for wealthy 'media types' and 'businessmen', or at least for the bohemians, who are mostly 'small-time entrepreneurs' with disposable incomes (89, 10, 47). To make matters worse, Adam is an ex-Communist Party member now involved in shady deals with the government which he hopes will fund a chain of cafés from Tokyo to Manhattan. As he

explains himself to Justine, ““we were all a bit naïve, weren’t we? As if our meetings and our marches and our protests could ever change the world”” (14-15). Justine’s response illustrates the two sides of her political nature. Shocked at her friend’s materialism, she nevertheless admires his success, finding in the café a sort of ‘golden glow’, a youthful energy and vision that ‘propelled us all forward in time’.³³

The postmodern vacuity of the café finds its antithesis in her father’s house, where the investigation takes Justine on a contrary journey into the past. Professor Charles Hillyard, an academic and writer born into the working class, was an important figure on the intellectual wing of the CPGB, but became an anachronism after 1989, when ““the bottom [...] dropped out of the Marxism market”” (69). The house is evoked by Justine as a symbol of this irrelevance, of something ‘old-fashioned, from another era’, but also of enduring values that continue to haunt the present (7-8). Just as she finds the dark, dilapidated exterior ‘casting a shadow’ across the old university quarter, so the dusty piles of research material cramming the interior, the ‘out-of-date’ papers and books overflowing from files, drawers and cupboards, ‘lived on, inert and malignant, as if my father’s ghost had returned to haunt me’ (7, 30, 61). Her task of sorting through this ‘dead matter’, all of which is on the CPGB and the wider left-wing movement, sets loose an unwanted trail of memories:

I wished it was as in ancient Egypt, where the most cherished belongings of the deceased [...] were placed in the tomb, to comfort the soul and make it feel at home in death. My task of clearing out would accomplish the very opposite. As I parcelled up books for the library and folded suits for the charity shop, as I dismantled the papers and threw them on the bonfire, I’d be destroying the routines of his life and all his projects. This was a non-ritual signifying unbelief. (61)

Justine's sudden protectiveness towards the belongings suggests a developing respect for her father and for the movement he personified. Indeed, it is with veneration that she realises the accumulated research embodies 'a museum of political activism, a monument to the memory of Communism', which the EU is determined to suppress (62). From this point on, Justine's inquiries take two linked paths. Firstly, the discovery that the typescript of Professor Hillyard's last book, an unfinished semi-autobiographical history of the CPGB, is missing from the house increases her sense of governmental involvement. Despite Adam's dismissal of the idea ("people like your father – they're not relevant any more [...]. Why on earth should anyone want to off him?"), Justine is intent on finding out whether her father's death, supposedly caused by a heart seizure, was actually a political assassination (18).

The second path is a more dialectical inquiry into the shape of modern Europe. Through studying her father's papers, Justine learns to counter the EU's official account of European history with records of the radical tradition, or what she terms 'the unconscious of history' (57). Awakened by her studies are buried memories of the anti-fascist struggle, the Greek Civil War, the building of the welfare state, the Hungarian Uprising, the anti-colonial struggle and the peace movement. There are also reminders that radicalism was a cultural, as much as political, formation. As 'a Communist Party child', one who until her teenage rebellion had 'known that We Were Right', Justine participated with the rest of the Party faithful in the meetings, peace marches, summer camps and 'visits to the Moscow State Circus, the Red Army Band and Eisenstein films' (62-3). The activities taught her that 'communism's appeal was to the emotions, to the longings of the hungry, the exploited, the wrecked', but also to an entirely logical rejection of 'the Ruling Class, Big Business or Capitalist Ideology' (64). Although the use of capitals may seem to ironise left-wing discourse, Justine has seen enough of the new Kakania to know the socialists 'were right, so utterly, and sometimes self-righteously *right*',

and to agree with her father's mantra: "Socialism or barbarism; there's no third way" (64, 61). Again, it is her father's jumble of books and papers that crystallises the task ahead:

The labyrinth also testified to a great vision, and I knew that at the end of his life my father in his last work had been excavating [the Party's] history in order to uncover the reasons for defeat, indeed it had been more than that, it had been intended as the rediscovery of a lost past, a kind of resurrection, at least a reassertion of its value. (62)

With Professor Hillyard's manuscript remaining lost, the first-person narrative is Justine's attempt to complete his work, to preserve the collective struggle from forgetting. Crucially, there is nothing nostalgic about the endeavour. To begin with, the narrative admits the deficiencies of the radical movement: the factionalism, the patriarchal attitudes, the totalitarianism of the eastern bloc and the hypocrisy of western middle-class Marxists clinging to wealth (such as Justine's own parents, whose money she inherits). Moreover, the preservation of the past is not the same as an avoidance of the present. When one of her father's comrades describes CPGB members as "displaced persons" ("So many people [...] feel displaced. Since the Party collapsed"), Justine is deeply affected, the remark capturing her own yearning for a movement that she still associates with home.³⁴ If this could be considered 'nostalgia', a term deriving from the Greek *nostos* (home) and *algos* (pain), then the sentiment is not the antithesis of political radicalism, as it is often understood, but rather an instance of Benjamin's emancipatory historical memory, or of what Alastair Bonnett theorises as 'radical nostalgia': the notion that nostalgia, particularly in periods of rapid capitalist transformation, 'works within and against the present, that it reconstitutes modernity, that it is not just reactive but reaches out and down to shape our hopes for the past and the future'.³⁵ Indeed, the first-person narrative that Justine produces is a form of popular history, or 'history from below', a scholarly retrieval of the material and ideological lives of common people for the purpose of

accruing knowledge for future struggles.³⁶ As Justine realises, such retrieval is essential in the 1990s, when the willed amnesia of ‘a smug and vainglorious capitalism’, in David Marquand’s phrase, was ensuring that radical history ‘was being swept away even from the great collective memory’.³⁷

The renewal of Justine’s political allegiance is advanced by her investigation, which unearths a web of governmental corruption and violence. During the timeframe of the narrative, the corruption revolves around the waterfront development, where a grassroots consortium, led by an ex-CPGB member, is about to use a stretch of prime land to provide jobs and housing for the community. Just before the project starts, however, the major investor is shot and the National Coalition uses the resulting scandal to pass the site to Forest Brothers Investments, a corporation funded by the Coalition itself. The main channel for the funds is the enigmatic Minister of the Interior, Alex Kingdom. Described as ‘arrogant and authoritarian’, Kingdom seems the very image of an upper-class Englishman, although his official biography locates his origins in an orphanage in the Kakanian slums, suggesting a self-made man of remarkable drive (76). Yet the truth about Kingdom is very different, as Justine slowly discovers. During military service in Germany in the 1940s, her father and a CPGB comrade came across a Lithuanian, supposedly a communist, who claimed that his life was being threatened by fascist compatriots; seeing in him a future Party activist, the two men smuggled him to Britain, although here he evaded them, changed his name to Kingdom and started a real estate business, making his wealth through speculation on bombed-out residential sites.³⁸ Furthermore, Justine learns that he was not a communist during the war, but a small-time blackmarketeer who collaborated with both the Soviets and the Nazis and who only fled to Britain because he had murdered an American soldier. Although Justine is wrong to assume that Kingdom killed Professor Hillyard (who died in a scuffle with Adam), he is likely to have killed several CPGB members who found out about his past, and also to have organised an attempt on Justine’s life, which occurs

just as she is learning about her father's time in Germany. It also turns out that Kingdom is the mastermind behind the right-wing terrorist group, which he invented in order to act "as saviour of the city" by opposing it, thereby advancing his bid to be the next prime minister (220). In short, Justine stumbles upon another suppressed or 'unconscious' history, that of the horrific course of post-war capitalism. Spanning the European continent from west to east, this is "a byzantine underworld of intrigue and manipulation [...], pulsating in the dark like some rogue bacterial culture in history's boiler room" (123).

Justine's increasing insight into this 'underworld' presents her with a stark political choice. On the one hand, she can withdraw from political commitment and return to the decadent lifestyle she enjoyed in California. Throughout the investigation, Justine's desires certainly remain those of a detached bohemian, with her narrative continually interrupted by shopping trips, love affairs and parties. On the other hand, she can assume a responsibility to the labour movement by joining one of the several leftist organisations that continue to operate in Britain. Most obviously, there is the grassroots consortium that fights the government's plans for the waterfront, an example of the attempt by social democracy to ameliorate "the savage exploitation that capitalism brings" (67). Alternatively, there is a band of Russian communists aiming to reinstate the Soviet Union (the way of totalitarianism that Professor Hillyard turned to before his death) and a radical youth underground that, with the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' and the dissolution of the CPGB, aims to rebuild revolutionary socialism from scratch. In this way, the novel dramatizes the options facing the left after the Cold War. The dilemma of 1989, Callinicos writes, is simply stated:

Do we let the market rip, with all the disastrous consequences that will have for the well-being of humankind [...]? Do we seek to humanize it, as social democracy has sought ineffectually to do since the beginning of the [twentieth] century? Or do we struggle to

replace the anarchy and injustice of capitalism with a social system based on the collective and democratic control of the world's resources by working people?³⁹

Although Justine gives a sizable portion of her inheritance to the revolutionary underground, choosing the path of collectivist democracy, it proves as undesirable as Soviet centralism, particularly after its bombing of Kingdom's headquarters (the eponymous 'flying saucer building') looks set to bring the Minister even more popular support (120, 195). It is partly the failure of the contemporary left, and partly her acculturation in a capitalist society, that leads Justine back to the bourgeois individualism represented by The Lost Time Café. After Adam is killed in the attack on Kingdom's building, she inherits the café and takes to the work like a true entrepreneur, giving no further thought to collectivist action or the city's dispossessed. After the truth about Kingdom emerges, and the government can no longer hold onto the waterfront project, the café even looks set to benefit financially from the social housing that the consortium will bring to the district, a reminder that in a system of 'welfare capitalism' it is always capitalism that dominates. Despite her temporary drift to the left, Justine's ambitions lie elsewhere: 'I'm really a loner', she admits: 'I like the spectacle, the flirting, the dance on the surface' (259). The closing scene, in which she arranges 'a proper Party funeral' for her father, is less a celebration of the Professor than a final rejection, a laying to rest of the ghost summoned up by his research (71). The sense that the ending is ultimately pessimistic about political reform is heightened by the fact that it is the 'Brussels-nurtured *bon vivant*' who takes over as Prime Minister and that the EU continues its post-Cold War expansion, descending on the former eastern bloc "like vultures on the corpse" (68).

The message of the novel, however, does not lie in the ideological vagaries of its narrator. Despite her turn to business, Justine's completion of the left-wing history that her father began offers a clear 'reassertion of its value', insisting that the history of socialism is

necessary for understanding and solving the crisis of late twentieth-century Europe. In this way, Wilson departs from the major strand of British speculative writing on the EU. The dystopian novels of such ‘reluctant Europeans’ as Andrew Roberts, Brian Aldiss and Rob Grant have challenged Europeanist fervour with right-wing calls for a return to isolationism.⁴⁰ For Wilson, herself a former member of the CPGB, it was not isolationism that was needed, nor a further swing to the right, but a socialist basis for continental unity, however unlikely this may have appeared. In this sense, *The Lost Time Café* is aligned to a number of post-1989 realist novels – Jeff Torrington’s *Swing Hammer Swing!* (1992), James Kelman’s *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994), Livi Michael’s *All the Dark Air* (1997) – which retain socialist values in a decade when ‘there was not even a language in which to talk about socialism, much less something as insane as revolution’.⁴¹ Indeed, the on-going ills of capitalism, which according to one estimate have caused 100 million deaths from war, genocide and imperial exploitation over the centuries, only serve to emphasise that socialism’s ‘underlying value, the wish to create a system of social justice, [...] should be retained’.⁴² In the mid-1990s, as neoliberalism gathered pace, there was both a rise of progressive politics in western Europe and a return to power of former communist parties in most eastern European countries, even if these were still obliged by the EU to stick to the path of liberalisation. The movement for political and economic reform needs more authors who are prepared to say to the EU, in Albert Camus’s famous phrase, ‘[y]our Europe is not ours’.⁴³

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Case, 'Being European', p. 116.

² Quoted in Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 26.

³ Quoted in Erik van Ree, 'Heroes and Merchants: Joseph Stalin and the Nations of Europe', in Wintle, ed., *Imagining Europe*, p. 53.

⁴ MacClancy, 'The Predictable Failure of a European Identity', in Axford, Berghahn and Hewlett, eds, *Unity and Diversity*, p. 116.

⁵ Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p. 230.

⁶ Judt, *Postwar*, p. 197.

⁷ Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007), p. 14.

⁸ Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. by Deborah Furet (1995; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. x. As Couze Venn writes, '[t]he end of the Cold War/Third World War has released capitalism from needing to respond to calls for responsibility [...]. It has lost the ability to respond to suffering' (quoted in Bauman, *Europe*, p. 24). A similar point is made by one of Ingo Schulze's characters: "'We, in the East, had been the guarantors that capitalism in the West had worn a human face'" (Schulze, *New Lives*, p. 194).

⁹ Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010), p. 35.

¹⁰ M. Keith Booker's remark in the 1990s that the suppression of British left-wing culture 'has been one of the major cultural/political phenomena of the century' is relevant to many other national cultures (Booker, *The Modern British Novel of the Left: A Research Guide* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 3).

¹¹ Quoted in Williams, *Writing Postcommunism*, p. 24.

¹² Croft, 'Authors Take Sides: Writers and the Communist Party 1920-56', in Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman and Kevin Morgan, eds, *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of British Communism* (London and Boulder: Pluto Press, 1995), p. 83.

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁴ de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*, trans. by Leonard M. Friedman (1954; London: Collins, 1957), p. 239; Taher, *Love in Exile*, trans. by Farouk Abdel Wahab (1995; Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001), p. 56. With similar despair, Anita Konkka describes a character as ‘one of the rare people who still believed in the socialist revolution’ and Victor Serge has a Russian character say “[n]o one will forgive us for having begun Socialism with so much senseless barbarity” (Konkka, *Fool’s Paradise*, p. 66; Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (1948; New York: New York Review of Books, 2004), p. 286).

¹⁵ Juraga and Booker, ‘Introduction’ to Juraga and Booker, eds, *Socialist Cultures*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Christa Wolf quoted in Williams, *Writing Postcommunism*, p. 11; Jürgen Habermas, ‘The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies’, in Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (1985; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 51.

¹⁷ Davies, *Europe East and West*, p. xi; David Priestland, *The Red Flag: A History of Communism*, new edn (2009; New York: Grove Press, 2009), p. xv.

¹⁸ See Kate Hudson, *European Communism since 1989: Towards a New European Left?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), pp. 145-6; and Ronald Kowalski, *European Communism 1848-1991* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 225.

¹⁹ Quoted in Adam Burgess, *Divided Europe: The New Domination of the East* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 109. The irony of ‘democratisation’ is captured by a left-wing character in one of Eugen Ruge’s novels: “now we’re not supposed to think about alternatives to capitalism! So that’s your wonderful democracy” (Ruge, *Times of Fading Light*, p. 265).

²⁰ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, p. 498.

²¹ See Ronald Kowalski, *European Communism 1848-1991* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 187; and Günter Kunert, ‘The State of Europe’, *Granta*, Vol. 30 (1990), p. 161.

²² Quoted in Callinicos, *Revenge of History*, p. 15; Murdoch, *Under the Net*, new edn (1954; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 99.

²³ Callinicos, *Revenge of History*, p. 3. See also Douglas Kellner, ‘The Obsolescence of Marxism?’, in Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, eds, *Whither Marxism?: Global Crises in International Perspective* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 14-15.

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- ²⁴ Quoted in Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), p. 19. In a publication of 1998, Croft commented that ‘almost nothing is known about the specific cultural histories of the British Communist Party’ (Croft, ‘Introduction’ to Croft, ed., *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 2).
- ²⁵ Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 9.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 3.
- ²⁷ See Walter Benjamin, ‘Left-Wing Melancholy’, in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg, eds, *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 304-6.
- ²⁸ Wilson, *The Lost Time Café* (London: Virago Press, 1993), pp. 6, 78, 4, 3, 3. Further page references to the novel will be given in the text.
- ²⁹ Gilroy, ‘Foreword: Migrancy, Culture, and a New Map of Europe’, in Heike Raphael-Hernandez, ed., *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. xx.
- ³⁰ The effects of privatisation are exemplified by the local university, now run for the benefit of share holders, which has sacked its porters (‘permanently employed men who belonged to trade unions’) and hired cheap student labour (Wilson, *Lost Time Café*, p. 41).
- ³¹ See Lynn Guyver, ‘Post-Cold War Moral Geography: A Critical Analysis of Representations of Eastern Europe in Post-1989 British Fiction and Drama’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2001), p. 64.
- ³² Wilson, *Lost Time Café*, pp. 75, 227, 86, 224, 47. Although European culture is the major influence, it is only one feature of the globalisation reshaping city space, with American and Asian influences also apparent. As Justine says of the postmodern topography that results, Kakania is ‘many cities in one, all cities in one’ (*ibid.*, p. 25).
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 19. Although unconnected to Justine’s divided selfhood, Wilson herself admits to being prone to internal divisions, writing about how her flights into ‘escapist identities’ have come into conflict with the pragmatism of the committed protester, who only ‘live[s] fully in the present’ on political demonstrations (Wilson, *Mirror Writing: An Autobiography* (London: Virago, 1982), pp. 82, 1).
- ³⁴ Wilson, *Lost Time Café*, p. 170. One ex-member of the CPGB once termed the Party ‘a little private world of our own, or [a] large or extended family’ (Samuel, *Lost World of British Communism*, p. 13).
- ³⁵ Bonnett, *Left in the Past*, p. 169. See also Svetlana Boym’s notion of ‘countermemory’, a clandestine recording of the past that ‘point[s] at seams and erasures in the official history’ (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 61).

³⁶ See Frederick Kranz, 'George Rudé and "History from Below"', in Krantz, ed., *History from Below: Studies in Protest and Popular Ideology*, new edn (1985; Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 3-6.

³⁷ Marquand, 'After Socialism', *Political Studies*, Vol. 41 (1993), p. 51; Wilson, *Lost Time Café*, p. 134.

³⁸ Kingdom's real background helps to explain the novel's reference to the Forest Brothers, which were a collection of nationalist resistance movements in the Baltic States fighting a guerrilla war against Soviet occupation in the 1940s and 1950s (see Mart Laar, *The Power of Freedom: Central and Eastern Europe after 1945* (Brussels: Centre for European Studies, 2010), pp. 77-83).

³⁹ Callinicos, *Revenge of History*, p. 135.

⁴⁰ See Roberts's *The Aachen Memorandum* (1995), Aldiss's *Super-State* (2002) and Grant's *Incompetence* (2003).

⁴¹ Wilson, *Lost Time Café*, p. 64.

⁴² Peter Rietbergen, *Europe: A Cultural History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 464. For the estimate of capitalism's ruinous impact, see Mark Sandle, *Communism* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2012), p. 124. As one of Christian Jungerson's characters argues, "'Socialists aren't responsible for as many people dying as those who support the policies of the US and Europe, policies that reinforce poverty'" (Jungerson, *The Exception*, trans. by Anna Paterson (2004; London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2006), p. 385).

⁴³ Quoted in Luisa Passerini, 'Dimensions of the Symbolic in the Construction of Europeanness', in Passerini, ed., *Figures d'Europe: Images and Myths of Europe* (Bruxelles: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2003), p. 28. In 1990, Salman Rushdie commented that 'liberal capitalism [...] will require novelists' most rigorous attention, will require re-imagining and questioning and doubting as never before' (Rushdie, 'Is Nothing Sacred', *Granta*, Vol. 31 (1990), p. 109).