

Introduction



International Communism and the “Cultural Front”

The articles in this Special Issue of *Journal of Labor and Society* explore the theme of international communism and culture in the period from the early 1920s to the 1970s. They are based upon contributions to a workshop on “Comintern and the Cultural International” organised by the “Rethinking International Communism” research network, held at Liverpool John Moores University (UK) in June 2022.¹ From the outset, communists sought to create not just a new global political order but an egalitarian “proletarian civilization” that would supplant all existing forms of society. They were conscious that their revolutionary project required cultural as well as political change to achieve its ends, and their activities and thinking correspondingly reflected that fact.² The aim of a “cultural revolution”, and the idea of culture as a revolutionary tool, took varied forms and changed over time but at its heart involved altering the ways in which existing societies were perceived, changing senses of identity and self-perceptions, and redefining the nature of human relationships. This

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- 1 This is the second publication to emerge from the research network, which brought together scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds with differing approaches to the history of the Communist International to reflect upon recent exciting developments in the field, and to consider new avenues of research. The editors gratefully acknowledge the support of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Research Network Grant in funding this event and other activities of the network. We are also indebted to the other participants at the workshop for their contributions, comments and suggestions which have helped shape this introduction and the special issue as a whole: Gleb Albert, Bernhard Beyerlein, Kasper Braskén, Katerina Clark, Christina Kiaer, Kevin Morgan, Brigitte Studer and Elinor Taylor.
 - 2 Scholarly work on the Soviet Union has long emphasised the centrality of ‘the cultural front’ to the Bolshevik regime, from its very inception in 1917. For an overview of the literature, see David-Fox (2015), especially chapter 4 ‘What is Cultural Revolution’; and the significant collection of essays edited by Kiaer and Naiman (2005); see also Fitzpatrick (1992).

thinking, linked to the “modernising” ethos of communism, was strongly promoted by the early Bolshevik regime in Russia and was mirrored in the international communist movement created after 1919.³

As in the Soviet case, cultural politics were central to the aims and practices of the Communist International (Comintern), although this aspect of Comintern activity tended to be overlooked by historians of the international communist movement. While the cultural history of the principal communist regimes has received considerable attention the same has not been true of the wider international communist movement.⁴ Despite the contemporary importance given to cultural change, this was not reflected in a level of attention from researchers equivalent to that lavished on other aspects of international communism, where narrowly political and organisational studies from a European perspective long dominated.⁵ Links to culture and cultural production were explored only partially, and sometimes peripherally, with studies largely confined to the attempts to recruit prominent artists and intellectuals to the cause of communism and the influence of Soviet and later Chinese official cultural organisations and artistic movements such as Socialist Realism, the stress on raising the cultural level of workers, and promotion of new forms of identity like the notion of the “New Soviet Man”.⁶ The internal

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- 3 The term “cultural revolution” came into widespread use as officially accepted terminology in the USSR and Comintern with varied meanings from the early 1920s. On the relationship between communism and modernism see the essays in Vigneux and Wolikov (2003).
 - 4 The degree to which research into the history of Communist regimes, particularly the USSR, and that devoted to international communism has largely been conducted in mutual isolation and following different agendas has been described as something of an “intellectual iron curtain”. See Morgan (2017: p. 553); Clark (202: p. 6); and Studer and Hautmann (2006: p. 40). For example, Smith (2014) has an excellent section on culture with essays on a variety of themes but which devote no attention to communism outside of the main communist states. Stern and Tismaneaunu (2022) and Skrodzka et al. (2019) are partial exceptions, with some essays covering topics outside the principal communist states.
 - 5 The absence of the cultural dimensions of international communism is striking in the older literature and even in some more recent overviews. For example, see Borkenau (1971); McDermott and Agnew (1996); Broué (1997); Service (2007); Wolikov (2010); Pons (2014). Two recent overviews do have a cultural dimension, at least in terms of considering communist identities and transnational communist culture (Studer, 2015, 2023).
 - 6 The Soviet organisation with the clearest overlap with the international communist movement was the Soviet All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), which promoted Soviet culture abroad and had funds to allow foreign artists and writers to travel to the USSR and other countries: see Fayet (2014). See also Coeuré (1997); Stern (2007); David-Fox (2011); Stern and Tismaneaunu (2022: pp. 177–185 and 193–197).

culture of communist movements was also neglected, overshadowed by a focus on ideology and the political policies followed by the Comintern and its member parties. Recent work has, however, begun to highlight the wider significance of cultural revolution to the Comintern and to integrate cultural perspectives more fully into the analysis of the communist movement. Amelia Glaser and Stephen S. Lee (2020: p. 530), for example, emphasise how, at “the core of the Comintern was a translocal proletarian movement that used art and literature to imagine and spread communist ideology, aiming to consolidate a worldwide revolutionary class.” The Comintern, seen from this perspective, was a “global institution of cultural transfer” whose central bodies and affiliated political parties adopted “a set of common activities, rituals and cultural practices” (Bayerlein, 2017: pp. 30–31). While all the organisations linked to the International at every level were involved in the promotion of a shared, and theoretically universal, communist culture and identity, there were also a wide range of initiatives and organisations more specifically linked to cultural production and activities. These again existed at every level of communist organisation and included: educational associations and centres; leisure and sports organisations, including the International Sporting Organisation (Sportintern); a wide range of associations and publishing houses devoted to literature, journalism, art, theatre, radio, music, film, photography, including Workers International Relief (IAH); organisations promoting healthy lifestyles (including vegetarianism); the promotion of Esperanto as a universal language; and organisations that advanced new ideas about sexual and personal relationships (Bayerlein, 2017: pp. 30–31 and 51–59).⁷

The concept of “culture” has become a very broad term to the point at which it can conceivably cover almost everything to do with past and present human societies (see, for example, Sewell, 2005). In these essays it encompasses several different, often interrelated, aspects of culture and cultural approaches, particularly the connections between communist organisations with art and forms of cultural expression (literature, painting, sculpture, music, film, photography, and the performing arts) as well as the examination of the everyday social and political cultures of communist organisations and their members. This broader research agenda first began to emerge from the late 1990s as scholarly attention first began to focus upon the cultural aspects of

7 Founded in Berlin in 1921 as the Internationale Arbeiter-Hilfe (IAH) by Willie Münzenberger, as well as raising funds for the relief of famine in Russia and to provide aid to workers in distress, this organisation was very active in producing and distributing propaganda films and sponsoring theatrical productions. See the article by Fredrik Petersson in this issue for examples and Braskén (2015).

global communism. It was the interior world of communists that received the first serious analysis. In France, works written and edited by Claude Penetier and Bernard Pudal broke important new ground examining party cultures and individual subjectivities of communists in France and the Soviet Union, notably through the lens of autobiography (Penetier and Pudal, 2002; see also Morgan, 2005; McIlroy et al., 2001; Herrmann, 2010). For the German Communist Party, Eric Weitz explored party culture and the meaning of communist political commitment among activists in two German regions. In Britain, a pioneering and still influential work was that by Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism*, followed and significantly nuanced by (among others) Kevin Morgan et al, *Communists and British Society*. Important though all these works have been, however, they still tended to examine communist cultures through national lenses, the key international dimension being that of the connection with the Soviet Union (Weitz, 1997; Samuel, 2006; Morgan et al. (2007).

Over the last decade, this developing focus on culture in diverse forms has been one of the most significant strands in the wider transformation of our understanding of the international communist movement. Often with a transnational approach, informed by wider developments in cultural and social history, and with a far less Eurocentric perspective, this new research has significantly displaced the long-standing preoccupation with the institutional and ideological history of the international communist movement, and with entrenched stereotypes of communist behaviour and thinking, to provide more nuanced, complex, and pluralistic interpretations. Ironically, the emergence of these new research agendas was actually delayed by the so-called “opening of the archives” after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when historians eagerly fell upon the mass of new records that became available to try and finally settle rather hackneyed debates rooted in the Cold War about the balance of power within international communism between the ‘centre’ (Moscow) and the “periphery” (communist parties and affiliated organisations), and issues about political ideology and policies in explaining the failure of communism (Narinsky and Rohjan, 1996; Rees and Thorpe, 1998; Worley, 2004).⁸ It was only recently that there has been the space for new issues and perspectives to be explored, with a more expansive view of the cultural dimensions and cultural impact of communism at the forefront.⁹ The articles in this special issue reflect

8 Though see Andrews et al. (1995) for an early effort in the post-Cold War era to examine the cultural history of a national Communist Party.

9 Recent outstanding examples of new studies of transnational communist culture include Glaser and Lee (2020) and Clark (2021).

many of these new developments and - important to note – their frequent intersection with other key concerns in the current wave of reassessment including: the importance of communist anti-colonialism and anti-racism; the significance of gender and sexuality; the development of transnational and informal communist networks; communist relationships with the established cultural and social orders; and the legacy of international communism beyond its relative failure in terms of its higher political goals.¹⁰

Though the Bolsheviks and the communist movement strongly proclaimed their novelty as “parties of a new type” and that communists were people of a “special mould”, they were also the inheritors of long traditions of cultural dissent and iconoclasm. The movements of the working-class political left in the Nineteenth century often had close associations with *avant garde* artistic and literary critiques of society and had developed a rich tradition of political symbolism and language to attract supporters and to express their aims and identity. The need for a cultural revolution in the struggle to create a socialist society was therefore something of a natural progression for the new Bolshevik regime. Nevertheless, the “cultural front” as it was labelled by Sheila Fitzpatrick (1992) in her pathbreaking work on the topic, was of fundamental and immediate importance for the fledgling Bolshevik regime after its seizure of power in 1917. One of the Bolsheviks stated aims, as Joachim Hellbeck (2009) underlines, citing Trotsky, was “to create an ‘improved edition of mankind’”. For Hellbeck (2009: p. 5), the revolution promoted “a new thinking about the self as a political project”, one aimed at transforming “the population into politically conscious citizens who would embrace historical necessity and become engaged in building socialism out of understanding and personal conviction” (Hellbeck, 2009: p. 6). This revolutionary imperative reached down into all aspects of early Soviet society, including impacting upon “the interior spaces of the home, the family, the body, the self” (Kiaer and Naiman, 2005). The Soviet cultural project also impacted upon the worlds of the arts, notably in literature, as Geoffrey Roberts (2022: p. 11) has emphasised, “For the Bolsheviks, words were the expressions of ideas that, allied to radical action, could become a material force capable of transforming not only societies but human nature itself.” Roberts (2022: p. 11) argues that, “Reading and writing were seen by the Soviet regime as a means of collective and individual self-emancipation from both bourgeois ideology and cultural backwardness and then the achievement of a higher, communist consciousness.” Katerina Clark

¹⁰ For recent overviews, see Dullin and Studer (2016, 2018); Drachewych (2019); and Beaumont and Rees (2023).

(2021) sums up the significance of this “cultural front” for the Bolshevik regime; “culture”, she argues, “emerged as the area defining Soviet identity.”

This approach to culture as an intrinsic part of the revolutionary transformation of society became embedded in the Comintern, not least through the involvement of figures such as Nikolai Bukharin who occupied key positions in both the Soviet regime and the international during the 1920s and played a pivotal role in debates about cultural revolution and in formulating policies to achieve it.¹¹ This did not mean, however, that the organisations and policies of the international communist movement simply mirrored developments in Soviet models – though these were certainly influential and much commented-upon and followed in communist ideas and propaganda.¹² The articles in this special issue illustrate the far more uncertain and varied nature of communist cultural initiatives and practices; the circumstances that drove them, the opportunities they might present, and the role of culture within communist organisations and in the lives of communists themselves. Partly, this was because the aspiration to a universal proletarian culture inevitably confronted the diverse realities of global cultural differences in which communist organizations and their members were equally rooted. This is very evident in Stephanie Smith’s discussion of the role of prominent artists in the Mexican Communist Party, where cultural and political traditions and the local milieu powerfully shaped the nature of their involvement, and in Elke Weesjes’ discussion of the relationship between communists and wider society in the Netherlands. In practice, cultural background and environment often differentiated and divided communists and proved stubbornly hard to overcome. Communist thinking about culture naturally most focussed on the immediate use of cultural means to achieve revolution, and with nurturing the seeds of a future proletarian civilization within the communist movement. But the debates and cultural initiatives were more wide-ranging in practice – and perhaps more so than other aspects of communist political ideology and strategy. As Frederik Petersson demonstrates in his article on Berlin, the use of cultural means to achieve political ends was often driven by a pragmatic

11 A member of the Soviet Politburo, Bukharin was also a member of the Executive Committee of the Comintern from its founding in 1919 and General Secretary from 1926 to 1929. On his ideas see Biggart (1987, 1992).

12 Soviet models were commented upon in the international communist press and by Comintern organisations and national communist parties. Matters discussed ranged from artistic and literary movements (especially Socialist Realism), sport and leisure, education, religion and Atheism, the position of so-called “national minorities”, the position of women, childhood, food, and alcohol. See Glaser and Lee (2020).

desire to reach a particular audience and could involve semi-independent organisations such as the League Against Imperialism and Internal Workers Aid. Radical communist and socialist thinkers also independently developed their own ideas: such as the Antonio Gramsci, who saw “cultural hegemony” as one of the key battlegrounds in revolutionary struggle, and José Carlos Mariátegui, who argued that revolution needed to incorporate a “spiritual” message to challenge dominant religious ideas and for the recognition of “indigenous” cultures in a future socialist society.¹³ Discussions also ranged over the significance of gender, ethnicity, language, sexuality – as well as the dominating theme of class and its connotations – to communist visions of equality. Consequently, while there was a general acceptance among communists and within their organisations that the “cultural front” mattered, and that communists should identify and promote “proletarian” values and cultural ideals, it was difficult to translate this into consistent policies and practices.

In fact, the ambiguities of communist culture were manifest within the ranks of communists themselves, not least in the problem of defining a communist identity. Discussions of what it meant to be a communist have long animated studies of communist political activism, dating back at least to the Cold War classic, *The God that Failed* (Crossman, 1949). The picture of communists as “sectarians”, encouraged to adopt a party identity, culture, and political outlook that would set them apart from the “bourgeois society” they sought to overthrow, was based upon images and ritual practices that the Comintern (and later organisations) certainly encouraged in a failed quest for uniformity. Such (negative) impressions of Communist militancy on the lives and artistic careers of former communist militants were given additional lease of life by critical accounts and autobiographies, such as that of the socialist historian Raphael Samuel (2006) who, reflecting upon his own upbringing from a family of Communist militants, famously remarked that “to be a communist was to have a complete social identity ...” Samuel’s analysis has enjoyed a long shelf life, influencing work in various national contexts, but, as Weesjes emphasises here, his far from typical experience of growing up as a Communist certainly skewed his account. Instead, while communists in the Netherlands participated in a distinctive party culture and activities, they

13 On the ideas of Gramsci and Mariátegui concerning art, culture and revolution see Landy (1986); Femia (1987); D’Allemand (2000); Francese (2009); and De Castro (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

also accommodated themselves to many aspects of the dominant culture of existing society – indeed they did not wish to be separate and excluded but wanted to be accepted as part of the wider working-class. These findings match other recent studies that suggest that in practice communists were explicitly or inadvertently influenced by many aspects of existing or dominant cultures that included language, national and regional sentiments, folklore, festivals, rituals and attitudes to race, sex, and gender.¹⁴

Frederik Petersson's work on international anticolonial networks also dovetails with studies of national Communist Party cultures, like that of Elke Weesjes, in this case through a micro-history of the Berlin-based cultural activities of the Comintern League against Imperialism – the anti-colonial organisation founded in 1927.¹⁵ As Katerina Clark, among others, has recently emphasised, communist literary and cultural endeavours were structured within the organisations and networks of the Communist International and its affiliated bodies, such as the LAI and the Literary International (Litintern), founded in 1932. While traditionally Moscow loomed large as the directional centre of international communist activities in the cultural sphere, recent work has increasingly turned in two directions. On the one hand, toward examining the horizontal connections between communists in different regions or locales, rather than, or as well as, the vertical connections between Moscow and the periphery; and, on the other hand, to an increasing awareness of the role played by key hubs other than Moscow in the organisation and direction of international communist activities (Clark, 2021). Petersson's work joins that of such scholars as Karl Schlögel (2007) and Brigitte Studer (2023) in emphasising the centrality of Berlin to the Comintern organisation, notably in this case as a major European hub in the organisation of anti-colonial activism. In his contribution, he draws upon Monica Black's study of Weimar Berlin to define culture as something that "relates to the understanding of systems, meanings, mores, norms, symbols, customs and practices, representations and sensibilities, and how they were formed and changed over time" (Petersson, 2024). In Petersson's microhistory, the peculiar geographies and political

14 For some examples, see Morgan et al. (2007); Wirsching (2013); and the articles in the special issue on "Sexuality, Respectability, and Communism", *Twentieth Century Communism* 20 (2021); pp. 21–40.

15 Until relatively recently, the Comintern affiliated organisations, such as the LAI and the IAH, were under-examined topics in the history of international communist organisation. See the contributions in Weiss (2017).

networks of the city itself helped to shape the content and form of anti-colonial resistance, much as the particular environment of Paris, in the work of Jennifer Boittin and Michael Goebel, did within the French context (Boittin, 2010; Goebel, 2015).

The relationship between the international communist movement and artistic production and representation was also complex. Communism was most associated with elements of the literary and artistic *avant garde* and communists eagerly embraced photography, film and radio as means of modern mass communication – as explored in the articles by Petersson, Smith and Strippoli. This involved direct sponsorship by communist parties and affiliated organisations, but also more informal links to individuals and literary and artistic groups (such as the Artists International formed in 1932 by British artists) that were eager to put their art at the service of revolutionary change.¹⁶ Some episodes in the history of communist internationalism, such as the cultural campaigns in support of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, were notable for provoking a global artistic response and were often strikingly modernistic in form.¹⁷ However, very “traditional” means of expression and the use of “indigenous” and “vernacular” forms and imagery were also part of the communist lexicon, particularly after 1935 and the turn towards popular fronts and more generally outside the confines of Europe and North America.¹⁸ There was again much debate within communist organisations about the most appropriate forms of expression for a proletarian movement and the messages that should be conveyed. While the written word was of considerable significance through much of the global communist movement, art and visual imagery played an important role in the dissemination of communist ideology and the grounding of communist ideas in national idioms. As Stephanie Smith emphasises in this issue, art was particularly significant to the Communist Party in Mexico. Here, low literacy levels and a long-established tradition of popular mural art encouraged the Mexican Communist Party to turn to Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiras to propagate party propaganda and to forge connections between the party and Mexican workers and peasants. As Smith argues, the MCP “understood the value of culture” and “ultimately (...) derived a great deal of prestige from its association with art

16 For a recent exploration of these links, see Fowkes (2023).

17 On communist solidarity and cultural responses see Kirchenbaum (2015).

18 Finch (2015) charts the changes in cultural politics in the case of the French Communist Party. In Latin America, Asia and Africa, the appropriation of traditional cultural symbols and forms of literary and artistic expression by communists was often integral to their political propaganda.

and the muralists” (Smith, 2014). The relationship was not without tensions, and became increasingly volatile later in the 1920s, but, initially at least, both the Party and the artists connected with it, argues Smith, derived significant benefits from this connection. This was demonstrated through the publication, *El Machete*, begun by artists sympathetic to the Party, but quickly taken up by the PCM as its main newspaper. For the Party, argues Smith (2014), *El Machete* provided “appealing propaganda”, while “the newspaper also provided the artists with the opportunity to experiment with new techniques and artistic approaches.” This was not untypical, and relationships with producers (artists, writers, playwrights, filmmakers, photographers) who valued their artistic freedom as well their political commitments could involve tense negotiations and be subject to disillusionment and breakdown.

El Machete also features in Giulia Strippoli’s (2024) contribution to this issue, the newspaper publishing several photographs taken by the Italian photographer and Communist, Tina Modotti – who was also employed by the paper between 1927 and 1930. Indeed, one of the themes that emerges from Strippoli’s article is the significance of the international communist press, and in the 1930s particularly, the communist press in France, as a vehicle for the publication and dissemination of the work of these female photographers in an artform very much dominated by male practitioners. It would be going too far, perhaps, to say that the communist press specifically championed the work of female photographers, although as Strippoli emphasises, the war photographer Gerda Taro was taken up as a hero of the antifascist struggle by the French Communist Party and the wider international following her death in Spain in 1937, publications such as *Régards* and *Ce Soir* having previously published her photographs from the front (Strippoli, 2024). It is fair to say, however, that the networks provided by the international Communist movement, and its global press, offered a platform for these female photographers which was not widely replicated elsewhere in this period. Central to Strippoli’s argument is the significance of the artistic vision of the six female photographers discussed in the piece, their individual “gaze” interacting with both utopian and socialist realist themes, emphasising that “far from a single indistinguishable communist culture” socialist realism could “accommodate various gazes and materials” (Strippoli, 2024).

Communist organisations and funding provided opportunities for artists, writers, and intellectuals to develop their work and ideas, to travel and create connections that would not otherwise have been possible. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, the relationships between cultural producers and communism were clearly not straightforward, nor was it without friction and frustration on both sides: ultimately, the chief interest of the Comintern

and its affiliate organisations was in the creation of a “cultural front” that would advance the communist revolutionary project. But there was also a considerable and enduring legacy of cultural experimentation, linked directly or indirectly to the cause of communism and communist organisations. This was in many ways an attempt to create the future proletarian civilization in the imagination, based on critiques of the existing order but also in visions of a better post-revolutionary world of justice and equality. While this took many forms and never approached the “universal” values to which communists theoretically aspired, international communism played a key role in encouraging and disseminating a variety of forms of artistic representation, many of them novel and influential. Ironically, it sometimes appears that it is these works – and much of the visual symbolism of communism – divested from the ideas and aims of the movement itself which has best survived. The effectiveness of artwork, plays, films and photographs in mobilising support for communism, and for causes such as anti-racism and anti-colonialism which communists also espoused, is very hard to gauge. Frederik Petterson’s article gives some tantalising insights into the reactions of audiences to events in Berlin, but this is an area of the cultural history of international communism which maybe remains to be explored in greater detail.

An equally mixed picture of international communism itself is also revealed through these cultural perspectives. Within communist organisations, particularly national parties, the promotion of a set of universal values and a “proletarian” culture often proved illusory. Once again, this was based upon an imagined idea of a global working-class that often had little relation to the diverse reality of different societies and cultures. A contrast with the Soviet Union, and later communist regimes, was also evident: trying to fashion a new form of society from a position of political dominance and using the coercive power of the state was vastly different from the position faced by communists in the wider international movement seeking revolution as minorities in hostile political and cultural environments. The pressures to be both “special” and apart, but also to belong and be accepted, were clearly acute and the result was that communists often lived culturally dual lives. In this sense, communists in the Netherlands were both very communist in their identities but also very Dutch at the same time. Those in Mexico equally so in terms of the cultural expressions through which they defined their ideals and aims. As such it might be better to speak of communist cultures in the plural rather than the singular. At the same time, the general aspiration to internationalism and to be part of something truly global was undoubtedly a central aspect of communist identity. It was most strongly expressed in the many opportunities that communist organisations offered to meet, to share ideas and experiences

in places like Berlin, Paris, New York, Shanghai, or Buenos Aires. These encounters strengthened bonds between communists and allowed them to participate in shared events that often mixed the “political” and “cultural”, such as those in the global village of inter-war Berlin. The plays and films that were integral to this form of communist activity also brought together the two faces of the “cultural front”: as propaganda to promote the cause of communist anti-colonialism but also as a shared experience that bound together militants and supporters in a common global endeavour of the imagination.

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