The political (non) distinctiveness of Marxism-Leninism

Dr Giorgos Charalambous, University of Cyprus and Dr Dan Keith, University of Sussex

Paper presented by Dan Keith at the Political Studies Association Annual Conference
25-27 March 2013, Cardiff

the notion of communism does not have a determinate meaning but one which has to be viewed historically, rather than by definition, however complex

Thompson (1998: 4)

Introduction
Despite a recent upsurge in publications on the European radical left, we know little about the current state of one of its most historically dominant strains; that of Marxism-Leninism. The study of these Marxist-Leninist parties has been subsumed in the exploration of the broader radical left tradition (Hudson 2012; 2000; March 2011; 2008; Bale and Dunphy 2011; Dunphy and Bale 2011; Dunphy 2004; Olsen et al. 2010; March and Mudde 2005). Studies of what March calls the ‘extreme left’ have focused largely on their electoral fortunes (March 2011, Lazar 2002). Recent attempts to ‘map’ the subgroups within the radical left have, classified these parties as 'Conservative Communists' and recognised that they are different from 'Reformed Communists' (March, 2008; 2011). Scholars have spent little time investigating whether parties that label themselves as Marxist-Leninist are actually a distinct group in terms of theory and practice (Backes and Moreau 2008).

A systematic comparative analysis of Marxist-Leninist parties does not exist. Nevertheless, developing an understanding of them is important when they have at times been important in their countries’ histories, active in revolutions and in resistance movements fighting against dictatorships. During the cold war Western European Communist parties provoked controversy as the ‘enemy within’. This article begins to fill the significant gaps in our knowledge about these parties by studying the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the Communist Party of Greece (KKE). Although these parties have declined in electoral terms they are still often able to gain five-ten per cent of the vote. This is enough for their ‘extreme left’ policies to prevent the formation of left-wing coalition governments (for
example in Portugal during the mid 1990s). In Greece this has prevented the formation of national governments in response to post 2008 economic crisis. Both the PCP and KKE retain large memberships (The PCP has over 60,000 members) and have been at the forefront in protests against austerity measures.

It is puzzling that the KKE and PCP did not break with Communism when other West European Communist Parties were more adaptive and reformed their programmes (see Botella and Ramiro 2003). Other radical left parties have found inclusion in government and have been ‘brought in from the cold’ through sacrificing Marxism-Leninism (see Dunphy and Bale 2011; 2007). This makes it necessary to re-examine those parties that resisted change. Studying their lack of responsiveness to external pressures can reveal a lot about party change (Keith 2011). The PCP and KKE have been treated by previous literature as largely similar in nature (March 2011; 2008; March and Mudde 2005; Dunphy 2004; Bosco 2000). There has been very little attempt to study Marxist-Leninist parties since the collapse of the Soviet Union and more specifically there have only been a few studies on the PCP and KKE (the most important of these include Bosco 2002, Cunha 2008, 1992).

According to Backes and Moreau (2008, p. 554), Marxist-Leninist parties 'characterize themselves, as revolutionary, working-class oriented, are active with trade unions, internationalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-fascist'. March’s attempt to ‘map’ the different categories of radical left parties goes further and reports about ten basic similarities between parties calling themselves Marxist-Leninist (March 2011).

These studies, have established that some similarities still exist between Marxist-Leninist parties. A lack of empirical analysis, however, means, that we need a framework to analyse a broader range of positions on factors including membership of the EU, NATO, their position on key Marxist theorists and their short term policies. There is also a need for deeper analysis to question the degree of similarity in their theories of revolution, imperialism and class conflict. Avoiding the normative question of how Marxism-Leninism should be practiced, we explore whether there are significant similarities between these parties, so as to allow us to speak of Marxism-Leninism’s political distinctiveness today. The central question asked here is do the remaining Marxist-Leninist parties provide a theoretically coherent tendency within the communist movement? Furthermore, does Marxism-Leninism
have any substantive meaning or manifestation? Do different parties interpret and apply Marxism-Leninism differently?

Our research draws on both secondary and primary material (analysis of party documents and elite/expert interviews) to provide an assessment of the nature of the PCP and KKE. It develops an analytical framework from which to build comparisons with the wider population of self-labeled Marxist-Leninist parties. These parties include parties in Slovakia, Russia, Ukraine and Latvia (see March 2011) and numerous miniscule parties both within and beyond Europe. This paper begins by analysing the history and development of Marxist-Leninist parties. It identifies reasons why we can expect significant diversity between these parties. The second section builds on this to establish a comparative framework to compare them.

**Marxism-Leninism: A specific historical ideological strand?**

Marxism-Leninism is Lenin’s elaborate version of the scientific analysis of society developed by Marx and Engels. This idiosyncratic form of Marxist theory, asserts that capitalism will dissipate and be replaced socialism and then communism. It is ‘an approach to the seizure of power by the proletariat and the building of socialist society, which legitimates revolutionary action by the Party on behalf of the working class’ (DSL 1998). Marxist-Leninist parties used to have much in common. These parties came from the left-wings of social democratic parties; espoused international proletarianism; were loyal to the Soviet Union (well into the 1950s); sustained the Leninist basis of internal party organisation called democratic centralism and defended it as a necessary and truly democratic form of decision and policy making until the 1980s. Moreover, they gravitated to the Soviet Union and the journal 'Problems of Peace and Socialism' was the centre of their international activity (Bull 1994, Waller 1988).

We could, however, hypothesise that these parties have taken divergent trajectories for two reasons. First, there has also been theoretical and political conflict within the international communist movement over how Marxism-Leninism should be theorised and applied. Following Lenin’s death the Stalinist version of Marxism-Leninism prevailed until the 1950s. This was challenged by Trotskyists and Maoists, who laid claim to Leninism (DSL 1998, p. 280). This led to numerous splits and expulsions as ‘the creation, development and evolution
of Marxism-Leninism was the focus of crippling sectarian battles throughout the world over what Lenin "had really meant" (Marxists.org).

In the 1970s scholars reported increasing diversity between West European Communist parties. The Eurocommunist tendency challenged the orthodox view of Marxism-Leninism, by arguing that Lenin's essential contribution was that on political leadership and the development and functioning of capitalism (DSL 1998, p.281). Consequently, Eurocommunists including the PCE in Spain rejected what they saw as inflexible approaches towards class struggle and coalition-building. These parties accepted institutions within capitalist liberal democracy as vehicles that could be used to promote workers' rights and socialism (see Narkiewicz 1990; Devlin 1977; Mujal-Leon 1981; Timmermann 1979; Boggs 1983; Blackmer and Tarrow 1975). Disagreements mounted both within and between parties rendering Marxism-Leninism a contested concept, leading to significant levels of diversity and polycentrism (Bull and Heywood, 1994; Waller and Fenemma 1989). By the late 1980s the breakup of the traditional West European Communist ‘party family’ was apparent (Bull 1994, Waller and Fennema 1988).

Second, we could expect that Marxist-Leninists have learnt from or been shaped by their respective historical experiences. In the absence of a 'guiding centre', following the collapse of the Soviet Union, domestic and partisan considerations may have played a more important role. Parties functioned in different contexts, facing different political opportunity structures, cleavages, dominant issues and opponents (see Tarrow 1991; Kriesi 1995). Therefore, their needs, possibilities and strategic calculations might have also differed. It is necessary to question whether the parties have become so different that the label ‘Marxist-Leninist’ still has analytical value. Do we need new ways to classify and understand these parties? Have the parties made any failed attempts to change or can we uncover subtle forms of adaptation? Has Marxism-Leninism become 'doomed' to be applied increasingly diversely?

Choosing units of analysis

We can expect to find differences between Marxist-Leninist parties. This paper seeks to find out what they are through using a comparative framework that covers three levels of analysis (or areas of party activity) derived from the central tenets of Lenin's contribution to Marxist thought: official ideology, political behaviour (or, as Lenin used to refer to, 'tactics')
and organizational structure, including their internal rules of procedures. Within each level of analysis we focus on a wide range of analytical units. These reflect a variety of historical divisions around the 'true nature' of Marxism-Leninism, as illustrated from the discussion of debates within the revolutionary left in the previous section. A general matrix for the comparative framework of Marxist-Leninist parties is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Matrix of comparing Marxist-Leninist parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Analysis I: Official Ideology</th>
<th>Level of Analysis II: Political behaviour/tactics</th>
<th>Level of Analysis II: Organizational structure/internal rules of procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issues</strong></td>
<td><strong>Units of Analysis</strong></td>
<td><strong>Issues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worldview</strong></td>
<td>Dissolution of the Soviet bloc</td>
<td>Government-opposition dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Views on Marxist theorists</td>
<td>Coalition seeking at national level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyses of global capitalism</td>
<td>Coalition seeking at regional level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>View of multi-party politics</td>
<td>Transnational affiliations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The role of the working class</td>
<td>Bi-lateral affiliations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Method for socialist transformation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teleology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies</td>
<td><strong>Issues</strong></td>
<td><strong>Units of Analysis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political behaviour at home</td>
<td>Democratic centralism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Membership recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political behaviour abroad</td>
<td>Members' Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Candidate Selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Role and power of each party organ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relations with trade unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relations with peasant organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relations with the anti-globalization movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relations with post-materialist organizations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Official Ideology

At the level of official ideology, we begin by asking whether Marxist-Leninist parties share a common view of the past and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. We then analyse the fundamental factors that political ideologies develop around - a critique of the present, a vision for the future, and a plan to achieve this vision (Jost et al. 2009; Heywood 2008; Freeden 2000). Therefore, we look to their theories regarding global capitalism and views on what Marxists often call ‘bourgeois democracy’; and of the Communist party’s role in the transition to socialism; their favoured methods for socialist transformation and the more specific teleological element of how they envisage socialism and/or communism. Last, as a way to assess the coherence between parties’ more long-term, system-related beliefs and their short-term programmatic positions we examine their main policy pledges on themes of national economic, social (and welfare) and foreign policy (including their stances on the EU and NATO).

Political behaviour

Here we focus on whether Marxist-Leninists share a common approach to political struggle within capitalist liberal democracy. We investigate their strategies towards their respective party systems, government-opposition dynamics and alliance seeking, at both national and regional/local level. The distinction between national and regional elections is examined to reveal whether parties are prepared to adjust their strategies in accordance with the issues at stake. Lenin placed little emphasis on this distinction. Yet, there is now strong evidence that, national elections and regional elections take place in two distinct arenas, each with a specific number of particular issues and that parties tend to respond to competition within each of these arenas differently (Schakel 2011). This contributes to the undeveloped literature of Left-Left regional coalitions (Olsen and Hough 2007).

The international orthodox communist movement was characterised by a significant level of internal solidarity and external hostility towards parts of the radical left that diverged from Soviet communism in the first half of the twentieth century (see Sassoon 1998). If the Marxist-Leninist principle of internationalism is to be taken seriously, then we should expect these parties to be capable of cooperating at the transnational level. The European Union, has become a new centre of socialization for member states (Checkel 2005). It is important to question whether Marxist-Leninist parties have found new possibilities to cooperate in the European Parliament and beyond it (March and Dunphy 2012; Dunphy 2004).
Since scholars have found that the PCP and KKE have struggled to develop transnational links within the European United Left – Nordic Green Left (March 2011, Bell 1998; 1996), we ask what is holding them back and examine the various degrees to which they cooperate. It is also necessary to ask how the anti-globalisation movement may have shaped Marxist-Leninist strategies and whether these parties have found opportunities to forge links or have acted independently (see Hlousek and Kopecek 2010). Furthermore, did these parties respond in similar ways to the emergence of transnational left-wing social movements and organizations that in some respects share Communist principles?

**Organisational structure**

At the level of organizational structure, our main question is whether there are particular rules of internal procedures, specific linkage strategies *vis a vis* society and common forms of societal organization and mobilization among Marxist-Leninist parties? Party organization concerns both how the party organises internally and within society as a whole (Lawson 1980, Panebianco 1988). Lenin took a leading role in specifying how Communist parties should organise. The Communist International incorporated his ideas into its twenty-one conditions for membership. There are now several studies of organizational factors in the Communist and post-Communist successor parties in East-Central Europe (for example Grzymała-Busse 2002, Ishiyama and Bozóki 2001; Ishiyama 2000, 1999). There are, however, very few studies on the internal party organizations of West European Communist parties, despite a long tradition of work on them (see for instance Duverger 1954). More research is needed when studies show that organizational factors shaped the ability of some parties to break with Communism (see Keith 2011, 2010). Scholars have also made little effort to study democratic centralism from a comparative perspective since the 1980s (Waller 1988).

To fill these considerable gaps in our knowledge we first examine whether parties have a common conception of what democratic centralism means and how it should be practised. The history of west European Communist parties suggests that this is highly unlikely. As Waller concluded (1981, p.133; 1988), in the only systematic and historical studies of democratic centralism, this organisational practice 'has meant different things at different times to different people and different Marxist-Leninist parties'. However, what Waller (1981) termed as the ‘orthodox version of democratic centralism’ played a highly significant role in Communist practice. This generally had several common characteristics:
- The application of the elective principle to all leading organs of the party from the highest to the lowest;
- Periodic accountability of party organs to their respective party organisations;
- Strict party discipline and the subordination of the minority to the majority;
- The absolutely binding character of the decisions of the higher organs upon the lower organs and upon party members;
- No horizontal dialogue and a ban on factions.

Research has highlighted that the first two ‘democratic’ principles were frequently lost as elections were rarely held (or were fixed) and the latter two centralist principles took over (Waller 1981, p. 12). In practice this meant that policy and decision making power was concentrated in the hands of the party’s top officials and that lower level bodies in the party hierarchy were policed by those above them. The high degree of power vested in the leadership enabled domineering leaders to regularly engage in one-man management and large, bloated leadership bodies, often with over a hundred members became little more than rubber stamps.

What is more, it was common for officials to interfere in the running of local affairs and congresses were rarely forums for debate. Instead, they simply functioned to praise decisions already taken by the leadership on the basis of ‘scientific socialism’ and its ability to perceive the common good. Members of regional assemblies, leadership bodies including Central Committees and daily Politburos were usually nominated by the level above them in the party organisation and remained fully subservient to them. Moreover, congress delegates tended to be obedient ideologues selected by party officials. Under democratic centralism internal opposition was crushed as reformers were expelled or disciplined and there was limited room for debate. There were few mechanisms by which to hold the leadership to account. Members were also taught to take pride in upholding unity to make the party effective and were given little access to positions of influence or freedom of expression in party publications (see Waller 1988; Waller 1981; Mclnnes 1975; Von Beyme 1975).

We know little about whether Marxist-Leninist parties still practice this style of democratic centralism. Waller notes that it could also be possible for parties (including Trotskyist
parties) to practice Lenin’s pre-revolutionary (pre-1921) version of democratic centralism which gave more room for the free circulation of ideas and the formation of factions (Waller 1981, p.120). Does this orthodox definition prevail today among Marxist-Leninist parties? To answer this question we analyse the role of and power of each of the various party bodies – including the Central Committee, Political Bureau, Municipal Committees and party cells - in decision-making processes. We also investigate how Marxist-Leninists discursively portray their decision making processes. In Soviet Russia, the Central Committee was presented as the expression of the proletariat’s mind. It would only need to be periodically controlled by the party base. Do Marxist-Leninist parties still see their internal organisations this way?

While the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc has been attributed to the dominance and corruption of a party-centred nomenklatura and led to the democratisation of decision-making processes in many other parties (Scarrow et al. 2001), have such developments also affected those labelling themselves as Marxist-Leninists? If this has been the case, then have Marxist-Leninist parties found distinct ways of democratising? Do they still rely on armies of paid party functionaries?

Second, we analyse how these parties have developed links with civil society by examining their relationships with trade unions, peasant organizations, the anti-globalization movement and post-materialist organizations. To what extent do Marxist-Leninist parties still conform to thesis nine of the twenty-one conditions that stated that parties must:

...systematically and persistently develop communist activities within the trades unions, workers’ and works councils, the consumer co-operatives and other mass workers’ organisations. Within these organisations it is necessary to organise communist cells which are to win the trade unions etc. for the cause of communism by incessant and persistent work. In their daily work the cells have the obligation to expose everywhere the treachery of the social patriots and the vacillations of the “centrists”. The communist cells must be completely subordinated to the party as a whole.

Tiersky (1983), for example, pointedly called communist parties’ mobilization within society, in the form of mass ancillary organizations, 'democratic centralism outside the party'. Are Marxist-Leninist parties open to influence from such groups or do they still seek to protect
their vanguardism and ideological purity at any cost? Do they infiltrate and control or work in cooperation with social organizations? How instrumentalist are they towards civil society and to what degree does this vary between different types of civil society organisations? As Charalambous and Christophorou (2013: 103) put it, Communist parties are likely to base these decisions on communist interpretations of the significance and value of different civil society organisations. Communist theory rejects the distinction between the state and civil society (see Meiksins Wood 1998). Therefore, it could be expected that parties with more orthodox conceptions of capitalism and more centralized party organisations will be more selective and instrumentalist in their approach towards linkage.

Marx identified the working class as the true revolutionary force in society. Marxism-Leninism, however, is based on the idea that Communist Parties should develop links to a broader array of social classes and groups. Lenin identified revolutionary 'toilers', which comprised of both the industrial proletariat and the peasants, instead of ascribing revolutionary value only to the former (DSL 1998, p. 280). European capitalist liberal democracies have much smaller peasant populations than Tsarist Russia. Yet, the question remains, in so far as a strategy towards peasants exists within these parties, what does it look like and how does it manifest itself organizationally?