Eurocommunism's 'Third Way': a failed experiment with a significant political legacy

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Eurocommunism is today now remembered as dead end, an ideology whose time never came. Understanding it within the full history of the European left, however, there is much to learn from its imaginative attempt to reconcile socialist radicalism with the European democratic tradition, national and local politics with solidaristic internationalism, and socialist values and social justice with pluralist institutions.

The European Left is once again confronting a series of interrelated crises, shaped by entrenched structural challenges, economic turbulence, and volatile domestic and international political dynamics – a context it has faced before and that is often compared to the crisis of the 1970s. Given this, it is worth revisiting the Left's past attempts to rethink and reposition itself in response to a shifting and fluid domestic and international context. Among the most ambitious of these efforts was Eurocommunism, which has seen a revival of public and historiographical interest in recent years.

In an era defined by democratic erosion, the further fragmentation of the traditional working class and the emergence of new and increasingly severe forms of exploitation and subalternity, the ascent of illiberal populism and the ecological imperative for deep transformation, looking back to Eurocommunism could offer a lens through which to better deconstruct the present crisis. While the

political circumstances of the 1970s differ significantly, several key dimensions of the Eurocommunist project continue to resonate.

Eurocommunism has long been regarded as a failed attempt to overcome the constraints of the Cold War, often reduced to a tactical manoeuvre for electoral survival during a moment of global transition. Yet Eurocommunism — with all its internal contradictions — was also something more. It demonstrated that the mere management of redistributive policies, even as extensive as they were in the post-war period, could not in itself generate a progressive project of inclusive citizenship and social justice. And it showed that the historical and political-cultural traditions shaped by Europe's long struggles for equality and social justice cannot simply be set aside; rather, they must be incorporated into any broader and more radical political project.

Eurocommunism was indeed an attempt to combine the pathos of a more egalitarian future with a pragmatic analysis of historical traditions and political conditions. This is certainly something worth reclaiming today.

Eurocommunism yesterday

Emerging in the 1970s at a moment of crisis in both capitalist economies and the Soviet bloc, Eurocommunism represented an ambitious attempt at renewal within the European communist movement that had resonance within the wider Left. Conceived in Italy, France and Spain, but spread across Europe and beyond as a real-*politik* to overcome the rigid geo-political and ideological constraints, it was a response to a dual conundrum: how socialism might be redefined within the institutional and cultural frameworks of European political history, and through which political strategies it could be realised. Although imprecise, even naïve, the term captured the aspiration for a more adaptable and expanded form of socialism, one in which freedom of expression and pluralism complemented the 'humanist' promise of class solidarity. It argued that the path to socialism could not be separated from the struggles of European parliamentary democracies to build, in the words of Enrico Berlinguer – the leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the chief architect of Eurocommunism – a 'progressive and substantial democracy'[1].

By 1984, when Berlinguer died suddenly, the project had already exhausted its political momentum. And in no time, it vanished entirely from the Left's vocabulary. Only in recent years have both historiography and political-intellectual debate begun to show renewed interest in Eurocommunism[2]. While it undoubtedly failed as a political strategy, its legacy cannot be dismissed as inconsequential: Eurocommunism has been central in shaping both the rethinking of the European Left and the reconceptualization of socialism within advanced democratic systems.

A theoretical association with Antonio Gramsci's reflections on the complexity of socialist revolution in the West, together with the post-war successful 'hegemonic' governance achieved by the Italian Communists in cities such as Bologna and Modena, gave Eurocommunism a solid historical and intellectual legitimacy. Yet, it remained caught between continuity with the post-war communist discourse, marked by the reiteration of 'old' revolutionary schemes and narratives (read: Soviet dominance), and the hopes for a more egalitarian vision for the future, grounded in an expanded pluralist socialism which engages with the European democratic tradition (read: socialdemocracy). It was this unresolved dialectic that undermined its immediate theoretical impact and, ultimately, its political viability. As the Argentinian sociologist Julio Godio noted in 1977 in a seminal intervention significantly titled *Los Nuevos Gramscianos*, Eurocommunism was at the same time 'a response to the crisis of Marxism' and 'a Machiavellian tactic.' By the logic of history, it was defined by both and became the point at which the past and future of the European Left converged.

Its brief trajectory continues to generate sharply divergent interpretations: for the enthusiasts, it represented a moment of political innovation and ideological renewal of the Left, while for the detractors it amounted to a fundamental betrayal of the principles of socialism[3]. But Eurocommunism must be considered for what it was and for what it produced in terms of ambitions and limitations, vision and failures, rather than for what it might or might not have betrayed. It should be approached outside the rigid framework of the Cold War or the schematic lens of orthodox theoretical Marxist debate and, instead, situated within the 'longer and larger' complex transnational history of the European Left. When considered in these terms, it can be seen to have a profound and enduring legacy that still speaks to us.

Beyond the Cold War: Eurocommunist space and democracy

The two fundamental tenets of the Eurocommunist project were the attempt to construct a system of transnational solidarity capable of overcoming the binary US and USSR hegemonies, and a new conceptualisation for an expanded democracy. This orientation reflected both a repudiation, although implicit, of the Soviet model and an attempt to register the profound socio-political changes generated by the upheavals of the 1960s.

Viewed from a short-term perspective, what most clearly distinguished the Eurocommunist project was its critique of the democratic deficiencies on both sides: the absence of political freedoms behind the 'Iron Curtain' and the persistence of social and global inequalities in the 'free world.' Equally important, for the Western communist parties and especially for the PCI, was the tactical need

to carve out an autonomous political and electoral space beyond the inflexibility of the bipolar ideology of the Cold War.

That said, my argument here is that a more fecund way to approach Eurocommunism is to frame it as a transnational attempt, though ultimately unsuccessful, to reshape the internal political arena and the global political discourse . It shared this ambition with Third World uprisings and the global feminist wave, which sought to reconfigure centre-periphery structures and gender hierarchies outside the geo-political and ideological divide[4].

Setting aside the Cold War lens and approaching the 'Eurocommunist moment' from a longer historical perspective, hence, places at its centre the thesis of a 'democratic road to socialism,' which was central for the success of Italian communists after the war and envisaged as a process of gradual transformation carried out through constitutional mechanisms, mass participation 'from below' and the non-violent conquest of cultural and political hegemony. From this perspective, Eurocommunism sought to reclaim a distinctly 'Western' Marxism and European socialist tradition of struggles and class solidarity. In this approach, Antonio Gramsci's 'open' Marxism and Nicos Poulantzas' anti-reductionist theory of the state converged with the 'popular front' and anti-fascist legacies embodied by the French and Italian Communist Parties. This was further reinforced by the Spanish Communists, who, during Spain's transition to democracy after Franco's death, enthusiastically championed the idea of a 'flexible' communism. Viewed through this prism, Eurocommunism was not indeed an entirely new phenomenon but rather the condensation of tendencies that had been developing in Europe and within the European communist parties over the previous decades, both in the Western part of the continent and in the East, if we consider the 'reform communism' expressed in Alexander Dubček's 'socialism with a human face' during the Prague Spring in 1968[5].

This 'Eurocommunist space' was therefore not exclusively spatial or national-identitarian, but also theoretical and political. It was global and transnational insofar as it sought to embrace new social struggles, including those arising not only beyond the geographical boundaries but also outside the ideological and isomorphic West, which was never fully equivalent to the scope of Eurocommunism. According to Berlinguer, the 'European road to socialism' should be neither anti-Soviet nor anti-American[6], but should instead pursue a clear objective: world peace and a new model of international development and cooperation between the global North and South. In this context, Berlinguer and the Eurocommunists – particularly in the first phase when the enthusiasm was still strong – engaged in dialogue with the more advanced sectors of the European socialdemocratic parties and leaders such as former West-German Chancellor Willy Brandt and Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme. By forging relationships and networks that facilitated an array of cross-border and

cross-ideological transfers, Eurocommunists actively constructed a political space, instead of simply being a defensive reaction of the bipolar geopolitical scheme.

The short-term aim of this form of 'transnational communism' was concrete: to disseminate a specific programme – the 'peaceful road to socialism'[7] – within a specific historical moment – the 1970s global crisis. The long-term political ambition was inseparable from Eurocommunism's new conceptualisation of democracy. But, by expanding democracy as both a means of transition to socialism *and* as the political form of a fully constituted socialist society, Eurocommunism did not simply mediate between the Cold War poles but articulated a critique of democracy as a 'universal value' with a potentially 'universal appeal' marked by significant theoretical realignments[8].

However, Eurocommunism was never entirely coherent, either in its approach or in its organisation: its documents and pronouncements were mostly the product of compromises that largely reflected domestic concerns. National fragmentations reappeared quickly, the French Communists being the first to retreat to their former dogmatic positions. Berlinguer would later present Eurocommunism's ambition as a 'Terza Via' (Third Way) between orthodox communism and liberal and socialdemocratic traditions[9]. Certainly, its short lifespan, its inability to present a viable alternative to neoliberalism and its reduction to the representation of only the 'regional' aspect of the project – *Euro*communism – confined it to the margins. The term was then subsequently appropriated by an entirely different political project – seeking to give post-Fordism and neoliberalism a 'human face'[10] – with which the concept of Third Way remains associated to this day.

Curiously, the most emblematic case of regression and relapse was that of British communism, in the very country where the Third Way assumed an entirely new meaning. While in the late 1970s and early 1980s the Communist Party of Great Britain's journal *Marxism Today* reached its greatest influence – thanks to its blend of Gramscian analysis and openness to European experiences – the party itself engulfed in an endless and paroxysmal series of secessions and internal conflicts, effectively paralysing it until its final collapse. The impact of this phase was such that, even today, 'Eurocommunists' and 'Gramscians' are often used as synonyms, recast as the negative alternative to the militant tradition of the working class and frequently invoked in a critical sense[11].

Beyond definition: the Legacy of Eurocommunism

Recently, Eurocommunism has regained attention. The reasons are varied: the availability of new archival material has prompted a surge in historiographical

research; in public discourse, a renewed – almost 'orientalist' – nostalgia for communism has resurfaced, closely tied to the crisis of neoliberalism's hegemony as a comprehensive vision of society[12]. The meteoric rise and fall of Left populist movements such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, which to varying degrees claimed continuity with the Eurocommunist project, has added further resonance. Other, less electorally successful forms of Left populism, from the Five Star Movement in Italy to, in a more limited sense, Corbynism in Britain, have nonetheless exercised a significant cultural and political influence. All of them, however, diverged profoundly from Eurocommunism in their understanding of the party, the state, and the nature of political organisation.

While Eurocommunism's emphasis on a 'democratic road to socialism' anticipated many of the challenges now faced by Left movements, its commitment was to build socialism 'from below and within,' not through the deliberate deconstruction of political (liberal) institutions. By recognising and valuing the long history of popular struggles – especially the anti-fascist resistance – Eurocommunism sought to advance social transformation through mass participation *and* parliamentary engagement. Within this ongoing dialectic, Eurocommunism placed the party at the centre, as the paramount instrument for representing the working class and, by extension, for expanding citizenship and securing political and social rights. The democratic institutions forged through Europe's long history were, for Eurocommunists, not obstacles but essential terrains of political struggle: they created the space for, and sustained the possibility of, a viable form of democratic socialism.

Too often Eurocommunism has been positioned only in contrast: opposed to Marxism-Leninism on the one hand and to socialdemocracy on the other, facing accusations of reformism and revisionism, and of being a mere Trojan horse of capitalism. If we move beyond the Cold War lens and place Eurocommunism within the longer history of the European Lefts, a richer and more effective conceptualisation emerges. Rather than a descriptive label, Eurocommunism can be treated as a productive analytical construct for historical research and political reflection.

Eurocommunism was more than just the tactical coordination of the main West European communist parties. It was an attempt to 'globalise' a particular political tradition – the 'Italian road to socialism' – and was articulated through Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which conceived culture and civil society as the terrain on which the struggle for a progressive socialist politics had to be waged. It took shape as a strategy for navigating the crisis of the 1970s, but it sought to gather around working class politics a broader constellation of 'revolutionary' subjects. Seen in this way, Eurocommunism appears as a distinct episode in the history of the European Left: an ambitious effort to expand the Left political space and rethink what socialism could mean in a democratic setting.

The centrality of Italian communism is undeniable. Recent research has shown that the blueprint for the Eurocommunist formula originated in the PCI's cross-border and internationalist initiatives during the 1950s and 1960s[13]. Out of these experiences emerged a strategy of 'political transition' grounded in the use of democracy as an instrument of social transformation, capable of being adapted across diverse contexts. Because this strategy addressed a conjuncture of crisis that was global in scale, and because it spoke to a range of actors outside Western Europe, its significance extended well beyond the short-lived surge in electoral strength and social prestige enjoyed by European communism, especially by PCI, in the 1970s and early 1980s.

In addition, nurtured in the long tradition of unconventional Italian Marxism, Eurocommunism was an attempt to distance itself both from the USSR and from the United States, placing Europe's complex history at the centre of its 'universalist mission' without, however, lapsing into a sterile Eurocentrism. In this respect, the reception of Gramsci was decisive. Through his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci offered a more sophisticated and nuanced reading of Europe's history: his theory of 'hegemony' and his analysis of 'passive revolution' and 'historic bloc' helped the Left to integrate earlier processes of democratisation into a vision of social progress and radical transformation that did not reject Europe's heritage or political culture. Instead, it allowed space within the Left's 'revolutionary' strategy for the continued relevance of parliamentary institutions. It is no coincidence that the 'Gramsci moment' in Europe – when translations of the *Notebooks* began to circulate in French, English and Spanish[14] – corresponded to the apex of Eurocommunism.

This legacy also requires contextualising Eurocommunism's relationship with social democracy. Santiago Carrillo, the leader of the Spanish Communist Party, repeatedly insisted that the search for a democratic socialism was not intended to collapse into 'revisionist' social democracy, but to preserve and modernise the revolutionary intellectual tradition inherited from European communist history. Carrillo himself traced this legacy to 'already in the 1950s [when] the British Communists laid down a programme in which it was envisaged that the transition to socialism would take place under conditions of democracy'[15]. More significant was the Italian experience of governance in the so-called 'red regions' during the 1960s and 1970s – often described as a form of 'radical' social democracy. This demonstrated the possibility of combining the praxis of economic management and redistributive policies with the visionary ambition of constructing a concrete democratic socialism[16].

Eurocommunism, as already mentioned, was not without its unresolved limitations. It remained marked by the irreducible tension between state and society, and by a discourse often permeated with anachronistic references that clashed with the aggressive neoliberal turn reshaping Europe and the world. In retro-

spect, its discourse on democracy, pluralism and autonomy from Moscow can be read as an early, if incomplete, response to these transformations. Yet, in the context of the post-Fordist crisis of the mass party and of class politics, Eurocommunism's strategic limits proved deeper than its intellectual strengths. Above all, Eurocommunism failed to anticipate that the state would increasingly 'occupy the space of individuality;' a development that, in Poulantzas' incisive analysis, left democratic institutions caught in a dual tension: internally, the reduction of pluralism and, externally, the dispersal of political authority, where power remained managed but no longer hegemonized. The outcome was a new form of 'statism,' in which the form *but* not the substance of representative democracy survived[17].

Eurocommunism today?

Eurocommunism was an imaginative attempt to reconcile socialist radicalism with the European democratic tradition, national and local politics with solidaristic internationalism, and socialist values and social justice with pluralist institutions. Its partial failures do not invalidate its aspirations; if anything, those aspirations — democratic socialism as the terrain for strategic autonomy and transnational solidarity — are once again central to the Left's search for relevance in the 21st century. Eurocommunism matters today because, however briefly, it managed to preserve the *pathos* and ambition of radical social transformation, anchored in the tradition of European socialism, while combining it with a pragmatic understanding of Europe's political diversity and the intellectual and historical specificities of its nations. Balancing these dimensions was never easy, yet the willingness to attempt such a synthesis is precisely what distinguishes the Left from neoliberalism.

This becomes especially evident when considering Eurocommunism's concern with pluralism, autonomy, and internationalist solidarities. These themes speak directly to contemporary debates. At a moment when both the geopolitical order and the socialist imagination are once again in flux, the Eurocommunist vision of a 'third space' beyond Washington and Moscow provides useful conceptual scaffolding. Although the bipolar Cold War world has vanished, the impulse to construct democratic alternatives that avoid both authoritarian state capitalism and neoliberal constraint endures.

The Eurocommunist project also offers insight into the reconfiguration of the Left's political subjectivity. With the decline of the traditional working class and the proliferation of new social and political identities, the Left confronts the same dilemma that animated Eurocommunism: how to broaden its base without diluting its transformative ambitions. The Eurocommunist attempt to weave together class politics, civil society mobilisation, cultural struggle, and demo-

cratic reform remains a relevant – if incomplete – template for rethinking socialist strategy. Eurocommunism's theoretical foundations, particularly its engagement with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Poulantzas's theory of the state, and its critiques of both bureaucratic statism and liberal technocracy, offer valuable resources for those seeking a non-dogmatic, open-ended Marxism capable of interpreting and acting within today's complex political terrain.

For the contemporary Left, the lessons of Eurocommunism lie above all in its attempt to combine radical critique with institutional realism. It outlined a model for engaging with democratic institutions without capitulating to their limits, and underscored the centrality of cultural struggle and intellectual autonomy. In an era when social movements often oscillate between maximalist rhetoric and technocratic resignation, Eurocommunism's failures are instructive as well: they reveal the risks of moderation without mobilisation, and of adapting to liberal democracy without transforming it.

Ultimately, Eurocommunism's legacy rests less in the fleeting successes of a political strategy than in the questions it posed about democracy, pluralism, the autonomy of the Left, and the possibility of a socialism rooted in European traditions yet open to broader international connections. These questions remain unresolved, but they continue to echo today, reminding us that Eurocommunism was not merely a failed experiment of the past but a significant chapter in the longer struggle for social justice and democracy – a struggle that still defines the present.

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Notes

1. Enrico Berlinguer, *La democrazia è un valore universale* (3 November 1977). The Italian leader delivered this speech in Moscow at the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution. Now in www.enricoberlinguer.it.
2. 'The Past and the Present of Eurocommunism.' *Soundings* Vol 86, 2024; Hugues Le Paige. *L'héritage perdu du parti communiste italien. Une histoire du communisme démocratique*. Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2024; Josefina L. Martínez, 'Pablo Iglesias y Enrico Berlinguer: del Eurocomunismo a la video-política,' *La Izquierda Diario*, 15 May 2021; David Broder, 'Syriza and the death of Eurocommunism,' *New Statesman*, 29 September 2023. For a recent historical account, see Ioannis Balampanidis, *Eurocommunism. From the Communist to the Radical European Left*, Routledge, 2019.
3. Patrick Larsen, 'www.marxist.com, 26 September 2021; Guido Liguori, 'For Enrico Berlinguer, Communism Meant the Fullest Spread of Democracy,' https://jacobin.com/, 25 May 2022.
4. For a global view of Eurocommunism, Victor Strazzari, 'Forging Socialism Through

Democracy: A Critical Review Survey of Literature on Eurocommunism,' *Twentieth Century Communism*, Vol 17, 2019, pp26-66.

5. Silvio Pons and Michele Di Donato, 'Reform Communism,' in *Endgames? Late Communism in Global Perspective, 1968 to the Present*, edited by Juliane Fürst, Silvio Pons and Mark Selden, Cambridge University Press, 2017.
6. 'Per un'Europa né anti-sovietica né anti-americana', *Report to the Central Committee of the PCI*, Rome 7-9 February 1973, partially published in *l'Unità*, 8 February 1973.
7. Berlinguer reaffirmed the specificity of Eurocommunism at the Conference of Communist and Workers' Parties of Europe, explicitly using the term '*Eurocommunism*,' on 30th June 1976. His speech, 'Per una via europea al socialismo' was published in *l'Unità* on 1st July 1976; now in Enrico Berlinguer, *La pace al primo posto. Scritti e discorsi di politica internazionale (1972-1984)*, a cura di Alexander Höbel, Donzelli, 2023.
8. Berlinguer, 'La democrazia è un valore universale,' *op.cit*.
9. Marco Di Maggio, *Alla ricerca della Terza Via al socialismo: i partiti comunisti italiano e francese nella crisi del comunismo (1964-1984)*, Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2014.
10. Strazzari, *op.cit*.
11. Ben Harker, *The Chronology of Revolution. Communism, Culture, and Civil society in Twentieth Century Britain*, University of Toronto Press, 2021.
12. Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, Memory*, Columbia University Press, 2017.
13. Silvio Pons, *The Rise and Fall of the Italian Communist Party. A Transnational History*. Stanford University Press, 2024.
14. I may point here to my article 'How Gramsci Went Global,' *Tribune/Jacobin*, 11 November 2021.
15. Santiago Carillo, *Eurocomunismo y Estado*, Editorial Crítica, 1977.
16. Luca Baldissara e Paolo Capuzzo (a cura di), *Il comunismo in una regione sola? Prospettive di storia del PCI in Emilia-Romagna*, il Mulino, 2023.
17. Nicos Poulantzas, 'Le risposte che è difficile trovare. Marco Diani intervista Nicos Poulantzas.' *Rinascita*, 12 October 1979.