



University of  
**Salford**  
MANCHESTER

# The radical left since 1989 : decline, transformation, and revival

Bull, MJ

<b>Title</b>	The radical left since 1989 : decline, transformation, and revival
<b>Authors</b>	Bull, MJ
<b>Type</b>	Book Section
<b>URL</b>	This version is available at: <a href="http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/52681/">http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/52681/</a>
<b>Published Date</b>	2019

USIR is a digital collection of the research output of the University of Salford. Where copyright permits, full text material held in the repository is made freely available online and can be read, downloaded and copied for non-commercial private study or research purposes. Please check the manuscript for any further copyright restrictions.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [usir@salford.ac.uk](mailto:usir@salford.ac.uk).

# **The Radical Left since 1989: Decline, Transformation and Revival**

*Martin J. Bull*

Any assessment of the impact on the West of the Cold War in 1989 cannot fail to consider the question of what has happened to that political space to the left of social democracy occupied since the Russian Revolution by western communist parties. Indeed, the overthrow of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe posed an immediate and dramatic question about these parties: whether they had any further relevance (albeit as opposition parties) in the western political systems of which they played a part. After all, their very creation and continued existence had been predicated on an equally monumental historical event: the Russian Revolution of 1917. That revolution had ushered in a long-term distinction between social democratic parties on the one hand and communist parties on the other, some of which (in the East) became rulers, while others (in the West) became long-term opposition parties to the capitalist system. The implication of the disappearance of the former, therefore, was not difficult to draw: they were surely redundant, and this was the expectation.

Thirty years on, however, when we look at the area known commonly as the ‘radical left’ (see below), we see a rich tapestry of political parties, many (but not all) with ‘communist’ in their name. In short, communism as we knew it disappeared but not, it seems, communism *per se* or the radical politics with which it is associated, and which more generally has witnessed a mushrooming of new variants with the freeing of the radical left area from what was the overarching shadow of the Soviet umbrella. This chapter assesses the trajectory and fortunes of the radical left in the period since 1989 as a means of providing a perspective on the significance of the 1989 events for this political area. The chapter, in a first section, contextualises the historical importance of the 1989 revolutions. The second section then

assesses the immediate impact of the revolutions on the family of West European Communist parties (WECPs) in the early 1990s. The third section analyzes the transformation of the radical left that subsequently occurred, exploring the current radical left and assessing to what extent it can be described as a genuine 'party family.' The final section looks at the performance of the radical left and its likely prospects.

## The Historical Context of the 1989 Revolutions

It is not possible to understand the significance of the 1989 revolutions without reference to their historical context and specifically to the Russian Revolution of 1917. Although divisions between reformists and revolutionaries in Socialist parties pre-dated 1917, it was the Russian (or October) Revolution which cemented an ideological and organizational division between Communist Parties on the one hand and Socialist or Social Democratic parties on the other, giving birth to two distinct party families (von Beyme 1985; Sassoon 2010). Two years later, in 1919, the Communist International (Comintern) was founded, and in 1923 the Labour and Socialist International. In 1920, the Comintern formulated 21 Points (a form of international Communist manifesto) which had to be adhered to by any parties wishing to join. This set off a reaction across socialist parties elsewhere in the world, with factional struggles resulting in the hardening of some stances of existing socialist parties to conform to the Comintern's demands or, more frequently, in breakaway factions from the socialist parties forming new communist countries across the world. Significantly, in the Comintern and its successor (the Cominform), what started out putatively as an international umbrella for communist parties became a vehicle for the dominance (and defence) of the Soviet Motherland, once it became clear that the revolution achieved in that country was not going to be so easily exported elsewhere.

Of course, it would be fanciful to argue that this division (between socialist and communist parties) remained unchanged between the 1920s and 1989. In the period until the 1960s, western communist parties—while participating in their respective parliamentary democracies as any other political parties and embodying a level of ambivalence in what they actually stood for—essentially followed the Soviet Union’s foreign policy, which changed over time: from orthodox in the 1930s to promoting Popular Fronts (alliances between communist and socialist parties) in the 1940s, to a more orthodox line again in the 1950s Cold War. However, in the 1960s the strains in the international communist alliance began to show, especially with the emergence of new types of political parties on the far left. The Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 proved to be an important turning point as western communist parties were divided in their responses, the larger Italian and Spanish parties coming out in opposition to it. This laid the basis for the development of so-called Eurocommunist parties (especially the Italian, Spanish, and French communist parties) and ‘national roads to socialism’ in the 1970s, which strained further the relationship with the Soviet Motherland, since Eurocommunism was premised on the rejection of the guiding influence of a single country over the international communist movement. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980 and its intervention in Poland the following year, which witnessed the imposition of martial law and repression of the Solidarity trade union movement, constituted a further turning point in Soviet–western communist relations. The influential Italian Communist Party (PCI) refused to participate in the international conference of communist parties held in Paris in 1980, strongly criticized both Soviet actions, and, in response to the latter, Enrico Berlinguer, the leader of the PCI, declared that the progressive ‘impulse’ of the October Revolution had become exhausted. The 1980s therefore witnessed a fragmentation between western communist parties, the Italian and Spanish following their own ways, while the French returned to a more orthodox position in support

of the Soviet Union. Eurocommunist unity (which had always been more apparent than real) was dismantled, but it was not replaced with any other unity, thus confirming the essential failure of the international communist movement to impose any common model on the relationship of non-ruling parties with Moscow. The electoral and organizational decline of western communist parties during the 1980s enhanced further this fragmentation as the individual parties looked for different ways to respond to loss of voters and members.

Yet, despite these monumental changes in the relationship between western communist parties and the Soviet Union, and despite the internal changes in the configuration of the western European left, the essential distinction between communism and social democracy remained not just valid but the most important division still prevailing in the European left. WECPs were still regarded and treated as a ‘party family’ and the very fact that there was a wide-ranging debate over whether there was anything still ‘distinctive’ about these parties seemed simply to confirm that the division, however much ‘softened’, remained intact. True, the nature and role of the relationship with the Soviet Union had dramatically changed, yet, if Eurocommunism had stood for anything, it was not a break with the Motherland but rather the idea that there was no single model governing that relationship—which was still regarded as ‘special’ (in the sense of more ‘privileged’ than other parties of the left had—even if that was based on little more than a legacy). This proximity was confirmed in the response of these parties to the reform process, commonly known as *perestroika*, embarked upon in the Soviet Union in 1985 by President Gorbachev.. The prospect of ‘real’ socialism being reformed was too captivating to be ignored by those WECPs that had distanced themselves from Moscow previously, and they found themselves seduced back into a distinctive relationship with Moscow based on support for Gorbachev. And since, at the same time, some more orthodox western communist parties were suspicious of, if not outright opposed

to, Gorbachev's programme of reform, the division between western parties was transformed into one based on 'pro-Soviet' versus 'pro-Stalinist' positions. Either way, the Soviet Union, on the cusp of the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, still played a key defining role in WECP identities. From that flowed two other features which continued to distinguish their identities from other parties of the left: their teleological nature (however much WECPs had embraced western principles of democracy, at the same time they remained committed to building a society different to the capitalist one -they were pursuing 'parliamentary roads to socialism'), and the maintenance of a party organizational principle, democratic centralism, which emanated from Leninism and through which internal elections were controlled and dissent suppressed.

This is not to suggest that there was any uniform model of WECPs, since there was variation both between and inside these parties along all three dimensions (the link to the Soviet Motherland, their teleological nature, and the operational principle of democratic centralism). But these differences did not change the distinctiveness in the identity of these parties in relation to social democratic parties, arguments being advanced to support this even in relation to the more 'liberal' of them, such as the PCI (Bull 1991a). Indeed, to a large extent, this reflected the debates inside these parties between those advocating the effective social democratization of these parties versus those who argued that it was the very deradicalization of their parties (to the mere management of capitalist development) that left them no different to the socialist parties of Craxi, Gonzales, and Mitterrand. The leaderships, for the most part, were either 'centrist', mediating between the extremes while allowing a degree of 'liberalization', or 'orthodox', resisting any of these changes. The events of 1989, however, changed that situation for ever, quickly bringing to an end the history of a distinct family of non-ruling communist parties in the west.

## The 1989 Revolutions: WECs and their Successors

The West European communist parties' support for, and hope in, the perestroika reform process left them totally unprepared to deal with the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe (symbolized in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) and the ending of the Soviet Union in 1991. Perestroika was concerned with reforming socialism, and, irrespective of exactly what this entailed, it meant that the process was evolutionary and aimed at retaining socialism intact. The revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, in contrast, were concerned with throwing out socialism altogether, and the speed and decisiveness with which this proceeded, combined with the optimism that had been generated around Gorbachev's reform program, caught the Western communist parties off guard. Extraordinarily, the ruling communist parties of Central and Eastern Europe (beginning with the Hungarian) started shedding their names, symbols, and histories while the non-ruling parties of the West dithered and hung on to theirs. For the latter, the dilemmas they had been confronting until then (electoral and organizational decline) were dramatically transformed into an existential crisis involving their very survival as communist parties. Their responses to this crisis brought the tensions between and inside the parties to breaking point, and this erstwhile 'family' of WECs cracked and, by the early 1990s, was no more.

A simplistic, 'linear' view of history, of course, would have dictated a straightforward 'social democratization' of these parties and the overcoming of a seventy-year division in the history of the European left. Yet, this was never likely to have happened for two reasons. First, as outlined above, this 'family' of parties had always 'housed' within it very different parties shaped by differing national environments over a seventy-year period but held together in what was often a semblance of unity by their teleological nature, internal organizing principle, and loyalty to the Soviet motherland. Second, the idea and meaning of 'social democratization' had

been completely transformed in the course of seventy years, meaning it was no longer such an easy ‘choice.’ In particular, any Western communist parties contemplating this option were aware that their social democratic counterparts had long been grappling with analogous problems as the WECPs in terms of organizational and electoral decline. Ironically, therefore, of the different choices facing the parties, straightforward ‘social democratization’ was probably the least appealing, because simply crossing the Rubicon offered no sure prospect of survival.

WECPs became, broadly speaking, divided into three camps in their immediate responses to this crisis (Bull 1994). First, some parties adopted what might be described as a ‘social democratizing’ logic, recognizing in the collapse of ‘real socialism’ the failure of communism itself, requiring therefore the effective dissolution of their party organizations and the shedding of their heritage, symbols, and names, while at the same time avoiding a straightforward social democratization which would have entailed a straightforward embracing of their pre-1917 colleagues on the left. Instead, these parties attempted to follow a ‘new road’ on the left, immediately evidenced in the choice of names (which avoided any reference to social democracy) and a continuing quest to be independent. The Italian Communist Party, for example, transformed itself into the Democratic Party of the Left, and the Finnish Communists into the Left Alliance. Second, other parties—such as the Spanish and Greek parties, as well as part of the Italian party which split to form Communist Refoundation—viewed the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe as a rejection of a particular ‘degenerated’ form of socialism but not of socialism itself. Indeed, they viewed the collapse in ‘real existing socialism’ as a veritable opportunity to return to the original Marxist principles and (re)construct communist parties on that basis. Third, some orthodox Western communist parties (the French, Belgian, German, and Portuguese), at least in the short-term, simply rejected the idea that anything had changed that required them to re-



evaluate their strategies and goals (a position that became increasingly untenable after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991).

If, therefore, we are in this section assessing *only* the fate of Western communism (as opposed to the trajectory of all the party organizations that formerly represented Western communism as well as other radical left developments – see next section), the focus is on the second two groups, since both aspired to continue with the doctrine that putatively inspired the 1917 Russian revolutions. They can also be viewed together since some of them shifted position from the orthodoxy group to the other ‘re-founding’ group. Their electoral performances after 1989, however, were anything but successful. Leaving aside the Cypriot Communist Party (AKEL) as an exception (based on its unusual national environment), an analysis of the first fifteen years of elections after 1989 (March and Mudde 2005, p. 48) shows electoral stasis or decline for all the main Western communist parties that opted to stay in existence: the Danish, French, Greek, Italian, Luxembourg, Portuguese, and Spanish communist parties. Excluding elections in the year 1989 itself and also election results where the communists were part of an electoral alliance, the largest share of the vote secured by a Western communist party in the period up to 2004 was 9.9% by the French Communist Party in 1997. Compared with its heyday in the years of Eurocommunism, Western communism became a marginalized political movement after 1989, their changed situation characterized, and likely exacerbated, by two other factors.

First, while the communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe could be distinguished from WECPs on the basis of their ruling nature in communist regimes, once the revolutions of 1989 had taken their course, the choices faced by the political parties as parties were not so different and their responses were equally divided, except that the anti-communist sentiment was, for obvious reasons, even more pronounced. Even though some ‘successor’ communist parties survived in areas of Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Russia, Ukraine, Czech

Republic, Moldova), most of the erstwhile ruling communist parties took the route of social democratization (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), or at least conversion into some kind of non-communist party of the left/center-left (e.g. Serbia, Romania, East Germany), while in other countries they disappeared altogether (e.g. Croatia, Slovenia, the Baltic States) (March and Mudde 2005).

Second, the disappearance of the Soviet Union both as an example (albeit flawed) of 'real existing socialism' and as an international 'leader' of the communist world removed a vital linking factor or reference point for communist parties in the West that decided to stay in existence. The point was that non-ruling communist parties had not been just a distinct family apart or a 'Western' movement but part of an international movement represented by a network of ruling regimes and a 'Motherland', all embraced by the same Marxist-Leninist ideology. However tainted the ruling 'model' had been, its removal changed fundamentally everything for the rulers and non-rulers alike (Bull 1991b).

To summarize, the impact of the 1989 revolutions on Western communism was fundamental in nature, comprehensive in scope, and both immediate and long-term in time-span. The revolutions effectively destroyed the international communist movement and WECs as a distinct 'family' of parties. These parties were already facing long-term organizational, ideological, and electoral decline, and the dramatic events of 1989 caused them to splinter, both internally and externally, with the most influential of them 'leaving' the communist fold for pastures new in the social democratic/ democratic socialist area. Moreover, those which attempted to keep the communist label or aspiration alive, either in orthodox or (apparently) rejuvenated form, were left, for the most part, as marginalized remnants of a burnt-out cause. End of story? Not at all, for Western communist parties have not, since 1989, made up the entirety of the 'radical left' experience. On the contrary, while in the early years after 1989 there may have been good reason to focus on the fate of Western communism in the form of

post-communist organizations (be they orthodox, rejuvenated, or social-democratized), it was becoming clear, within a decade, that the events of 1989 had helped stimulate a far broader sea change in the political area to the left of social democracy (Hudson 2000), generating new configurations of radical left politics that remain with us to this day.

In fact, to understand fully what happened to the radical left after 1989, it is important to note that Western communist parties did not constitute the entirety of the 'left of the left' experience *before* that date, making the revolutionary impact of 1989 more a catalyst for change already underway than acting as something entirely new. The monopoly of Western communism on the far left had already begun to be undermined in the two decades before the 1989 revolutions by two notable developments: the emergence of the 'New Left' on the one hand, which was prominent in the 1960s and 1970s, and the 'New Politics' (Greens) in the 1970s and 1980s on the other. Both of these originated in social-cultural phenomena and saw their original expression (first in the United States) in the new social movements (and notably but not only the student movements) of the late 1960s, which were concerned with broader issues than just forms of class struggle: civil and political rights, gender, drug policies, peace, the Third World, and so on.

In Europe, the combination of the rise of social movements and increased industrial militancy saw the New Left become an outlet for the frustration with the traditional channels of expression of the far left (communist parties), seen increasingly as bureaucratic organizations that had become wedded to parliamentary practices. WECPs in several European countries therefore found themselves 'outflanked' by political organizations (occasionally in party political form) forwarding not just radical social and policy reforms, but non-parliamentary, grassroots politics as the best expression of democracy and achieving their goals. In some European countries, the New Left or extra-parliamentary left became the origin or impetus towards the growth of terrorist movements, some elements effectively deradicalizing and

channeling their efforts into democratic socialist ventures as the movement split, while others became more militant and went down the route of political violence (e.g. Tarrow 1989).

The New (or Green) Politics came from a not dissimilar milieu, but it was one more characterized by ecologism and opposition to the use of nuclear energy. Their challenge to the far left was two-fold. On the one hand, they rejected, in the causes they pursued and the electorate they represented, the long-standing notion of the left–right cleavage in politics. On the other hand, there was no doubt that, if placed anywhere on the traditional political spectrum, the Green parties that emerged were—on various criteria—clearly more radical and leftist in nature than centrist and right (Richardson and Rootes 1995). Their original ideological basis, ecologism, rejected capitalism, and was skeptical about the capacity of representative democracy to deliver on the environmental agenda, promoting forms of direct democracy instead. Indeed, if there was a difference between the parties it was focused on how much ‘red’ was on the inside of the ‘Green’ (hence the nickname ‘melon’ parties for several of them). In short, traditional parties of the far left such as WECs found their role under threat on two related fronts, for the Greens threatened to show that it was possible to be radical and leftist in a new era of political competition where the traditional left–right cleavage no longer properly represented a range of choices that corresponded to society’s aspirations.

These changes help explain why traditional parties of the left (social democratic and communist) found themselves in electoral, ideological, and organizational decline in the 1980s. In short, the tidal wave of change unleashed by the 1989 revolutions hit a family of parties already in difficulties, and the effect could be described as completing a process already underway by instigating an existential crisis that was not just limited to WECs. The monumental scale of what occurred in 1989 meant that all left-wing political parties (and notably all parties to the left of social democracy) found themselves tarnished in the public

perception (no matter how independent they had become from the Soviet Motherland), with their traditional policies (based fundamentally on nationalization or at least a strong interventionist state) viewed as out of touch if not dangerous. Left-wing politics was entering a phase of acute hostility from other political forces and western publics at large, necessitating a fundamental reconfiguration and re-think that would see the European post-war radical left changed for ever.

## From the WECPs to the Radical Left: a New Party Family?

The 1989 revolutions were a watershed moment in the history of the left because they removed a decisive division in the far left that had structured it for more than seventy years. WECPs, at least as a fairly distinctive family of parties, exited a political space to the left of social democracy that they had long coveted, allowing that space to be occupied, over time, by other actors. This development allowed other factors to play a significant part in the way in which the far left subsequently developed. These factors included: the expansion and growth of New Left and New Politics issues; the rightward drift of social democratic parties in the 1990s; the development, and later discrediting, of notions of a 'Third Way'; the world economic crisis of 2008; and the subsequent rise of protest politics and populism. The changes were, therefore, a combination of pre-existing trends that now found space to mushroom more fully, alongside new issues sparked off by changes in the political, economic, and social environment. Combined they have acted as a foundation for transformative change in that political area to the left of social democracy, reconstituting, reshaping, and reforming the old WECP family into something different, now commonly known as the 'radical left' or Radical Left Parties (RLPs). But, thirty years on, do RLPs constitute a genuine 'party family' like their WECP forbears? Mair and Mudde (1998) identify four different criteria to evaluating the existence and distinctiveness of a 'party

family’: the parties’ names or labels; the parties’ origins (or their sociology); party policy or ideology; and the international federations or transnational groupings to which the parties belong. This section will use these four criteria to assess the extent to which the post-1989 radical left might be seen as a real ‘party family.’

Table 1 classifies by nomenclature (which in practice, to a large extent, also indicates their origins) the parties most commonly associated with the ‘radical left’ in western European political systems. Four features immediately stand out from this table. The first is the extraordinary tapestry of radical left parties in Europe that has emerged since 1989. Indeed, this area has been widely dubbed a ‘mosaic left,’ which, in contrast with their WECP predecessors, is the ‘heir of multiple and often conflicting legacies’ (Balabanidis, quoted in Katsourides 2016: 6). The party names alone give clear indicators of the diversity of sociological origins: communist, worker, Proletarian, democratic socialist, socialist, Green, left, radical, as well as ‘We Can’ (associated with origins of an antiestablishment or protest nature). The second is the increased emphasis on alliance or coalition-making in the new parties (an anathema to the former communist parties before 1989), especially in relation to the Green parties (the so-called Red–Green alliances). The third is the rise, especially since the economic crash of 2008, of a new category of ‘Radical Left Parties’ (RLPs) in the form of Podemos, a social protest party that is more difficult to classify easily on the traditional left–right spectrum (Pauwels 2014).<sup>i</sup> The fourth is that, despite these important features of organizational change and the disappearance of the ‘family’ of WECPs, there has been a persistence of the communist name and communist organizations. Contrary to many of the expectations and observations of processes underway in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 revolutions, communist parties in the West survived and even grew (Hudson 2000).

<TABLE 1 HERE>

Table 1: ‘Radical Left Parties’ in Western Europe since 1989 by Nomenclature and Country, and including Average Vote (2000–2015)\*

	<b>Communist</b>	<b>Workers</b>	<b>Socialist</b>	<b>Left</b>	<b>Red– Green &amp; Other Alliances</b>	<b>Protest</b>
<b>AUS</b>	Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ) 0.85%					
<b>CYPR</b>		Prog. Party of Working People (AKEL) 32.83%				
<b>DMK</b>			Socialist People Party (SF) (until 2012)		Red–Green Alliance (EL) 4.5%	
<b>FIN</b>					Left Alliance (VAS) 8.5%	

<b>FRA</b>	French Communist Party (PCF) 5.34% & Rev. Communist Party/New Anti-Capitalist Party	Worker's Struggle (LO)				
<b>GER</b>				The Left (DL) (prev. Party of Democratic Socialism, PDS) 9.73%		
<b>GRE</b>	Communist Party of Greece (KKE) 6.4%				Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) (prev. Prog Left Coalition, SYN) 16.38%	
<b>ICE</b>					Left Green Movement (VG) (prev.	



					People's Alliance, Ab) 13.87%	
<b>IRE</b>		Workers' Party (WP)	Socialist Party (SP)	Democratic Left (DL) (1992–99) (from split in Workers' Party)		
<b>ITA</b>	Communist Refoundation (RC) 4.02% & Party of the Italian Communists (PdCI) 2.32% **	Party of Proletarian Unity (PdUP)				
<b>LUX</b>				The Left (DL) (from merger of New Left & Communist Party) 3.36%		
<b>NETH</b>			Socialist Party (SP) 9.66%			

<b>NOR</b>	Norwegian Communist Party (NKP)		Socialist Left Party (SV) (prev. Socialist People's Party, SF) 7.9%			
<b>POR</b>	Portuguese Communist Party (PCP)*** 7.74%			Left Bloc (BE) (from 1999 merger of People's Democratic Union (Marxist), Rev. Socialist Party (Trotskyist), and Politics XXI (dem. socialist))6.8 6%	Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU) (electoral alliance between PCP and Greens)	
<b>SPA</b>					United Left (IU) (prev. Communist Party of Spain)	Podemos ('We Can') 20.7%

<b>SWE</b>				Left Party (V) (prev. Left Party - Communists, VPK) 6.4%		
<b>SWI</b>		Party of Labour (PdAS)				

\*Average Vote figures from Katsourides (2016: 7), except for ...[to add]

\*\*The Italian Communist Party (PCI) has been excluded from the above list even though it remained in existence until 1991, as this was only because its process of transformation, prompted by the 1989 revolutions, had not been completed. Its successor parties included Communist Refoundation, so the PCI's disappearance here is treated as a direct consequence of the events of 1989.

\*\*\*See 'Unitary Democratic Coalition' for electoral alliance.

Instinctively, the fragmentation expressed in Table 1 does not appear to be a likely foundation for a 'party family,' something that tends to be reinforced by the difficulty that was experienced in finding a common term or label for this grouping, once the term 'post-communist' parties began to wane as a useful instrument of description (Bell 1993; Bull and Heywood 1994) . Expressions such as 'far left' (e.g. March 2008) or 'extreme left' may have seemed to have been adequate in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 revolutions, when expectations of total marginalization if not disappearance were rife. However, WECPs

themselves had for a long time been out-flanked by tiny orthodox Marxist-Leninist parties devoted to overthrowing the capitalist order through political violence, which, like their ‘extreme right’ counterparts (Mudde 1996), had been dubbed the ‘extreme left’, making such a term difficult to transfer. Alternatives, such as ‘left of the left’, ‘New Left,’ or ‘New European Left’ (Hudson 2000) did not catch on, possibly because they lacked an adjective to distinguish these parties from their social democratic counterparts (and ‘left of the left’ was, in the 1990s, used more as a question concerning the whole of the left: ‘what’s left of the left?’). ‘Transformative left’ (Dunphy 2004) and ‘Radical Left Parties’ (March 2011) constituted clearer attempts explicitly to recognize the continuing division of the left into two broad camps: social democracy and its affiliates on the one hand and a ‘grouping’ to its left. Of these two terms, it is the latter that gained traction and Radical Left Parties (RLPs) is now a widely used label to group together the diverse political groupings to the left of social democracy. Even though there are inherent problems with the term, especially in some areas outside an English language context (see, for example, Calossi 2016: 86-9, who proposes his own alternative of ‘anti-austerity left’ to capture the most significant paradigm-shifting event in the Millennium), ‘Radical Left Parties’ retains a definitional relevance appropriate to the ‘expansionist’ aspirations of the parties to the left of social democracy as well as usefully mirroring a similar expression developed to account for changes in right-wing political parties (Mudde 2007), which, together, convey a sense of a more fundamental change that might be at work in undermining the traditional left–right party spectrum through the rise of RLPs and Radical Right Parties (RRPs).

However, it should be emphasized that it has not been possible to make good sense of RLPs without the use of sub-divisions. Different authors have used variations of sub-divisions depending on the emphasis they place on different possible criteria (origins, ideology, policies etc.). March’s (2011) categorization provides a good illustration of the sort

of sub-divisions necessary to make sense of what would otherwise constitute too diverse a range of individual party organizations under one umbrella: ‘conservative communist’ parties, ‘reform communist’ parties, ‘democratic socialist’ parties, ‘populist socialist’ parties, and ‘social populist’ parties (this last being distinguished by its explicit fusion of left and right wing traits, making it controversial to define as a genuine RLP).

If it is possible, while recognizing and accepting these parties’ diverse social origins, to categorize them under a single umbrella term (albeit with sub-divisions), do they stand for a single ideology or set of policies or do they, at least, carry a ‘distinctiveness’ analogous to their WECP predecessors? In fact, there are commonalities that act as clear binding elements in the post-1989 radical left. In narrow definitional terms, March and Mudde (2005: 25) define RLPs as ‘radical’ in the sense of first, a rejection of ‘the underlying socio-economic structure of contemporary capitalism and its values and practices,’ and second, the proposal for ‘alternative economic and power structures involving a major redistribution of resources from the existing political elites.’ And the authors define them as of the ‘left’ in the sense first, of ‘their identification of economic inequity as the basis of existing political and social arrangements,’ second, of their anti-capitalist (as opposed to anti-democratic) nature, and third, of their international outlook in identifying national problems as having ‘global structural causes.’

At the same time, it is easy to identify clear differences between the parties. Since they do not now all originate from a split in social democracy, some of them do not define themselves in relation to it, indeed do not even view social democracy as constituting the left. They also have very different ideological beliefs, some motivated by Marxist or socialist principles, others principally by ecological or environmental beliefs. They have different views on internationalism and the European Union (EU). And they have very different, party organizational features (Amini 2016: 12-13). This has resulted in most classifications (or sub-

divisions) being based on the differences between so-called ‘traditional’ RLPs (essentially those emanating from the ‘communist’ fold) and New Politics/New Left RLPs (as in March cited above). Yet, while these differences are still evidently present, there are signs that they are breaking down, at least in terms of potential identity indicators of whole parties. Gomez, Morales, and Ramiro (2016), in a detailed analysis of RLP programmatic positions, found that some of the parties that were consistently identified, on the basis of programmatic positions, as being located in the New Politics category, were, in fact, parties that still remained loyal to the communist identity.

If this suggests that change is occurring, it should be added that the programmatic positions of RLPs have, perhaps inevitably, also been shaped by the changing broader political context in which they have been operating. The decade immediately following the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe witnessed the emergence of much stronger forms of both globalization and monetary integration at both European and international levels, reducing the range of policy instruments available to left-wing governments to achieve their objectives. The reaction of center-left (social democratic) parties has been largely to accept this more circumscribed set of affairs, with a notable shift towards the center in their policy positions, thus opening up space to their left (especially as these parties have experienced a decline in members and votes). That political space, inherently constrained at first by the dominant tide of neoliberal thinking, became more viable and vibrant as a consequence of the great recession of 2008 and the ensuing Eurozone crisis, which produced a hardening of the resistance to globalization as an inevitable form of capitalism, notably regarding the EU, where the Eurozone crisis witnessed the emergence of austerity policies effectively imposed on national governments through use of the Stability Pact to ensure compliance with the EU’s deficit rules. Ironically, therefore, if the overthrow of the communist regimes in 1989 was expected (at least in the long-term) to unify

communists and social democrats, the implementation of austerity politics two decades later confirmed just how different social democratic parties remained from the communist and other RLPs and drove a further wedge between them: ‘The implementation of the austerity measures has fundamentally operated as a new political cleavage, which has once again separated the social democratic forces, on the one side, and the Anti-Austerity Left parties, on the other’ (Calossi 2016: 107). Finally, the subsequent rise of the populist far right (also in reaction to globalization and the great recession) fueled even more activeness and visibility on the part of the radical left, which views the former as a significant risk to democracy itself. In short, the radical left political space has partly been defined, and been helped in defining itself, by the changing political context in which it has been working over the past thirty years. Fagerholm (2017), in a detailed study of party programmes of RLPs before and after 1989, found that while amongst a majority of RLPs there was during the 1990s a perhaps inevitable deradicalization of leftist party programmes and a consequent shift towards the center (on the left–right dimension) compared with the pre-1989 positions of such parties, the period after the economic crash in 2008 witnessed a shift back towards a stronger emphasis on leftist socioeconomic themes amongst several of the reform communist parties, democratic socialist parties, and populist socialist parties. In addition, the author found that, although the post-1989 period was marked by an increased emphasis amongst RLPs on what might be described as ‘new left’ issues such as diversity and, notably, environmentalism, these parties nonetheless have remained:

distinguishable from competing (non-left) parties mainly through their comparatively strong emphasis on socialist economics (i.e. issues related to nationalization and the controlled economy) and working class interests, and from all other, non-radical left, parties through their emphasis on Marxism and other issues frequently associated with

radical left rhetoric, such as anti-imperialism, demands for peace, and a critique of European integration and the armed forces. (Fagerholm 2017: 32).

This is probably explicable not just in terms of ‘old habits die hard,’ but by the dramatically changed political context since 2008 that has made radical left propositions more pertinent and potentially more attractive to voters than in the previous two decades. Indeed, while 1989 marked a significant turning point in the trajectory of the radical left, it cannot be seen as the only one of the past thirty years, as the veritable crisis of 2008 and the great recession that followed have demonstrated.

Finally, if there is a semblance of definitional and programmatic unity, the question arises as to whether these parties are or can be represented by the same organization internationally. Perhaps the best indicator of this is the attempt to obtain unity behind a single European Parliamentary Group. Prior to 1989, WECPs were members of the ‘Communist and Allies’ Group. Post-1989 that became redundant, but the first attempt to create a new parliamentary group, led primarily by the Italian and Spanish communist parties, represented an attempt to bring together former communists and social democrat parties in a single organization, ‘European United Left,’ despite the presence of the European Socialist group. This operation was opposed by the more orthodox communist parties, led by the French, which set up the ‘United Left’ group in opposition. Neither of these groups survived beyond the 1994 European elections. The European United Left was left untenable by the departure to the European Socialist parliamentary group of the sizeable Italian Democratic Party of the Left (formerly PCI), and the United Left did not have the numbers to reconstitute an autonomous group. Meanwhile, changes in national and European politics made possible a form of rapprochement between the two sides and a new ‘Confederal Group of the European United Left’ (GUE) was established and later expanded (after the EU’s Scandinavian enlargement in



1995) to the ‘Confederal Group of the European United Left and Nordic Green Left’ (GUE/NGL), which has a confederal nature based on two groups. The clear absence of communist or Marxist references in the name and declaration of the group, combined with the environmentalist orientation of the group since the entry of the Nordic Green Left, reinforce the notion of a clear break with the old communist group after 1989 and the construction of a European parliamentary group better representative of the constitutive parts of the radical left (Calossi 2016: 154-60). This is not to underestimate the diversity and divisions amongst these groups, but they have managed to maintain the group intact. Outside and beyond the European Parliament, most (if not all) of the RLPs are members of the Party of the European Left (PEL), which was founded in 2004 and whose first President was the then leader of the Italian Communist Refoundation Party, Fausto Bertinotti. The party’s purpose, as stated in its statute, is to unite ‘democratic parties of the alternative and progressive left of the European continent,’ with its main reference points being ‘the values and traditions of the communist, socialist and workers movements’ as well as ‘feminism, environmentalism and sustainable development, peace and international solidarity, human rights, anti-fascism, progressive and liberal thinking.’ At the same time, the break with the traditions of the pre-1989 communist left could not be made more specific in the preamble where it excludes any association with Stalinism, which it declares as being in contradiction with socialist and communist ideals (Calossi 2016: 178).

To summarize, while the ‘radical left’ differs from some of the usual criteria associated with a party family, and notably the origins in a common sociological root and name (be it social democracy, Christian democracy, fascism, communism and so on), and while it is difficult to compare it to the West European Communist Party family that preceded it, there is nonetheless a sufficient degree of cohesion around its definitional attributes

(‘distinctiveness’), its programme, and its international outlook and representation to suggest that the radical left is more than just the sum of its individual parts, and therefore can be usefully studied as a political grouping that has carried on the mantle of radical left politics after 1989. If so, the remaining question to ask is how well it has performed in doing so.

## Changing Performance of Radical Left Parties

Writing in 2005, March and Mudde described the trajectory of radical left politics as characterized by ‘decline and mutation’ (and they might have added ‘deradicalization’ too). Significantly, the authors, while pointing up the opportunities presented to RLPs by their freedom from the ideological constraint of the Soviet Union, identified one of its most difficult problems as being the lack of a ‘clear meta-narrative’ and ‘an alternative development model’ (March and Mudde 2005: 42-3). As outlined above, while the latter does not still exist, a ‘meta-narrative’ has, to some extent, begun to emerge in the past decade, framed around ‘anti-austerity’ politics (Calossi 2016). Moreover, since this has been on the back of a world economic recession of which the Eurozone crisis has perhaps been its most potent symbol, there has been a beneficial effect on the fortunes of the RLPs.

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed a dual impact on the radical left: the imposition of the neoliberal agenda on the one hand and the broad acceptance of that agenda by social democrats on the other (many would argue under the guise of the so-called ‘Third Way’). The radical left’s record, in this situation, was a mixed one. While in the 1990s, RLPs tended to be behind strikes and demonstrations against governments, securing modest electoral success (e.g. in Spain, France, and Italy), the 2000s witnessed several examples of RLPs entering into government as junior partners to social democrats or supporting them in parliament, including in Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Spain, and Sweden. While the social democratic responses varied (Merkel et al. 2008) they

constituted, for the most part, a form of suppression of the traditional social democratic platform and acceptance of the necessities of neoliberalism and globalization. The experiences for RLPs were sobering in terms of governmental achievement (e.g. Dunphy and Bale 2011) and electoral outcomes (see Table 1).

The economic crash of 2008 and the subsequent imposition of austerity, notably through the EU's 'fiscal compact,' combined with continued social democratic compliance with this approach and the resultant electoral debacle of social democratic parties, (Downes and Chan 2018) and the rise of the right has, over time, given RLPs a new voice, greater visibility, and a measure of success that would hardly have been anticipated back in 1989. One can highlight the increase in support for RLPs in countries such as Greece (Syrizia), Denmark (Red–Green Unity), the Netherlands (Socialist Party), Portugal (Communist Party and the Left Block), Germany (the Left), and Finland (Left Alliance). In addition, new parties that mix up radical left ideas with others (Podemos in Spain) have proved electorally successful and led to a revitalization of interest in radical left politics. The European United Left/Nordic Green Left Group in the European Parliament increased its number of MEPs from 35 (in 2009) to 52 in the 2014 European Parliament elections (although the Communist Party of Greece then left the group, reducing it to 14).

Supporters of RLPs are generally younger than those of other parties, more educated, more secular, more likely to be based in urban conurbations, more likely to have a trade union background, are generally more dissatisfied with the workings of parliamentary democracy, and are more Eurosceptic (Ramiro 2016, Gomez, Morale and Ramiro 2016; Rooduijn et al. 2017). However, the Eurozone crisis and great recession appears to have added a further component to this support: those pro-EU voters who have nonetheless become increasingly dissatisfied and negative—as a result of the economic impact of the Eurozone crisis—with

the EU's neoliberal, austerity-driven approach to the crisis, thus enabling RLPs to 'forge a heterogeneous electoral coalition of Eurosceptic and pro-EU voters' (Beaudonnet and Gomez 2017: 322).

The radical left, in short, has an agenda and it is one that has gained traction. Yet, its regeneration and prospects should not be overstated for three reasons. First, its electoral gains have not, in the very recent past, matched that of its radical right counterparts. An analysis of the percentage vote share for RLPs in the 28 countries of the EU in the last two parliamentary elections saw an average rise of 1% compared with nearly 2% for Radical Right Parties, which have been able to exploit, in particular, the European migration crisis with simple messages that have linked the crisis to Euroscepticism and thereby provided a basis for the attraction of traditional working class voters (Bruno and Downes 2018). Second, the success of RLPs is evidently linked to, if not mainly explained by, the collapse of the center-left parties' vote (whose overall vote share across the EU 28 in the past two parliamentary elections declined by almost 2.5%) due to their effective acceptance of neoliberal austerity politics (Downes et al. 2018). Indeed, research has shown that, despite the greater heterogeneity of radical left and right parties and some degree of commonality between them, the two types of parties have 'sharply diverging ideological profiles' with both expressing 'the traditions associated with their mainstream counterparts,' meaning that they should be seen as 'splinters from the party families with which they are commonly associated.' In that sense radical left and right voters are, like mainstream voters, ideological voters who still, to a large extent, gravitate to an ideological area and then support a specific party within that area (Rooduijn et al. 2017: 536-41). If so, it suggests that if the center-left parties re-radicalize (as for example has happened in the British Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn), RLPs may be prone to losing their newfound support. Third, there remain significant questions about the political offerings of RLPs. While the visibility and

prominence of RLPs has grown in line with the deleterious impact of austerity politics, and while fierce opposition to neoliberalism has gained traction and revealed an appetite amongst many people for an alternative, the shaping of that alternative remains in its infancy.

Furthermore, and perhaps inevitably in terms of the heterogeneity of this party family, any moves towards developing a serious alternative will bring out a constellation of different ideas that will test the unity of this party family. In short, the current increased attractiveness of the radical left probably has more to do with its frontal opposition to austerity politics than any alternative it is promising – and that is hardly a recipe for sustainability in the long run.

## **Conclusion**

The revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 were a veritable milestone in the history of the Western European political left, and especially that political area located to the left of social democracy since the Russian Revolution of 1917. With the overthrow of the communist regimes, there seemed, in 1989, to be no further rationale in the division between communists and social democrats, and no further role for the former to play. That scenario appeared at first to be played out in the 1990s as post-communist parties divided in their responses to the historic events of 1989, and what had been an historic and influential ‘party family’ died. Yet, in doing so, few of the parties that made up that family simply accepted social democracy as their new reference point. On the contrary, most of the parties or their successors were determined to keep radical left politics alive by experimenting with new names, platforms, and alliances, as well as keeping the communist name alive. Furthermore, the disappearance of both the WECP party family and the suffocating embrace of the Soviet motherland created fresh opportunities for other party organizations to flourish. As a consequence, a new form of radical left politics was born. True, it is difficult to argue that RLPs constitute as clear and united a ‘party family’ as their WECP predecessors. Yet, there is

sufficient commonality to make them the object of comparative study. Furthermore, the significant changes in the broader political context have made their coherence, visibility, and growth more visible. Neoliberalism and its effective acceptance by many social democrats, the great recession, the Eurozone crisis, the EU's neoliberal response in the form of austerity policies, and the suffering this has produced across Western European nations has given new voice to RLPs, as well as facilitating the rise of new forms of radical left politics in both left-wing populism and a form of populism that merges the ideas of left and right in its programs. The revolutions of 1989, in short, did not end radical politics but acted as a catalyst to its reshaping, a process that was further influenced by the economic shock of 2008 that is still reverberating today.

## References

- Amini, B. (2016) 'Situating the Radical Left in Contemporary Europe', in B. Amini (ed), *The Radical Left in Europe in the Age of Austerity* (London: Routledge).
- Beaudonnet, L. and R. Gomez (2017) 'Red Europe versus no Europe? The impact of attitudes towards the EU and the economic crisis on radical-left voting', *West European Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 316-35.
- Backes, U. and P. Moreau (2008) (eds) *Communist and Post-Communist Parties in Europe* (Göttingen: Vandenhock and Ruprchet).
- Bell, D. S. (1993) *West European Communists and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford: Berg).
- Bruno, V. A. and J. F. Downes (2018) 'Why has the populist radical right outperformed the populist radical left in Europe?', 8 August, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2018/08/08/why-has-the-populist-radical-right-outperformed-the-populist-radical-left-in-europe/>, accessed 29 November 2018.

Bull, M. J. (1991a) 'Whatever Happened to Italian Communism? Explaining the Dissolution of the Largest Communist Party in the West?', *West European Politics*, Vo. 14, No. 4 (Oct), pp. 96-120.

Bull, M. J. (1991b) 'A New Era for the Non-Rulers Too: West European Communist Parties, *Perestroika* and the Revolution in Eastern Europe', *Politics*, 11 (1), April 1991, pp.17-22.

Bull, M. J (1994), 'The West European Communist movement: past, present and future', in M. J. Bull and P. Heywood (eds), *West European Communist Parties After the Revolutions of 1989* (London: Macmillan), pp. 203-22.

Bull, M. J. and P. Heywood (1994) (eds), *West European Communist Parties After the Revolutions of 1989* (London: Macmillan).

Calossi, E. (2016) *Anti-Austerity Left Parties in the European Union. Competition, Coordination and Integration* (Pisa: Pisa University Press).

Downes, J. F., and E. Chan (2018), *LSE Europpblog*, 'Explaining the electoral debacle of social democratic parties in Europe', [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/06/21/explaining-the-electoral-debacle-of-social-democratic-parties-in-europe](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/06/21/explaining-the-electoral-debacle-of-social-democratic-parties-in-europe), 21 June; accessed 29 November 2018.

Downes, J., E. Chan, V. Wai and A. Lam (2018) 'Understanding the "rise" of the radical left in Europe: it's not just the economy, stupid', *Democratic Audit*, 12 July, <http://www.democraticaudit.com/2018/07/12/understanding-the-rise-of-the-radical-left-in-europe-its-not-just-the-economy-stupid/>; accessed 29 November 2018.

Dunphy, R. (2004) *Contesting Capitalism? Left Parties and European Integration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

Dunphy, R. and T. Bale (2011) 'The radical left in coalition government: Towards a comparative measure of success and failure', *Party Politics*, 17 (4): 488-504.

- Fagerholm, A. (2017) 'What is left for the radical left? A comparative examination of the policies of radical left parties in western Europe before and after 1989', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 25:1, pp. 16-40.
- Fagerholm, A. (2018) 'The radical right and the radical left in contemporary Europe: two min-max definitions', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 411-424.
- Gomez, R, L. Morales and L. Ramiro (2016), 'Varieties of Radicalism: Examining the Diversity of Radical Left Parties and Voters in Western Europe', *West European Politics*, 39: 2, pp. 351-79.
- Hudson, K. (2000), *European Communism since 1989: towards a new European Left?* (London: Macmillan).
- Katsourides, Y. (2016) *Radical Left Parties in Government: the Cases of SYRIZIA and AKEL* (London: Palgrave).
- Mair, P. and C. Mudde (1998) 'The Party Family and its Study', *American Review of Political Science*, 1, pp. 211-29.
- Merkel, W., A. Petring, C. Henkes and C. Egle (2008) *Social Democracy in Power: The Capacity to Reform* (London: Routledge).
- March, L. (2008) *Contemporary Far Left Parties in Europe. From Marxism to Mainstream?* (Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung).
- March, L. (2011) *Radical Left Parties in Europe* (London: Routledge).
- March, L. and Mudde, C (2005), 'What's Left of the Radical Left? The European Radical Left Since 1989: Decline and Mutation', *Comparative European Politics*, 3, pp. 23-49.
- Mudde, C (1996) 'The war of words: defining the extreme right party family', *West European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 225-48.



- Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Pauwels, T (2014) *Populism in Western Europe* (London: Routledge).
- Ramiro, L (2016) 'Support for Radical Left Parties in Western Europe: Social Background, Ideology and Political Orientations', *European Political Science Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 1-23.
- Richardson, D. and C. Rootes (1995) (eds), *The Green Challenge: The Development of Green Parties in Europe* (London: Routledge).
- Rooduijn, M., B. Burgoon, E. J. van Elsas and H. G. van de Werfhorst (2017) 'Radical distinction: Support for radical left and radical right parties in Europe', *European Union Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 536-59.
- Sassoon, D (1997) *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (The New Press)
- Tarrow, S. (1989), *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Von Beyme, K. (1985) *Political Parties in Western Democracies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> One might add that there are new protest or populist parties that seem to mix up left and right ideas and claim to be neither of the left or right but to go beyond this cleavage, of which the Five Star Movement in Italy is the best example. For a general discussion of the definitional challenges presented by the existence of left and right wing populism see Fagerholm (2018).