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On the (non) distinctiveness of Marxism-Leninism: The Portuguese and Greek communist parties compared



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ABSTRACT

The study of parties that label themselves as Marxist-Leninist has, for the most part been subsumed in the exploration of the broader radical (or, far) left tradition in the post-1989 period. In an attempt to bridge this gap in the recent literature on radical left parties, this article attempts to uncover the (non) distinctiveness of Marxism-Leninism by studying empirically two European parties that are self-labelled as Marxist-Leninist – the Greek (KKE) and Portuguese (PCP) Communist parties. The central question we explore is whether there are significant similarities between these parties, so as to allow us to speak of Marxism-Leninism's distinctiveness today. Overall, the two parties studied here have enough in common to testify to Marxism-Leninism's ongoing distinctiveness with several qualifications, especially concerning ideology.

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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 is, of Marxism-Leninism. The study of Marxist-Leninist parties has been subsumed in the exploration of the broader radical left (Gomez et al., 2016; 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, Backes and Moreau, 2008; Lazar, 2002). Overall, 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.

Recent attempts to 'map' the subgroups within the radical left have classified these parties as 'Conservative Communists' and recognized that they are different from 'Reformed Communists', and that differences between these parties grew after the events of 1989–1991 (March, 2011, 2008). There has not, however, been a systematic comparative analysis of Marxist-Leninist parties since the 1980s. Nevertheless, developing an understanding of them are important, since they have at times been crucial players in their countries' histories: active in revolutions, and in resistance movements that fought against dictatorships. This article is supposed to fill the significant gaps in our knowledge about Marxist-Leninist parties by studying two of the last of such parties that have a substantial presence in parliament in Western Europe: the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the Communist Party of Greece (KKE). We focus on their evolution since the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc in 1991. These cases have also played a leading role in attempting to develop links between Marxist-Leninist parties through the International Meeting of Communist and Workers' parties that the KKE first organized in 1998. By analysing these cases, we

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develop an analytical framework for building comparisons with the wider population of self-labelled Marxist-Leninist parties. This includes parties in Slovakia, Russia, Ukraine and Latvia, and the electorally successful cases of Cyprus and Moldova (March, 2012), numerous miniscule parties and parties beyond Europe. While other 'reform Communist' parties, such as those in Italy and Spain, broke with Marxism-Leninism, the PCP and KKE have remained committed to this teaching, thus enabling us to study the similarities and differences between these parties (March, 2011).

Although the popularity of KKE and PCP has declined, they are still often able to gain five-ten per cent of the vote at elections. This is sometimes enough to prevent the formation of left-wing coalition governments. Both parties retain large memberships and have been at the forefront of protests against austerity measures. Moreover, it is puzzling that the KKE and PCP did not break with Communism when other West European Communist Parties (WECPs) were more adaptive and made more substantial reforms to their programmes (Botella and Ramiro, 2003a). Other radical left parties have also found inclusion in government and have been 'brought in from the cold' after they sacrificed ideological purity (Dunphy and Bale, 2011). This makes it necessary to re-examine those parties that resisted change. Studying their relative continuity in the face of external pressures can reveal a lot about party change itself (Keith, 2011). According to Backes and Moreau (2008: 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' different categories of radical left parties goes further and reports basic similarities between 'Conservative Communists', including their predisposition to revolution, the working class membership and class conflict (March, 2011).

These studies treat Marxist-Leninist parties as a distinct group within the left. However, this is at odds with reports of the increasing ideological and strategic differences within Marxist-Leninist parties, as they reinterpreted Leninist principles (Lazar, 1988). It also runs contrary to findings that the differences between parties in Southern Europe have grown since the 1970s. A lack of empirical analysis means that we need a framework that can enable systematic comparisons of Marxist-Leninist parties and that would help to uncover the differences that exist among them.

We avoid the normative question of how Marxism-Leninism should be practiced. The central question we explore is whether there are significant similarities among Marxist-Leninist parties, so as to allow us to speak of Marxism-Leninism's distinctiveness today? Moreover, we ask whether Marxist-Leninist parties provide a basis for a coherent grouping within the Communist movement. Have the parties made any failed attempts to change or can we uncover understated forms of adaptation? Finally, have they 'softened' in ideological terms like other radical left parties? (March and Mudde, 2005; Botella and Ramiro, 2003b).

Our research is based on both the rich details available from the secondary literature as well as primary materials (analysis of party documents and elite/expert interviews) to provide a comparative assessment of the nature of the PCP and KKE.

The first section of the paper identifies the reasons why we can expect some diversity between these two parties. We then outline a comparative framework for analysing Marxist-Leninist parties. Subsequently, this framework is used to compare the development of the KKE and PCP since 1991. In the conclusion, larger questions about the radical left and party adaptation are raised. We uncover the factors that have shaped the ideological, political and organizational differences between the two parties. Our findings have also suggested that while generally the KKE and the PCP are Marxist-Leninist parties, but they have their own qualifications. In particular, the parties have more in common in terms of their organization and political behaviour rather than in their ideological discourse. Therefore, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of the universe of Marxist-Leninist parties.

1. Marxism-Leninism: is it a specific historical ideological strand?

Lenin's reformulation of Marxism asserts that the Party should take revolutionary action on behalf of the working class to build a dictatorship of the proletariat and a socialist society, which legitimates revolutionary action (Lane, 1998). Accordingly, a party of professional revolutionaries should seize power on behalf of the proletariat and destroy the economic and political structures of capitalism (Clarke, 1997). The state structure is rejected as being part of capitalist development. Involvement in parliamentary politics is avoided or exercised in aim of exposing the limitations of rival political parties (Valenta, 1989: 41).

Marxist-Leninist parties used to have much in common. The parties originated from the left-wing of social democratic parties; espoused international proletarianism and were loyal to the Soviet Union (USSR). The parties also used the Leninist basis of internal party organization called democratic centralism, along with a mass-party model (Bull, 1995; Waller, 1988). In particular, WECPs were urged by the ComIntern to seek alliances through periods that lacked revolutionary momentum and, to prepare the revolution by radicalizing the masses through constitutional methods.

We can, however, hypothesize that these parties have taken divergent trajectories. First, in the 1950s, intense conflict emerged within the international communist movement when Trotskyists and Maoists challenged the Stalinist interpretation of Marxism-Leninism (Lane, 1998: 280). In the 1970s, scholars reported increasing diversity as 'Eurocommunist' parties challenged the orthodox view of Marxism-Leninism as promoted by the USSR and accepted capitalist liberal democratic institutions as a means to promote socialism (Narkiewicz, 1990; Balabanides, 2015). By the late 1980s, the breakup of the traditional West European Communist 'party family' was apparent (Waller and Fennema, 1988; Bull and Heywood, 1994).

Second, Marxist-Leninist parties function in different historical contexts, encountering different political opportunity structures, cleavages, issues and opponents. In the absence of a 'guiding centre', following the collapse of the USSR, domestic considerations may have played a more important role in shaping the parties' strategic calculations (Charalambous, 2013: 5).

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