

Dividing and conquering fight for a place in serie

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Question: How many Albanians does it take to screw in a lightbulb?
Answer: That's not funny. That's fascist.

The fact that they have no sense of humour is one of the best reasons why few take the Communist Party of Canada Marxist-Leninist seriously anymore.

They also don't have very many members these days, and few ties to popular groups and organizations outside of their party. Interestingly, however, they still seem to have a lot of money and they remain visible: at McGill, for example, a group of CPC-ML members who sign their leaflets as either the Friends of Albania or as the McGill Student Movement have been trying all year to get attention for their party by making political hay out of the disarmament movement.

On the whole, the CPC-ML's half-dozen members at McGill have not been setting the place on fire, a pattern reproduced (most of the time) wherever else they are active across the country.

Not so long ago, however, the CPC-ML had to be taken seriously.

The long march Revisited

The roots of the party lie in an important development within the political left in Europe and, sort of, in North America.

There was a great deal of disenchantment in the 1960's with what constituted at that time the "traditional left". Social democratic parties were in disrepute. When they came to power, as in Britain and West Germany, social democrats seemed more intent on managing capitalist economies efficiently than bent on dismantling them. The move towards the centre which allowed moderate left parties to become serious electoral contenders discredited them in the eyes of many on the left. In Canada, the New Democratic Party was the object of this kind of disenchantment.

Traditional communist parties fared no better. Particularly after the Soviet Union crushed the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia with tanks in 1968, old-line communist parties were attacked for being tools of an imperialist power (it took a considerable effort of will to present Russia as the socialist fatherland after 1968) and generally for being hidebound, Stalinist, and internally undemocratic. The French Communist Party's repudiation of the worker - new middle class uprising in France the same year did old-line communists no good, either.

There were a number of interesting consequences of this disenchantment.

In the late 60s and 70s the British Labour Party and the German Social Democratic party began to develop critical and increasingly effective left wings. The French Socialist party united and moved to improve its left credentials with a better programme and a *union de la gauche* strategy. Even crusty old-line Stalinists reacted, beginning to talk about Eurocommunism. In Canada, a group of academics put together the Waffle group and tried to build a left wing within the NDP: they were, however, quickly and efficiently expelled from the party.

More interesting still, a great number of students and others in Europe and North America gave up on the traditional left altogether and began searching for a "new left". A small but influential number of these found their answer in Maoism.

The gentle reader will be spared a discussion of the elaborately embroidered dogma which made up the European-North American version of Maoism. For its proponents, suffice it to say, Maoism represented a perfect third option, replacing social democracy and Soviet communism.

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As originally conceived, western Maoism wasn't bureaucratic and mechanical, but spontaneous and human with lots of dialogue, self-criticism and mass popular action. And it wasn't just theory, so the theory went, because there was a pretty big country already practising Maoism, providing an example.

Building from these inspired beginnings, the Maoists made two long-term contributions to the search for a new left, one positive and one not so positive.

Their fundamental insight — shared with anarchists and trotskysts — has a direct application today. Socialism, according to Maoists, is not the inevitable grand tectonic shift for which everyone must wait, but rather a program they must bring about themselves.

And socialism isn't what you get inside a Russian government office building, but something human and perhaps joyful. These ideas have been picked up and are being applied by people, particularly in Europe, who are now taken very seriously indeed: the disarmament movement, environmentalists, feminists, the worker-self-management movement, and others in their various and many guises, including the Green party in Germany. All owe an intellectual debt to the New Left of the 60s and early 70s.

The second long-term effect on the Maoists is less positive. They didn't see themselves as merely an interesting school of thought, but as serious, revolutionary communists who intended to act on their beliefs. Having worked out their politics, they began to organize political parties to apply them. The Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist) (CPC-ML) was the Canadian product of that resolve.

There was a contradiction in the way the Maoists organized their parties. Their principal contribution to politics was to reject old-line communism and introduce some fresh air into the extra-parliamentary left. Having done so, they proceeded to set up parties along strict Stalinist lines, quickly setting their ideas into strict, and increasingly irrelevant, doctrine.

Just as the Waffle movement was the pale Canadian shadow of the re-animated left wings of the British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, so the CPC-ML was a pale — and twisted — shadow of similar formations elsewhere.

It was founded in 1970, in Montreal, by a long-winded and rather peculiar man named Hardial Bains. Maoist-new left intellectuals across Canada joined the party in the hope they had found the instrument for applying their beliefs.

Politics by two-by-four

Things began to go terribly wrong with the CPC-ML almost immediately. Its first order of business was to consolidate the entire left and working class within itself, mainly by eliminating other left groups. This they proceeded to attempt to do with crude violence, quickly eroding the party's support.

In February 1970, party members appeared at an anti-Vietnam War protest on Parliament Hill, and attacked other demonstrators with two-by-four boards. On May 20, 1971, party members provoked what one observer remembers as a "purposeless, bloody riot" with Montreal police. All through those months, members were actively attempting to break up meetings of other left groups, disrupting speakers at universities and elsewhere, and engaging in strident verbal assaults on opponents.

The crudeness of the CPC-ML's tactics and political line led to a major split within the party. In 1972, a group of Montreal members broke off to found the Quebec Revolutionary Student Movement (MREQ in French). In 1975, the MREQ would join with the staff of a CPC-ML bookstore and other groups to form the "Ligue" (CCL-ML), subsequently the Workers' Communist Party — which would in turn become a considerable more formidable organization than the CPC-ML, with a history all its own.

Meanwhile, the CPC-ML refined its tactics. In place of violent, physical assaults on the members of enemy