

Eurocommunism: a discussion of Carrillo's "Eurocommunism and the State"

Sam Aaronovitch

1. Introduction

Santiago Carrillo took the chance to write this book in 1976 after entering Spain "illegally" in order, as he says, to tackle "one of the most confused and difficult questions confronting a communist today." It is not a major and original contribution to Marxist theory but it is, nevertheless, an important and liberating book written in a simple and direct way.

Part of its importance rests in the fact that the general secretary of an important communist party has written a book which begins to break with past traditions and reflexes in the international communist movement and which gives reasons for a strategy which has attracted to itself the name of Eurocommunism. Of course, that title is not strictly accurate. It is applied to communist parties such as the Japanese which are not European and would be rejected by some communist parties in European countries. Eurocommunism has nevertheless acquired a meaning and Carrillo describes it as "a tendency in the modern progressive and revolutionary movement that is endeavouring to get to grips with the realities of our continent - though in essence it is valid for all developed capitalist countries - and adapt to them the development of the world revolutionary process characteristic of our time."

Carrillo's book is addressed to three sets of people: to the Spanish people generally, to the membership of his own party and to the world communist movement. This has to be borne in mind because it is a conscious political intervention at all these levels.

My intention is not to give a digest of the book but to discuss a number of issues which I think are raised by it in the hope that not only will people read it but also continue the discussion.¹

2. Can we define the elements of Eurocommunism?

The label assumes there is some common strategic view linking the communist parties described as "Eurocommunist". Carrillo does not give a "bill of

contents" but basing myself on his book and on other documents by communist parties and individual communists let me propose this as reasonably summarising this view.

First: the Soviet model of 1917 is an inappropriate one for advanced capitalist societies which have powerful and extensive state structures, developed civil society (i.e. a dense network of social, cultural and political groupings based on voluntary commitment), and considerable democratic traditions and practices.

Second, in such societies, the road to socialism involves the working class, through its organisations, actually developing its own unity and building a series of alliances which put it in a leading (hegemonic) position in all spheres of economic, social and political life thus enabling it to speak for the people as a whole.

Third, the socialist road is inseparable from the fight to broaden and deepen democratic practices and to break the barriers which restrict and distort them in capitalist societies.

Fourth, through popular struggle, advance can be in stages which include changing the balance of forces within the structures of the state (affecting also the organs of coercion) and through a battle of ideas which removes the legitimacy of capitalist exploitation in the minds of the people.

Fifth, a key point in that socialist road is the formation of elected governments, based on popular support, seeking to carry out programmes which make substantial inroads into capitalist economic and political power. Such governments would establish democratic regimes of a new type. These are not yet socialist but represent transitional forms to socialism if the majority of the people are prepared to go further along that path.

Sixth, this approach rules out the idea of one party (such as the CP) having a *monopoly* of working class leadership just as it rules out the idea of a one-party political system as the objective.

Finally, socialism is regarded as inseparably connected with the extension of democracy in all areas of activity.

Carrillo provides his own summary in the following words:

¹ Carrillo's book has six chapters: 1. The state versus society; 2. The ideological apparatuses of the state; 3. The coercive apparatuses of the state; 4. The model of democratic socialism; 5. The historical roots of "Eurocommunism"; 6. The dictatorship of the proletariat.

"The parties included in the 'Eurocommunist' trend are agreed on the need to advance to socialism with democracy, a multi-party system, parliaments and representative institutions, sovereignty of the people regularly exercised through universal suffrage, trade unions independent of the State and of the parties, freedom for the opposition, human rights, religious freedom, freedom for cultural, scientific and artistic creation, and the development of the broadest forms of popular participation at all levels and in all branches of social activity." (p. 111)

Such an approach offers the *possibility* (not the inevitability and not the certainty) of a road to socialism without civil war.

3. What are the historical roots of Eurocommunism?

I find Carrillo's chapter on this theme one of the most interesting and important parts of his book. He makes the obvious point that these "Eurocommunist" tendencies did not arise overnight, referring to the British Communist Party's *British Road to Socialism* in the fifties, the impact of the 20th Congress of the CPSU (with Khrushchev's revelations of the massive crimes committed in the Soviet Union), of the effect of the Sino-Soviet split (on the Japanese Party for instance), of the development of Italian communist thinking especially by Togliatti etc. But he goes back further, to the 1930s. In going into these questions he writes, "a kind of dichotomy is to be seen, dating back to before the Second World War, between, on the one hand, certain of the general ways in which communist parties posed questions - even within what might be called Stalinism, with which many of our ideas were imbued - and, on the other hand, with practice, which strove to get to grips with reality and entered into conflict - sometimes not visible on the surface - with the ways in which those questions were posed." (p. 113).

He then suggests that we may need to re-examine the history of the Popular Front in theory and practice. He refers to differences between the Comintern and Maurice Thorez (leader of the French Communist Party) where Thorez favoured taking part in the French Popular Front government and the Comintern opposed this. Carrillo writes that this was not a difference of secondary importance but a basic question concerning the scope and content of the Popular Front. He argues:

"It is not much use speculating after the event on what might have happened if Thorez had got his way; but it is reasonable to suppose that in that event the French Popular Front would have been something different from what it was and that its ability to pursue a more resolute anti-fascist policy would have influenced the situation in Europe and probably in Spain." (p. 114)

He then goes on to discuss the experience of the

Spanish Popular Front and the Civil War of which, of course, he had unique experience. However, I do not propose to give a digest of the chapter. What Carrillo is beginning to argue but does not develop is, in my view, a much broader and more radical thesis.

The Soviet model of revolution was inappropriate for advanced capitalist countries *at any time*. The Communist International, dominated by the CPSU, time and again got its perspectives wrong and intervened damagingly in the affairs of the individual communist parties and, one supposes, in the affairs of the British communist party as well.

Again and again, the requirements of the Soviet state were substituted for the fraternal relationships of communist parties.

The Seventh Congress of the CI in 1935 marked a major advance but even then, as Carrillo's comments suggest, CI intervention made it more difficult for the communist parties of France and Spain for instance, to work out their best strategy.

In Britain, in the very year of the Seventh Congress and of Dimitrov's classic statement, the Party Congress adopted its programme *For a Soviet Britain*, itself in conflict with the essence of Dimitrov's approach.

All this leads me to the view that it is wrong to consider Eurocommunism as solely the product of the post-war world. We have been in the habit, for instance, of arguing that the *British Road to Socialism* as we have developed it, could only have meaning as a result of the major changes in the world balance of strength brought about by the war and its consequences. Certainly, such changes have been immense, but the experience of the 1930s shows that such programmes were conceivable then and would have been important if the communist parties had felt freer to develop strategies which accorded with their own conditions.

We have been using an argument which, in my opinion, has prevented us from coming to terms with the truth about our own history and that of the international communist and working class movement. It is hardly surprising that in discussing the historical roots of Eurocommunism, Carrillo does so in a chapter which concerns itself very much with the Comintern and then the Cominform (which was created after the war).

The dissolution of the CI during the war, the experiences of the war itself and the role in that war of such communist parties as those of France and Italy, accelerated a process of independent strategy that was already under way. But, in making an historical re-evaluation, can the matter stop there? If the Comintern and later the Cominform was often wrong, and if therefore the political line and practice of communist parties was often wrong, what then of the judgments which communists made of social-

ist and social democratic trends in the inter-war years and even later? Did we not help to produce *their* errors and obscure the positive elements that existed amongst them? The question must at least be asked if only because of the problem Carrillo comes back to again and again, namely the relationship of communist parties with the Soviet Union.

4. Carrillo and the nature of the state

Carrillo's ideas on the state are amongst those which need careful and critical examination.

He stands by what might be regarded as the most orthodox of positions in arguing that even in the most democratic bourgeois societies, the state is the organised power of one class; that the state has become the instrument of one group of capitalists, the monopoly capitalists against the rest of capital as well as against the rest of society; the state, he asserts is becoming "less and less a *state for all* and more and more a *state for the few*." (p.25).

But he then argues that the contradiction between society and the state, "given the present dimensions and features of the state apparatus, can and must culminate in a crisis within that apparatus, the members of which mostly have their origins in the under-privileged classes and are really in a similar class situation, and who, constituting as they do a mass force, cannot be separated off like the army and the police in barracks bristling with defences and isolated from the rest of society." (pp25-26).

Carrillo attaches the greatest importance to what he calls the "ideological apparatuses of the state" (following the view of Althusser), which include, in his view, religious institutions, the educational system, the family, as well as the judicial apparatus, the political apparatus (presumably including political parties? SA); and the apparatuses of information (press, radio, television etc.) and of culture, (p.20).

He argues that a growing crisis affects this vast ideological apparatus and that the socialist forces through determined, resolute and intelligent struggle could turn the weapon of ideology, the ideological apparatuses, against the classes which are in power (p.45).

The developing struggle to transform the state apparatus by democratising it will find its reflection in the coercive apparatus. He refers to developments amongst the police and army in France, Italy and Holland for instance. His chapter on "The Coercive Apparatuses of the State" contains an attempt to present arguments directed at elements in the Spanish police and army as to what the role of such forces should be in democratic Spain, seeking to express the tensions which must exist in the police and armed forces within his country (as in others).

Carrillo then asks whether a democratic transformation of the military mentality can be attained as a result of a social crisis, due to factors other than war.

He answers:

"definitely, the forces of change in developed capitalist countries can only try to win over or neutralise the greater part if not the whole of the army by other than traditional means. This requires a drastic revision of the attitude of the forces of change towards the military apparatus, a new approach to the whole question, capable of accepting certain characteristics of the military mentality and of extending and deepening within it the objective effects of the present crisis in society".

He goes on to argue that the

"old anti-militaristic attitudes, pure political agitation, a negative approach to the army, would not facilitate the task but would make it impossible and would help the ruling oligarchy to form a bloc with the army", (p. 65)

Carrillo raises powerful and important points and his discussion of the army is exceptionally interesting. But I find myself with questions and reservations which space allows me to present only very baldly. In the first place, by taking over the idea of "ideological apparatuses of the state" including the family, religion, culture etc., Carrillo has, in my view, confused matters in two different ways. In one way, by extending the state to cover virtually every institution in society he converts it into an all-pervading essence so that it loses its distinctive character. In another way, he cannot see that many of the institutions he discusses, such as the education system (in the UK for instance) and also the political party system (as it functions in parliament) straddles both civil society (the sphere of voluntary organisation) and the apparatus of state.

In addition, it is debatable whether the state can be treated as simply the instrument of one class or even a fraction of a class. This latter approach comes very close to the earlier primitive definitions of state monopoly capitalism as the fusion of the monopolies and the state.

It is much harder to accept Carrillo's picture of the possibility of democratic transformation of the state from within as well as from without if the class nature of the state is defined in this narrow way.

The idea of democratic transformation of the state is of course connected with the idea of the transition to socialism.

5. What kind of strategy? The problems of transition

As we know from our own prolonged discussions on *The British Road to Socialism* going back to 1951, it is the strategy of the transition which is the most complex problem of all. Not surprisingly, it is the area which Carrillo also finds difficulty in exploring effectively. This is partly because the very act of formulating a strategy is a political act designed to

help change the situation in the period in which it is presented; and also because the future can never be known; in politics, the unexpected plays an exceptionally important role as the events of May 1968 demonstrated to both the French and Italian communist parties.

In many ways Carrillo's book is discursive and not well organised. A large part of the discussion on problems of transition is however to be found in his chapter on "The Model of Democratic Socialism".

The fact that the chapter has this title itself creates some confusion as to whether Carrillo really does envisage some stage resulting from the assertion of the "anti-monopoly socialist forces" as he calls them, and before the establishment of state power directly and consciously used for the construction of a socialist society. However, in discussing his economic programme with which the chapter starts, he says that his model presupposes "the long-term coexistence of public and private forms of property . . . ; in this stage *which is not yet socialism, but which is also no longer the domination of the State by monopoly capital.* . . ." (p.77). After discussing this for two or three pages, Carrillo then writes:

"This system, which will still be economically mixed, will translate itself into a political regime in which the owners will be able to organise themselves not only economically but also in a political party or parties representative of their interests; this will be one of the component parts of political and ideological pluralism. . . . The overcoming of social differences will follow a natural process and will not be the result of coercive measures but of the development of the productive forces and of the social services, so that through a gradual process, encouraged by education, all sections of the population will be integrating themselves in the social collective." (p.80).

Political parties are presented here as reflections of positions of ownership but pluralism will involve parties which base themselves on ideologies and combinations of ideologies not necessarily reflecting the kind of ownership situation in which its founders find themselves. This is a very "reductionist*" view which cannot be maintained. And it also appears to disregard the evolution of existing political parties and tendencies.

Again, the reference to "natural process" fills me with some disquiet. Transitional stages cannot but involve considerable tension and struggle. There is no sense in which, in such a stage, a consensus can "naturally" appear as Chilean experience has shown only too plainly. Such formulations can only accentuate the readers feeling of vagueness and lack of careful analysis.

This unease is increased because Carrillo a little later makes it clear that the communist party in

such a process does not seek a position of dominance in the state and society or to have a monopoly of power but "aspires to a power in which different political groups representing these forces (of culture and labour, SA) take part and cooperate, according to their real weight, in emulation for progress, socialism and democracy." (p.101).

Sometimes, the problem we are discussing is referred to as that of the transition to the transition to socialism! Obviously this has always occupied revolutionaries. Laclau, for instance, in his book *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* quotes Gramsci in 1924 being concerned at what he regarded as the incorrect position of the PCI in rejecting the idea of a Constituent Assembly and proposing the idea of Soviets. Gramsci asks

"Is it likely that the slogan of the Constituent Assembly will become current again? If it is, what should be our position on this? Briefly, the present situation must have a political solution. What is the most probable form that such a solution will take? Is it possible to think that we shall pass from fascism to the dictatorship of the proletariat? What intermediate phases are likely or probable? I think that in the crisis the country is going through, the party which has the advantage will be one which best understands this necessary process of transition."

Critics of Carrillo

One way of approaching the problems involved in even theorising about the nature of a transition is to refer to two sets of criticisms made of Carrillo, one directly by Claudin in his book, *Eurocommunism and Socialism*, and one indirectly by Andre Gunder Frank in a review of Claudin's book in *New Left Review* March/April 1978. Claudin, who was a leading figure in the Spanish Communist Party until expelled in 1964, presents a very sympathetic view of Eurocommunism but he has some important criticisms of Carrillo's approach. He considers that a phase involving a critical attack on monopoly capitalism can only be a "period of uncertain struggle, during which monopoly capital, though badly beaten remains undefeated. That implies a period of the most acute class conflict, since the defeat of monopoly capital would signal the inception of a process which would see the elimination of capitalism altogether and the start of the socialist transition."

Claudin's verdict is very stark:

"It is therefore unrealistic to conceive of any 'advanced democracy' providing a long period of 'democratic stability'. It is equally illusory to look for any *stable* alliance with the *entire* non-monopoly bourgeoisie or with any political representatives of any fraction of monopoly capital . . .". (p. 107)

Claudin is highly critical of a predominantly gradualist tactic "essentially centred on the political arena, especially on elections, and which subordinates all forms of mass action and social struggle to a quest for alliances with one or several fractions of the bourgeoisie (and we must not forget that the non-monopoly bourgeoisie comprises the greater part of the bourgeoisie and is responsible for the exploitation of the greater part of the working class)". In his view, the deep structural crisis of present day capitalism leaves little time; time is short, he insists. Claudin represents what some have called "left" Eurocommunism compared with "right" Eurocommunism represented by Carrillo.

A criticism which embraces both Carrillo and Claudin comes from Andre Gunder Frank.

Like Claudin he dismisses the idea that monopoly is "a kind of benign tumour which can be cut out of the economic system, rendering the patient more competitive and healthy". He reinforces the argument that the gradualist approach permits the mobilisation and organisation of counter-revolution. He then demands an answer to the question that if the crisis is severe "why *must* there be space for a realistic intermediate policy, especially if the crisis does not allow for much time to discover it and put it in train?" Frank believes that Eurocommunism will never pose the key question of state power.

I have presented these criticisms of Carrillo at some length because they raise some of the important questions for discussion.

Four Comments

But I have four points I would like to make by way of comment.

First, the label of Eurocommunism is in danger of obscuring the major *differences* between the countries concerned. The Italian party's vision of the "historic compromise" takes into account among other things the peculiar features of the Christian Democratic Party with its substantial left. There is little comparison in terms of existing political structure with the situation in the UK for instance; and the differences between Spain and France are profound. The lines of strategy have to be very broadly defined indeed if they are to embrace these different sets of conditions. The temptation to set up new models (e.g. that of the PCI) needs to be resisted if new blunders are not to be perpetrated.

Second, the idea of advancing working class hegemony, precisely because of differing conditions, has to be worked out in very concrete terms for each country. Carrillo, it seems to me, makes only a very limited contribution, but it affects for instance the actual proposals around which alliances are to be constructed.

The organisations of the working class for instance,

cannot go into an alliance saying that they must get everything they want or else no agreement is possible. But the nature of the compromise must vary between countries and, within countries, must change over time according to very subtle balances in economic and political conditions.

Third, the view of the anti-monopoly alliance by Claudin is unnecessarily restrictive. Carrillo's conception of the bloc of labour and culture with its positive objectives is much nearer the approach of the broad democratic alliance made in the *British Road to Socialism*. Such a concept also recognises that class analysis does not exhaust the character of movements which must be combined in a broad democratic alliance, most notably the movement of women and the movement to meet national aspirations.

But the development of such a broad democratic alliance - together with its aims - should not be equated with agreement on undertaking a socialist transformation. This is to make an unwarranted leap and appears to impose on the broad democratic alliance the view of one section which is now seeking to construct it.

This point leads to my fourth point: the criticism of so-called "gradualism". I believe it is true that in our discussions on the road to socialism the nature of capitalist resistance and sabotage is inadequately discussed. One has only to read in recent issues of the *Sunday Times* of the combined pressure of the IMF and the US Treasury upon a right-wing Labour government to imagine the reaction to even modest advances along the British Road to Socialism!

Political Conditions

But I think the critics of Carrillo are nevertheless missing the point. Yes, it is true that there is a serious crisis of world capitalism. But to argue that this means there is little time to create some space for developing the broad democratic alliance and that therefore, by implication, as seems to be Frank's position, the communist parties should swiftly launch a struggle for state power is illogical. How can a struggle for state power succeed if the *political* conditions are not present and if that very approach would precipitate the worst kind of authoritarian reaction which could set back the working class movement for decades?

The recent elections in France, Portugal, Spain, and Greece with the almost spectacular rise of varied socialist parties (as well as the results of the recent local elections in Italy) show that this kind of impatience is not a substitute for a strategy which can develop the political conditions for revolutionary change.

In spite of continuous political crises, threats of military coups, American intervention at various

levels, the PCI has demonstrated an ability to push forward the boundaries of working class and popular strength. This has made it *harder* for Italian capitalism to reverse the process and affects the ability of big business to use external pressure (though they will certainly do so).

Nevertheless, the development of the strategy broadly defined as Eurocommunism does carry with it the danger of a swing to the right in style and policy which can weaken the connections of the communist parties with the masses and especially the large mass of rejected and alienated people in the big urban centres. This can be seen in Italy, amongst the youth especially. In France the formal unity of the socialist and communist parties was inadequately buttressed by a grass roots movement.

The development of the movement "from below" is sometimes extended to the notion of new popular organs which represent working class and popular power as against those of the state. There is, however, a distinction to be drawn between *state* power and the power that the organisations of a class which does not yet have state power can exert. The idea of constructing a *dual* system of power parallel with both the representative organs of Parliament and Local Authority and the existing organisations of the labour movement is not a strategy consistent with the Eurocommunist approach. But popular movements can grow up which must have their autonomy encouraged, not suppressed or distrusted.

6. The nature of socialism and the characterisation of the Soviet Union

Carrillo criticises Lenin for underestimating and belittling the generic concept of democracy by identifying it with the state. Socialism and democracy are regarded as inseparable and the critique of the Soviet Union, whilst recognising its important achievements goes much further than, for instance, Gollan in the article in which he initiated the discussion on socialist democracy in *Marxism Today*.

Carrillo's view is that "the October Revolution has produced a state which is evidently not a bourgeois state, but neither is it as yet the proletariat organised as the ruling class, or a genuine workers democracy."

In trying to define the nature of state power in the Soviet Union he later suggests that "the question is whether the State, which is no longer capitalist, is not an intermediate phase between the capitalist and the genuine socialist state, in the same way as the absolute monarchies were an intermediate phase between feudalism and modern capitalist parliamentary democracies; a phase which through analysis of its characteristics and functions, would enable a more objective and scientific explanation to be given of the Stalin phenomenon and others like it." (pp.164/5).

Monty Johnstone (*Socialist Europe*, No. 3, p.27) criticises Carrillo and argues that a more useful approach is to ask on behalf of which class, essentially and historically, does the ruling bureaucratic stratum operate in the Soviet Union and answers that it can only be the Soviet working class. This is a discussion which has hardly began.

Not surprisingly, Carrillo's book has been reviewed with great hostility in the Soviet press, though no Russian edition has been published there which would enable the people of the Soviet Union to evaluate Carrillo's arguments. There seems to me to be substance in Claudin's view that the Soviet Party's hostility to Carrillo partly stems from its fear that if this view became widespread among communist parties, it would represent a withdrawal from the CPSU of its "legitimacy" in the eyes of Soviet communists and sympathisers and have powerful internal repercussions.

The exploration of Carrillo's analysis is complicated by the fact that the French and Italian communist parties, for instance, are close to becoming parties of government which would involve them in negotiations with the Soviet state as such. Whether such a constraint operates or not, the Marxist analysis of the socialist countries remains an important task for Marxist parties everywhere which can only help them in their struggle for socialism. Carrillo has left the matter still in a confused state (which he recognises).

7. Concluding points

The issues raised in this article far from exhaust the problems posed and discussed by Carrillo. I have said very little about his views on the role of the communist party and on pluralism. He also brings out into the open the lack of an agreed international policy by the communist parties of Western Europe on such matters as the Common Market, nuclear defence etc. But I hope that Carrillo's book will be read and discussed as part of the wide-ranging review and political re-evaluation taking place in the world communist movement and that democratic debate will join with political practice.
