

CONFLICTING CURRENTS IN THE PCF

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INTRODUCTION

The defeat of the left in the **1978** French legislative elections marked the end of an era for the *Parti Communiste Français*. The most extensive experiment into United Front politics in the PCF's history and fifteen years of strategic continuity had led to failure. The party's turn toward profound self-examination after the elections was therefore not surprising. What has come as a surprise, however, is the way—contradictory, confusing, often opaque, and sometimes brutal—in which the PCF has tried to re-evaluate its position. Basic aspects of the **PCF's** identity have been at stake. What should its strategy be? What should its relationship to socialist countries be? What kind of internal life will it have? Will it continue down the road of Eumcommunism? More than a year after the defeat of 1978, none of these questions have been answered. But the party's inability to chart its own future has simultaneously provided invaluable sources of understanding of what the PCF is now.

Anyone familiar with French politics knows that the PCF is not the paragon of scientific socialism governed by a truly democratic centralism in the service of a clear vision of socialist change which it claims to be. Nor is it the manipulative, **autocratically**-controlled, monolithic army of single-minded militants described by its enemies. The **PCF's** reality is both more prosaic and more subtle than either of these caricatures. As befits a political formation comprised of several hundred thousand members of very different political generations, with varied backgrounds, acting in countless different spheres of organizational activity, the PCF is very complex. This essay will analyse this complexity in a way which will, hopefully, illuminate the sinuous paths which the PCF has followed in recent times. The French Communist Party has, as we will **see**, a complicated internal political life due to the existence of different **currents** of strategic opinion. Its responses to the outside world follow from conflict and coalition between such currents as they act

within different spheres of party practice. These spheres of practice have evolved historically at different rates away from common Bolshevik-Stalinist roots, such that, in recent times, they have existed in relationships of contradiction one with the other. The defeat of 1978 was, in large part, caused by a knot of contradictions in a Eurocommunist vision of social change and practices of mobilization, alliance behaviour, and internal party life which made its implementation difficult. In response to this defeat, currents in the party, working in the context of contradictions, each proposed very different recipes for the future. Understanding what resulted from these processes is the object of our work.

1. *THE REALITIES OF MARCH 1978*

The failure of March 1978 revealed a number of truths about the PCF which the years of mobilization around the Common Programme of the Left had hidden from all but the most astute observers. For years, French Communists had pursued what seemed to be a realistic, if difficult, United Front strategy. In support of this they had worked a number of profound doctrinal changes away from their Comintern origins towards a genuinely democratic Eurocommunist vision of socialist transformation. The party's goals were easily summarized. It had wanted to make a Left coalition a majority in the country, install itself as the determining force in this coalition and thereby pull its Socialist ally away from its social democratic proclivities and towards genuine change. Objective number one had been reached. Alas, for the PCF, *Union de la Gauche* benefitted the PS much more than the PCF, especially electorally. In consequence, the Socialists, sensing that they and not the Communists would have the largest share of resources to shape the direction of any future Left government, slipped away from commitment to the kinds of changes which the PCF felt necessary. The split on the Left of September 1977 and the defeat of the divided Left in March 1978 followed.

For the PCF, the failure of 1978 was basically one of mobilization. The party had been unable to convince enough people to support its cause. When one asked why this had happened, however, the profoundly contradictory reality of the PCF became clearer. In its conceptualization of the transition to socialism and in its strategy, the party had taken its distance from the Bolshevik-Stalinist past. In its ability to *implement* this strategy, however, the PCF had 'modernized' in much less satisfactory ways. United Front strategy, designed to produce progressively more radical rounds of structural

reform opening a 'democratic road to a socialism, in itself democratic' made sense. As befits the reality of France in the 1970s, the party had rejected the Soviet experience as model and committed itself to a *socialisme aux couleurs de la France*, to be constructed democratically out of French materials without reference to any *a priori* blueprint. Unfortunately for the PCF, modernization in one realm of practice had not automatically entailed change in others. Herein lay the drama.

For its strategy to work, the Party needed to accumulate new resources of support, in particular to expand its social base to appeal to sections of the new middle strata. This was no simple matter, for to do so it would first have had to demonstrate that it had come to grips with and broken with its involvement with Stalinism and the distortions which Stalinism had worked in the PCF during the years of Maurice Thorez's leadership of the Party. In fact, largely because of the monumental error of Thorez in 1956 in refusing to seize the opportunity of the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU to begin de-Stalinizing in France, the Party still had not fully faced such issues by the early 1970s. Thus it **approached** new groups not as a party which had reflected upon and learned from the mistakes of its past, but rather as one of heroic continuity. Moreover, it was also slow to provide members of new middle strata with a secure place and role in its vision of change. In theory, new middle strata were to have a place in a broad and complex anti-monopoly alliance which would respect their social specificity and their interests. In practice, traditional PCF *ouvrierisme*, dating from earlier party strategies and from deep French working-class reflexes, was the rule. Workers were the vanguard and main force for radical change. It was, therefore, the duty of non-working-class groups who wanted change to subordinate their own goals, their specificity, to those of the vanguard. This contradiction between the party's de-Stalinized, de-Bolshevized strategic position, which was based on an expected expansion of PCF support among new intermediary groups, and older mobilizational styles, was catastrophic. The Socialists had their own burdensome past, to be sure. Yet, through historical accident and political astuteness, the PS was able, unlike the PCF, to present itself to new middle strata as a party which had broken **with** this past. Beyond this, French social democracy had always been both iniddle class and reformist, less marked, as a result, by *ouvrierisme* than the PCF. Thus the Communists failed to produce the resources of support which their strategy demanded, while *Union de la Gauche* strengthened the Socialists.

Not unrelated to the PCF's general mobilization problem in 1978 was the contradiction which existed between the PCF's modernized vision of socialist transformation and the nature of its internal life. French Communists seemed determined to implement a Eurocommunist strategy with a party designed for a very different strategy. The general lack of internal democracy in the party was evidenced in numbers of PCF actions in the 1972-8 period. Abrupt about-faces on major political questions continually emanated from the party leadership, rarely with prior discussion in the party at large.' Moreover, the PCF's style of mobilization, intimately connected with its internal life, reinforced the problem. In good Leninist terms, Communists saw their task as one of bringing revolutionary consciousness to the masses 'from without'. Traditional methods for doing this, dating from the Thorez era, were unquestioned. The consciousness which was called for was to be conceptualized at the leadership level of the party, then to be forwarded to the people through PCF cells. Yet, the PCF's commitment to a democratic road clearly implied that the people should play a primordial role in deciding for themselves what they wanted. In the light of the party's vision of change, then, the Left Common Programme of 1972 ought to have developed profound connections with the people whose lives it was designed to change. In fact, however, the Common Programme was propagandized to the people, rather than emanating from, and therefore involving, them.

Thus far we have accounted for the failure of 1978 by suggesting that de-Stalinization and de-Bolshevization in different spheres of PCF activity had proceeded at varying rates. In the areas of PCF strategy and the party's vision of a transition to socialism substantial change, amounting to theoretical Eurocommunization, had occurred. Yet success at implementing this strategy and realizing this vision depended on commensurate changes in other realms of PCF practice which had not occurred at all or had occurred only partially. Insufficient democratization of the PCF itself, insufficient reflection of the party's history, antiquated notions of how to calculate risks in an alliance strategy for change, all undermined the success of what looked, on the face of it, to be a reasonable strategy. However, on its own, this picture of a party caught in contradictions created by uneven evolution of separate spheres of practice is incomplete. For these spheres or structures of practice were maintained and changed by political actors. In the PCF, central actors in recent times have been political *currents*.³ The term current refers to an informal coalition around a particular strategic predilection. The

mass bases of currents are found in the analyses made by large numbers of rank and file Communists, analyses which are almost always incomplete, sometimes little more than strong feelings. Leaders, by their positions and abilities, turn such mass analyses into coherent positions; they thus define currents in practice. But they represent currents as well. Currents have always existed in the **PCF**, so much so that they are enshrined implicitly in **PCF** vocabulary with its references to the 'sectarian' and 'opportunist' temptations between which the party must navigate to ensure its success. They have never been acknowledged openly, however. In the Thorez years, with the extreme centralization of authority in the party's Secretary-General, currents were submerged in a constant quest for Communist unanimity, a quest backed by the threat of **expulsion**.⁴ Since Thorez, the internal life of the party has, *de facto*, been increasingly marked by the interplay of currents. Acknowledging their existence in public is still taboo, however. Thus the **PCF**'s life of currents is carried on underneath a facade of unity. In the period which concerns us most, that of *Union de la Gauche*, two major currents coexisted and conflicted in the party. A third coalesced during these years and has only very recently become important.

The current which took the lead in defining the strategy of *Union*—which we will call the **United Front/Eurocommunists**—had honorable precedents in the party's past, emerging from the Popular Front politics of Maurice Thorez and from the political spadework of Waldeck Rochet, *Thorez's* successor, in the 1960s. Leaders of this current, Georges **Marchais** in particular, were responsible for pushing the party towards the 1972 Common Programme and later, after 1975, towards the important dose of Eurocommunism which culminated in the party's Twenty-Second Congress in 1976.⁵ The **United Front/Eurocommunist** approach involved a quest for alliances with the non-Communist Left around agreed-upon programmes of reform to be enacted by the Left in power which would progressively work a transition to Socialism in France. For a number of reasons, the **United Front/Eurocommunists** focused much attention on the workings of the party's alliance strategy at *the top*, on the level of dealings with the leaderships of other organizations. They also tended to stress electoral mobilization above other forms of party activity in their calculations of how to succeed. In part because of the problems raised by these biases, and despite the powerful positions which **United Front/Eurocommunists** held in the party leadership, this current was never able to establish complete consensus within the **PCF** on its policies.

In fact, at every important juncture in the history of Left Unity, the United **Front/Eurocommunists** were opposed by a 'go-it-alone' current with a strategy of its own to propose. The 'go-it-aloners' believed that the crisis of French capitalism, together with the profoundly class-collaborationist nature of French social democrats, would eventually allow the PCF to gather important new strength, provided it maintained its radical identity in an uncompromising fashion. To this current, *Union de la Gauche* was a dangerous strategy. By granting the French Socialists a new certificate of honorably Left conduct—which they did not deserve—it allowed them new opportunities to reconstruct their sagging fortunes. It also led the PCF to compromise its identity in pursuit of alliance—hence the reticence of the 'go-it-aloners' to approve Eurocommunist changes. Finally, it would lead the Communists into an inevitable trap when the Socialists betrayed a united front alliance, 'turned to the Right', and followed their true vocation of managing the capitalist crisis.

The years of Left unity for the PCF were years of opposition between United **Front/Eurocommunists** and 'go-it-aloners' in which both had considerable resources. With recent party history, much rank and file support and the Secretary-General on their side, the United **Front/Eurocommunists** had the initiative. However, the need to maintain a consensus in the party on their policies obliged this current to accept limits on the changes which they desired to promote in order to reach a viable compromise with their strategic opponents. This need, plus the very real limitations in perspective of the United **Front/Eurocommunists** themselves, explains the development of the contradictions between practices during the *Union* years which we have discussed earlier. Because consensus was a problem and possibilities for change limited, the United Front/Eurocommunists focused their energies on the task of promoting strategic change. Taking on the 'go-it-aloners' in other realms of practice, in particular that of the party's internal life, even to the limited degree that the United **Front/Eurocommunists** felt necessary, **would** have **involved** doing battle with the 'go-it-aloners' which might have jeopardized change in the strategic sphere. Thus given the existence of currents within the party and, more importantly, given the nature of these currents, the development of different spheres of party practice—mobilization, alliance **behaviour**, internal life—was bound to be uneven.

That there were real political reasons for the development of contradictions between different spheres of practice, that this development was not simply due to mistakes, is clear from the

actual history of *Union de la Gauche*. The margin of manoeuvre available to the United Front/Eurocommunists was so narrow and their position so precarious that on every occasion when a failure in their strategy seemed imminent, their leadership position was threatened, leading to remarkable zigs and zags in PCF behaviour. A good example of this process is found in the events around the Twenty-First Party Congress. When a series of by-elections in 1974 showed the PS beginning to threaten the PCF's own traditional electoral base, the 'go-it-aloners' took the offensive and managed to turn the leadership's original proposal for the Twenty-First Congress into a hard-line attack on the PS, resulting in a full year of virulent anti-Socialist polemicizing. Then, as the electoral period of 1976-8 approached, the balance shifted back dramatically. The great rush of Eurocommunism around the Twenty-Second Congress of 1976—distance from the USSR, the limited opening up of party life at the base, and the Twenty-Second Congress itself—were the response of the United Front/Eurocommunist current to the earlier signs of failure.⁶

In this general process of conflict and coalition between 'Unity' and 'go-it-alone' currents—always masked, of course, by the Communists' desire to present themselves as unanimous (a desire shared by both major currents) a third current, Left Eurocommunism, began to coalesce. Left Eurocommunism accepted the party's United Front strategy but was aware of the contradictions which existed between this strategic vision and the party's other practices. Its goal was to **resolve** these contradictions by modernizing the party's mobilizational and alliance behaviour and changing the party's internal life. Left Eurocommunism, often inspired by the PCI, posited the conditions of PCF strategic success in new ways of approaching the masses which would have encouraged them to participate in the definition and implementation of reform to change their lives. The Left Eurocommunists, in other words, took seriously the proposition of the Twenty-Second Congress that the central contradiction in French society was between advanced capitalism and democracy. In this view, the struggle for greater democracy—through workers' control, in part—was a struggle against monopoly capitalism and for socialism. If the 'go-it-alone' critique of the United Front/Eurocommunist perspective was that it was strategically wrong, the Left Eurocommunist position was that it was strategically correct, but that, for whatever reasons, the party had not been simultaneously given the means to carry out this strategy.

2. WHAT WAS TO BE DONE?

The defeat of March 1978 created a new situation for the PCF. The Right remained solidly in power. Faced with a deepening economic crisis, it was newly free to make French workers pay a high price for the economic changes which strategists for the French bourgeoisie felt necessary. *Union de la Gauche* and the Common Programme were both dead issues. Each major Left party could measure the extent of its failure and each was determined to rebuild its position. This new situation therefore obliged the PCF to change its line. But in what directions?

Abstract logic dictated that the party should have seized the occasion to begin to resolve all of the contradictions which had prevented success in 1978. But there was nothing abstract about the party's situation. At a moment when new approaches were called for, each current in the PCF moved forward to present different analyses of the failure and propose new solutions. Between the currents existed profound disagreement over what was logical and what was contradictory. Georges Marchais' injunction to the party to 'discuss' the situation after the election was an invitation for differences of opinion to appear in public, although, at the same time, the *Bureau Politique's* announcement that the Socialists were completely responsible for the defeat rather limited the prospects for debate. Changing the PCF's line at a moment when awareness of the contradictions the party faced was high and disagreement between currents ran deep promised to be a difficult and disheartening task.

The impossibility of communications with the Socialists, themselves faced with fundamental questions of how to proceed and engaged in their own inner party struggles, made some form of Communist 'going it alone' almost inevitable. However, 'going it alone' could have been undertaken in any number of ways. It was the specific mode of 'going it alone' upon which the PCF eventually decided which counted. The two key messages which came out of the Central Committee meeting at the end of April 1978 (the first since the election after more than a month of the prescribed 'discussion') resolved little. To begin with, the entire responsibility for the Left's failure was ascribed to the PS, which had 'turned to the Right'. Secondly, the PCF was henceforth to pursue the line of *union à la base*. The first message was not completely true. Many Communists recognized the PCF's share of the responsibility for the failure of the Left and the contradictory behaviour of the party. The second

message was quite unclear. 'Unity from below' was a time-honoured PCF slogan, used often in the past when the party found itself isolated, as in the 'class against class' period, the 1939-41 years, and during the Cold War. It was thus recognizable to more experienced party members. But was it this old-style 'unity from below' which was meant this time, a 'unity' which consisted mainly in attacking social democrats and reinforcing inner party discipline? If so, it was a tactic and not a strategy. With *Union de la Gauche* at the end of its long road, what a confused party needed was a strategy more than a tactic, and this need was felt especially powerfully by the post-1968 generation of party militants who had known only *Union*. To many such militants 'unity from below' implied action unconnected with any vision of social change, a deeply troubling prospect.

In fact, the lack of strategic clarity in the call for 'unity from below' was not accidental. It followed from a profound lack of agreement between currents within the party and, even more importantly, within the leadership, about strategy, as we will presently see. Nonetheless, to many in the PCF, the leadership's proposal for a shift away from strategic clarity around *Union de la Gauche* to strategic confusion around 'unity from below' was deeply discomfiting. The turn towards confusion was all the more troublesome because it occurred within the context of a major internal explosion of discontent about how the party worked, as well as its past activities. Thus a deeply divided leadership which could agree only on a confusing line was faced with the task of creating consensus around this line at a moment when the basic structures of the inner-party life, used to create consensus, were being fundamentally challenged.

What Strategy for the Future?

The United Front/Eurocommunist line had no clear future after March 1978. Left Eurocommunists, who had an alternative to this line which would have built on the 1978 failure without discarding the central policies of the older strategy, were too weak to prevail. Thus events ensured that the 'go-it-alone' current, coalesced in the party leadership around Roland Leroy, editor of *l'Humanité* and a member of the Secretariat of the party, was empowered to promote new political initiatives. Nevertheless, if the 'go-it-alone' current was in a position to suggest certain *tactics* for the post-electoral period, its primary ambition was to work a fundamental change in the PCF's *strategy*, one which amounted to a renunciation of Eurocommunism. On the level of strategy, however, no consensus was possible on a

'go-it-alone' perspective. The drama in all this, then, was that no **current** within the PCF was in a position to propose a strategy which could be accepted.

The short-term tactical aspects of the proposed 'go-it-alone' strategy were clear. The PCF should seek to prevent the Socialists from coming anywhere near the **PCF's** natural and traditional social base, while at the same time doing everything possible to deepen party support in this base. The target groups were workers, the poor, and the populations of regions especially hard hit by economic crisis. Working to appeal to such groups, the PCF could count on maximizing its own strengths, its ability to organize at the plant level, for example, and its credibility as a tribune for the poor and the economically threatened. These strengths were, simultaneously, the Socialists' greatest weaknesses. The PCF could generate and lead militant struggles against plant shutdowns, industrial restructuring, or the effects of the European Economic Community on southern farmers in ways which the PS, which lacked the resources, the skills and, for the most part, the will to do so, could not. Beyond this, such actions were to be accompanied by a constant and strident barrage of anti-Socialist propaganda designed to strip the PS of any and all Left credibility which it might have gained with the groups in question during the time of *Union de la Gauche*.⁷

The 'go-it-alone' current was not simply proffering short-term tactics, however. As a strategy, to 'go it alone' would imply a drastic change in PCF perspectives. The proposed line was based on the premise that the Socialists were irreparably class-collaborationist, that they could *never* be counted on to be loyal allies in any real process of change. The argument claimed further that, in the profound economic crisis faced not only in France but everywhere in Europe—a crisis which was destined to last indefinitely—social democracy had become the major strategic option of monopoly capitalism, the best way to enlist the co-operation of workers for anti-working-class policies. The principal conclusion which flowed from this analysis was that, as the crisis deepened, the PS would move ever more decisively to the Right, towards direct co-operation with the bourgeoisie. In the process, it would expose the hollowness of the progressive rhetoric which it had deployed in the seventies. In this context, if the PCF strengthened its position among workers and the poor, relentlessly denounced the Socialists, and maintained its radical purity, much of the social and electoral strength which had flowed to the Socialists during *Union de la Gauche* would abandon the PS and respond to the new appeals from the PCF. The 'go-it-alone'

strategy, then, was based on a projection that French social democracy was headed for a disaster from which the PCF, if it followed an appropriate course, was bound to profit. The second major conclusion which followed from the 'go-it-alone' analysis was that the entire strategy of *Union de la Gauche* had been wrong, from beginning to end.

The short-term, tactical side of the 'go-it-alone' perspective was sufficiently plausible in the aftermath of March 1978 to provide a content for 'unity from below' which elicited support within the party beyond those who accepted the perspective as a full-blown strategy. By renouncing an immediate search for allies and the political restraint which that entailed, the PCF could concentrate its efforts on strengthening its position within those areas where it felt most comfortable and still had the best chance of success. They also effectively neutralized Eurocommunist strategic objectives. United **Front/Eurocommunists** and Left Eurocommunists could both see 'go-it-alone' tactics, as opposed to strategy, as useful for their own ends. The first current, looking to the moment when the balance of forces might shift in favour of the PCF so that United **Frontism** at the top could be renewed, could see some potential for re-balancing in 'unity from below'. Left Eurocommunists could approve the shift in PCF emphasis towards mobilizational activity at the base and away from simple electoralism. They could hope that, through their actions, the nature of this mobilization could become fully democratic and *autogestionnaire*.

Consensus on these 'go-it-alone' tactics was not total, however. To the degree to which 'unity from below' was not connected to a long-term perspective for broader social change, it discomfited numbers of Communists, accustomed to long years in which such perspectives had been clear. Some even wondered whether such tactics might not be counterproductive. If the PCF were unable to provide the masses with anything except local struggles without a foreseeable payoff in social change, might they not be further demobilized? Worse still, the Socialists would certainly be willing to provide a global view of change, however misleading it might be. Would not such a view be doubly enticing in the absence of any Communist counterpart? The most powerful, if difficult to weigh, opposition to this form of 'unity from below' came from important leaders of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), the PCF's vital labour ally. The CGT was a mass trade union organization (staffed and run by tens of thousands of militants, many of whom were Communists) whose success depended, to an important extent,

on its ability to appeal to workers on trade union grounds, regardless of political belief. The CGT had been badly burned in its mass appeal by its too-close identification with the PCF's position during the electoral period. This, plus the fact that the economic crisis also had a serious effect on its mobilizational capacities, made many of its leaders newly conscious of the need to establish greater CGT autonomy from the PCF. To the degree to which 'unity from below' meant the Communists would focus their efforts on attacking the Socialists, the danger was great that Communists acting as trade unionists within the CGT, would do the same thing and would further politicize the CGT, thus limiting its mass appeal.⁸

If the 'go-it-aloners' could create a coalition of support in the party on their tactics—even if this coalition had its limits—the longer-term strategy which they offered and tried to impose was powerfully divisive. To the degree to which it was sectarian and anti-pluralist, it threatened the very foundations of Eurocommunism, its strategic perspectives of peaceful change based on pluralistic alliance politics.⁹ Because the 'go-it-alone' strategic perspective ultimately implied the denunciation of the United Front/Eurocommunist policies which the Marchais leadership and the party organization had carried on for a decade, with massive rank and file support, it was completely unacceptable to large numbers of Communists who believed in the United Front/Eurocommunist strategy. Left Eurocommunists saw themselves as the correctors of the flaws which had been allowed to develop in the PCF strategy in the decade, mainly of its top-down approach and its failure to devise new democratic and *autogestionnaire* mobilizing techniques. But their goal was a broadened and modified Eurocommunism. 'Going it alone' strategically was thus perceived as catastrophic to them as well.

Thus the PCF slipped into a confusing stalemate after March 1978. Old-style *Union de la Gauche* was at least temporarily unworkable. The post-electoral balance of currents within the party and its leadership gave more initiating power to advocates of the 'go-it-alone' perspective. But the proponents of such a perspective could gain acceptance only for their short-term tactics, and only for some of those. 'Unity from below' was defined in their terms, then, not because their strategy was acceptable but rather, because their tactical suggestions could create something of a consensus. On a strategic plane no consensus existed on 'going it alone'. Far from it. But no consensus existed on any other strategy either. In effect, as the PCF moved towards its Twenty-Third Congress it had no

strategy, or rather, the different currents within the party each had their own, but with no one current able to impose its views on the whole party.

Organizational Contradictions and the Problem of Order

It was in this context of strategic conflict between different currents that problems in the inner life of the party exploded. When the mobilizational tension of the electoral period relaxed, Communists turned their attention naturally towards a search for explanations for the 1978 failure. Beginning immediately after the elections, the party, at all levels, scrutinized the past, the behaviour of the leadership and the internal life of the PCF in ways, and with a breadth of scope, which were entirely new in Communist history. No stones were left unturned and few opportunities were lost—including opportunities for public expression *outside* the party—to ask the most probing questions. The response of the leadership to the beginnings of debate rapidly turned the more discontented towards a thorough questioning of the party's internal life. Immediately after the election the *Bureau Politique* enjoined the party to a full discussion of what had happened, while at the same time itself giving schematic explanations of things—the most important being that the failure was the fault of the Socialists—which seemed to admit of no appeal. Moreover, if the party's official spokesmen often acknowledged that 'wide-ranging discussion' was taking place, they never acknowledged what was being discussed. *L'Humanité* did the same thing, which meant that the actual themes of the debate were never officially disseminated throughout the party. The characterization of the party's new openness at the rank and file level by a prominent *contestataire* as *le droit de râler* (the right to grouse without consequences) seemed rather appropriate.¹⁰

From the point of view of the Communists' need for new clarity, particularly about the party's own life, this explosion came at the appropriate moment. From the point of view of the leadership, concerned, at the critical moment of transition, with order, the timing could not have been worse. One of the principal responsibilities of the PCF's leadership has always been to ensure consensus within the party so that it could act in the world in a unified way. In the aftermath of March 1978 this duty was felt with great urgency. Historic failures in and of themselves carry the risk of disintegration for any party. Beyond this, the failure created a new situation calling for a changed line. Promoting consensus during a change of line would have been arduous. On top of all this, there was serious

conflict, and not only among the leadership, about what this new line should and might be. The conflict was such that it created a balance of forces out of which no coherent new direction could emerge. In such a context, the development of a major internal crisis in the PCF was bound to intensify the leaders' fears of critics and disintegration. As if to fan such fears, the situation quickly led to unprecedented forms of rebellion. Prominent *contestataires* were so determined to press for change in the party that they flouted basic rules in the process. The flood of letters, petitions, articles and books which appeared outside the party's own forums (which, we have already noted, were almost completely closed to the protestors, even those who did first offer their contributions to party publications) in the 'bourgeois media' amounted to conscious efforts by rebels to circumvent normal patterns of party debate and create new channels of horizontal communication.¹¹

It was not only the question of order which pushed PCF leaders towards restoring consensus in the party. The urgency of this task was reinforced by the play of currents within the leadership itself. The partisans of 'going it alone' were pushing Georges Marchais and his current on the defensive because of the failures of 1977-8 on issues of strategy. Crisis and dissent in the party would obviously become additional weapons against Marchais, and against the whole Eurocommunist approach, were they to spread too far. Thus the balance of currents as well as traditional responses and duties pushed the leadership to place its highest priority on the problem of discontent in the party. The resolution of the problem was not simple, however. The first tactic of the leadership was to identify and isolate the most dangerous protestors. Here the progress of Eurocommunization within the party, insufficient though it had been, made it impossible to label the *contestataires* as renegades and traitors and to expel them. In addition, rank and file Communists knew that the issues underlying the discontent were real and demanded that they be discussed. Thus, the most radical *contestataires* had to be isolated while the bulk of debate around the issues troubling ordinary Communists had to be directly into existing party channels in ways that would ultimately rebuild unity.

Identifying the milieu where the most troublesome protestors lived was not difficult. Only intellectuals possessed the will and the tools to carry discontent outside normal party channels, since their profession involved manipulating words and their institutional position gave them privileged access to the media. The first job for the leadership, then, was to isolate those intellectuals willing to

break party rules to express their rebellious views from the rest of Communist intellectuals. This task involved, to begin with, giving the bulk of Communist intellectuals new reasons to express their views *within* the party and new issues about which to talk. The leadership counted on such expression to result in a moderation of positions. Perhaps the most significant internal step in this direction was taken by Georges Marchais very early after March 1978 when he announced that there would be no expulsions, no matter what. This meant that determined *contestataires* were deprived of a fundamental tactic, that of provoking the party leadership into the kind of retaliation which would have created martyrs.

The leadership's campaign to channel discontent into the party was pursued vigorously after the summer vacations of 1978—the leaders hoping, of course, that the long French vacations would themselves have a calming effect. Then, in the early fall, a number of new concessions were granted, some in party procedures, some on political questions. Pledges were made, for example, that the forthcoming Twenty-Third Congress would institute changes in party regulations so as to allow much more political discussion. The promise of regular open forums in *l'Humanité* and the other party press, made in the spring, was reiterated. Beyond this, the leadership moved to provide evidence that it was capable of confronting a number of issues of substance which the protestors had raised. For example, criticism had been rife about the high costs of the PCF's inability to confront its own past, in particular its historic acceptance of aspects of Soviet society and the Soviet party as a model for its own theory and actions. In September 1978, immediately prior to the most important Communist event of the new year, *La fête de l'Humanité*, the official party publisher released *L'URSS et nous*, a series of essays about the past and present of the Soviet Union.¹² *L'URSS et nous*, authored by five Communists, received the blessing of the *Bureau Politique* which urged all Communists to read and discuss its contents. The book documented the ghastly human costs of Stalinism and began to analyse Soviet social structure in a search for the causes of such aberrations, concluding with a strong condemnation of the persistent lack of democracy in the USSR. Since these questions had not been fully broached by the PCF previously, the book's appearance was greeted both inside and outside the party as a sign of progress. More important, party discussions of the book, as called for by the *BP*, clearly engaged Communist intellectuals.¹³ On quite another issue, that of the PCF's historically inept approach to the proliferation of new, issue-oriented social movements, another

party-sponsored book, *La Condition féminine*, engaged militants in a new reflection on the women's movement as well as a consideration of the party's treatment of women within its own ranks.¹⁴

The encouragement of debate — particularly among intellectuals — on issues as important as the USSR and the women's movement revealed the complexity of the leadership's tactics. *Vis à vis* the outbreak of protest within the party, both matters were diversions, in that they pulled militants' attention strongly away from the burning issues of the 1978 failure. The debate on the Soviet Union rapidly focused on 1956 and the PCF's error in not seizing the occasion of the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU to begin de-Stalinizing. This raised the possibility, of course, that Maurice Thorez, dead since 1964, would be blamed for 1978 because of what he had not done in 1956. On the other hand, the discussion about the USSR and women had their own positive dynamic. They were often the first party discussions by rank and file militants of these questions from critical points of view. Therefore, even if they did provide a diversion in the context of 1978, they also meant that in the future the PCF would be led to develop a more complex and subtle position on both the USSR and the women's movement. In addition, they allowed new areas of questioning to be officially opened within the party which could not easily be shut down or ignored in the future.

Later, in December, the leadership took the unprecedented step of inviting 400 selected Communist intellectuals, including a number of the most prominent *contestataires*, to a weekend encounter with the entire *Bureau Politique* to discuss the problems of intellectuals. It was quite unclear what the leadership intended to produce through this, except to give intellectuals some direct sense that the BP would listen to them and to give members of the BP their chance to tell the audience what the proper attitude of a Communist intellectual should be. Nevertheless, the meeting turned out to be much more tumultuous and frank than anyone had expected. *L'Humanité* faithfully published excerpts from the weekend, including a number of quite corrosive criticisms of the leadership made from the floor. Georges Marchais was visibly moved by the proceedings, to the point of promising, in an impromptu closing talk, that the PCF would undertake a profound overhaul of its perspective on the role of intellectuals in both society and the party.¹⁵ The meeting of 400 was officially followed by a series of local encounters with intellectuals in party sections throughout the country.

Calls to understanding and real concessions were also accompanied

by calls to order. The leadership's goal was not only to conciliate Communist intellectuals and reaffirm their place within the PCF (and therefore, discourage them from going outside to criticize) but also to re-establish limits on legitimate behaviour within the party. Thus, Paul Laurent, the *BP*'s most prominent 'liberal' and the one figure to whom protestors looked for support, published his own book about the PCF in the fall of 1978. *Le PCF comme il est* was full of discussion about the presence and extent of inner-party democracy. The book was adamant that the foundation of this democracy would only be democratic centralism, that the party's success depended on this rule, and that violations of this rule created 'tendencies' which would compromise the PCF's chances for success and survival. The message was clear: proprieties must be respected.

Urging respect for proprieties was not enough. The leadership wanted also to make sure that, once the more extreme *contestataires* were isolated, the party's own media of communication were free from contamination by *contestation* and gave no encouragement, even inadvertently, to unhappy Communists. Taking the party in hand meant that, in the fall and winter of 1978-9, the party's line, and *only* the party's line, was to be disseminated by the party press and throughout the PCF at all levels. In other words, the context of party debate was to be carefully limited, as necessary. There was obviously no problem with *l'Humanité*, controlled as it was by Roland Leroy, leader of the 'go-it-alone' current. In fact, *l'Humanité* was so well in hand that from reading it one would have had a very difficult time discovering that there was any discontent within the party at all. Such was not the case elsewhere, however. Thus when *La Nouvelle Critique*, the PCF's prestigious monthly for intellectuals, published the first of two instalments of observations on the party by *contestataires*, the leadership called in the editorial board, obliged them to stop publication of the second instalment, and threatened the very existence of the review if it did not change its ways.¹⁶ *France Nouvelle*, the official weekly of the Central Committee which had, after the Twenty-Second Congress, become one of the better sources of intelligent Eurocommunist thought, was also dealt with. First of all, known *contestataires* on the editorial collective were excluded from the board.¹⁷ Next, the contents of the magazine were subjected to ever more severe editorial control until *France Nouvelle* quickly lost all of its originality, becoming virtually indistinguishable from *l'Humanité* in its position. This process, in turn, led to the resignation of six members of the editorial collective, one by one.¹⁸

Controlling the PCF press more thoroughly was not the only

tactic deployed to shape and limit the context of debate within the party. Exemplary action was taken *vis-à-vis* party organizations themselves—the Paris Federation in particular—which had harboured more than their share of *contestation*. The *Fédé de Paris*, where 'liberalism' had been the work of Paul Laurent when he served as its First Secretary (before his promotion to the top party leadership), had become the most open and Eurocommunist of perhaps any of the PCF's Federations. Moreover, since Paris was also the centre of French intellectual life, it was not at all surprising to find that this Federation had a goodly share of *contestatates*. 'Working on' the *Fédé de Paris* to get it to solve its 'problems' with protestors was therefore a logical step for the leadership. Thus, in December the Central Committee raked the Paris Federation over the coals. In January the entire Paris Federal Secretariat was requested, by the *Bureau Politique*, to engage in a self-criticism about Paris' 'opportunism' in the past *vis-à-vis* the Socialists and its policies on intellectuals. Not only did the Secretariat refuse to do so but it also counter-attacked, accusing the *Bureau Politique* of erroneous appreciations of the experience of *Union de la Gauche* and the nature of the Socialist Party, plus blindness about the real problems which the party faced among new intermediary strata of the population.

The most public results of this move against Paris were the resignation of the Federal First Secretary, Henri Fiszbin, in January, followed by the resignation of almost all the rest of the Paris Secretariat at the April Conference of the Federation. But rather more important than these resignations were the effects of the threat to Paris on the behaviour of the whole Paris party organization, down to the level of sections and cells. Middle-level party officials knew that they would be held responsible if further troubles with *contestatates* broke out. They recognized that the *Fédé* itself was vulnerable to further sanctions if the future included more problems of protest. As a result, they themselves began to limit and channel debate at the base. Sometimes the methods used to do so were heavy-handed. More often, however, they were the more subtle approach of *permanents* in Paris disseminating what the French call *la bonne parole*. Party officials repeated over and over again, in their contacts with rank and file Communists, that things were not as bad as they seemed, that the party had made progress in recent times and that further progress was possible if militants struggled intelligently within the party to promote it. What Paris officials did, then, in response to attack from the top was to urge a tactical retreat on their Eurocommunist troops. Limits on inner party protest were

presented as the best ways to survive into better days, when the good fight for Eurocommunism could be taken up again. For the most part, the message was well understood at the rank and file level.

The general tactics adopted by the party during this period led towards limiting debate and discontent as well. To begin with, the leadership followed the astute course of deluging the rank and file with different things to do and discuss, such that the central issues in the party's internal crisis were eclipsed by calls to day-to-day activity. Beyond this, the 'go-it-alone' approach adopted by the party after the elections stressed action towards workers, the poor and those most victimized by the crisis of French capitalism. Action *vis-à-vis* new middle strata was downplayed as a result. Such tactics, in themselves, stimulated strong responses of *ouvrierisme* in the PCF, reflex responses which were powerful among French Communists even in more ordinary circumstances. One major aspect of this *ouvrierisme* was, of course, anti-intellectualism. It has never been very hard for much of the PCF membership to see Communist intellectuals as potential agents of the bourgeoisie, redeemed only by their submission to the vanguard mission of the working class. This perspective, transformed into guilt, has always been present among Communist intellectuals as well. The party's year-long mobilization for the European elections in June 1979, illustrates this well. The PCF's position, strongly 'go it alone' and partly designed to attack the Socialists who were both quite European and tied internationally to the German Social Democrats (to the PCF, the symbol of social democratic betrayal), was *ouvrieriste* and nationalist. The PCF opposed the expansion of the European Community to include Greece, Spain, and Portugal, while blaming 'Europe of the multinationals' and its French promoters and defenders for the 'decline of France'. Anyone (intellectuals in particular), who was sensitive to the different positions of the PCI and PCE and to any of the difficult realities of an already existing international division of labour was placed in an impossible situation. To the degree to which they voiced objections, they could be disqualified as anti-working-class and/or, in the context of the post-electoral difficulties, *contestataires*. As a result, they kept quiet, for the most part.

The so-called 'anti-Communist campaign', which the leadership discovered anew in the fall of 1978, had similar effects. The PCF's stress on this campaign was premised on the not altogether incorrect notion that in the aftermath of electoral defeat the bourgeoisie, and also the PS, had set their sights on a major reduction in Communist influence, with the destruction of the PCF as a longer-term goal.

According to the PCF, the media were the chosen instrument of this attack, which had as one of its central objects promotion of the belief that socialist change led automatically to *gulags* and that, in consequence, people would be wise to make the best of capitalism—all the fracas around the 'new philosophers' was cited as a prime example of this. One of the purposes of the stress on the 'anti-communist campaign'—which later became the 'ideological war' in the project for the Twenty-Third Congress—was to create the atmosphere of a besieged fortress within the party. Whatever the accuracy of the leadership's analyses of the party's situation, mobilization to defeat the anti-Communist campaign created another powerful constraint on the expression of unorthodox views by Communists. More specifically, it created an automatic mechanism for the disqualification of anything *contestataires* said outside the party. Writing in *Le Monde*, publishing books on the PCF, appearing independently on television, being interviewed by the *Nouvel Observateur*, all became activities which demonstrated either the political *naïveté* or the treasonable intentions of any Communist who did such things.

By February 1979, when the PCF began the preparation of the Twenty-Third Congress, *contestation* had been roundly defeated. Intellectual *contestataires* still existed, to be sure, and still tried to make their voices heard *within* the party.¹⁹ Indeed there was even some attempt to set up in Paris a regular public forum in which unorthodox views could be discussed, an experiment which revealed as much about the profound differences of opinion between protestors as anything else. What was important, however was that communications between *contestataires* and normal party life had been cut off. Serious discontent still existed within the PCF, with large numbers of rank and file Communists willing to speak their mind on any occasion. However, the bulk of discontent was directed inwards, through acceptable party channels. Moreover, an atmosphere of intimidation had been created which significantly moderated the thrust and intensity of this discontent. Few of the basic issues raised by such discontent had been dealt with, however, and in particular those about the way that the PCF worked internally. And, the process of controlling discontent had magnified old habits—which might in turn block serious confrontation with issues in the future. Complete consensus had not been restored either. For this however, the party leadership had an immense weapon in reserve—the preparation of the Twenty-Third Congress.

3. THE TWENTY-THIRD CONGRESS: THE FUTURE BEGINS NOW?

The tri-annual Congress of the PCF is perhaps the most important single institution in the life of the party. The Congress, composed of delegates from the rank and file, is the official legislature for French Communist policy. The preparation of the Congress, in which past and future strategies of the party are elaborated, is the high point of the 'democracy' of democratic centralism. The Congress decides the PCF's line for the following three years. Its delegates elect the party's Central Committee, charged with overseeing the execution of the line between Congresses. The Central Committee, in turn, elects the *Bureau Politique* and the *Secretariat* of the party, the PCF's day-to-day leadership. Historically, PCF Congresses have had two major functions. First, they have had the manifest function of debate and deliberation on the party's past and future which the party's statutes have given them. Secondly, they have had the purpose of regenerating consensus within the PCF. Preparation of the Congress and the Congress itself have always had the goal of creating broad agreement within the party on the courses which it should follow, so that the PCF could face the world in the post-Congress period united.²⁰

If the PCF's claim to hold democratic discussion prior to the Congress and its obvious desire to emerge from the Congress unanimous seem to conflict, it is because these two functions have, in fact, often been in opposition. Historically, the creation of unanimity around the leadership's policies has been more important than the consideration of policy alternatives for the Congress. The institutional key to this has always been the current leadership's power to stack the preparation of the Congress in favour of the policies which they desired. This power comes from two sources. First, the huge effort to prepare a Congress has always begun with the leadership's submission of a detailed and complete proposal to the rank and file of the policies which the Congress should adopt. This proposal then has provided the framework for pre-Congress discussion. In the history of the PCF this has meant that militants prepared Congresses on the basis of a line already decided upon by the leadership. There has never been any possibility, for example, of proposing and discussing alternative projects or of the leadership submitting a number of options to the party. As a result the task of the rank and file has been the cosmetic alteration and, ultimately, ratification of, a pre-existing line rather than open debate without *a priori*. The quest for consensus has predominated over the desire for

any consideration of policy alternatives. Beyond this, the leadership has always possessed a repertory of devices to ensure that the actual preparation of the Congress moves in the direction of the unanimous ratification of the project which they have proposed. At every stage, procedures for regulating debate, considering amendments, and electing representatives to the next level of preparation are organized by higher instances of the party.²¹ The final result of these procedures and powers has not been that discussion and debate have been absent from Congresses and their preparation. Rather, it has been that the purpose of such discussion and debate has not been to make decisions. Instead, the preparation of Congresses has provided experience not unlike a vast inner-party school familiarizing Communists with the scope and characteristics of the party's new line in order to give them the facilities to deploy this line in the outside world after the Congress.

The primacy of solidarity over any real debate about policy alternatives in the history of the PCF's Congresses has not been accidental. Desire to balance the two functions in any equitable way disappeared in the Thorez era, when the practices of the Soviet Party were taken as a model. Perceptible change in the situation, perhaps more than in any other area, would be a tangible index of the PCF's real movement away from the legacies of Stalinism in its internal life. Thus, every Congress in recent times has been a test. The Twenty-Second Congress, for example, whose resolutions became the lynch-pin of PCF Eurocommunism, represented progress in the party's understanding of its environment but was prepared in the old ways. The Eurocommunist line came down from the leadership and the adoption of the new resolutions—the dictatorship of the proletariat was eliminated from party strategy by a virtually unanimous vote of the Congress—was engineered in the traditional fashion. The Twenty-Third Congress was an important event not only because of the complexity and confusion of its context, therefore, but also for what it might say about change in the PCF's internal life.

Alas, the Twenty-Third Congress could not stand aside from nor overcome the party's difficult position in 1978-9. The leadership's proposed Congress resolution, when it appeared in February 1979 to initiate the three months of Congress preparation, began with a title-slogan 'The future begins now'. Party militants who read the long text were entitled to ask to what future this referred. If it were a future of confusion, contradiction, and uncertainty, then the document's title was appropriate. Party policy was not supposed to

reflect the chaos of reality, however, but to provide Communists with a clear line with which to make sense of the chaos. For the Twenty-Third Congress, the leadership's project fell short of this goal. It reflected, instead, the strategic and tactical bewilderment of the post-March 1978 period. Rather than setting out any clear perspective for the future, it *amalgamated* the positions of the currents existing within the party. While it did betray a certain bias, that of the 'go-it-alone' current, it did not foreclose other strategic possibilities. In short, it was a document designed to make peace among Communists in the present which would give those with future control over the party a number of options from which to choose.

The core policies which the document proposed were 'unity from below' and 'struggle'. The key to the future lay in mobilizing 'at the base', focusing on workers and white collar employees, the centre of the social alliance which, once constructed in the context of profound and ineluctable economic crisis, would flow outwards to incorporate new intermediary strata and thus shift the balance of power within the Left toward the PCF. 'Go-it-alone' strategic perspectives were evident also in the document's characterization of the PS as irretrievably class collaborationist *by nature*, incapable, unless forced by the class struggle, of doing anything but serve the bourgeoisie in its hour of need. The document also revealed that pro-Soviet elements within the PCF had gained new influence. The project, discussing recent history, the international balance of forces and recognizing that socialist countries still misunderstood that democracy was inseparable from socialism, nevertheless pronounced that 'the balance sheet is globally positive' for the socialist countries.²²

The document would have looked like the product of a coalition between 'go-it-alone' strategists and keen defenders of the past attitudes towards the USSR if it had stopped there. And, had it done so, it would at least have had the virtue of some consistency. However, it went farther. The line pursued by the United Front /Eurocommunists in the seventies was not renounced at all; rather it was reaffirmed. Aside from the fact that the document underlined in several places that the Twenty-Third Congress followed the directions set out by the Twenty-Second, it was stated that *Union de la Gauche*, with certain changes based on analyses of the 1978 failure, was a future necessity, when and if 'unity from below' and 'struggles at the base' had sufficiently redressed the balance between the Communists and the Socialists. Moreover, it was not only the *Marchais* version of Eurocommunism which was reaffirmed. Left

Eurocommunists could find aspects of the project which supported their strategic position. 'Unity from below' was not only to be the old-style 'attack the Socialists and steal their base' formula. Instead, it was also to be *autogestionnaire*. Communists would seek out the problems of ordinary people and help them to organize democratically to solve these problems. Moreover, mass organizations and movements were to have their own lives, separate from and independent of that of the party. In this way, the PCF's goal was described as the creation of a society in which the division between those who direct and those who follow would be overcome. Indeed, a great deal of stress was placed on the notion that fundamental change would begin with diverse struggles for *autogestion* and for democracy, rather than be set in motion only by an electoral *grand soir* which would bring the Left to power.

In all this, then, almost everyone in the party could find things as well as bases for profound disagreement. What was lacking was a clear strategic perspective. In fact, this was because the party was unable to agree on any such perspective. The preparatory Congress document thus *did* reveal a significant change in the PCF. De-Stalinization, in the context of the failure of *Union de la Gauche*, had led to a strategic stalemate between the currents within the PCF which could not be overcome to produce a coherent Congress proposal. As a result, various coalitions between currents were formed, almost *ad hoc*, although the document seemed to give relative advantage to the 'go-it-alone' perspective (only in the tactical sense, however), to produce an incoherent document. Thus the Twenty-Third Congress would be unable to fulfil one of the historic functions of the PCF Congress, that of setting out a clear line for the party to follow into the near future. Because it offered something to almost everyone, it might, however, fulfil the other historic function, that of creating inner-party consensus.

The three months between the appearance of the leadership's document and the Congress itself in May provided the very strange spectacle of tens of thousands of Communists debating long and hard to achieve unity on a document whose contents were confusing in the extreme. Indeed, perhaps for this reason, there was more debate and discussion on the Congress proposal than most Communists could remember from the past. This happened partly because almost everyone, including most of those who were unhappy about **March** 1978 and its aftermath, knew that a demonstration of PCF unity to the outside world was important. The actual preparation of the Congress reflected this, even if it was

carried on with little joy. At cell and section level, the degree of democracy in debate depended on the degree to which inner-party changes of the 1970s had already taken root. Where genuine openness had been institutionalized, genuinely open debate for the most part followed. In these cases, however, the structures of the document itself plus awareness on the part of militants of the balance of forces within the party led even severe critics of the party's recent past to *amend* the text rather than reject it. The text helped here. Its strategic balance, reflecting an evident conflict between perspectives within the leadership, gave almost everyone a position to defend *within* the document against other stances, *also* in the document. Amending the proposal meant approving it, of course. In many cases, probably the majority, approval was given because it was prompted from above, since the party organization had been fully mobilized to produce this result.²³

It was at the next level of preparation, that of the federations of the PCF, that the leadership's desire to produce unanimity was most strongly visible. At the Paris Federal Conference, for example, the amount of institutional pressure brought to bear to produce approval of the leadership's project on a group of delegates who obviously favoured the project by an overwhelming majority to begin with was quite *astonishing*.²⁴ This is not to say that real debate and discussion were absent. If there was some genuinely contradictory and critical debate, however, the bulk of the discussion involved elucidating and analysing the Congress document rather than disagreeing with its basic choices. Even so, those presiding over the Conference encouraged an atmosphere of intimidation directed towards those in fundamental disagreement with aspects of the party's position. At the same time, all of the usual devices of contrived discussion, manipulated commissions for the consideration of amendments and prearranged nominations for positions as delegates to the Congress itself were deployed. In the judgement of observers, the same result of near unanimous approval (one vote against; four abstentions out of 580) would have been produced by free and open discussion. The anxiety of the Paris leadership seemed strangely out of place (and similar results occurred elsewhere) unless the difficulties and conflicts of the previous year were taken into account.

The Congress itself, five full days long, was a concert of unanimity, this time less contrived. It was a *grande messe, vieux style*. Speaker followed speaker to approve, illustrate, elaborate, or provide exegesis on the resolution. Out of the eighty or more

delegates who spoke to the Congress, only one made the slightest critical remark about the proposal and his remarks, directed towards the PCF's problems with intellectuals, were clearly within, and perhaps prompted by, the leadership's own position on the question (the two members of the Bureau Politique in charge of work with intellectuals were both dropped from the BP at the Congress, because of their inept performance). There were few signs at the Congress of the huge explosion of protest which had occurred in the party only months earlier. There were few signs either of the deep malaise in large segments of the PCF about the lack of coherence in the resolution produced by the leadership. Instead, the Congress proceeded to make the leadership's text—and the stalemate between currents in the party which it represented—into an historical monument. The Congress document was passed, incoherence and all, unanimously.

CONCLUSIONS

Did the strange spectacle of the PCF's Twenty-Third Congress ratifying an incoherent policy proposal unanimously mean that nothing had been resolved in the period since the 1978 elections? Not quite! For after five full days of perfect ritual communion, an immense surprise occurred in the last hour of the Congress. When Gaston Plissonnier read the list of those elected to the Bureau Politique and its Secretariat, the name of Roland Leroy was not included in the Secretariat. In addition, several known supporters of the Marchais United Front/Eurocommunist position had been promoted both to the BP and to the Secretariat. Roland Leroy, of course, was the leader of the 'go-it-alone' current in the leadership. His demotion meant at least a strategic, if not a tactical, defeat for the 'go-it-alone' group. Since no serious explanation of Leroy's 'defeat' was given, one was obliged to resort to Kremlinological methods to piece together what had happened. In fact, Leroy had pushed his post-election advantage in the leadership too far and in ways which had upset the delicate balance of forces within the party, thus creating a coalition of forces against him, which led to his dramatic downfall. In particular, as the Congress approached, Leroy and the 'go-it-alone' forces had tried to organize a basic repudiation of the entire Union de la Gauche/Common Programme *experience*.²⁵ This presented the rest of the PCF with the possibility that the drive towards Eurocommunism, the stewardship of Marchais (and company), and the all-important Twenty-Second Congress would all be disavowed. Despite the ways in which the preparation for the

Congress had been structured from the top to prevent any outbreak of *contestation* and to produce acceptance of the document, the last few weeks of inner-party discussion (and especially the section and federal conferences) revealed a substantial amount of rank and file resistance to any such drastic disavowal. Officials sent from higher levels to follow these instances of the Congress preparation could not help but notice this opposition to a complete and unequivocal disavowal of *Union de la Gauche* and repudiation of the Twenty-Second Congress. The sentiments of many militants, then, were added to the realities of the external world, to block the full implications of a 'go-it-alone' strategy.

Ultimately, then, the Twenty-Third Congress was a victory for Eurocommunism. Marchais' opening and closing speeches to the Congress affirmed this. In the first, the Secretary-General made a special point of strongly reaffirming the PCF's commitment to Eurocommunism, defining it as a democratic and pluralist vision of transition to socialism. In the second, he re-emphasized that the Twenty-Third Congress was to be interpreted as the continuation of the work of the Twenty-Second. In practical terms, it was not clear what the victory of 'Eurocommunism' implied, however. Permission was granted to the leadership to move back towards *Union de la Gauche* when circumstances looked propitious. However, the immediate tasks of rebalancing forces within the Left would have to absorb quite a bit of Communist effort before such circumstances could exist. *Unzon de la Gauche* was in the PCF's future, then, but probably not before the Presidential elections of 1981.

While the positive aspects of the reaffirmation of Eurocommunism at the Twenty-Third Congress are most important to underline, the negative side should not be overlooked. The defeat of the 'go-it-alone' strategic offensive had occurred not in open debate on issues of principle, but behind the closed doors of the leadership. The party in general had been apprised neither of the dimensions of conflict among its leaders—in which the future of the party was at stake—nor of the reasons why the conflict had concluded with the defeat of one of its major protagonists. Here one saw evidence of some change in the PCF, yet insufficient change, which created new problems. Decision-making in the PCF had once been completely centralized around the Secretary-General. Collective leadership had replaced this in recent years and this was an important step. Yet, collective leadership, given the existence of currents within the party, created conflict within the leadership. The doctrines of collective responsibility and secrecy observed at the top of the party

meant, however, that this conflict was carried on without its nature being communicated to rank and file Communists. There are diverse reasons, good and bad, why debate on different strategic and tactical options has not been extended to the party as a whole—as it has, to a degree, within the PCI. Such debate might generate 'factions' within the party. It might also undermine the PCF's cherished self- and public image of unanimity. It might, finally, sap the party's ability to act coherently in the outside world. On the other hand, forces within the leadership effectively represent currents which really exist, and which have, in different forms, always existed, within the party. Thorezian-Stalinist autocratic centralism simply pretended that the reality of the party was otherwise. It is no longer possible to pretend this. But what now exists is an *ad hoc* system of representation of currents in the leadership covered up by a facade of unanimity. The disadvantages of the system are obvious. Ordinary Communists do not truly participate in the discussions which decide PCF policy. Rather, it is leaders who carry on this discussion in their place, but without revealing its contours and content. In the process, a mythological picture of unity in the party is perpetuated which, in itself, limits the scope of discussion and debate at the base as well as making it very complicated to cope with any instances of conflict which do break out.

The Twenty-Third Congress of the PCF was important, then, more for what it revealed about the party's problems than for solutions which it provided to them. It showed a party internally divided between different strategic currents. The advance of Eurocommunism had clearly been threatened by the 'go-it-alone' current and if the Congress blocked this threat, it did the blocking in a mysterious way which allowed few prognoses for Eurocommunism's future. Basic problems in the party's inner-life remained unresolved. Indeed, the frenetic rush earlier to isolate the *contestataires* and to produce unanimity at the Congress itself may well have been steps *away* from a resolution. The party leadership made new pledges to confront the PCF's past—most notably promising to produce a new official history of the PCF, thereby admitting by implication that existing histories were inadequate. But, by deciding that the 'balance sheet' of Socialist countries was positive, the Congress risked reinforcing some of the more powerful negative reflexes created by this past. The conception of 'unity from below' expressed in terms of democracy and *autogestion* was a promising innovation in the discussion of PCF mobilization behaviour, but there existed little evidence that the party as whole knew how to put this into

practice. The sectarian characterization of the Socialists as inevitable class collaborationists would certainly not make PCF alliance behaviour any more subtle in the future either. The 'future' which 'begins now' at the Twenty-Third Congress is, therefore, an uncertain one for the PCF.

NOTES

1. Here the list of such things is long. Contradictory Central Committee discussion around the signature of the Common Programme in 1972 was hidden from the party until 1975. Only then did ordinary Communists and others learn about the extent of conflict within the party leadership about the signature. In 1974 the rapid shift from harmony with the Socialists to a year-long and quite virulent polemic against them was decreed from above in mysterious ways. The party's shift on defence policy in 1977, which led to a complete reversal of the PCF's positions on the French nuclear deterrent from opposition to support, was never discussed by the party as a whole. The summer 1977 hardening of negotiating positions in the *actualisation* talks with the Socialists, undoubtedly connected to a shift in the balance between currents in the leadership, has never been explained. We could go on, but the point is obvious.
2. For further discussion of this see Geroge Ross, 'The New Popular Front in France', in *The Socialist Register 1977* and George Ross, 'Crisis in Eurocommunism, The French Case', in *The Socialist Register 1978*.
3. The term *current* is used ably, although in a somewhat different sense from the way we use it, in Gerard Molina and Yves Vargas, *Dialogue à l'intérieur du parti communiste* (Paris: Maspero, 1978). In a more recent quasi-official book published by the PCF's publishing house, Jean Burles also uses the term. See J. Burles, *Le parti communiste dans la société française* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1979).
4. The great *affaires* in the PCF's history were, in fact, the settling of accounts between the party leadership and the representatives of currents who refused to accept the leadership's definitions of PCF strategy. Barbe-Célor in the late 1920s was the first. The major post-war *affaires* were those which led to the elimination of Charles Tillon and André Marty in the early 1950s (because of their nationalism), and the banishing of Marcel Servin, Laurent Casanova and a host of lesser figures in 1961 (because of their disagreement with Thorez over the nature of Gaullism and the strategies which ought to be followed to deal with Gaullism). The last, if lesser, *affaire*, was the expulsion of Roger Garaudy in 1969-70 because of Garaudy's positions on new middle strata and intellectuals.
5. In the months after mid 1975 the PCF denounced the Soviet Union's lack of democracy and its actions on human rights, took new steps to make the PCF a mass, as opposed to a *cadre* party, and abolished the

party's commitment to a dictatorship of the proletariat at the Twenty-Second Congress. It also joined the Italians, Spanish and Yugoslavs in opposing Soviet hegemonism at the Conference of European Communist Parties in East Berlin in 1976.

We have stressed the importance of leaders in making inchoate feelings into coherent positions. In this process of Eurocommunization after 1975 it is clear that the role of Jean Kanapa, Georges Marchais's 'brain' and *eminence grise*, was absolutely central. Kanapa, the PCF's international affairs specialist in the mid 1970s, shifted the PCF's positions on the Soviet Union and promoted new contacts with the PCI. Kanapa was also the chairman and chief energizer of the Central Committee work group which prepared the resolution for the Twenty-Second Congress, hence the promoter of the abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. His death in September 1978 was an important blow to the dynamics of the United Front/Eurocommunists. Georges Marchais, essentially a politician oriented to day-to-day action, lost his major connection to theory and longer-term analyses. One can never be sure of the exact importance of individuals in shaping organizations, but the absence of Jean Kanapa was certainly of great significance in the PCF's difficulties after his death.

6. There were other notable instances of conflict between currents causing shifts in PCF policy. It is more than likely, for example, that the PCF's hardened position in the negotiations with the PS over updating the Common Programme in the summer of 1977 followed from a shift in the balance of currents at leadership level.
7. The party developed a unique tactic for discrediting the PS in this period, its stress on the Socialists' alleged 'double language'. Essentially this tactic, directed mainly towards PCF militants, accused the Socialists of lying about their real politics—right wing—when the Socialists said anything with a left tinge, and accused the Socialists of telling the truth—right wing—when the Socialists did talk like social democrats. Such 'heads I win, tails you lose' manicheanism was redolent of the bad old days of the 'class against class' period of the late twenties.
8. The history of the CGT in this period is another story altogether, and a fascinating one at that. The CGT reacted to the 1978 defeat by taking a pronounced turn towards new openness and new independence from the PCF. Its Fortieth Congress in Grenoble in November, 1978 was almost certainly the most democratic and innovative Congress in modern CGT history. It is clear that a number of important CGT leaders, including some Communists, believed that such a new course was, in itself, necessary to ensure the CGT's future. It may also be that the CGT was being prompted in such directions to counterweigh the predominance of 'go-it-alone' perspectives in the party as a weapon on the side of the United Front/Eurocommunists. Certain evidence about the behavior of Georges Seguy, CGT Secretary-General, indicates that he was profoundly opposed to the turn in the *Bureau Politique* of the party, of which he was an important

member towards 'going it alone'. The CGT is always more comfortable, for reasons of mass appeal, when the party is open to other political forces, least so when it is isolated.

The degree to which most of the PCF was attached symbolically to the positions of the Twenty-Second Congress—the high point of PCF Eurocommunism—was evident from the fact that even the most ferocious advocates of 'going it alone' were obliged to present themselves as continuing in the line of the Twenty-Second Congress, even when this was not true.

10. The '*droit de râler*' notion comes from Molina and Vargas, *op.cit.* See also their very interesting contribution in H. Weber and O. Duhamel, *Changer le PCF* (Paris: PUF, 1979).
11. On this see Ross, *Socialist Register* 1978, *op.cit.*, pp. 179 ff., and footnotes.
12. A. Adler *et al*, *L'URSS et Nous* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1978).
13. Debate on *L'URSS et Nous* in the party was not calm. The book attacked some long-cherished rank and file illusions about Socialist societies which numbers of Communists were not eager to relinquish. Indeed, by December or so the book had created a considerable backlash in the party, perhaps contributing to the inclusion in the proposal for the Twenty-Third Congress of the section which concluded with the 'globally positive balance sheet' for Socialist countries. It is certain that the debate led to the coalescence of a pro-Soviet sub-current in the leadership, around the powerful Gaston Plissonnier who, in turn, probably played a major role in the demotion of Roland Leroy which we discuss in the conclusions to the present essay.
14. See Yann Viens, *et al*, *La condition féminine* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1978).
15. For accounts of this meeting see *l'Humanité*, 11 December 1978, pp. 3-9.
16. See *La Nouvelle Critique*, November and December 1979. This latter issue contains a painful explanation by the editors of why they acceded to the leadership's pressure. The articles whose publication was blocked were published, in part, by *Nouvel Observateur* in December.

Jean Rony, an eminent *contestataire* who would not give in, and also a member of the *France Nouvelle* board, simply ceased to be invited to board meetings. For a poignant discussion of the *France Nouvelle* affair see Yvon Quiles, another ex-editor, in *Maintenant*, No. 11, 5 March 1979.

18. At about the same time there was a purge of personnel at *Editions Sociales*, the party publishing house, connected in part to a financial crisis but also with the presence of rebels among the directors of *ES*.
19. Books from PCF dissidents flowed from French presses with incredible rapidity. Both *Les Editions du Seuil* and *François Maspero* established full series of such books. In the Seuil series, all published in 1979, see Raymond Jean, *La singularité d'être communiste*, Jacques Brière (*ex-France Nouvelle*), *Viue la crise!* Gerard Belloin (also *ex-France Nouvelle*), *Nos rêves, camarades*, Antoine Spire, (*ex-Editions Sociales*), *Profession*

Permanent. In the **Maspero** collection, all 1979, see **F. Bouillot** and **J.M. Devésa**, *Un parti peut en cacher un autre*, **Christine Buci-Glucksmann** et al., *L'Ouverture d'une discussion*, **Etienne Balibar**, **Guy Bois**, **G. Labica**, *Ouvrons la fenêtre, camarades!* See also **Hélène Parmelin**, *Libérez les communistes!* (Paris: Stock, 1979). **Jean Rony's** *30 ans du parti* (Paris: C. Bourgois, 1978) is also noteworthy. *Contestataires* also wrote regularly in *Maintenant* in the spring of 1979. Dissident journals such as *Luttes et Dibatés* (Paris) and *Positions* (from the Bordeaux PCF student group) were also influential. Perhaps the most interesting book of all from this period on the PCF is **Weber and Duhamel**, *Changer le PCF*, *Op.cit.* The pieces in this book by **Molina and Vargas** and **Labica** are excellent, while the articles by **Christine Buci-Glucksmann** and **Jean Rony** are perhaps the best discussions of the Left Eurocommunist position to be found anywhere.

20. 'Preparing the Congress' means a long and complex series of activities. First the party leadership publishes its proposal for a Congress Resolution. Next this proposal is debated and amended at cell level, and the cell elects delegates to represent its positions at the Section Conference. During the three month pre-Congress period in 1979 cells were enjoined to meet weekly to discuss different aspects of the proposal. The next step, the Section Conference, repeats the same actions in a concentrated period of two days, while electing its new leadership and delegates to Federation Conference at the same time. The Federation Conference deliberates again on the proposal for two or three days and elects delegates to the Congress. Congress itself sits for almost a week before voting the final resolution.
21. Every preparatory stage for the Congress above that of the cell (and more often than not at the cell level as well) is overseen by a figure (or figures) from the higher leadership, who often colludes with the chair to supervise the momentum of discussion. Amendments to the proposal are considered, first of all, by small committees appointed by the leadership of the instance in question (Section, Federation, Congress) who are empowered to recommend the acceptance of some and the refusal of others. Again, more often than not this means that amendments are **considered which** provide editorial or other change in accordance with **leaderships'** desires, and not in accordance with the desire for open debate. Candidacies for positions of delegates to the next higher instances (Section to Federation, Federation to Congress) are considered in similar Committees which propose a list of nominees only as long as necessary to fill the number of posts and clearly in accordance with that the leadership desires. Such committees also use a number of other criteria, such as social origins, for deciding on officers and delegates, criteria which can be-used to **manipulate** nominations. In 1979, over and above all of this, PCF leaderships at all levels were enjoined to follow certain quite specific criteria of appointment designed to filter out possible *contestataires*. In all of this it is extremely difficult for any obvious unorthodoxy to reach the floor of the Congress itself.

22. The apparition of this *bilan globalement positif* in the Congress proposal probably was due to change in the international environment (in particular the 'human rights' campaign of the Carter administration and the Sino-Vietnamese war), to the inner-party backlash against *L'URSS et Nous* which we have already discussed, and to the new ability of pro Soviet members of the leadership to bargain their support for other policies in exchange for retrenchment on the question of existing Socialist countries, given conflict between currents in the party.
23. Numbers of cells, and a few isolated sections, actually rejected the proposal. But even on these levels, where discontent was most powerful, the proposal was usually approved overwhelmingly.
24. The presence of such a favourable body of delegates was not due to chance, of course. Delegates had been carefully filtered at Section Level in most sections to weed out possible opponents of the proposal. Thus only a very small number of people actually reflected the degree of discontent persisting at the base in their Conference speeches.
25. In the last three weeks or so before the Congress a new and powerful theme was introduced from above into the Congress preparation. This was that the Common Programme had, from the beginning, created a 'demobilizing logic'. There was some attempt on the part of the United Front/Eurocommunists to balance this by discussion of the 'positive aspects' of the Common Programme experience. But it was clear that the debate was being prodded from quarters in the party who believed that this experience had no 'positive aspects' and that it ought to be repudiated outright.