

ORGANIZATION AND STRATEGY IN THE DECLINE OF FRENCH COMMUNISM

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Introduction

The history of the *Parti Communiste Francais* since the mid-1960s is profoundly disturbing. Arguably the strongest Communist party in the advanced capitalist world at the beginning of this period, the PCF has systematically dissipated much of this strength since then. From more than one fifth of the vote, its electoral score had fallen below 10 per cent by 1986. The decline in its mass organizational strength, particularly in the membership and mobilization power of its union ally, the *Confederation Generale du Travail* (CGT), has also been substantial.¹ The party's ideological appeal—its ability to command an attentive audience for its politics and visions of the world beyond its own immediate circles—is now minimal.

The consequences of the collapse of French communism have been little short of tragic for the French Left. Not only has the PCF declined, but along with it so has Marxism in France. In addition, the considerable leftward pressure which a strong Communist movement had been able to apply to the various currents of left of centre opinion has virtually disappeared. If the French Socialists have set a new course towards a gallicized imitation of the promiscuous, media-centred, centrist electoralism of the American Democratic party, while the bulk of the French intelligentsia falls over itself celebrating Toyota capitalism and Tocquevillean politics, the decline of the PCF's ability to persuade is the major reason.

What has befallen the PCF is of more than local interest. To be sure, it has had its own share of serious problems and has made its own share of mistakes. Still, the PCF is a party which has been as energetic in fighting the good anti-capitalist fight over the years as any mass political organization in advanced capitalism. It never fell into the social democratic trap of accepting the post-war Keynesian-Fordist capitalist order as a satisfactory blunting of capitalist oppression, and always sought strategies, tactics and theories pointing in socialist directions. It never accepted the logic of Cold War and American hegemony and persistently struggled for peace and *detente*, often at considerable cost to itself. It never abandoned its belief in the liberating mission of the working class, has been tireless in its efforts to help this class defend itself against capital and arm itself with revolutionary ideas and, in its own organizational life, consistently insisted that the

party itself had to be run by workers.

For many analysts a listing of the extremely adverse conditions which the party has had to face is enough to explain the PCF's sad fate. The movement of capital in crisis has undercut the party's traditional social bases. There has also been a not-unconnected conspiracy against the PCF conducted, in concert, by the rejuvenated French Socialist Party of Francois Mitterrand and the French Right. Moreover, the shift from international *detente* to renewed Cold War—the trans-national dimension of the new Right onslaught—has undeniably hurt the PCF. From this point of view, the party fought against huge odds and, outgunned, was unable to prevail.

However, attributing predominant causal weight to such large external processes averts scrutiny from the party's own responses to these processes. And even the most favourably inclined observers of the French Left—including the PCF leadership—recognize that too much remains unaccounted for by doing so.³ Throughout these years of challenge and ultimate decline, the PCF has been consistently unable to place one foot in front of the other strategically. Instead, faced with a very complicated new world, it has repeatedly tripped itself, walked sideways and, on occasion, stumbled backwards altogether. However difficult the party's new setting has been, it is obvious that the PCF has not been able—far from it—to make the best of its circumstances.

It seems clear, therefore, that the party made serious mistakes in evaluating its situation over the years. Indeed, one need look no further than the party's own contemporary debates for a discussion of the 'mistakes' thesis. To the present leadership, the PCF's united front strategy, begun most recently in the 1960s, was profoundly mistaken and caused the present problems. The party ought instead to have affirmed its separate identity and purposes rather than sought alliances with treacherous social democrats. Opponents of the party leadership claim, conversely, that it was the party's unwillingness to follow united frontism through to its logical conclusions which was the basic mistake. From this point of view, repeated forays into excessive *ouvrierisme* and sectarianism, and atavistic *gauchiste* beliefs that the PCF could survive in militant autonomy are the culprits. One problem with this debate is, of course, that in the modern period the PCF has, at different points, pursued *both* of these strategies and declined with each. Next, and more important, the strategic mistake thesis does not go far enough. The critical matter is to find the reasons *why* mistakes were made.

Yet another argument asserts that the party's system of authoritarian democratic centralism is the cause of decline, that this organizational order created conditions which made good strategic decisions impossible to reach. This position has the initial virtue of pointing to organizational factors and moving away from environmental and 'decisional' reduction-

isms. This essay will show, however, that the PCF's organizational system is vastly more complicated than stereotypical portraits of democratic centralism allow. Moreover, simply asserting that the PCF's authoritarian democratic centralism exists does not *explain* strategic decisions at all. All it implies is that for better or worse such decisions have been made by a very small number of people at the top of the party.⁴

The argument of this essay is that however adverse the conditions faced by French Communism, the PCF's decline has proceeded quite as much from the effects of the contradictory workings of its internal life. In consequence, the PCF has lacked the capacities necessary to make the far-sighted strategic decisions which challenging times have demanded. What follows is not, however, the usual 'democratic centralism doesn't work' discussion. Things are much more complicated than this, as we will argue in the first part of the essay. The PCF's essential problems have followed from a paralytic stand-off of genuine strategic conflict inside the party, even if the weight of this stand-off has been greatly increased by the workings of democratic centralism. It has not been an absence of internal political debate which has caused the PCF's problems, but the distorted and inconclusive nature of the actual, and very real debate, which *has* occurred. Part II will then use the results of this exploration to sketch new analyses of PCF strategic decision-making at critical junctures in the party's recent history: in the 1960s; from 1974-79 during and after 'rupture' of *Union de la Gauche*; and in the contemporary period. More generally, the essay tries to raise deep questions about how a mass anti-capitalist Left might organize itself, and it is to these questions which we will turn in conclusion.

I. ANALYSING PCF INTERNAL LIFE

Democratic Centralism: Fiction and Fact

The PCF's internal structures are easy to present in abstract ways. A 'base' of ordinary members and *militants*—the distinction being between occasional participants and genuine activists—is organized into cells of three types, urban or rural local geographical, and workplace. Cells are then aggregated into Sections. Cells and Sections are the main organisms for outreach (mobilization, propaganda, proselytization) and for 'creating a vanguard'—integrating and socializing new recruits into party life. In principle the PCF, even by the 1980s, had not ceased being a *cadre* party, with 'good' Communists being not simply passive cardholders and dues payers but active in advancing the party's goals in the "outside world and in incorporating party perspectives into their lives and identities.

Sections are aggregated into Federations. Federation leaderships are elected by delegates designated by Section Conferences which are convened during the triennial period of Congress preparation. From

Federation level upwards one tends to find *permanents*, full-time party functionaries, whose *career* is the PCF. Federation Conferences, which occur just prior to Congresses, elect delegates to the triennial Congress itself. The Congress then elects the members of the party Central Committee, the PCF's 'parliament' (140 members or so of late). Once constituted at the Congress, the Central Committee elects the party's day-to-day 'government', the *Bureau Politique* (20 or so), the more restricted *Secretariat* of the Central Committee (at present seven members of the BP) and the Secretary General.

The triennial Congress resolution setting out the party's analyses and strategy for the coming period is, in principle, the PCF's basic law binding all Communists from top to bottom of the party until the next Congress. Congress resolutions thus are the documents of reference, along with reports from periodic Central Committees convened to discuss implementing Congress guidelines, both for Communists themselves and analysts of the party. The day-to-day operation of this 'binding' is achieved through the system of democratic centralism, the key procedural doctrine of PCF inner life.

For public consumption, PCF democratic centralism is presented as conforming to textbook Leninist descriptions. Its major 'democratic' moment occurs during the months of Congress preparation, when all Communists debate fully and openly about the party's analyses and strategies for the next three years. On the basis of debate which proceeds from bottom up through each level of PCF organization, new analytical and strategic 'laws' evolve and are adopted.

Once these laws are officially voted, the 'democratic' moment of democratic centralism ends and the 'centralist' one begins. Henceforth, until the opening of debate for a new Congress, all Communists, whatever their position in the party and whatever reservations they may have had about the Congress' outcome, are obligated to implement the new line. In this stylized version of democratic centralism, then, one 'line' and one only will exist in the party, excepting only those moments just before the Congress when the party's primary goal is to debate democratically the constitution of a new line.

The shortfall between profession and fact about democratic centralism is great and widely recognized, even inside the party.⁵ To begin with, actual processes of Congress preparation start with the top party leadership, the *Bureau Politique*, debating the basic lines of analysis and strategy which *it* thinks appropriate. This leadership then convenes a sub-committee of the Central Committee to put together a long 'Project of Resolution' for the coming Congress. This document, once adopted by the full Central Committee (ordinarily a quasi-automatic process) is then submitted, in elaborated and internally consistent form—a documentary *fait accompli*—to the party as a whole for the purposes of 'democratic' debate. From this

point the leadership mobilizes the party apparatus from the top down to ensure that the original 'project' gets adopted without substantial changes.⁶ Except in unusual circumstances, critics have little chance to reshape the document. This, plus the fact that advancement in party careers is determined by close observation from above, means that the line initially set out by the leadership will eventually be adopted if not unanimously, then overwhelmingly.⁷ Thus in contrast to the insistence of textbook democratic centralism that there be only one line in the party after the Congress has spoken, in fact, there exists immense pressure for there to be only one line *during* Congress preparation.

It should come as no surprise that the 'real existing' PCF has been organizationally long on centralism and short on internal democracy. Open, conflictual debate which eventuates in decisions directly 'representing' the tenor of the debate is very rare.⁸ Yet the story does not end here. Indeed, this is but the point of departure of our argument. How does such a party work? The answer is to be found within the very complicated patterns of representation and decision-making which actually do exist in the PCF.

Adding Complexity: Currents and Distorted Representation

The secret to the understanding of the modern PCF is to recognize that it has consistently been a maze of buried, denied but nonetheless lively and politically salient internal conflicts. 'Currents', representing basic differences about strategy, tactics and the identity of the party itself persist inside the party, no matter what the official line of the party might be at any given time. The primary sources of such conflict have been in deeply rooted internal divisions about appropriate strategy for the party, traceable to residues of the party's strategic past. To speak metaphorically, the different strategic moments of the PCF's history have *all* lived on, in complex ways, embedded in different parts of the party. The ways in which strategic pasts and presents co-exist inside the party provide the most important key to unravelling mysteries about the party's inability to devise adequate strategic responses to the challenges which it has faced since the 1960s.

At least since the 1930s, the PCF has regularly alternated between two very different strategies, united frontism and militant autonomy (which we will henceforth call 'going it alone'). United frontism has been the PCF's approach when it seemed desirable to pursue governmental power in France. It was consecrated originally by the Comintern's 1930s decision to promote 'United Fronts Against Fascism'. It was resurrected, in different tactical forms, during and after the War; and then, as *Union de la Gauche* from the early 1960s to 1977 and from 1981 to 1984.⁹ In contrast, 'going it alone' is a strategic position modelled on the Comintern's 'class against class' period, which has been the party's course when a positive strategy

of participation in legitimate French political life was not possible and/or desirable. This course emerged when united frontism had clearly failed, when the party was isolated domestically for other reasons, or during those moments when the party decided that international concerns had priority over domestic ones (1939-1941, 1947-1953, 1978-1981).

A third type of 'internationalist' sensitivity has often co-existed with one or the other basic PCF strategic outlook.¹⁰ The PCF, which lived much of its development as a prominent and loyal member of the international Communist movement, grew to maturity believing that its outlook ought to have two interconnected and congruent levels—domestic and international, the latter involving notions of the class struggle on a global level of which class struggle in France was but one part. For the first four decades or so of the PCF's history this juxtaposition translated into a more or less militant defence of Soviet diplomatic goals, whatever the party's domestic strategic choices, and created a powerful pro-Soviet lobby inside the party. For the modern period which concerns us, however, the coming of peaceful co-existence and *detente* between the superpowers created more variability in the PCF's internationalism. Nonetheless, depending upon the balance of forces prevailing at any given moment between united frontism and 'going it alone' inside the party, the pro-Soviet lobby has been able to exercise more or less influence.

The party's two main strategic outlooks have always had different relationships with the bedrock of the PCF's traditional revolutionary identity. United frontism, because it has been a coalition-seeking outlook based on formal programmatic agreements and pointed towards electoral victory, has usually demanded that the party trim its revolutionary sails to attract allies and sustain alliance.¹¹ Thus alliance politics has been pursued, almost by definition, at some risk to traditional PCF identity.¹² In contrast, 'going it alone' has existed much more symbiotically with the PCF's store of revolutionary symbols while stressing 'united fronts from below'.¹³ This has meant that proponents of 'going it alone' have had a slight advantage over united frontism in inner-party debate by virtue of their privileged relationship with the party's historic symbols and social roots.¹⁴

The dynamics of this differential relationship to basic symbolism are important to note. If the structures of French domestic politics have consistently obliged the PCF to pursue alliance strategies, 'go it aloners', with working class/workerist symbols on their side, have almost always voiced warning of the risks involved, and closely monitored the evolution of united front initiatives in the interests of higher loyalties to the party's 'identity'. United frontist experiments have thus almost always been partially mortgaged in advance by the existence of powerful internal opposition to them. The PCF's legacy of strong internationalism, living on in the minds of different Communists, has posed yet another problem

for united frontism. To the degree to which pursuing united frontist coalitions has demanded taking distance from Soviet diplomatic goals, it has tended to create a current of 'internationalist' internal opposition which has often overlapped with 'go it alone' opposition.

Democratic Centralism Revisited

We are not here arguing that the organizational forms of democratic centralism—which both the PCF and its critics have singled out as the major source of French Communist uniqueness—do not matter. What we do contend is that the stereotypical portrayals of democratic centralism are gross exaggerations. It has not been true, at least in the last two decades or so, that the PCF has been the unified army of dedicated Communists ever and always prepared to recognize the greater wisdom of the party as 'collective intellectual' that the party itself has sought to pretend. Nor has it been true that the party has been the top-down dictatorship that its enemies, and most analysts, contend. Democratic centralism *is* a powerful set of mechanisms for limiting and focusing debate on themes desired by the leadership. Nonetheless, these mechanisms have consistently had to confront and cope with the existence of strategic disagreement inside the party.¹⁵ It is this interaction between official organizational form and informal inner-party Communist politics which is important to stress, for, as we claim, such interaction has played a major role in limiting the party's prospects for strategic success. Yet how does this interaction actually happen and what difference does it make?

It is the leadership collective which considers how the party should act in the world. It must do so by confronting and responding to external factors—the movement of capital; domestic, social and political developments; the international system—and from internal conditions in the party itself. Moreover, any individual member of this collective must consider the dynamic balance of forces existing *within the leadership itself*.¹⁶ On the basis of such considerations individual leaders struggle for their preferred strategic lines. Ultimately they 'deal' with one another and form shifting coalitions whose political composition gives final colouring to collective leadership choices. Official party decisions about strategy and tactics are thus made by a collective of leaders with varying strategic inclinations who have some power to voice these inclinations. Since these inclinations are similar to those which exist at the base of the party, such leaders also 'represent' the base's own variations, even though this is never acknowledged.¹⁷

No major 'current' is likely to win—ie. to shift the party line's centre of gravity towards its preferred positions—without having to deal with other leadership elements with which it does not completely agree. This, in itself, is likely to blur strategic clarity. In its decision-making, the leadership must also bear in mind that any new line which it concocts,

whatever its strategic bias, must 'play' well enough at the base to maintain a sufficient degree of consensus and minimize characteristic forms of voice—grumbling, substantial withdrawals of membership energy and the like, or, even worse, large membership departures. This consideration means that the leadership must recognize the persistence of rank-and-file strategic differences in some way, another instance of distorted 'representation'. This dimension of the leadership's responsibility to the rank and file is likely to make blurred strategic outcomes even more likely.

What is most significant about the structures which we have been describing is thus what they mean for the actual *content* of PCF strategic decisions. The PCF must constantly respond to a multiplicity of changing external challenges. The organizational forms with which the PCF endowed itself were alleged to be optimally suited, given their flexibility and capacity to focus effort, to such response. To begin with, however, because of the existence of internal currents, modern strategic decisions, if they almost always have come down on the side either of united frontism or of 'going it alone', have ordinarily had to give much more than lip-service to the momentarily defeated strategic outlook. Official party policy, then, if weighted in one or the other direction, has usually been an amalgamation of **both**, with some variant of internationalism appended for good measure. Such amalgamations, beyond the confusion which they create for the party's public debates, have symbolized a generalized inability on the modern party's part to engage on any bold and direct strategic **path**.¹⁸

The central point is more general. However appropriate either basic strategy as a response to environmental **challenges—and, at least as historically formulated by the PCF, there have always been serious questions to raise about both**—the inner-party actions of its opponents virtually ensured that it would not work. To this must be added the effects of the PCF's quite strong pro-Soviet lobby, seeking, as it does, to ally itself with those whose strategic views are most likely to maximize pro-Soviet international **postures—however** appropriate these postures may be in pursuit of PCF domestic success. Given this, the likelihood of any successful PCF response to its domestic challenges declines even more.

II. THE PARTY'S RECENT LIFE: ILLUSTRATIONS

The purpose of drawing this portrait of modern PCF internal life has been to provide ways of explaining the PCF's persistent inability to be successful strategically. The point is not to deny that French Communism has faced a difficult world in recent decades. However difficult this global situation has been, the party's persistent inability to make the most of its situation stands out in ways that call for further discussion. The second part of our essay turns to illustrations from recent PCF history of the general argument we have just outlined.

Preliminaries: Turning to United Frontism in the 1960s

By the early 1960s the PCF had turned away from its Cold War isolation towards a new united frontism. The turn, if decisive, was awkward. United frontism had been consecrated as the PCF's major positive strategy by the experiences of the Popular Front and Resistance-Liberation periods. During both moments, alliances with other social and political forces had been possible and, quite as important, seen as desirable by the PCF leadership. Tried and true habits of how to seek allies, what kind of programme around which to ally, and what kind of unifying political discourses to use, had been formed as well.¹⁹ And, at least in the heads of PCF leaders and theoreticians, notions had been formed about how to move from reformist alliances to revolutionary change, by passing through a stage of 'advanced democracy'. Unfortunately in neither earlier period had the strategy been able to get much beyond spurts of reformism and efforts to shape France's international involvements before the PCF's allies, social democrats in the first instance, had decided to move on to other, less threatening, things.²⁰

Movement into a united frontist mode in the 1960s was not made easier for a party hardened by the long, rigorous 'go-it-alone' years of the Cold War during which quasi-'class against class' and pro-Soviet internationalist attitudes had both been profoundly absorbed by the Communist base and apparatus.²¹ Moreover, united frontist success would have been difficult in the best of circumstances. In the very traditional terms in which it returned in the 1960s, the strategy combined electoralism, top-down mass organizational mobilization and power struggle with other party apparatuses. Those who most favoured this line thought that by carefully nourishing and deploying its disciplined mass organizational power to maximize its electoral strength and its political weight, the PCF would gain advantage over its allies, coming eventually to power in a position to outmanoeuvre them towards ever more radical rounds of reforms. There were large elements of statist Jacobinism in this, as well as a considerable dose of what the founding fathers would have called parliamentary cretinism. And in the absence of creative new tactical ideas, probably in the direction of decentralizing and democratizing rank-and-file mobilization and encouraging progressive movements among the new middle strata of post-war capitalism as well as among workers, united frontism was not likely to succeed.²² Thus it was inevitable that considerable internal strategic conflict would occur.²³

The most significant difficulties arose in 1965, around the first direct Presidential election in the Fifth Republic. The PCF, now led by Waldeck Rochet, supported François Mitterrand. Putting aside such small matters as Mitterrand's Fourth Republic record and his clear desire to use the PCF as a stepping stone for his own purposes, the most important issue raised by inner-party opponents of the new united frontism concerned the ways

in which the new Presidentialist structures of the Fifth Republic might work against the party. Other things being equal, a moderate Left candidate would always be better placed than a Communist in any Right-Left Presidential run-off under the new system. Given the powers of the media and the new institutional importance of the President, however, this would mean that PCF support for Mitterrand-type candidacies would almost certainly transfer vital political resources to the non-Communist Left, ultimately strengthening it vis-a-vis the PCF itself. Such change in the balance of forces, in turn, would ensure PCF strategic failure.

Those who reasoned in this way were prescient, as it turned out. And their arguments, when combined with less sophisticated anti-united frontist feelings in the party, meant that there were numerous causes for foot-dragging against the party's strategic opening. The power of the PCF Secretary-General over party life, the clear desire of many Communists to overcome their isolation and participate in 'real' French politics and, it must be said, the fact that the PCF's united frontism played into a social democratic counter-strategy meant that, in the later 1960s, united frontism progressed. In 1967 the PCF and a conglomerate of non-Communist Left organizations signed a preliminary electoral programme. May-June 1968 slowed things down, but ultimately did not alter the perspectives of any major actors. Thus by 1972 the PCF and the newly rejuvenated *Parti Socialiste* signed a 'Common Programme for Left Government' and *Union de la Gauche* was officially launched.

Strategic conflict inside the party did not, therefore, halt early momentum towards a new united front. But it undoubtedly did place important constraints on this momentum. In order for the party to succeed with *Union de la Gauche*—and probably for the party to succeed at this point in any strategic posture—the 1960s were a critical moment for reflection and change *from the Left* to adapt to changes in the French class structure and the movement of capital. **Cross-class** alliances which strengthened the Left rather than playing into the hands of reformism needed to be theorized and brought into being, a task which would have involved great new political and mobilizational creativity. The dangers of the situation were **twofold**: the party might refuse to change at all, or the party might change in 'opportunistic' ways, weakening its radical militancy in order to make political alliances easier to contract and pursue. Both courses promised similar outcomes, loss of resources and drift to social democracy.

In the event the party did begin to change, but at a snail's pace, and mainly in areas of doctrine and theory. French Socialists wanted reassurance that the PCF was taking distance from the Soviet model, which the PCF was willing to provide doctrinally, in small doses, about matters

such as 'peaceful and French transitions to socialism' and the likelihood of pluralistic, multiparty politics during this transition.²⁴ Theoretically, the party took considerable steps beyond its earlier primitive 'pauperization' perspectives in its French adaptation of State Monopoly Capitalism analyses.²⁵ Neither movement forward, however, really seriously addressed the issues of new patterns of mobilization and new class alliances. Moreover, neither involved any new reflection of the way the PCF itself worked.

In fact, in the 1960s a complex and unstated deal was struck between united frontists and militant 'go it aloners'. The former pursued the moves which ultimately led to *Union de la Gauche*. The latter lived grudgingly with this return to united frontism as long as it touched the traditional identity of the party as little as possible and until the strategy showed signs of failing. This deal meant that the party generally avoided obviously opportunistic moves and refused to offer too much of its heritage in exchange for alliance, but at the price of inadequate reflection and adaptation to a changing French society. 'Go it aloners' and pro-Soviet elements were able to see that what the party defined as its heritage was traditional *ouvriérisme* and relatively uncritical visions of existing socialism. During a period when the post-war boom was working dramatic changes in the shape of the French class structure and in the nature and outlook of French workers, and while existing socialism settled into the sclerosis of the Brezhnev era, such stodginess was dangerous.

The party's response to the May-June 1968 events provided a striking illustration. Repeated assertions that the students *really* wanted what the PCF wanted, a 'democratic reform of the university', and were being misled by *gauchiste* provocateurs and 'German anarchists' towards a presumptuous outflanking of the PCF on its left, revealed a party which had very few clues to what was going on among the young, new middle strata and the *intelligentsia*.²⁶ And when Roger Garaudy dared to raise such issues in the aftermath of May-June, even if in somewhat opportunistic ways, he was ostracized and eventually removed. On another plane, the party's somewhat daring condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which might have been an important step towards an intelligent independent position on 'really existing socialism', was rapidly taken back through PCF support of Czech 'normalization', the product of an internal coalition of 'go it aloners' and pro-Soviet lobbyists.²⁷ Indeed, even at the moment of the PCF's most significant united frontist triumph, the signature of the 1972 Common Programme, powerful scepticism and opposition were expressed by the Central Committee and serious inner-party division *persisted*.²⁸

1974-1979: From United Front Failure to Militant Confusion

By winning the then weak Socialists over to *Union* and bringing a United Left to power, the PCF hoped simultaneously to win over the bulk of

new Left supporters, in particular those coming from the growing new middle strata, to the Communist side. Yet the inability of the party to change itself sufficiently to strengthen its own position, in large part a result of internal disagreement about the wisdom of this strategy in the first place, meant that in the absence of miracles the party was likely to lose. 'Go it aloners' had of course warned all along that united frontism was a mistake which would only benefit the Socialists.²⁹ In the aftermath of elections in 1974 their warnings became more pertinent. *Union de la Gauche*, while clearly pointing the Left towards power, was also helping French social democracy to reconstitute itself at the PCF's relative expense. Signs that 'go it aloners' were moving to shift the party's strategy away from *Union* were thereafter more frequent.

The June 1974 Central Committee adopted a resolutely, almost naively, united frontist Congress 'project'. By early autumn, in the wake of unfavourable by-elections, the hands of leadership 'go it aloners' (led by Roland Leroy) had been strengthened to the point where they were able to engineer a major, and unprecedented, 'hard line' rewriting of the XXIst Congress proposal during the course of Congress preparation itself. There was considerable evidence in this extraordinary process as well that 'go it alone' initiatives from the top found ample echo at the base even though the party had been installed in a united front posture for a decade!³⁰

This initial struggle was resolved by a subtle compromise. First of all, the XXIst Congress invented an ambiguous slogan for immediate purposes (the *Union du Peuple de France*). Then throughout much of 1975 the party engaged in a strident anti-PS campaign designed to warn both PCF members and the Socialists themselves that further poaching on PCF electoral territory would not be tolerated. After that, with elections in the offing in 1977 and 1978, the party turned energetically towards its brief, but exhilarating, 'Eurocommunist' period. At the XXIIInd Congress in 1976, for example, the party abandoned its commitments to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'—leaving behind Leninist theories of the state—and proclaimed that the major contradiction of state monopoly capitalism involved popular thirst for democracy at all levels.³¹ In the same year, the party also sided with the Italian and Spanish Communists to block Soviet goals at the Berlin Conference of European Communist Parties.³²

The united frontist majority of the leadership had been obliged to allow 'go it aloners' to blow off steam in order then to push the party precipitously forward along the earlier strategic trajectory. For their part, the 'go it aloners' prepared for the moment of united front strategic failure which they 'knew' was coming. However, the compromise package thus developed was a volatile mix. The alliance strategy was bringing more and more intermediary strata and 'Eurocommunist' recruits into a party which was also rapidly growing. On top of this, entire Federations—Paris in particular—were taking on a Eurocommunist colouring. Faced

with this, 'go it alone' elements felt increasingly threatened. Finally, the combination of doctrinal change and international Eurocommunism threatened pro-Soviet elements (along with the Soviets as well), turning them into potential inner-party allies of the 'go it aloners'.

The balance of power between currents in the PCF's leadership and, in consequence, the leadership's centre of political gravity, shifted towards the 'go it aloners' after the 1977 Municipal Elections, leading to the *rupture* of *Union de la Gauche*. Put briefly, during talks to update the Common Programme in the summer of 1977, the PCF leadership threatened the PS with *rupture* unless it capitulated on central programmatic issues, nationalizations in the first instance, in advance of the 1978 elections. The PS, feeling its new strength, refused to give in, leading to a break in September.³³ In consequence it was decided that the party ought to counter-attack, first by blocking Left victory in 1978 (attacking the Socialists' 'Right Turn'), next by strongly reasserting the PCF's 'identity' and finally by running a PCF candidate in the 1981 Presidential elections.³⁴

The party's tenuous pre-1977 strategic consensus was broken without real agreement on an alternative. Thus the 18 months between the 1978 elections and the XXIIIrd Congress in May, 1979 was fraught with conflict and uncertainty.³⁵ The most dedicated united frontists in the leadership initially refused to accept even the temporary shift towards 'going it alone' which had marked the 1978 election campaign.³⁶ The Paris Federation leadership simultaneously engaged in a quiet campaign against the beginnings of a line shift.³⁷ Official party publications like *France Nouvelle* and *La Nouvelle Critique* acted similarly. The CGT (whose leadership was also divided on strategy) promoted an open and, in union terms, united frontist, Congress at Grenoble in November, 1978.³⁸

Such manoeuvring at different leadership levels occurred against a backdrop of massive rank-and-file discontent. Here on a scale greater than ever before in PCF history, ordinary Communists who objected to the change of line chose protest rather than submission, despite the rules of democratic centralism. *Contestataires*, as they came to be called, wrote in the 'bourgeois press', produced pamphlets, petitions, and books.³⁹ These public outbursts, mainly from intellectuals with access to the media and a heightened willingness to take risks, were but the tip of the iceberg. Inside the party, particularly in Paris, there was massive, if quiet, protest at the same time.

We know rather less about the activities of leadership 'go it aloners' during this crucial period. It seems reasonably certain, however, that Roland Leroy, the most vocal 'go it alone' leader, mobilized all of his resources (*Humanité*, contacts in the apparatus, power in Federations in his own Le Havre-Rouen fief and in the Paris Red Belt, etc.) and his considerable political intelligence in favour of a thoroughgoing and definitive 'go it alone' break with united frontism.⁴¹ This line found an

echo in parts of the party base disoriented by the changes and defeats of the mid-1970s and eager to mobilize on anti-middle class, anti-intellectual, pro-workerist themes. And by late autumn 1978, a *de facto* leadership alliance had been struck between 'go it aloners' and pro-Soviets.

The remainder of the story up through the XXIIIrd Congress in spring 1979 was similar. The 'go it aloners', pro-Soviets and their allies mounted a campaign against the change of line in the Paris Federation, turning what had been an audacious expression of Eurocommunist voice into a massive exodus, with Parisian Communism paying a huge price in the process. Despite this, the hard liners did not completely win the day. The XXIIIrd Congress proposal, a good indicator of the outcome of this period of strategic conflict, was a confusing amalgamation of different positions reflecting not only the leadership balance of power but also 'representing' a more or less viable (if strategically contradictory) coalition of different currents at the base. Its strategic centre of gravity was an old-fashioned anti-Socialist 'united front from below. . . until we are strong enough to impose our kind of united front from above' posture. According to this position, the Socialists, incorrigible class collaborationists, could only be forced leftwards by a more powerful PCF. When this had happened, however, united frontism would re-emerge.

The new line lacked coherence. It combined the modernism of the later *Union de la Gauche* period with a strident appeal to sources of PCF traditional identity. Its heavy workerism and strong anti-intellectualism contradicted its profession of faith in decentralized, *autogestionnaire* social change helped forward by *Union de la Gauche* of the right kind.⁴² Its renewed pro-Sovietism was little short of self-destructive.⁴³ In fact, the coherence in all this was not longer-term strategic, but short-run political, the product of conflict and compromise at PCF leadership level which had been heavily influenced, in turn, by leadership perceptions of what was happening 'at the base'.

What underlay all this? In the 1960s, a strategically divided PCF had set out on a new and risky united frontist initiative which carried such prospects as the PCF had for successful modernization in the face of massive social and political change in France. This strategy was a high risk gamble, however. Failure to modernize the party's approaches away from its traditional Jacobin statism, electoralism, and nearly exclusive focus on organization-to-organization coalition building would lead to major defeats. The modernization which was necessary, however, also involved taking considerable distance from traditional *ouvriérisme*, from Soviet diplomatic goals, and, perhaps, from certain organizational practices. 'Go it alone' forces inside the party, powerfully nourished during the 'state of siege' Cold War years, and more aware of the dangers which new Gaullist political institutions held for the PCF, resisted this scenario. Some go-it-aloners believed that the party should indeed modernize, but without

united frontism. Others simply favoured the perpetuation of time-honoured traditional habits. Pro-Soviet elements opposed doctrinal and international changes. The combined influence of these contrary currents presented insuperable barriers to the PCF modernization which was needed to keep the PCF from manipulation at the hands of French socialism. The consequences came in the party crisis of the later 1970s.

1984–85: The Pyrrhic Victory of Going It Alone

The PCF 'normalized' itself after the XXIIIrd Congress in order to implement what mattered most of the complicated 1979 Congress proposal, 'reasserting party identity' prior to the 1981 Presidential campaign.⁴⁴ In practice this turned out to involve a great deal more activity to regenerate traditional PCF reflexes such as workerism, and vituperative attacks on social democracy, than stress on the modernism of *autogestion*.⁴⁵ The events of 1981 demonstrated how inadequate these PCF strategic decisions had been. Attempting to 'cut down the PS' led to 15%+ for Georges Marchais in the 1981 presidential elections—a loss of 25% from 1979 levels—a result which opened the road for Francois Mitterrand's election. The PCF's confused post-1977 strategy, designed to reverse the tide, had worked to produce precisely those results which it had been designed to prevent. The party then decided, although, once again, not without substantial internal conflict, that it would be better to join 'the presidential majority' to 'make change succeed' than to take the potentially catastrophic risk of continuing to 'go it alone'. Hat in hand, the party thus returned to *Union de la Gauche*, becoming a junior partner (with four ministers) in the first Left government of the Fifth Republic.

This turn was most uncomfortable, and, in retrospect, one wonders why it was so easily made.⁴⁶ Indeed, it took but one short year of Left power for many of the PCF's post-1977 prophecies about the Socialists to begin coming true. After an impressively reformist period, the government turned in 1982 toward austerity, retreat from further change, and in some areas, rollback of what had earlier been done. The PCF's confusing 'we are a party of government and a party of struggle' line devised for the XXIVth Congress in 1982 resolved nothing.⁴⁷ As austerity deepened, unemployment rose and the government retreated from reforms, 'go it alone' sentiment grew inside the party, so much so that it became increasingly difficult for the public and many Communists themselves to know whether the PCF was more 'in than out' of the majority, or 'out than in'.⁴⁸

By mid-1984, with the government pursuing 'modernization' (industrial surgery plus a large new dose of unemployment) and the four PCF Ministers still in place, the PCF fell to 11 per cent in the elections to the European Parliament. In effect, after 1981 the party had got the worst of all worlds, losing support from a dwindling 'people of the Left' because of

general disaffection from government policies and from others because it seemed ambivalent in its support of such policies. What was to be done? As in 1977, so in 1984 the party turned inwards towards conflict between two strategic outlooks. This time, however, because the conflict had to take account of the facts of intervening years, confrontation was sharper.

Sticking with *Union* meant hoping against hope that the party would not be further undercut by a PS bent on 'catching all' the Left nor would it be punished for staying on a sinking governmental economic ship. In the hope of changing these odds proponents of further *Union*—who rapidly acquired the label of 'renovators'—advocated an historic *aggiornamento*, a major PCF self-criticism and subsequent democratic opening-up of the party, with particular emphasis on this last matter. Some renovator leaders even proposed modifying democratic centralism. This position had substantial support at the outset. Moreover, in June and July 1984 there was very real 'fractional' organizing at the top of the party—BP and Central Committee members plus numbers of Federation and Section officials.⁴⁹ Second-rank top leaders also 'floated' very carefully towards this position during June and early July.⁵⁰

The 'go it alone' side calculated risks very differently. Only by leaving government on economic policy grounds and mobilizing against austerity and the crisis could the party hope to rebuild its fortunes. 'Going it alone', then, meant reasserting PCF militancy, anti-crisis defensiveness and leftism. Its major opponents in the leadership, Roland Leroy and Gaston Plissonnier, brought to bear their own very powerful organizational and territorial bases plus the support of CGT leaders who were tired of having their hands tied by PCF participation in government. The 'go it aloners' acquired two more reserves of support. The core of the renewed *Union* project involved changing the top leader of the party, a goal which, of course, predisposed the existing **Secretary-General!** against it. Equally important, the PCF's membership and *militant* base, had itself become more workerist and 'go it alone' after the traumatic amputation of Eurocommunism in the later 1970s and the deceptive experience of Left government itself.

Although the *Union* position was minoritarian, if powerful, to begin with, its defeat was guaranteed by two factors. The first was the timidity of Charles Fiterman, former Minister of State and for some time considered the most likely successor to Georges Marchais, the only plausible renovator candidate for party leadership. Persuading Fiterman to assume open advocacy of this position and to move towards a leadership challenge was a critical task for the dissenters, for a number of other important leaders might then have followed.⁵¹ But Fiterman, a cautious man and an expert reader of internal power balances, knew that were he to move and lose, his claim for the leadership and his party career would be over. Thus he assumed a low profile, waiting to see how events unfolded. These events

themselves were the second factor. The formation of the Fabius government and the subsequent collapse of PCF negotiations with the new Prime Minister in mid-July 1984 made it clear that the new government was determined to pursue the austerity/industrial surgery line of its predecessors and to make no concessions to win continued communist support.

Once the PCF had left government it became difficult to argue in favour of further *Union de la Gauche*. Moreover, this political change reinforced tendencies to close ranks at leadership level, making it much harder to promote the self-critical debate urged by the renovators. Fiterman, abruptly no longer a Minister and in need of time to reconstruct his inner-party power position, fell in quietly behind the 'go it aloners'. Second ranking leaders who had earlier 'floated', but who carefully managed their careers by making sure that their lines of retreat were covered, followed Fiterman. In all this Marchais, hewing to the party's centre of political gravity, used his considerable resources to consolidate his own threatened position. Perhaps the most important factor which saved Marchais, however, was the absence of a successor capable of patching together the party at a moment of leadership division and externally-imposed tactical change.⁵²

The June-to-September 1984 strategic conflict at leadership level was extraordinary for the extent to which usually opaque leadership operations were opened up for general viewing. Conflictual Central Committee discussions were leaked to the press (the September CC was even extensively reported, warts and all, in *Humanité*). Top party leaders, especially those of renovator persuasion like Pierre Juquin, Claude Poperen and Marcel Rigout, went public with their positions. By September, 1984, however, with the core of the leadership lined up behind 'going it alone' and Marchais in charge again, *faute de mieux*, the outcome of the PCF's crisis was pre-ordained.

On the important level of analysis and rhetoric, the XXVth Congress which followed in February 1985 was one of strategic clarification, ending the party's lurching more clearly in favour of 'going it alone' than at any earlier moment. Its central proposition was that 'the last 25 years of *Union de la Gauche*', of dealing with the Socialists 'at the summit', had been a mistake which had cost the party dearly in terms of integrity, identity and, above all, support. During these years, the resolution continued, the party had sought change in a statist and top-down way, in the process losing touch with the dramatic social changes which France was experiencing. United frontism had a two-stage vision of change—first the party would compromise rightwards; then, after a round of radicalizing reforms had been enacted, it would push forward to a transition to socialism. This, asserted the Congress, had led the PCF to efface itself to promote alliance, to mislead the masses into

expecting a bestowal of change from political elites, and was furthermore inappropriate to the new circumstances of capitalist crisis of the 1980s.

Rejecting generations of strategic habit was ostensibly the major purpose of the XXVth Congress. But to replace them with what? What was needed, it was said, was a decentralized militant 'anticrisis' struggle, against rising unemployment in the first instance. This approach would mobilize ordinary people of all kinds in a 'new majoritarian popular *rassemblement*' to deploy their creativity and impose 'new criteria of management' which stressed human over financial profitability.⁵³ As the snowball of such struggle gathered momentum, the outlines of a *socialism française et autogestionnaire* would emerge.

Such clarity as there was in this new line was **negative—against** what had gone before. The appeals to mobilizational innovation in the new proposal were interesting, but abstract. No one really knew how to do the things which an *autogestionnaire* strategy advocated. Quite as important, the new strategy provided very little for Communists and, more important, voters, in the way of day-to-day *political* objectives. While other parties, and especially the PS, thought only of the next elections, the PCF's new strategy seemed indifferent to such events. However, elections, after all, were what most of the French thought of as the very stuff of politics. The PCF's new modernism was not only much too late, it was much too vague. *Autogestion* was fine, but how, and to what ends?

Even if the 1984-85 crisis marked what looked to be the definitive rejection of top-down united frontism, such a strident rejection of fifty years of PCF tradition did not win unanimous approval. The major **conflict** which wracked the party, beginning in June 1984, proceeding through the Congress in 1985 and continuing through today, was less, as the press had it, between renovators and conservatives than between defenders of united frontism and advocates of 'going it alone'. At the Congress, nearly a score of Central Committee members opposed the new line and there was a much larger number of 'waverers', perhaps upwards of 25 per cent. Among Federation and Section level officials, opposition and 'floating' were quite as evident. Opposition 'at the base' was widespread even with the screws of democratic centralism tightly turned down (abstention and disapproval were at an historic **high—10%+—at** Section and Federation Congresses). Opposition even appeared on the floor of the Congress with a significant number of speeches against 'going it alone', plus more than 50 abstentions on the final vote on the Congress Resolution (of 1,722 *very* carefully chosen delegates). Fifteen of the dissenting CC members were removed at the Congress, with the leadership allowing the three most prominent (Pierre Juquin, who was demoted from the *Bureau Politique*, Felix Damette and Marcel Rigout) to stay, for largely cosmetic purposes.

None of this kept the *renovateurs* quiet, however. In the aftermath of the PCF's miserable results in the March 1986 legislative elections (9.8 per cent, the worse since the 1920s), there was an explosion of renovator action again, petitions for a new Congress, protests, newspaper ads, interviews with Pierre Juquin everywhere. In all this, it was clear that despite the severe administrative actions taken to limit dissidence by a leadership now more or less united on the rejection of united frontism, if less than clear about what ought to supersede it, a somewhat decapitated united frontist current still existed inside and around the frontiers of the party.⁵⁴

CONCLUSIONS: STRATEGIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

The story which emerges from our illustrations can be briefly summarized. Internal strategic stalemate had prevented the PCF from modernizing itself appropriately when, beginning in the later 1950s, everything around it called on it to do so. The united frontism which the PCF leadership proposed in the 1960s—a carbon copy of the party's 1930s-1940s strategy—was not likely to work very well as it stood. But it might have evolved into a more satisfactory confrontation with French realities. The internal balance of forces within the party clearly blocked any such evolutionary prospects, however. In consequence, the inadequate strategy with which the PCF faced the 1970s was doomed. Thus, 'go it aloners' and pro-Soviets in the party were bound to gain strength. By 1979, they were able together to begin a confused and misunderstood retreat from the party's earlier alliance strategy. In turn, this retreat increased the rapidity of the party's decline and obliged it to return to united frontism after 1981 in a greatly weakened state, a shift which rapidly eventuated in further failure and, ultimately, a stronger victory of 'go it alone' forces after 1984.

The cumulative effects of such long-term strategic stalemate were not only PCF decline, but also increased PCF incapacity to respond to decline. One could read the novel modernist and *autogestionnaire* sides of the official position of the XXVth Congress as being of considerable interest to replace a fifty-year-old vision devised when France had a majority of workers, peasants, shopkeepers and artisans. But the genuinely modernizing elements in all this were two decades too late. Moreover, the new line created a whole new set of potential contradictions between strategy and practice. It was virtually certain that the party's new official rhetoric would be little more than trendy covering for traditional behaviour. Underneath abstract talk about 'new criteria for management', 'industrial solutions' and *autogestion*, good old workerist defensiveness seemed certain to persist.⁵⁵

We must conclude where we began. The PCF has faced a very harsh world over the past three decades or so. The movement of capital, both in the post-war boom and in the interminable crisis which has followed, has

challenged, and often humbled, all militant working-class movements. Politically, the predominance of social democracy and, more recently, of the Right has allowed little space to the left. The international situation has been especially difficult for Communist parties. All of these things, and more, have made recent Left successes in advanced capitalism few and far between. But what has been striking about the record of the *Parti Communiste Français* when facing these conditions has been its propensity for political mistakes. The party has badly assessed its surroundings, used inappropriate strategies and pursued inept tactics. This essay has tried to present an analysis of the PCF which might help to explain why the party has compiled such an extraordinary record of strategic **misjudgements**: the point of departure of the analysis is that when a large organization has persistent serious problems in coping adequately, many of the most important reasons for this ought to be sought somewhere in the complex workings of the organization **itself**.

We have thus suggested that the PCF was, in fact, a vastly more complicated internal political system than most observers have been willing to admit. 'Currents' of strategic preference of varying strengths, forms and outlook divided the party from top to bottom. Because of divisions at the top—which 'represented' those below in distorted ways—PCF strategic decision-making resulted from complicated bargaining and conflict between very different positions. This led repeatedly to difficult-to-understand and inadequate strategic compromises. Existing democratic centralism was then used to generate ratification of such confusing compromises, often at great cost to the intelligibility of PCF debate.

The present party leadership may well be correct in asserting that the united frontism of the '60s and '70s was a colossal **mistake**—even if it studiously avoids any genuine attempt to explain why such colossal mistakes could be made. Still, if there may have been a very narrow path to united frontist success, it could only have proceeded through major PCF changes. These could **not** be worked, as we have seen, in large measure because of opposition to united frontism almost every step of the way from militant isolationists, 'go it aloners', *inside* the party. The chances of a strategy which was very risky to begin with thus became nil. At the same time, the historic commitment of the party to united frontism as a positive strategy for legitimate participation in French political life when such participation was desirable and/or possible made it impossible for the party to try out the strategic options of the 'go it aloners' during this same critical moment in the '50s and '60s. Conversely, when the logic of united frontist failure became clearer in the 1970s and the party leadership moved to reverse the party's strategic directions, the combative presence inside the party of united frontists made this change incredibly difficult, in ways which continue today in the varied activities of Pierre Juquin and the *renovateurs*. The worst irony of all in this has been that

most of the genuine modernizers in the party were also united frontists. Thus after 1977, when the party leadership tried, at least in words, to promote belated modernization, but within a 'go it alone' framework, it found itself deserted by such Communists and had to rely upon the most traditional elements in the party in ways which have made modernization a very halting and contradictory process.

This analysis has not been the usual 'democratic centralism is bad' story. Although it would take another essay to discuss the issue, we do believe, on balance, that authoritarian democratic centralism in the PCF is a central problem which French Communism must resolve before moving forward.⁵⁶ But the real issue which we have been discussing is the way in which the strategic history of French Communism has embedded itself *in the very workings of party organization itself*. The workings of such embedded strategic fractions, mediated and powerfully distorted by the workings of democratic centralism, have made the party unwieldy, often paralyzed, sometimes incoherent and, of late, absorbed by frenzied debate mobilizing much of the energy which might have been better applied to struggling intelligently against capital and the Right.

The PCF's problem has not been an absence of debate, then, despite democratic centralism. There has been a great deal of debate, in fact. But its effects seem to have made it very difficult for the party to pursue any course of action energetically. It is essential to note that *none* of the organizational issues which have contributed so much to the party's difficulties have even been discussed, let alone resolved, in the party. The PCF clearly ought to institute vastly more internal democracy than it has had, so that differences can be argued out and conclusions reached openly. However, is it not at all clear that greater internal democracy is the unique answer to the PCF's dilemmas, despite the persistent claims of the *renovateurs* that it is. The more general question of what organizational forms a modern Left will need remains unanswered. The PCF's experience demonstrates that it may be as important to the Left's success as the question of strategy itself.

NOTES

1. In rough and ready terms, the CGT was considerably stronger in 1965, say, than all of its trade union rivals, *Force Ouvriere*, the CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail*) and a few smaller groups, taken together. By 1986 the CGT was still slightly stronger than either, but its vast advantage in power had been significantly cut down. See George Ross, 'Le Social in Mitterrand's France: From One Left to Another', in George Ross, Stanley Hoffmann and Sylvia Malzacher, eds., *The Mitterrand Experiment, Continuity and Change in Socialist France* (London: Polity Press, 1987).
2. There is one set of arguments which we are obviously relegating to a footnote, the New Left's favourite old saw about the disappearance of the working class.

No doubt the movement of capital has led to vast changes in the nature and structure of the working class and changed its relationships with other social groups as well. And it may well be true that the PCF was insufficiently attuned to such changes and paid a serious price for this. The working class, in somewhat changed forms, clearly persists. Rather than heralding its death, a position which we find ultimately reactionary, it would be rather better to analyze these changed forms and their implications.

3. The PCF leadership's own thoughts about its fate are of great interest. See Secretary-General Georges Marchais' reports to the PCF's 25th Congress in 1985 in *Cahiers du Communisme*, March-April 1985. Marchais' considerations are entirely *strategic*: The party's plight followed from long-standing strategic errors. The argument of this paper is that such considerations are incorrect to the degree to which they leave undiscussed the party's organizational problems, which have consistently rendered appropriate strategic responses extremely difficult to develop.
4. This point of view often does proceed to hypothesize about the reasons for strategic mistakes, almost always in hostile and inaccurate ways. One version asserts that it is mistaken to expect the PCF to respond successfully to challenges from its domestic setting because the party has always seen its primary strategic tasks in international—pro-Soviet—rather than domestic terms. The most sophisticated proponent of such views is probably Annie Kriegel, who connects such independent variables to the dependent variables of PCF internal organization, unlike a number of other commentators in the same general camp. Cf. Mme Kriegel's journalism in *he Figaro* or *Les Communistes français*, her classic ethnography of PCF organization (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968). Less satisfactory members of this 'school' are observers like Claude Harmel and Jean Montaldo.

The second view asserts that decision-making in the party has been totally authoritarian (or 'Stalinized') and that the PCF Secretary-General has held virtually unrestrained power, making strategic failures the result of the errors of the incumbent Secretary-General. Here Philippe Robrieux is the major writer. See his four-volume *Histoire Interieure du Parti Communiste français* (Paris: Fayard, 1980-1984).

Since the mid-1960s, at least, the record is clear on the 'international positions take priority' issue. While the PCF has, to varying degrees, been pro-Soviet on international issues, such inclinations do not begin to account adequately for the party's responses across a wide range of other issues which are closer to home. The totalitarian Secretary-General thesis works even less well. A degree of collegial leadership did come to exist in the PCF after the passing of the party's long-time leader Maurice Thorez in 1964. While such collegiality was a far cry from democracy, it was quite as far nonetheless from total domination by the Secretary-General.

5. In this context, it is worth repeating a joke often made by Communists themselves. 'In our system of democratic centralism you have to see the party as a tall apartment building with a central staircase. The party leadership has the democratic right to throw buckets of water down the staircase onto the rank and file. The rank and file, in turn, have the democratic right to throw the water back up the staircase to the leadership.'
6. See Jane Jenson and George Ross, *The View From Inside, A French Communist Cell in Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), for illustrations of this with reference to the XXIIIrd Congress in 1979.
7. Often the apparatus is instructed in detail about how to organize debate with reference to those parts of the resolution which are to remain unamended and

what limits of amendment are to be allowed for others. Elections of delegates to Section and Federation Conferences and the Congress as well as elections to official positions at all levels of the party are carefully supervised from above to ensure that co-operative people will predominate.

For ordinary Communists, this disparity between the facts and fiction of democratic centralism has meant living in a party in which appeals to loyalty, solidarity and unity in the name of class struggle around lines decided at the top have ordinarily supplanted the norms of 'bourgeois democracy', to use a now-obsolete term. In Albert Hirschman's ever-useful categories, real, existing democratic centralism has claimed to allow 'voice' to Communists while, in fact, muting such voice through excessive centralism and overpowering injunctions to loyalty. Exit, of course, is one often-exercised option for French Communists. But what happens to those who opt for longer-term presence in a party which has traditionally granted but limited voice and demanded strong loyalty? See Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

The PCF's special fondness for united frontism, escalated into a strategy for change, is at least partially explained by the fact that the Comintern's basic strategy shift in the 1930s was largely based on the French situation. Here, and on other related matters, the curious reader would do well to refer to André Donneur's very good analytical history of PCF-non-Communist alliances, *L'Alliance Fragile* (Montreal: Nouvelle Optique, 1984).

'Internationalism', properly speaking, ought not to be called a strategic preference because its purpose in the modern period has not been to change France but to achieve goals in international politics. There have, of course, been moments in the PCF's broader history when internationalism was the primary component of PCF strategy, ie. when influencing French politics towards certain invariably pro-Soviet international postures has been the party's most important goal.

In the PCF's eyes, united frontism has been a strategic vision split into two moments. In the first, the order of the day was working compromise to create coalitions around the highest common denominator of programmatic agreement, with the party consciously adjourning its revolutionary pretensions, attenuating its 'vanguard' role in order to conciliate otherwise divided political and social forces. The second moment, a 'transition to socialism', could only ensue after the success of the first had shifted the centre of gravity of French political life to the Left, allowing the PCF to become the openly 'revolutionary' party it claimed to be.

Perhaps the major characteristic of the PCF's united frontist appeals, beginning with the Popular Front, has been its claim that only the PCF and its allies, real or potential, could genuinely represent a French national political tradition flowing from the Enlightenment and the Revolution. In such appeals, capital and the political Right have almost always been portrayed as anti-national, as working against France's integrity, often hand-in-hand with foreign interests with designs, particularly economic, on France.

Some would say, not without reason, that this is because united frontism has usually involved an abandonment of prospects for revolutionary change in France in the interests of conjunctural alliances designed, almost always, to produce important reformist results, but without any logical strategic connection to fundamental social transformation. In any event, for most of its history the PCF has been at heart and in fact a working class and *ouvrieriste* party. Much in the social history of France, compounded by the party's intense experience in the international Communist movement, created a PCF early on

whose centre of political and affective gravity was working-class defensiveness (of almost a trade unionist kind) and profound mistrust of non-working-class and non-'revolutionary' forces. The PCF's core belief system, that workers constitute *the* revolutionary social force and that the party is the vanguard of this force, enshrines this bias and mistrust.

14. In terms of Hirschman's handy 'exit, voice and loyalty' notions the structure of options has thus been different for 'go it aloners' and 'united frontists'. When disturbed by party strategic choices, 'united fronters' are more likely to choose 'voice' in internal party struggle and ultimately, 'exit' if 'voice' proves ineffective. Moreover, since united frontists advocate alliance politics, their 'voice' is likely to find support and comfort in the broader political world. 'Exit' is more likely for them both because 'voice' is a difficult option to sustain in a democratically centralist party and, more simply, because 'exit' is a more plausible personal choice for Communists who tend to perceive non-communist Leftists less as implacable enemies than as slightly misguided members of the same basic ideological family. 'Go it aloners', in contrast, have fewer choices. 'Voice' in inner-party struggles conflicts with the kind of 'loyalty' demanded in the symbolic tradition of the PCF, while the absence of any other 'party of the working class' in France excludes 'exit'. 'Go it aloners' are thus much more likely to stay put for the long haul than are united frontists, 'loyally' remaining sceptical of united front initiatives until indications of difficulty mount, at which point traditional workerism is invoked to bring the party back to its 'identity', where it 'ought to be'. As Georges Lavau, undoubtedly the most astute contemporary analyst of the PCF, has pointed out for years, no matter what the PCF may attempt to do, it seems eternally condemned eventually to revert to traditional defensive, workerist postures, assuming its 'tribune' function. Cf. Georges Lavau, *A quoi sert le PCF?* (Paris: Fayard, 1981).
15. It may be worth proposing a schematic list of factors which seem to determine individual strategic preferences. Other things being equal, the strategic posture of the party at the time of an individual's recruitment and socialization into the party is important. In this sense the PCF—along, perhaps, with many other political parties—can be seen as a complex layering of different generations, each of whose general strategic preference will be the one which prevailed during the moment of its baptism into party life. Sociological factors like class position, work setting and residence location may crosscut and complement these historical ones, however. Communists from 'new middle strata' and intellectual backgrounds, and those from large cities as well (Paris in the first instance) have had united frontist leanings in recent decades. In contrast, Communists from solid working class settings—whether work communities, socioeconomic ghettos or long-standing Communist-governed municipalities—are more likely to favour workerist and 'go it alone' positions.

There are a number of possible countervailing influences to such generational and sociological influences, following from the ways in which individual Communists choose to live in the PCF. Undoubtedly a great many Communists, whatever their generational and sociological origins, choose to live in the party as *lignards*—the inner-party term for those who adapt readily. Position in the party organization is another variable. Official positions beginning even at cell level (committees and *bureaux*) increase external pressures to become *lignard*, whatever one's personal preferences, and whet appetites for upward mobility and achievement within the party. It is virtually impossible to survive as a *permanent*, for example, without being able to give at least a very convincing imitation of agreement with the line of the day.

16. Anyone who has studied the PCF knows that the party's top-level decision-

making processes are rigorously shrouded in secrecy. Nonetheless, what comes out of such varied and incomplete sources as do exist is a picture of a leadership—Bureau Politique, Secretariat and key Central Committee members taken together—which is also the locus of constant, if disguised and subtle, political conflict. Moreover, this conflict seems to be, more often than not, about the same strategic questions which divide the party more generally; i.e. the basic choice between variants of united frontism and 'going it alone' domestically connected to varying versions of 'internationalism'.

The major point of departure in differentiating between leadership and base levels of strategic conflict in the PCF is, of course, a consideration of relative power. Since the leadership actually *decides* the party line, its internal differences count for more. Thus the resources which different leaders can bring to bear on leadership decision-making become very important. There are a number of different ways in which specific leaders can accumulate power resources to influence decision making. The *Bureau Politique* and Secretariat are functionally divided, with each member assigned specific tasks. Often the exclusive control of an area of party activity confers resources on the incumbent controller. Resources may also flow from territorial bases—from the adroit use of a parliamentary seat or a mayorship, for example, or from careful cultivation of an important local PCF Federation (members of the BP and a certain number of important CC members ordinarily 'follow'—i.e. supervise—Federations, sometimes over very extended periods of time). Longevity and seniority in the PCF leadership itself allows the cumulative generation of larger stores of resources. Finally, the very fact, however vaguely it may be perceived, that different parts of 'the base' have competing strategic preferences can become a resource at certain points, allowing a leader to claim to 'represent' base level feelings in decision-making processes.

17. To continue with our Hirschmanite metaphor, the exercise of 'voice' at the very top of the party, however circumspect it usually is, 'reflects', in very complicated ways, the equally muffled expression of voice from below. Circumspection at the top and muffling at base levels are, of course, the products of the workings of democratic centralism.
18. The usual outcome of the PCF's public deliberations—and virtually all recent PCF Congress resolutions attest to this—is an official line whose strategic cutting edge is surrounded by a curious *mélange* of competing strategic viewpoints plus greater or lesser reference to internationalism (i.e. pro-Sovietism). Once such a *mélange* has been concocted, the entire leadership argues in its favour to the rest of the party and the world, no matter how baroque its arguments must sometimes be. Most importantly, the line has to 'pass' in the party at large. The job of promulgating a leadership decision through existing democratic centralism is not the simple 'rolling out the organizational weapons' process that is sometimes portrayed. Persistent divisions of strategic appreciation at the base of the party mean that such dissemination is rarely easy. The party apparatus is usually a reliable tool for disseminating a new line. The apparatus' task is helped to the degree to which the new line has been deftly constructed to form favourable inner party coalitions and to isolate or neutralize strong opposition. Yet, the very lack of decisional clarity implied by such deft construction often makes even the heavily directed debate of democratic centralism difficult to decode, even to the initiated.
19. We have recently discussed these issues in greater detail in 'Adieu vieilles idées: The Middle Strata and the Decline of Resistance-Liberation Left Discourse in France', in Jolyon Howorth and George Ross, eds., *Contemporary France: A review of Interdisciplinary Studies* (London: Frances Pinter, 1987).

20. Such as abandoning the Spanish Republicans in the 1930s and siding with the Americans in the Cold War in the 1940s.
21. Maurice Thorez defined the strategy in the most traditional of ways, as if nothing had changed in the world since the 1930s. One consequence was the emergence of an 'Italian' fraction of more modernist united frontists in the party as the 1950s approached. Then, as if to make absolutely certain the strategy would not work, Thorez proceeded, in 1961-62, to purge the party of these 'Italian' elements which were most conscious of the need for serious adaptative changes in the party and its outlooks to make united frontism work were both steps away from success. Eliminating the 'Italians' in both adult and student forms meant depleting pro-united frontists in the party.
22. The PCF under its historic leader, Maurice Thorez (who presided over the party from the early 1930s to 1964), had become nothing if not traditional after World War II and its determination to resurrect the unfinished Liberation United Frontist agenda was not surprising. What was surprising, however, was the degree to which the Thorez leadership seemed to believe that little had changed in French capitalism since the Great Depression and War. In theoretical terms, this meant that Thorez insisted, at virtually the precise moment when the magnitude of France's considerable post-war economic boom was becoming clear, that the French economy was being cannibalized by American imperialism and that French workers were undergoing relative and absolute pauperization. This insistence, and the heavily workerist tactics which followed from it, were perceived by parts of the party as creating insuperable handicaps to united frontist strategic success.
23. The works of Philippe Robrieux, if profoundly anti-communist, are the best introductions to the legacies of this period, see *Histoire interieure du parti Communisteyol. 2, 1945-1972* (Paris: Fayard, 1981); *Maurice Thorez, vie secrète et vie politique* (Paris: Fayard, 1975) and *Notre Génération Communiste* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1977). For vivid, if again anti-communist, descriptions of the party's hard-nosed pro-Soviet approach to intellectuals and culture see Jeanine Verdes-Leroux, *Au Service du Parti* (Paris: Seuil-Minuit, 1983). See also Irwin Wall, *French Communism in the Stalin Era* (Greenwich: Greenwood Press, 1983).
24. Perhaps the most important document from this period of doctrinal change was the 1968 *Manifeste de Champigny* (Paris: Editions Socialies, 1968) put together in the wake of both the May-June events and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August.
25. Here the major documents were synthesized and published in PCF, *Traite d'economie politique (manuel), Le Capitalisme monopoliste d'état*, 2 vols. (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1972).
26. For an interesting review of the party's positions in May-June see Claude Journes, 'Les Interprétations Communistes de Mai 1968', in *Pouvoirs* 39, 1986. The PCF now acknowledges that it missed the strategic boat on such matters, even if it would steadfastly deny any merit to our structural argument. For a thoughtful statement of the most recent party views see Alain Bertho, 'LES Socialistes: Parti, Societe, Institutions', in *Societe Francaise*, October-December 1984. Here Bertho is trying to explain why the Socialists were able to defeat the PCF in united frontism.
27. Waldeck Rochet's condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was meant both as a principled statement about the Czech events and a timid, but nonetheless necessary, step to prove the PCF's international sincerity. Yet it forged a unity between pro-Soviet elements and 'go it aloners' inside the party which, when added to Soviet external pressure and illness, ended Waldeck's

- brief career as Secretary-General. See Jean Fabien, *Kremlin-PCF* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1984).
28. See the report to the CC in August 1972 by George Marchais, Waldeck Rochet's successor, reprinted in Etienne Fajon, *L'Union est un combat* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1975).
 29. These warnings were based either on sophisticated reasoning flowing from analyses of the workings of Fifth Republican political institutions or from simple hostility to collaboration with inevitably treacherous social democrats.
 30. An excellent source of support for our vision of the PCF is Francois Hincker's *Le Parti Communiste au carrefour* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1981). Hincker was Roland Leroy's secretary in the period of the XXIst Congress in 1974, so his Chapter IV, on this turning point, is invaluable.
 31. The abolition of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' provision in the party's statutes was imposed on the party by the most traditional of organizational methods. Without prior discussion in the party ranks, the change was announced ('proposed') by Georges Marchais on television. No better illustration that PCF change, if it came, would exclude significant organizational reform, could have been imagined.
 32. The XXIIInd Conference documents are reproduced, with discussion, in PCF, *Le Socialisme Pour la France* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1976). On new PCF state theory see Francois Hincker, Jean Fabre and Lucien Seve, *Les Communistes l'Etat* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1977).
 33. See Pierre Juquin, *L'Actualisation a dossiers ouverts* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1978), for a blow-by-blow description of the talks, admittedly from the PCF side, but seemingly accurate. For a version of these events which claims, we think erroneously, that the PCF's shift was caused by Soviet pressure, see Jean Fabien, *Kremlin-PCF, Conversations secretes* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1984).
 34. There was belated leadership recognition at this point of the ways in which Fifth Republic institutions, in particular Presidential elections, favoured the PS, hence the decision to move towards a Communist candidacy in 1981.
 35. On rank and file perspectives on this period, see Jane Jenson and George Ross, *The View From Inside, op. cit.*
 36. Thus with considerable flourish the party publishing house published liberal and/or revisionist books in summer and fall 1978 on feminism and the Soviet Union, for example. See Yann Viens *et al.*, *La Condition Féminine* and Alexandre Adler *et al.*, *L'URSS et nous* (both Editions Sociales, 1978). Apparently well-founded rumour had it that Jean Kanapa, the PCF leader most responsible for Eurocommunism and Marchais' principal 'brain', worked steadily behind the scenes for a Eurocommunist resolution to the crisis until his untimely death in September 1978.
 37. See Jenson and Ross, *op. cit.*, and Henri Fiszbín, *Les Bouches s'ouvrent* (Paris: Grasset, 1980).
 38. See George Ross, 'The CGT', in Mark Kesselman and Guy Groux, *The French Working Class, Economic Crisis and Political Change* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984). It is clear that Georges Seguy (a political 'Italian', CGT General-Secretary and BP member) correctly feared the trade union consequences of 'going it alone' and undoubtedly also hoped to use a *unitaire* CGT as a bargaining resource in intra-PCF leadership conflict.
 39. See the contributions of Althusser and Elleinstein in *le Monde*, April 1978. Althusser's were quickly published as a book entitled *Ce qui ne peut plus durer au PCF* (Paris: Maspero, 1978). A random sample of other *contestataire* books from the period would include Etienne Balibar *et al.*, *Ouvrons la fenetre, camarades* (Paris: Maspero, 1979), Jean Rony, *20 ans de parti* (Paris: Christian

Bourgeois, 1978), Gérard Molina and Yves Vargas, *Dialogue a l'interieur du Parti Communiste français* (Paris: Maspero, 1978). See also Olivier Duhamel and Henri Weber, eds., *Changer le PC?* (Paris: PUF, 1979).

40. Here again Jenson and Ross, *The View From Inside*, may be a useful source. Inner-party critical discussion of the Soviet Union around *L'URSS et nous*, which had been authorized by the *Bureau Politique* in September 1978 (and which had provoked heated disagreements between pro-Eurocommunists and pro-Soviets at the base) was abruptly stopped. Then at the much heralded December meeting between the *Bureau Politique* and the '400 PCF intellectuals' the notion of the *bilan globalement positif* for the experiences of 'existing socialism' was launched for the first time.
41. Roland Leroy's case is most interesting. He seems to have opposed *Union de la Gauche* from the 1960s onwards in favour of a neo-Italian 'go it alone' line which would have pointed the PCF towards modernization to occupy then open spaces in French civil society. *Union* had the effect of helping the PS to occupy these spaces. Thus by the later 1970s Leroy was arguing his position more or less negatively. The PCF should pull back from *Union* in order to deflate the PS in the short run. Only in the medium run, once the PS was cut down to size, would the PCF be able to begin its occupation tasks. In these reformulated terms, and in the intra-party political conditions in which they were argued, Leroy's arguments, which had earlier been 'modernist', had become sectarian, workerist and nostalgic.
42. The hardest line 'go it aloners' had been beaten back by centrists of a non-Eurocommunist united frontist persuasion (Ronald Leroy was actually demoted at the Congress). In order to do this, these centrists had felt politically obliged to co-opt much of the 'go it alone' base—therefore isolating the more extreme 'go it alone' leaders—by proposing a highly traditionalist 'go it alone' shorter-run tactical position. This was possible only at the cost of isolating the most enthusiastic and Eurocommunist advocates of united frontism (many of whom subsequently left the party). In order to limit losses in this direction, therefore, the Congress proposal talked of 'eventual' *Union de la Gauche* and played on the notion of *autogestion* (which no one really understood but whose modernism could be seized upon as a positive glimmer of hope by moderate Eurocommunists). Given the complex manoeuvring at the top needed to hammer out this compromise, 'pro-Soviet' elements in the leadership were able to further their own particular desires, hence the notion of the *bilan globalement positif* for 'existing socialism'.

The tactical logic of all this was to attack the Socialists in order to deprive them of the Leftish *cachet* conferred by *Union de la Gauche*, then run a Communist candidate for President in 1981. This, the leadership reasoned, would deprive the PS of the 'Presidential' advantage which it had had (and which the PCF had helped it to obtain) since the 1960s. It had the mild disadvantage of possibly helping the Right to stay in power, of course. Nonetheless when these moves had worked to redress the PS-PCF balance, *Union de la Gauche* would be reinstated. Moreover the Congress confirmed the PCF's belated—1977—conversion to *autogestion* and a 'step-by-step' transition to socialism. Beyond this, the Congress proposal waxed eloquently and at length about the *bilan globalement positif* of the Socialist countries, even though they were 'insufficiently democratic'. On the XXIIIrd Congress see Jane Jenson and George Ross, 'Strategies in Conflict: The Twenty-third Congress of the French Communist Party', in *Socialist Review*, No. 47, September-October 1979.

43. The Congress in fact developed a subtle, perhaps too subtle, position on 'existing socialism'. The 'balance sheet' of existing socialism was 'globally positive',

but this meant 'global' in a literal sense. Existing socialism had played a strongly positive force in international affairs and made decades of relative peace possible. The position was less positive on matters of domestic social arrangements in the socialist countries, asserting that the USSR in particular was severely lacking in the democracy which was so much a part of the socialist vision. This position led the party to complex and costly behaviours internationally, such as support for the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and, later, tolerance towards the military coup against Solidarnosc in Poland. At the same time the party continue to hold that existing socialism was lacking internal democracy. The international positions and such contentions about democracy were somewhat contradictory, however, and in an atmosphere of renewed Cold War internationally and intensifying anti-communism domestically, only the first were really heard beyond the party itself.

44. The CGT was also normalized (if slightly later than the party) in ways which probably enhanced its own decline of support. See the Ross article in Kesselman, *The French Workers Movement*, *op. cit.*
45. This movement was intensified by the elimination of most of the united frontists at the base, including modernizers, a major part of the generation of post-1968 recruits, and a high percentage of those from new middle strata/intellectual situations. This kind of membership movement was intensified by the party's renewed pro-Sovietism which intervened at exactly that moment when the French intelligentsia as a whole was becoming dramatically anti-Soviet. All of this involved a larger decline in party membership than the leadership was willing to acknowledge. As of the XXIIIrd Congress the party began to fabricate its membership reports once again, after a refreshing interlude of honesty in the 1970s.
46. Here one can only speculate. Party leaders may have judged that refusal to participate in the first Left government in decades would have hurt the PCF more than participation. There may also have been some hope that PCF pressure could keep the PS honest on policy matters and that PCF Ministers might be able to shore up PCF positions in civil society in new ways. The abruptness of the party's shift from excoriating Mitterrand and the Socialists to embracing charter membership in the 'presidential majority' was yet another shock for the membership, quite as difficult to take as the shock four years earlier when the party began to attack the PS.
47. On the XXIVth Congress see George Ross, 'French Communism With Its Back to the Wall', in *Socialist Review*, September-October 1982.
48. Top-level PCF-PS meetings had to be held in December 1983. After the government turned towards 'modernizing' the steel industry in spring 1984, PCF protest was so great that the Socialists had to call for a vote of confidence in parliament in April, 1984.
49. Pierre Juquin of the BP was a key figure here, but he was not alone. Claude Poperen, another BP member was involved, along with PCF Ministers, Marcel Rigout and Anicet le Pors, with Charles Fiterman carefully moving in the background. Several members of the Central Committee and Federation leaderships were also deeply engaged. An accurate review of all this is to be found in Michel Cardoze, *Nouveau Voyage a l'interieur du PCF* (Paris: Fayard, 1987), pp. 117-140.
50. There were floaters in the Bureau Politique and Central Committee, and in numerous Federation leaderships, in Haute-Vienne, Meurthe-et-Moselle, and the Seine-St. Denis, among others.
51. Fiterman tended to favour this line, along with two of the other three PCF Ministers, Marcel Rigout and Anicet Le Pors.

52. Both of the most likely successors risked provoking greater disunity, Andre Lajoinie with united frontists and Charles Fiterman with hard-line 'go it aloners', ironically because he had been tainted by his very success as a Minister.
53. Philippe Herzog's book, *L'Economie Nouvelle a bras le corps* (Paris: Messidor, 1984) is the key document here, full of interesting new ideas about the operationalization of *autogestion* and ways to promote French national economic integrity thereby. Herzog has just produced a major redraft of the book, entitled *La France Peut se Ressaisir* (Paris: Messidor, 1987).
54. Indeed, from reading the newspapers—most of whom, to be sure, with anti-Communist axes to grind—one could learn little or nothing about the PCF itself, its plans, its ideas, its statements about the world, except the daily peregrinations of the *renovateurs*.
55. 'Going it alone' stridency after 1985 also concealed large unresolved leadership questions. In any business which had lost more than half of its sales in five years, the Chief Executive Officer and his lieutenants would have long since relocated to retirement villages. Yet tired old Georges Marchais remained PCF Secretary-General, surrounded by equally tired old men and women like pro-Soviet Gaston Plissonnier (71) and 'go it aloner' Ronald Leroy (59). This dual incapacity to change behaviours and leaders, despite persistently disastrous results, said a great deal about strategic paralysis.
56. This is one position of the *renovateurs* with which we agree. Their generally united frontist strategic perspectives are less appealing, we find.