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Reviewed by Carlos Eduardo Rebello de Mendonca (Rio de Janeiro State University)

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The Resilience of Old-Style Communism

If we think of the prospects many English-speaking academics envisioned just after the end of the Cold War–that we were on the threshold of what Ken Jowitt called in 1992 "The Leninist Extinction," or what Francis Fukuyama called the "End of History," indicating that liberal democracy was now "the only game in town"–it is surprising how long a rump form of Communism has survived.[1] All kinds of splinter groups from old-style Stalinist Communist parties are still sizeable and functional political formations worldwide. In no other single country has this phenomenon been more pronounced than in post-Soviet Russia, where the demise of the old Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) has not only provided the postcommunist political establishment with most of its top brass, but also spawned a host of political groups intent on rescuing the Communist heritage.

In this book, *Lenin's Heirs: A History of Communist Parties in Post-Soviet Russia*, Ângelo Segrillo describes in detail the concrete history of the events around this surprisingly–and at first sight unexpected–survival. To the lay as well as the specialized reader, most of this history, of course, is somewhat boring, in that it demands the detailed retelling, in a coherent narrative, of a long and extended process of splinters, mergers, frictions, squabbles, and open struggles among what seem to be mostly small groupings working at the outer periphery of the already confused and misleading post-Soviet Russian political system. However, behind this apparently misleading appearance, there is a general dynamic that can be discerned from the outset.

To avoid confusion, Segrillo's work is composed of a short introduction and short conclusion, with nine brief chapters describing events extending from roughly 1991 to 2000. In chapter 1 (introduction), Segrillo describes his object of research, which is the history of the five most important post-Soviet Communist parties, including the CPRF (Communist Party of the Russian Federation), the RKRP (Workers' Communist Party of Russia), the RPK (Party of Communists of Russia) , the VKPB (All-Union Communist Bolshevik Party), and the SK (Union of Communists).

Chapter 2 outlines the pre-1991 history of the Russian party system. Segrillo begins by pointing to two main traits of this system, including a belated development of the party system at the turn of the twentieth century, and the extreme Left position of the two pioneering political organizations of that time–the Russian Social Democrats and the Socialist Revolutionaries. This situation led to the fact that, in the eventual outcome of the 1917 revolution as a Bolshevik takeover leading to a one-party system, *ideological party-politics* were grafted onto a previous tradition of *bureaucratic-authoritarian governance.* This resulted in a dual character of the entire Soviet political system, in that the ruling Communist Party was at the same time an ideological (Leninist and therefore class-conscious) apparatus *sensu stricto* and a bureaucratic agency concerned with the management of Soviet state affairs. During the entire Soviet period, those two identities–the ideological and the national-bureaucratic–coexisted uneasily within the same party. The demise of the CPSU meant, in the political sense, the *breaking-up* of these two common identities into two separate ones. This fracture line informed the diverse ideological positions of the successor Russian Communist parties: on one extreme were purely ideological, strictly class-based, formations epitomized by the VKPB; and on the other, a "counter-hegemonic" parliamentary formation concerned with upholding Russian national inter-

est, i.e. the CPRF. In between were various "mixed" formations, such as the SK (later known as the Communist Party of Russia or RKP) and the RPK–all of them, however, acknowledging a common ideological foundation.

Of course, this twin ideological basis was there from the earliest days of the Soviet regime, as expressed already in Vladimir Lenin's political persona (Lenin, the leader of the world proletarian revolution–the Lenin of War Communism–as opposed to Lenin, the Russian leader struggling against encircling Western imperialism–the NEP [New Economic Policy] Lenin). However, the originality of the post-Soviet situation consisted in the *partial* breaking-up of the whole into its component parts. Until then, "class-wise" Communism never untied itself from its Russian roots, and "national" Communism, in turn, never broke completely from its residual class character.

Segrillo describes the internal CPSU processes from 1989 to 1991 that led to this fracture in chapter 3. The "right," or procapitalist wing (the Democratic platform), quickly veered toward Social-Democratic or traditional liberal politics, while the remaining groups, aiming to refound the Communist movement, were the extreme (neo-Stalinist) Left (Bolshevik platform), the Left-center (Communist initiative), and the center (Marxist platform). Chapter 4 presents the post-Soviet outcome of this process. Part of the Marxist platform broke with Leninism into a Left Social-Democracy-cum-grassroots movement (the Party of Labor). What remained around the Communist banner was the consolidated rump of the CPSU Left: the Left-of-center, pro-mixed economy SK, later known as the RKP-KPSS (Communist Party of Russia-CPSU); the RPK; the leftist (neo-Stalinist) VKPB; and the extreme leftist RKRP, a strictly proletarian, neo-Stalinist group prone to street fighting.

Chapter 5 deals with the belated reformation, alongside these strictly "Leninist" (i.e., class-oriented and residually internationalist) formations, of the old CPRF. This reformation was made possible by the 1992 constitutional court ruling that upheld Boris Yeltsin's banning of the former CPSU *ruling* organs but allowed for the functioning of the party's *grassroots* organizations. This freed the CPRF from its former *Soviet* setting and allowed it to reorganize on a purely *national* (Russian) framework. That allowed the CPRF to develop along *nationalist Communist* lines, "making the issue of the restoration of the power of the Russian Motherland a central, intrinsic cause in their vision of the retaking of the Socialist road" (p. 43).

As discussed in chapter 6, during the 1993 confrontation between Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament, the CPRF adopted a legalist posture favoring a "popular-democratic government"–as opposed to the confrontational stance of the RKRP, or the VKPB's indifference to what it considered a mere dispute between different bourgeois interests–that allowed it to take the banner of *state patriotism*, putting the *national* question ahead of the *class* one. As shown in chapter 7, it was after 1993 that CPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov developed his theoretical forays into the ideological realm, and produced a body of writings emphasizing the special character of the Russian nation and its particular values, including collectivism, communalism (*sobornost*) and state-ism (*gosudarstvennost*). He thus tied the Marxist idea of class emancipation to national liberation. Irrespective of its theoretical coherence in Marxist terms, such an ideology, was, for the time being, undoubtedly *effective*, and it accounts for much of the CPRF's electoral success in the 1995 parliamentary elections, as well as Zyuganov's near-victory in the 1996 presidential elections. Both of these Segrillo describes in chapter 8.

In the 1999 parliamentary elections and 2000 presidential elections, however, such a strategy backfired, as presented in chapter 9. Vladimir Putin "stole into" the CPRF's nationalist platform. In turn, the CPRF reacted by means of an even less ideological and even more "popular" (or populist) electoral platform, which came to the point of avoiding the merest mention of socialism. That contributed to diluting its distinct ideological identity and attracted it subsequently to the parliamentary supporters of Putin's centralizing, statist policies. In strictly electoral terms, however, the CPRF fared far better than the other parties of the Communist rump, of which the RKRP narrowly missed the 5 percent minimum vote necessary for parliamentary representation. Thus, in terms of the future prospects described in chapter 10, the Russian Communist movement is in a logjam. In the framework of Putin's authoritarian stabilization, the "patriotic" stance toed by the CPRF is a no-way street. Even more hopeless, however, is the more strictly "class vs. class" line held by its sibling parties, which fares poorly in a postmodern, less class-conscious political culture. The class line appeals only to a hard core of certain generational and professional groups–something to which the RKRP bore witness when, during its Tenth Congress in 2000, it passed a resolution for the intensification of work among younger age groups. Segrillo summarizes the Communist movement's logjam in his conclusion. In a nutshell, thus, the CPRF has in electoral power what

it lacks in revolutionary action; conversely, its siblings have a more revolutionary stance and no electoral penetration.

What should be concluded here in more general terms? That the resilience of Communism, in Russia as in other countries, has much to do with the plight of a hard core of various "overly oppressed" groups of people under global capitalist conditions: backward capitalist nations, oppressed ethnic groups, "underdog" fractions, and aging strata of working classes. This conclusion is attested to even in a cursory enumeration of numerous national groups making up today's world Communist rump. Leaving outside those who hold state power, these groups include such parties as the CPRF in Russia; Western European Communist parties toeing an anti-European Union line; Nepalese and Indian ("Naxalite") Maoist guerrillas; and the "post-Maoist" Communist party of Brazil, which forms part of the support base of the Workers' Party government even though it differs in its more hardcore social basis. However, what made the historical strength of the Communist movement, even in its Stalinist guise, was not its capacity to articulate "national" interest *per se*, but its capacity to link it to a broader platform of Marxist *sensu stricto* class emancipation–precisely what is missing in the present postmodern setting, without which it cannot stand the competition of other identity politics movements (authoritarian and/or populist modernizer-reformers, fundamentalists, and so on). What remains to be seen is if such a new Marxist synthesis can be reached in the future.

In those terms, Segrillo's work is something that could–and did–come far more easily from a Brazilian scholar's keyboard than from that of an American or Western European one, and that is what makes it, in my opinion, an important comparative analysis piece of history and political science scholarship.

Note

[1] Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History? " *The National Interest* 16 (summer 1989): 1-28.

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