

A minor history?

The Western communists, anti-imperialism and decolonisation in Africa

Recent years have seen a proliferation of studies on the relations between the communist movement and anti-colonial liberation movements, on the encounters between the 'socialist camp' and the Third World, and more generally on communism's influence on decolonisation and the formation of the postcolonial world. These studies have adopted global- and international-history perspectives which are ever less confined to the classic themes of debates within the Comintern or Soviet strategies during the Cold War. In particular, the use of a transnational approach directed at reconstructing the connections and influences that developed in parallel to the more visible and traditional relations of communist internationalism appears to be becoming ever more relevant. This conference seeks to make a fresh contribution to these new historiographical tendencies, proposing an examination of the communists who were active within the imperial and post-imperial spaces.

The conference will focus on the relations between the Communist Parties in the Western countries that had colonial empires (France, Britain, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain) and the African continent. Indeed, the relations between the European CPs and African anti-colonial movements constitute a more important object of study than was recognised in the past. Studying these relations is useful for understanding not only the dynamics between the metropolises and the colonies but also the dynamics between Marxist-Leninist-inspired political and cultural milieux in Europe and their counterparts in the colonial and postcolonial 'peripheries'. Both the Western communists' internationalist ramifications and their elaboration of their own national dimension demanded that they provide a response to the problem of the unequal and combined development among colonised and colonisers. This raised the question of the different conjugations of the nexus between socialism and nation, indeed in often contradictory ways. This was not least true given the centrality of Eurocentric visions across much communist internationalism and the resulting difficulties in elaborating analyses and languages that were adequate to the specificities of national self-determination on the African continent

Though often linked to an imperial or post-imperial context, these questions are also closely bound-up with the evolution of the international communist movement. In this sense, the conference will also delve into the interconnections between the communists in Western Europe, the Soviet Union, the socialist countries and African movements and parties, without neglecting the role of trade unions and other adjacent organisations. Indeed, the Western communists played a pedagogical and political role of both mediation and integration in their respective colonial and postcolonial contexts, also interwoven with the activity of other Communist Parties (from Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, Asia, and Cuba).

This role did not remain confined to the various Communist Parties' respective national zones of influence, but often overstepped the borders imposed by European domination. It made up part of the expansion of an anti-imperialist camp which from the era of decolonisation onward spanned multiple Third World states and movements. This encouraged contacts between the communist movement and African nationalists, which proceeded by way of the trade unions or youth activist circles in different countries. In this sense, the weight of trade union or youth and

student organisations linked to communist milieux was essential to the build-up of relations between European and African workers and intellectuals, as well as for the formation of leading cadres for local political movements and parties. In Africa, union federations and student milieux also became crucibles of important ideological discussions and innovations, fuelled by a rereading of the works of Marx, Lenin and Mao through the prism of the continent's particular historical and social conditions. The chronological span of the conference papers will coincide with that of the existence of communism *qua* global phenomenon (1917-1991), including the period of the crisis of the colonial system between the two wars, and centring on the era of decolonisation. The great powers' political and economic interventions and the bloody civil wars and liberation wars that set the continent ablaze from the 1960s onward would open up new scenarios and new perspectives for the relations between post-imperial Western Europe and postcolonial Africa. For this reason, the conference will privilege those historiographical analyses that aim to set the Western CPs' policy within a wider global context, observing the transnational dynamics that guided and complemented their activity. This, in the objective of better bringing to light the communist movement's role in the construction of anti-colonial ideas and languages, in the attempts to mould development models and models of statehood different and alternative to Western ones, and in the legacies that would be bequeathed to contemporary Africa.

The themes to be addressed at the conference can be situated between two distinct axes of research:

The relations between Western CPs and African movements in colonial or postcolonial spaces and in the context of the Cold War. What were the relations between the communists in the European countries that had colonial empires, and the political movements in the African territories ruled by their own nations? What were their relations like after the African states became independent? What impact did the communist movement's ideological and cultural reference points have on this type of European-African relations? How should we analyse the relations between national-liberation movements in Africa and the Western European communists in the context of the Cold War? What was the role and influence of the great world powers or local actors (USA, USSR, China, EEC, Cuba) within these relations and in the development of a North-South dialogue?

Union, youth and student organisations, between Europe and Africa. The communists' role. What impact did European workers' struggles have on anti-colonial struggles in Africa, and vice versa? What role did the European unions have in the formation and development of African union federations? What was the cultural and political influence of African student and youth circles in the capitals of Europe, and what was the role of communist teachers and intellectual circles present in Africa? What importance did the circulation of people and ideas between the socialist bloc, the Western Communist Parties and African anticolonial movements really have?

The conference will be held in Rome on 12 and 13 December 2019.

To participate, send an email to communismafricaconf19@fondazionegramsci.org by 30 April 2019 with an abstract of not more than 3000 characters (including spaces) and a CV of up to two pages.

The papers chosen will be announced on 31 May 2019.
Languages of the conference: Italian, French, English.

The conference organisers will take responsibility for speakers' travel and accommodation expenses.

Scientific committee:

Françoise Blum (CNRS - Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne); Marco Di Maggio (Sapienza Università di Roma); Silvio Pons (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa - Presidente della Fondazione Gramsci); Gabriele Siracusano (Università di Roma "Tor Vergata"- Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne); Serge Wolikow (Université de Bourgogne, Dijon - President of the Scientific Committee of the Fondation Gabriel Péri).