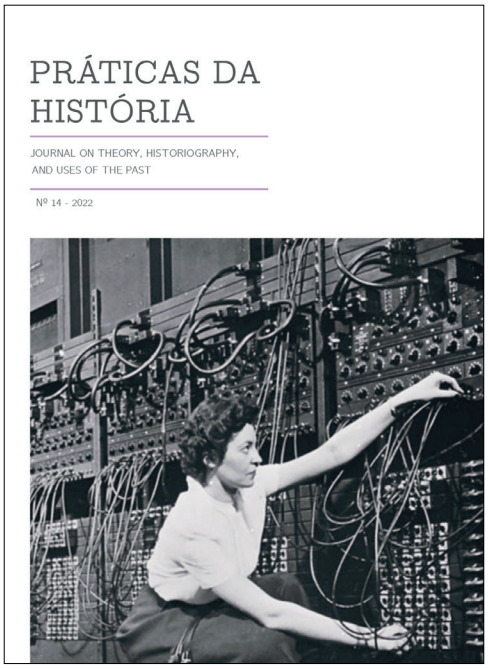

Recensão a *Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain. Childhood, Political Activism, and Identity Formation*, de Elke Weesjes

Giulia Strippoli

Práticas da História, n.º 14 (2022): 219-225

www.praticasdahistoria.pt

Elke Weesjes

Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain. Childhood, Political Activism, and Identity Formation

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021, 293 pp.

Giulia Strippoli*

The interviews with 38 British and Dutch cradle communists who participated in an oral history project about family life and childhood experiences are part of the large sources and literature that Elke Weesjes analyses in this comparative study on communism in Britain and in the Netherlands. The memories collected through the oral history project conducted over almost twenty years – between 2001 and 2019 – are interpreted together with archival sources, biographies and autobiographies, historiography, with the aim of proposing a different key to understanding communist mentalities than the ones presented by scholars such as Jolande Withius and Thomas Linehan who have described communists – respectively in the Dutch and in the British contexts – as rigid, non-affective figures, separated from the outside world and strongly dependent on the Soviet pedagogies and practices[1]. This focus and the

* Giulia Strippoli (giuliastrippoli@fcsh.unl.pt), Instituto de História Contemporânea, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Avenida Berna 26 C, 1069-061 Lisboa. This work is funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the Norma Transitória – DL 57/2016/CP1453/CT0056. Receção da recensão original: 09-05-2022. Receção da versão revista: 16-05-2022. Aceitação: 17-05-2022.

1 Jolande Withius, *Opoffering en heroïek: de mentale wereld van een communistische vrouwenorganisatie in naoorlogs Nederland 1946-1976* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1995); Jolande Withius,

comparative perspective are informed by scholars such as Andrew Flinn, Geoff Andrews, Gidon Cohen, Evan Smith, Kevin Morgan, and Matthey Worley, who, by considering more than one context, have complicated the pictures that drew a monolithic image of communist contexts (and that study the link with Moscow without looking at its possible variations)[2]. On the other hand, the combination of the interviews with other sources looks at the differences between oral history and the construction of social and cultural memory, to their particular methods of research, but also to the different contexts of raising and aims of oral history and memory turns (the former is connected to the objective of democratising history, which emerged in the 1960s, while the memory turn is more related to traumatic processes, such as the Jewish Holocaust or the disintegration of the Soviet Union) and to the cases of non-involvement of one methodology in the other[3]. The combined use of the research materials characterizes both Part I and II, the first dedicated to the British and the Dutch communist youth organisations from the 1920s to the 1990s, the second focused on the lives of communists and on the different family experiences between the public and the private spheres. The history of the YCL (the British Young Communist League) and of the Dutch youth organisations, the CJB (Communistische Jeugdbond – Communist Youth League) and then the ANJV (Algemeen Nederlands Jeugdverbond – General Dutch Youth League) show the similarities and differences of these movements in their social and political articulations, and in their relationships with the respective communist parties, the

Raadselvader. Kind in de Koude Oorlog (Amsterdam: Bezige Bij, 2018); Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920-39: From the Cradle to the Grave* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

2 See Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times. The Final Years of British Communism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2004); Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991. People of a Special Mould* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007); Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, eds., *Agents of the Revolution. New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005); Evan Smith, "Are the Kids United? The Communist Party of Great Britain, Rock Against Racism, and the Politics of Youth Culture", *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 5, n.º 2 (Fall 2011): 85-117; and Matthew Worley, "Marx-Lenin-Rotten-Strummer: British Marxism and Youth Culture in the 1970s", *Contemporary British History* 30, n.º 4 (2016): 505-21.

3 See Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, *Oral History and Public Memories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

CPGB (Communist Party of Great Britain) and the CPN (Communistische Partij van Nederland – Communist Party of the Netherlands).

In the period between the foundation of the communist parties and the youth organizations, and 1956, the CJB – and then the ANJV – and YCL differentiate themselves mostly because of their relationships with the communist parties, the ANJV being strongly linked to the CPN, while the YCL was more independent from the CPGB. According to the author, the anti-communist violence in the Netherlands during the Cold War and especially after the events of 1956 caused a major cohesion between the party and the youth's organization, a sense of belonging and strong unity in the two organisations, while in Britain 1956 meant not only that a significant number of members of the YCL left the league to join other organizations, such as Trotskyist or New Left groups, but also the end of YCL's solidarity with Moscow and the CPGB. In the following decade, both the YCL and the ANJV came out from isolation, thanks to their campaigns on specific issues: the Vietnam War, students' rights and nuclear disarmament, although the ANJV had more difficulties to abandon its sectarian attitudes, while YCL demonstrated a strong ability in connecting and being influenced by students' movements and in particular by women's groups. The ANJV, after an initial – and mutual – misunderstanding, started collaborating with *Provo*, mostly against the Vietnam war and for denouncing the police violence and the fascist presence in the Netherlands. Moreover, the YCL not only was able to connect more with the new radicalism of the youth, but during the decade developed a decisive independence from the CPGB, while the ANJV remained strongly dependent from the CPN and less connected with the movements that were born in the meantime. Weesjes dedicates the last chapter of Part I to the period between 1969 and 1991, and to the youth organisations in its relationships with communist parties, but also with anti-racist, feminist and gay rights movements. In both cases, the groups succeeded in being an important part of these new movements, and in being influenced by them: for instance, female members played essential roles in the YCL and in the ANJV. The differences, the analogies, the contra-

dictions showed by the two organisations during these decades – such as the conception of independence from the communist parties, because although the strong ties between ANJV and CPN the youth organisation was financially independent, different from its British counterpart – were overcome by their common demise at the end of the eighties.

Part I draws a plural scenario where the ANJV and the YCL showed differences and nuances and, moreover, were not always equal to themselves. Against this backdrop, Part II focuses on oral interviews to cradle communists to investigate different issues: the impact of World War II and of the events of 1956, communist home life, political and cultural upbringing, and the interactions between communist families and external spaces such as work, school, extended family and neighbourhood. Through the interviews, Weesjes innovates in arguing that communist ideology was not so comprehensive as previous studies have claimed. The author demonstrates her main thesis in showing how British and Dutch communist identities were shaped by external circumstances and that both in Britain and in the Netherlands, there was a gap between the formal and the informal practices, for instance between the party's directives and the adaptation of these practices in the private sphere. Besides inspiring more research on other communist contexts to challenge this interpretation, this part of the book provides several examples of the articulation in time and space of communist identities. In chapter five, the author explores the memories of childhood concerning the parents' trauma of the war, the Nazi prisons, deportations and executions and about the feelings connected to being a communist, a picture complicated by the events after 1956 and the double ostracisms and sense of abandonment experienced by children whose parents left the parties[4]. In the following chapter, the author focuses on how communist party members acted as parents, and on the role of the Soviet ideology within communist families. The scenario that emerges expresses a remarkable contrast between the parties' theories and the families' practices: although politics had a vital role in communist

4 Elke Weesjes, *Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain: Childhood, Political Activism, and Identity Formation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 185.

homes, that often means an ongoing access to information, exchange of opinions, and also the perception of being 'different' and somehow 'superior' to non-communist peers[5]. The variety of the interviews show that not all cradle communists had the same experiences in the formation of their political personality, nor in the parental education or emotional attention (or deprivation). This does not avoid the possibility of tracing a common framework that communists share and to formulate some generalisations about what distinguished them from non-communists in terms of a general progressive education, which had effects, for instance, in the absence of corporal punishments or in the conceptions of gender relationships[6], but the plurality of experiences inspires the author in looking at influences not only from the Soviet ideology, but also from the Western culture and from the indigenous circumstances.

According to Weesjes's studies and interviews, in Britain communists were more accepted than in the Netherlands, where the isolation of communists was conditioned by the strong anti-communist tradition and by the small size of the party, while in British society there were less differences between communist workers and the rest of the working class. Nevertheless, the oral project conducted by the author demonstrates that, differently from the results of Jolande Withius's research, good relationships and even friendships between communists and non-communists have been possible and fruitful in Dutch society[7]. The epilogue (chapter 8) focuses on the memories and legacies of the experience in communist families and on how communist upbringing has conditioned adulthood of the cradle communists, with a special focus around the collapse of the Soviet Union. A point of interest is that throughout the project – of almost twenty years – the participants have demonstrated a more critical attitude towards their experiences. The author explains this variation with the increased trust between the respondents and the interviewer and with the fact that, in the meantime, participants got older, and in some cases their parents had passed away. The other important result is that the author's questions

5 Weesjes, *Growing Up Communist*, 188-94.

6 Weesjes, *Growing Up Communist*, 214.

7 Weesjes, *Growing Up Communist*, 255.

"How do you look back on your upbringing?"[8] and "Do you have the same values as your parents when it comes to raising your own children?"[9] in general have provoked positive feelings in relation to respondents' upbringings, despite the expression of negative feelings aroused around the Soviet crimes. Moreover, the participants have tended to be sympathetic to their parents' choices and attitudes, and when they have noted difficulties, such as lack of attention or emotional deprivation, these did not overshadow the consideration of the positive aspects.

This research nicely combines the political history of youth organizations in Britain and the Netherlands, with the focus on the formation of the communist identities, telling an history that by using a plurality of sources, including oral interviews, highlights the connections between politics, education and legacies. This perspective inspires further research about communist organizations and individuals and shows the richness of addressing the study of communism through comparative lens to evaluate the influences of indigenous circumstances. Moreover, this book shows how the construction of communist communities, with all its obstacles, limits and contradictions, left members with legacies in terms of values and attitudes that are perceived as a positive heritage. If the choice of the comparison is due to the possibility of considering the indigenous characteristics, the focus on Britain and the Netherlands is justified by the isolation of communists, differently from other contexts, like the case of Italy and France. This approach not only differentiates from the anti-communist tradition that emerged during the Cold War, but by valuing the circumstances of each country[10], reaches the objective of proving the changing aspects of communism, the permeability of communist communities and, in doing so, stimulates the interest in multiplying studies on the legacies, in the present, of 20th-century communism.

8 Weesjes, *Growing Up Communist*, 260.

9 Weesjes, *Growing Up Communist*, 265.

10 The author exemplifies the anti-communist tradition by quoting Bob Darke. On the other hand, the references for the consideration of communism and labour movements in specific contexts are E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1963); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas in the English Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1972); and Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959).

Bibliography

Andrews, Geoff. *Endgames and New Times. The Final Years of British Communism*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2004.

Hamilton, Paula, and Linda Shopes. *Oral History and Public Memories*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008.

Hill, Christopher. *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas in the English Revolution*. London: Penguin, 1972.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959.

Linehan, Thomas. *Communism in Britain, 1920-39: From the Cradle to the Grave*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

Morgan, Kevin, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn. *Communists and British Society 1920-1991. People of a Special Mould*. London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007.

Morgan, Kevin, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn, ed. *Agents of the Revolution. New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2005.

Smith, Evan. "Are the Kids United? The Communist Party of Great Britain, Rock Against Racism, and the Politics of Youth Culture". *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 5, n.º 2 (Fall 2011): 85-117.

Thompson, E. P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1963.

Weesjes, Elke. *Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain: Childhood, Political Activism, and Identity Formation*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021.

Withius, Jolande. *Opoffering en heroïek: de mentale wereld van een communistische vrouwenorganisatie in naoorlogs Nederland 1946-1976*. Amsterdam: Boom, 1995.

Withius, Jolande. *Raadselvader. Kind in de Koude Oorlog*. Amsterdam: Bezige Bij, 2018.

Worley, Matthew. "Marx-Lenin-Rotten-Strummer: British Marxism and Youth Culture in the 1970s". *Contemporary British History* 30, n.º 4 (2016): 505-21.

Referência para citação:

Strippoli, Giulia. "Recensão a *Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain. Childhood, Political Activism, and Identity Formation* de Elke Weesjes". *Práticas da História, Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, n.º 14 (2022): 219-225.