

ANTI-COMMUNISM: IT'S HIGH TIME TO DIAGNOSE AND COUNTERACT

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1. What exclusion areas/mechanisms support anti-communist discourses?

Anti-communism is as old as communism, maybe even older. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx writes about the “spectre of communism”, which “haunts Europe” and against which “all powers of old Europe” have united: “Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies”. The communist party had not yet been created, the program had not crystallised yet, there were not yet people who would have identified themselves with the ideas of communism. Nevertheless, representatives of the old feudal and the new capitalist worlds had already protested against them. And they opposed them fiercely, using all available tools, both legal (prison sentences, fines) and extra-legal (assaults on members of left-wing organisations, destruction and arson of their premises, social ostracism).

This is not the place to dwell on the history of anti-communism. It suffices to say that it is long and bloody. In the 20th century alone, it was marked by: murders both of activists (Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were killed in January 1919 in Berlin by Freikorps militants) and of whole communities – these attacks bear a resemblance to genocide (more than half a million leftist activists, mainly communists, were murdered in Indonesia between 1965–1966 on the command of the right-wing general Suharto), the banning of political parties (the Communist Workers’ Party of Poland was banned in early 1919; there were paragraphs in the

legislation of the Second Republic of Poland on the basis of which communist activities were punished with imprisonment as acts of treason, by loss of employment), and by social stigma (from June 1934 Bereza Kartuska prison functioned as a “place of isolation” for activists deemed as dangerous for the state, many of whom were leftist and especially communists), interrogations, trials, prison, and death sentences (a “red scare” broke out in the United States in 1917–1920 and 1947–1957; in the latter case it was called “McCarthyism”, from the name of the initiator, Senator Joseph McCarthy; one of the peak moments of this campaign was the murder of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in 1953, involved in the US Communist Party, accused of spying for the USSR). If we mention the Norwegian right-wing extremist Andreas Breivik and his attacks in July 2011 in Oslo and on the island of Utoya, in which almost 80 people were killed, mainly members of the Norwegian Labour Party youth, it will turn out that anti-communism now adds more paragraphs to its grim history.

To answer the question about what fuels anti-communism today – in Poland and Europe, especially in our central European context – I will name three interconnected phenomena.

First is **the prevalence of a totalitarian paradigm**, in which Nazism and Communism are equated as the most atrocious ideas and systems in human history (because communism, defined by Marx as a classless society with common means of production, has never been realised anywhere in the world, in further parts I will be putting this concept into inverted commas as an example of discursive practice). Significantly, while in the Western debate the more precise term “Stalinism” is used – in 2008, on the 70th anniversary of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the European Parliament established 23 August as the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism – hardly anyone in Poland is paying attention to niceties: “communism”, or simply the left, is perceived as totalitarian here. A homogenizing sequence of associations (the left is communism, communism is totalitarianism, ergo the left is totalitarian) and the ahistorical character of the concepts used (no matter if we talk about the USSR in the 1930s under Stalin, Maoist China from the period of the Cultural Revolution, or Poland under Gierek, “communism” is murderous all the same) not only serves the denigration of the Polish People’s Republic, expelling this period from Polish history, but also – or perhaps primarily – the deprecation of Marxism, leftist programs, and any hopes and beliefs in Marxism and leftist activity as a remedy for capitalist exploitation, social inequality, fascist violence on a racist and anti-Semitic basis, as well as homophobic and misogynist violence. The totalitarian paradigm not only equates fascism and socialism (in Poland and the countries of the former Eastern bloc stubbornly called “communism” and pressed into the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, which should additionally emphasize its foreignness), but in fact recognizes the latter as worse, more sinister (the *Black Book of Communism* (1997) is of help here as it estimates the number of victims of “communism” at around 100 million; however, it is critically commented on by researchers on the subject, including historian Enzo

Traverso in the book *L'histoire comme champ de bataille* (2011)). Thus, anti-communism not only delegitimises the left, including communists, and depreciates the contribution of the left to the breakdown of fascism in 1945, but also contributes to the rehabilitation of the latter, as we can see in recent cases in Europe and other places.

Different shades of the totalitarian paradigm can be found in scientific research (for example, Timothy Snyder's book *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* is deeply immersed in it (2010)), but also in institutional forms of commemorating the "victims of two totalitarianisms" (for example, in Budapest's Terror Háza Museum, funded in 2002 by Prime Minister Orbán, only a few rooms focus on the activity of Arrow Cross (Hungarian fascists), while the vast majority commemorates the suffering of the Hungarians under Communist rule and their heroic revolution in 1956). Significantly, in many Central and Eastern European countries, anti-communism was also internalized by left-wing parties that had been going through the public expulsion process for years: repenting and apologizing for the "sins of their ideological predecessors", cutting themselves off from their own history, and often using a totalitarian argument in order to discredit their opponents on the left (!) side of the political scene (the example of the Hungarian left was well described by Csilla Kiss in the book *Historical Memory of Central and East European Communism* (2018), edited by myself and Stanislav Holubec).

Second is **the prevalence of the national paradigm**, which places the nation as the centre of the identity of modern states, parties, and political, social and cultural organisations. In right-wing circles, nationalism as a "catchy idea" of mobilisation is contrasted with "communist" internationalism, whose contemporary embodiment is to be found in the European Union. An important role in such a conceptualised nationalism is played by the figure of "Żydokomuna" (Judeo-Communism), grounded in the belief that "communism" was (and still is) an instrument in the hands of Jews, calculated for the destruction of the nation states. Hence the penchant of many right-wing politicians, activists and researchers to trace Jews among the communists and the communists among Jews, as well as the tendency to weigh fascist crimes against anti-Semitic "communist" crimes (the functioning of the "Żydokomuna" figure in Poland was analysed by Anna Zawadzka in the text *Żydokomuna: A Sketch for the Sociological Analysis of Historical Sources* (2010)).

After 1989, in Central and Eastern Europe, nationalism is celebrated as a liberational idea connected to the independence movement: a reaction to "communist enslavement", but also to an allegedly "communist" attempt to denationalise local societies, cutting them off from local cultural traditions. In Poland, this kind of thinking has a broad messianic – with a key ethos of suffering, sacrifice, heroism and bravery – and Russophobic foundation: the Soviet Union, and in fact Russia, is the incarnation of "communist evil", weakened in the Warsaw battle of 1920 and finally defeated in 1989. Aleida Assmann, a researcher of forms of cultural memory, points out that in the contemporary race of various communities for the title of "the

greatest sacrifice” and “the greatest hero”, the Central European nations clearly aspire to be placed in the forefront – precisely because of the suffering experienced in the period of “communism”, but also because of their heroic resistance to “foreign domination”. Thus, anti-communism is a strong drive for nationalism, as shown by the examples of not only bottom-up but also public commemorations of victims of “communism” and heroes of the anti-communist underground (e.g. celebration of Polish “cursed soldiers”, the Ukrainian Bandera faction, Croatian Ustasche, and Serbian Chetniks).

The national paradigm, however, takes possession not only of the right but of the centre and the left as well. Its hegemony manifests itself in narrowing the horizon of the actors of social, cultural and political life to the affairs of the nation, the inability to go beyond the narrowly understood national interests and to see that the world has always been a system of co-dependency: capital/exploitation/inequality as well as work/solidarity/fighting for the interests of oppressed groups. Putting national interests over a broader, universal imperative of action for the human rights to life, dignity, and equality can be considered as one of the causes of the crisis of the European left as an intellectual and political formation (as in the first decades of the twentieth century, which Eric Hobsbawm described in his book *Nation and Nationalism since 1780* (1990)). The nation displaces the class as an analytical category, but also as a category that organises social consciousness and imagination. We could observe this in Poland in 2018, which was utterly absorbed in celebrating the 100th anniversary of independence. Leftist, feminist and even LGBT circles joined the anniversary celebrations, bidding for patriotism and general love of the homeland while legitimising their position as the only valid one: accordingly, leftist, feminist, etc. Revolutionary slogans from a century ago – equality of all people regardless of class, gender, ethnicity, unification of the proletarians of all countries in a joint struggle against the alliance of capital, nation-state and church – have been either silenced or recalled only inasmuch as they did not conflict with the supreme idea of freedom of the nation. In a word, we are saying yes to Ignacy Daszyński, whose monument was unveiled in Warsaw on November 11, 2018 and united SLD and Razem, and to Rosa Luxemburg (not to mention Wanda Wasilewska) – no.

Third is **the museumisation of communism**, based on the perception of the communist movement and, more broadly, Marxism as a relic of a bygone era, a museum exhibit, not a living idea capable of gripping the masses (this was a point of the recently published book *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (2016) by Enzo Traverso). Newly built “museums and parks of communism” (Prague, Budapest, Druskininkai, Kozłówka) alternately demonize “communism” as a criminal idea and practice and ridicule its grotesqueness – just as the extensive “histories of communism” written by researchers present it as a short and closed stage in the history of mankind, not as a still unrealized and, more importantly, contemporary thought and vision corresponding to the challenges of the present:

deepening class inequalities, exploitation of the world of work through the world of capital, racial, ethnic, gender or sexual violence, environmental degradation, and restrictions on the movement of people (with the simultaneous free movement of goods and services). I would ascribe the “museumisation of communism” to a wider phenomenon, which can be described as the crisis of the Enlightenment project. It is characterized by the abandonment of egalitarianism, emancipation, rational thinking, and collective action in favour of hierarchy, difference, irrationalism and individualism, and, above all, by a departure from utopia, understood as a vision of a better future and from attempts to realize it – abandoning it in order to celebrate the current free-market democracy as “the best of all possible worlds” or to look back at the past and look for incentive to act in it. The “crisis of the Enlightenment project” understood in this way is also visible in central and eastern European left-wing circles: intellectuals, and often politicians and activists, abandon the critical diagnosis of reality and the development of a strategy to change it in favour of never-ending historical disputes, nostalgia for the past, and sophisticated analysis, which conceptual overload often does not match the problems and challenges of the modern world.

2. How to successfully fight against anti-communism?

Although it is undoubtedly safer to diagnose reality – in this case, to point out the causes and analyse the manifestations of anti-communism – I would like to attempt to outline three levels of struggle against it. At each of these levels of critical activity, deconstructing anti-communist figures and discursive strategies and practices of action should be accompanied by the effort to build counter-narratives. Not, however, to create myths or escape into nostalgia, but to break down the monolith of the dominant discourse and show other variants of thinking and possibilities of action.

First of all, in **the scientific field**, critical analysis of anti-communist clichés is crucial, revealing the power struggle and interests that hide behind the disavowal of socialism as an idea and political project. Also crucial is a reminder of the complex history of the revolutionary movement, un-forgetting its various actors: peasants, workers, progressive intelligentsia, women. The memory of the achievements and failures of the revolutionary movement should not lose sight of the historical context: the initial situation, and changes under the influence of external and internal factors. It should also take into account the flows of thoughts, ideas, people and practices, action within borders, and crossing the boundaries of nation states. However, history should not be “a teacher of life”, “a lesson for the future”, but rather “the memory of the future”, as Traverso writes in *Left-Wing Melancholia*, i.e. the memory of what still demands realisation. It is worth noting that this type of research is already conducted in many

centres around the world, including Poland. The most interesting of these attempts are clearly the interdisciplinary ones – it is difficult to think about the paradigm change while staying within the limits of only one discipline.

Secondly, in **the artistic and literary field**, it is necessary to indicate that literature, art, film, and the media can still be emancipation tools and that they are extremely desirable in this role (despite repeated bleak diagnoses about the crisis of media and readership). However, it should not be limited only to the registration of reality – exploitation, inequality, and general resignation and impotence due to being stuck in neoliberalism and nationalism – but should create an alternative. What is needed is involved literature, art and media, responding to the problems of the world, critical of the dominant message, with a broad concept of social, linguistic and emotional changes. In a word – what is needed is a new utopia, and hope that it is possible to realise it. This kind of literature, art, film and media, however, also requires involved critics and bold theories, because, as the classic used to say: “Without a revolutionary theory there cannot be a revolutionary movement”.

Thirdly, in **the political field**, we require a proper diagnosis of reality and adequate tools for its change. It is worth recalling that the communist project is still valid, that it is a “catchy idea” of mobilisation – still unrealised and, most importantly, responding to the pressing problems of modern times: exploitation, environmental degradation, the rise of nationalism and all kinds of fundamentalisms. The global crisis of 2008 and the emergence of grassroots socio-political movements – primarily the Spanish Podemos and the American Occupy Wall Street, but also the rise of Greek Syriza or the relatively good result of socialist Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party primaries before the presidential election in the US in 2016 – show that the progressive radicalization of reactionary forces requires decisive answers, formulated not in isolation, but in the broad cooperation of progressive forces – leftist and radically leftist. Are we ready for the next International?

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