



Comment

The need for memory

The debate on attitudes to communism is important, even in Britain

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Like a village cricket team that suddenly gathers in a circle of Maoist self-criticism, literary-journalistic England has launched itself into a curiously continental argument. What, our cricketers cry, was silly-mid-off's position on the gulag? Did the wicketkeeper see the Soviet Union as state capitalism or a deformed workers' state?

It is so deeply characteristic of Britain that a great debate about history, which in France and Italy was launched five years ago by a massive, documentary Black Book of Communism, should be sparked here by the autobiographical reflections of a well-known metropolitan novelist on the communist past of his novelist father and the Trotskyist past of his journalist best friend. Still and all, whether we get there by train or motor bike, it's an important place to be.

So let's move on and have this argument. But first, let's agree what it's about. First, it's about our collective memory of the 20th century. Between western attitudes to nazism and communism there has long been what Ferdinand Mount has called an "asymmetry of indulgence". A few years back I had dinner in Copenhagen in a restaurant called KGB. When I asked the waitress in dark green mock-KGB uniform what rank she held, she answered: "But I am Stalin". Hard to imagine a hip new place called Gestapo. It is therefore good to be reminded by Martin Amis of these names - Kolyma, Vorkuta, Butyrki - and never to use them lightly.

The asymmetry of indulgence is even more extreme when it comes to Mao, under whom, according to the guesstimates in the Black Book, some 65 million of the 95 million victims of communism died. Yet it is still socially acceptable to hang on your wall the famous Warhol portrait of Chairman Mao. Yes, the portrait is ironic of course; but would anyone hang a Warhol of Hitler?

That brings us to the second part of the argument, which is about moral equivalence. Was communism as bad as nazism? French and German intellectuals have been thrashing this out for years. The best answer was given by the arch-chronicler of Soviet terror, Robert Conquest, who said simply that to him the Holocaust feels worse. Rationally, it may be difficult to spell out exactly why it's worse to set about exterminating a whole race rather than a whole class, but the Holocaust does feel worse. The difference also has to do with intentions. Communism was originally a noble, emancipatory ideal, of a better world equally open to all human beings. Nazism never was. But then, the road to hell is - and in this case, actually was - paved with good intentions.

Above all, it has to do with people we know. Some of my best friends are ex-communists. No, really. In fact, come to think of it, many of my friends are ex-communists, if one takes a broader, idealistic understanding of communism. They are former party members turned dissidents, like the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, or old 68ers in Britain and across continental Europe. We know these human beings. We know their motives. We know their moral core. By contrast, while I have spent a lot of time in Germany, I can't think of a single friend who is an ex-Nazi - that is, was a believer in nazism beyond the age of, say, 16. The noble old ex-communist, yes. (I think here of Rusty Bernstein, co-author of the ANC's Freedom Charter, who died recently in his home of exile in Britain.) The noble old ex-Nazi? Well, no.

But most of all, this argument is about what a whole generation - roughly speaking, anyone who became politically conscious between 1965 and 1975 - did, said and thought about communism or socialism back in the

1960s and 1970s. Again, we have a very English form of what might be called the 68 debate. In Germany, it was sparked a few years ago by the publication of a photograph of the foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, beating up a policeman as a far-left streetfighter in the early 1970s. In England, it's about who said what to whom in the corridors of the New Statesman.

Yet the first commandment in all such cases is the same: the reckoning is individual. In this sense, biography is not such a bad place to start after all. Thus, for example, it seems to me an absurdly casual aspersion for Martin Amis to wonder out loud how James Fenton "qua poet, could align himself with a system that saw literature as a servant of the state". Where, when, how? Christopher Hitchens has just given a bravura defence of his position in these pages. In this respect, Amis's attack is plainly misdirected. To accuse former Trotskyists of having been soft on Stalinism is like accusing Lutherans of loving the Pope.

Yet there is one little semantic wrinkle in Hitchens' work which can usefully be unfolded, to advance the argument. This is his continued insistence on fingering "Stalinism" rather than communism tout court. That distinction could be taken to imply two things: (i) that it might have been significantly better under Trotsky, or even under a longer-lived Lenin, and (ii) that something good might still have come of communism after Stalin's death. The first is of course unprovable. (For what it's worth, Robert Conquest tells me he thinks the Soviet Union might simply have broken up sooner under Trotsky - but is that really what Trotskyists had in mind?) To the second, you might reply: "Well, it nearly did: Dubcek's 'socialism with a human face'." But what triumphed in Prague in 1989 was not 68-style "socialism with a human face", even if Dubcek was given an honoured symbolic place.

To be sure, the hope that it might still be "socialism with a human face" was an illusion that helpfully fuelled Gorbachev's willingness to let east European "reformers" go their own way in 1989. But it was an illusion nonetheless. It is one thing to say that communism was originally a noble ideal. To say that a system of humane communism was ever possible is quite another. I would hold, with Leszek Kolakowski, that democratic communism is like fried snowballs.

Meanwhile, other cricketers step out into this confessional circle. David Aaronovitch writes touchingly about his communist father. John Lloyd, in the New Statesman, makes a striking revelation of his own past illusions as a member of the wonderfully named British and Irish Communist Organisation. The argument has to be on beliefs and illusions - not just about the Soviet Union or East Germany, but also about China, Cuba or Vietnam. And it need not be confined to those who were then on the left or far left. Listen to Sir Edward Heath on communist China for starters.

The British debate is never going to be as fierce as in countries that have had strong communist parties. In this sense, the current fracas stands to the French or Italian one as cricket does to streetfighting. But, here as there, the class of 68 is now in power. A few exercises in mild remembering may do no harm to a governing party which has spent many years turning away from its own past.

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