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Celebrating 200 Years of Communism

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Anniversaries are a traditional opportunity for reflection. Two centuries ago Karl Marx was born. Considering the consequences of his life I wonder if I should reconsider my opposition to abortion. He wasn't a very nice person, as Paul Johnson detailed in his book *The Intellectuals*. Nor was Marx much of an intellectual. Worse, the consequences of Marx's ideas were disastrous.

That his philosophy was of little practical value was unsurprising. As Johnson pointed out, Marx's ideas were developed separate from facts. Like so many other academics, the communist theorist believed that reality should never get in the way of a good theory. As Johnson explained:

Marx, then, was unwilling either to investigate working conditions in industry himself or to learn from intelligent working men who had experienced them. Why should he? In all essentials, using the Hegelian dialectic, he had reached his conclusions about the fate of humanity by the late 1840s. All that remained was to find the facts to substantiate them, and these could be garnered from newspaper reports, government blue books and evidence collected by earlier writers; and all this material could be found in libraries. Why look further? The problem, as it appeared to Marx, was to find the right kind of facts: the facts that fitted.

A similar reality-free approach was taken by those who followed him and tried to put his ideas into effect. Applying the Marxist template to countries as divergent as Russia, China, Romania, North Korea, Albania, Cambodia, Czechoslovakia, and Ethiopia was bound to end badly. But who would have imagined how badly?

For those who forgot, or never learned, communism's toll, both *Death by Government* by R.J. Rummel and *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, with several authors, are essential reading. The numbers are grotesque, horrifying, unbelievable. *The Black Book* figures 85 to 100 million victims. Estimates vary widely among researchers and we will never know for sure. However, in raw numbers Adolf Hitler was only the third most prolific murderer, though the Holocaust should be recognized as a unique monstrosity. Debates over deaths that were intended versus those that merely proved inevitable when moronic, all-powerful leaders unleashed bizarre social engineering projects ignore the essential point: both forms of

killing were natural outgrowths, albeit extreme, of the philosophy developed by Marx, of course aided and supplemented by others.

The madness became almost total under Pol Pot in Kampuchea, the name affixed to the national charnel house previously known as Cambodia. Yet at least there was a purpose, though mad, in that tragic land. The old could not be reeducated. It had to be eradicated. More chilling was killing that seemed random, bureaucratic, perfunctory, petty. Even the killers did not pretend there was a higher purpose.

Observed Rummel of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, admired by so many:

[M]urder and arrest quotas did not work well. Where to find the "enemies of the people" they were to shoot was a particularly acute problem for the local NKVD, which had been diligent in uncovering "plots." They had to resort to shooting those arrested for the most minor civil crimes, those previously arrested and released, and even mothers and wives who appeared at NKVD headquarters for information about their loved ones.

Paradise on earth!

Of course, not every communist ruler intended to commit mass murder. A few truly imagined that after breaking a few eggs they could cook a fantastic omelet that would make up for all the hardship along the way. And there were plenty of ambitious activists, indolent time-servers, and indifferent folks in between who adopted the reigning zeitgeist, did what they were told, and concentrated on personal survival. Still, every experience with Marx as the political lodestar ended badly. *The lack of* mass repression and murder was surprising.

The good news of 1989 was that a real human being ran the Soviet Communist Party while those in charge throughout Eastern Europe were realists — they knew their systems had failed and could not be sustained without the aid of the Red Army. Once Mikhail Gorbachev made it clear that it would remain in its barracks, the satellites, upon which Marxism had been imposed from outside, toppled like bowling pins. Only in Romania was force required to remove a regime that lagged slightly behind North Korea in brutality. The dictator was prepared to shoot, but his one-time lackeys shot first.

Little of political communism lives on. China is essentially a fascist state, with a form of state capitalism. Vietnam seems to be a bit of the same, without the growing totalitarianism. North Korea is a traditional Asian monarchy: I have visited twice and on neither trip did I see a single image of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Castro, Che, or any other communist figure revered by communists elsewhere. That leaves Laos, which is a model for no one, and Cuba, which keeps the faith while trying to figure out how to attract foreign money without suffering the effects of foreign contact.

The people who best understand the essential reality of communism are those who lived under it. I have Russian friends horrified by America's direction today. They seem a bit, well, apocalyptic, but then, they endured the Soviet Union. A country and system venerated by many in the supposedly oppressive capitalist West as heralding a better way. "I have the seen the future

and it works” was a sentiment held by a surprising number of seemingly bright, sensitive, compassionate, well-intentioned people in America and Europe.

By 1989 most of them saw the light. Still, not everyone gave up the faith even when the Soviets and Eastern Europeans tore down the real walls — backed by guns, mines, dogs — which held them in. Years ago the *New York Times* wrote entertaining stories about delightful old revolutionaries who populated the Sunset Hall retirement home in Los Angeles. Explained the *Times*, “The library has an extensive collection of books on Marxism, Trotsky, Mao, and the Rosenbergs’ trial.” A 101-year-old resident, who had been a messenger for the Bolsheviks, proclaimed that Lenin was “the greatest politician we ever had in this world.” Another resident, only 90, announced that “socialism, crushed to the earth, will rise again.”

Sad to say, not all of them seemed to understand what they were endorsing. One denounced capitalism as “an evil thing in itself” but supported the transformation of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe “if they reflect the will of the people.” Indeed, he claimed that Lenin would have approved. Perhaps the man should have spent more time at Sunset Hall’s library and read about, oh, the Kronstadt rebellion. Vlad was, shall we say, less than magnanimous toward onetime supporters of the revolution who went astray.

The *Times* evidently found the retirees to be quite charming. (It is difficult to imagine a similar account of, say, the Horst Wessel Hall, home to aging Nazis.) And Lenin could very well be the world’s greatest politicians. But almost certainly he also was the world’s most destructive politician. Nearly eight decades after Lenin’s death, the residents should have understood that.

With only 11 residents and \$300,000 in debt, Sunset closed in 2005. The retirees were moved to another home nearby. With more modern facilities and larger rooms — an ironic attribute of the capitalist system which they so loathed.

These days, in America, at least, Marxism isn’t really about economics. Bernie Sanders might call himself a socialist, but the senator with three homes certainly doesn’t plan to give two of them away. He’s a redistributionist seeking to use capitalism to advance his political agenda. To those who didn’t live through real Marxism socialism apparently sounds kind of cool. (Just as some people believe wearing T-shirts featuring Che Guevara, Fidel Castro’s executioner, is cool.) Marxism is more likely to take cultural and other forms.

More disturbing is when those entrusted with the future of liberal democratic states don’t understand what is at stake. After protracted debate Trier, Germany — Marx’s birthplace — erected a statue of Marx from China. Matthew Omolesky termed it “the poisoned gift.”

There are so many levels of bizarre to the gift. It came from a government which is moving back toward dictatorship and totalitarianism. Beijing has initiated a full-scale assault on liberal values, political dissent, cooperation with the West, limits on the state, and restraints on the current president. That the Chinese government views Marx as worth celebrating is dubious praise.

Then there is the small matter of Marx’s legacy for China. Rummel figures the number of victims of Chinese communism to be about 35 million. *The Black Book of Communism* estimates more — six to ten million directly, 20 million in prison, and 20 to 43 million in the misnamed

Great Leap Forward. The vast majority of killings can be placed in the hands of Mao Zedong, the Red Emperor still honored by the Chinese Communist Party. His portrait hangs on the Gate of Heavenly Peace bordering Tiananmen Square, in which sits his dominating mausoleum. *The Black Book's* warning from 1999 looks increasingly prescient: "because the regime has never really disavowed its founder, it is still prepared to return to some of his original methods in difficult moments."

Finally, there is Trier's acceptance of the poisoned gift. Throughout the former communist world people struggled to figure out what to do with their surplus age of communist memorabilia of all sorts. Germany, part of which long languished under an avowedly Marxist system, now is very publicly adding one such memorial. Say what you will about the average Confederate general, he wasn't responsible for nearly as many deaths as Marx. Perhaps next will be a statue of Hermann Goering, head of Nazi Germany's air force. He was a decorated war hero from World War I, after all, and is part of his nation's history.

Supporters of the Marx statue say he is unfairly held responsible for the crimes committed in his name. Perhaps helping to explain the challenges facing the European Union, Jean-Claude Juncker, one of the EU's three presidents (he runs the European Commission), gave an impassioned defense of Marx. The poor, misunderstood man simply "was a philosopher, who thought into the future [and] had creative aspirations." Marx just wanted to improve social rights. "The things he wrote down were redrafted into the opposite," claimed Juncker. Saturday morning Juncker formally unveiled the statue.

Well, yes, Marx cannot be directly blamed for scores of millions of deaths. However, the philosophy which he promulgated led to that result in country after country. Why did his purist followers inevitably take the same, disastrous, path? Indeed, China's President Xi Jinping made the connection, lauding Marx as "the main founder of Marxism, the founder of Marxist political parties and the creator of international communism." That creation, international communism, resulted in unimaginable slaughter, destruction, hardship, repression, and horror around the globe. The genesis of that experience seems like a strange historical event to celebrate.

There were protesters in Trier. City spokesman Michael Schmitz said, "If you want to criticize Marx, you are welcome to do so, but not with violence or destructive rage." Naturally, it would be wrong to use Marxist tactics against Marx. They are only to be deployed against capitalists, and anyone else on the Left's enemies list.

Two hundred years ago Marx was born. He belongs in a small but important category: people who should never have existed. While we don't know what would have happened in his absence, it is hard to imagine that the world would not have been a better place. Unfortunately, we can't retroactively erase him from history. But we shouldn't treat his life like something to celebrate.

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