



# JACOBIN

## The New Red-Baiting

Jedediah Purdy

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Bret Stephens, whom the *New York Times* hired from the *Wall Street Journal* after Trump's election, woke up in a Cold War mood on Saturday. After reading journalist Anne Applebaum's new book, *Red Famine*, on Stalin's starvation of the Ukraine, Stephens began to seethe at early 1930s *Times* reporters who bought Stalin's excuses. Soon he was righteously asking whether anyone today recalls the depredations of Peru's Shining Path, or feels "even a shiver of inner revulsion at hipsters in Lenin or Mao T-shirts?" So, he asked the public from his rather bully pulpit, "Why is Marxism still taken seriously on college campuses and in the progressive press?" Why indeed? Because of "a permanent and dangerous state of semi-denial about the legacy of communism" on the "progressive" left. Thanks to this "semi-denial," Stephens writes, Jeremy Corbyn now threatens Britain with economic catastrophe from his woolly headed egalitarianism. But it gets worse. Because Bernie Sanders hasn't learned that "class hatred" is morally equivalent to "race-hatred" or that "Buchenwald and the gulag" are a paired set of catastrophic historical destinations, Sanders indulges in "efforts to criminalize capitalism and financial services," which will "have predictable results."

No, Stephens doesn't actually say that aggressive financial regulation and running against Wall Street will lead to mass murder. He, is after all, a Reasonable Man, and the idea, spelled out that way, is absurd — and egregiously disrespectful of the history he invokes so casually. But what on Earth, then, is he saying? Why are a few operatic notes from twentieth-century horrors providing the backdrop for otherwise totally nonspecific denunciations of the most popular active politicians in the UK and the US?

Read in isolation, Stephens's column is a face-palm pastiche of material the Cold War-minded *Wall Street Journal* kept in the drawers for slow news days. The fallacy is egregious. Why has Marxian thought not been discarded with Stalinism? One might as well ask why liberalism is taken seriously on college campuses given what we know about John Stuart Mills's involvement in British imperialism in India, the effects of trade policy on the Bengal Famine,

and Friedrich Hayek's soft spot for the murderous Pinochet regime. Why, for that matter, do campuses tolerate constitutionalism, considering its intimate involvement in American slavery? When I teach Marx (alongside, as it happens, John Stuart Mill and, yes, Hayek), I am not teaching (let alone channeling) Stalin's defense of collectivization, but the view that the material order of society is the heart of the ways we make and share value, wealth, authority. The very capacity to live a life, to act individually or collectively, depends on these, and so the kinds of lives we can lead, individually or collectively, are deeply a part of this material order. Capitalism is, for better and worse, one such order, and whoever talks about liberalism, constitutionalism, or authoritarianism had also better be prepared to discuss it. (If understanding this were a job condition for the *Times* op-ed page, every columnist there would be looking for work.) Stephens's reductive and prosecutorial attack is a parody of moral seriousness. Anyone who knows the first thing about American history knows that the "predictable results" of attacks on Wall Street are probably not whatever horror Stephens is inviting readers to imagine with that grotesque "Buchenwald/gulag" line, but rather — to lean on the lessons of actual US history — antitrust law; serious regulation of the financial industry; or even a discussion of *what else* the country could be doing with some of the money going to bonuses and hedge-fund managers, such as single-payer health care.

It's no surprise, really, that Stephens still addresses these prospects like an old *Journal* hand. In that ever-apocalyptic world, whenever anyone tries to raise the marginal tax rate, millions of peasants end up dead. The "bacillus" of communism "isn't eradicated," Stephens warns after describing Sanders and Corbyn as "fools, fanatics, or cynics." It is as if Albert Camus were a Cato Institute hack.

Stephens isn't the only one making facile comparisons. Donald Trump's amorality and authoritarian tendencies seem to have licensed a certain intellectual latitude in his critics. Last week in *Bloomberg View*, Cass Sunstein, an Obama official and prominent liberal law professor, argued that Trump's divisive politics "heightens the contradictions." Then it got really good: this strategy ties Trump, Sunstein argued, to the Russian trolling strategy of trying to "foster a sense of grievance and humiliation" among Americans, which was how Marx and Lenin sought to spark revolution, and was no doubt transmitted through "the Marxist tradition" in which Putin and others were schooled.

But don't just blame Trump or Putin: "intensifying social divisions . . . to make what divides Americans as salient and visible as possible, is more often associated with the left than the right (true to its Marxist origins)." Sunstein then proceeded straight to Bernie Sanders, who "has long been drawn to the approach, arguing that the interests of good, decent ordinary people are sharply opposed to those of powerful and supposedly evil actors (such as 'the banks')," moving the Democrats toward "a Manichean view of American society."

This argument, too, is baffling if you take its proposed intellectual history at face value. Emphasizing divisions in politics extends back to the social wars of classical Rome and the religious and theoretical disputes in the English Civil War — not to mention the American Revolution, which resulted in the expulsion and expropriation of a vast number of Loyalists (and never mind the Native Americans and enslaved people whom the British were suspected of favoring). There is nothing Marxist about its "origins" or present profile.

What is not at all baffling, however, is its effect: it revives the Cold War slander that leftists in the US are Stalinoid dupes who, even if they mean well, are opposed to the American genius of free markets (Stephens), “careful policy analysis” (Sunstein), and *e pluribus unum* (Sunstein ends his column with the phrase, in rebuke to Sanders.) It defines American radicalism as the potentially authoritarian enemy of a national unity that must not be risked. And it treats the Sanders campaign and Trump as, really, two sides of the same coin.

Back in March, Tony Blair was already making this case in the *New York Times*, pointing symmetrical fingers at a “rightist populism” that seeks to protect “traditional culture” from immigrants and “political correctness,” and, at the receiving end of his other pointer, a “leftist populism” that “has aligned with the right in revolt against globalization, but with business taking the place of migrants as the chief evil.”

So framed, “populism” comes to mean any politics that adopts an adversarial (especially anti-elite) tone and challenges some portion of the 1990s-vintage consensus. To save democracy from its own tendencies to division, unrealistic hopes, and grievance, a reassertion of elite responsibility and management is therefore what the moment requires — the heroism of moderation, to put it in terms Cold War liberals would have recognized.

This running-together of the democratic left’s attacks on inequality (including racial inequality) with right-wing nativism is not just sloppy thinking. It works to define the kind of democracy that has to be saved from Trumpism: in this version, as a return to the consensus neoliberalism of the 1990s and the Obama administration.

The Left’s view is different: that democracy needs to be defended against Trump so that it can be saved from runaway inequality and insecurity, the total monetization of politics, the persistence of white supremacy, and the collapse of unions and other necessary institutions of any halfway democratic economy. From this point of view, the relevance of Marxism is the recognition that some of what divides people politically is not bad faith or petty grievance, but a profoundly structured, pervasive difference in their social roles, life prospects, and control over their own activity and their societies. The conflict involved in engaging these divisions is part of the work of building democracy.

One doesn’t need Marx, strictly speaking, for the timeless observations that social life is class-ridden and that political power follows economic power unless there is an active effort to build and maintain democracy. But the observation seems to be what is bringing him to mind, and inspiring a warmed-over Cold War in liberal and conservative minds alike.