

FROM THE ANTI-COMMUNIST CONSENSUS TO ANTI-COMMUNISM

PRZEMYSŁAW WIELGOSZ

Anti-communism is one of the pillars of the right-wing ideological hegemony during the second decade of the 21st century. The Brazilian president, Bolsonaro, fights communism in his country, the US president, Trump, and the Madrid journal *El País* fight communism in Venezuela (as well as in their own countries), and the Polish newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, exposes the communist methods of the ruling party, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, while the pro-government media in Poland trace the communist genealogies of *Wyborcza*'s editors. Anti-communism blooms in Hungary, in Russia, in Turkey, and in the Philippines. But Poland remains a very good example of the nature, ideological function, and political meaning of today's anti-communism. The analysis of the local form taken by this phenomenon allows us to reconstruct the most important mechanisms of exclusion that support the anti-communist discourses and to answer the question of whether and how to fight against anti-communism.

After 1989 communism in Poland became an universal stigma, allowing the exclusion of some ideas and voices from the political arena and the public debate. During the period of transformation, the neo-liberal fundamentalists brandished it, pacifying the critical voices and discrediting various forms of resistance against the social outcome of the capitalist restoration – mass pauperization, unemployment, uncertainty and privatization. Today their inheritors have become victims of the similar operation conducted by the national-conservative right, which smells communism in any action taken by the (neo)liberal opposition. The neo-liberal anti-communism differs from the national-conservative one in terms of rhetoric and the level of honesty. Nevertheless, it plays basically the same roles. Both camps are connected through

the practice of limiting various forms of popular subjectivity and democratic control of the authority under the pretext of the alleged political immaturity, lack of competence and patriotism, or ethno-cultural foreignness of part of the society. In the 1990s worker demands were dismissed by identifying them with the figure of a *homo sovieticus*; in the year 2019 the demands of the rule of law, of women's reproductive rights, or of migrant rights are dismissed as crypto-communist creations of euro-leftism.

The real content of the anti-communism is best illustrated by the meaning ascribed to this word by its anti-communist trackers. Depending on whether the communist scarecrow is employed by the neo-liberal or national-conservative right, we will find it to denote either social rights or sexual minority rights – most often both, but in slightly different proportions. What is the conclusion? Well, in the conditions of rightist cultural hegemony and a brutal restoration of class power the exorcised spectre of communism becomes a sack capable of fitting all grassroots and popular, democratic revindications.

This explains neatly why in a Poland governed by the authoritarian right, the efficient defense of democracy is so difficult and the language of freedom and equality does not sound as loudly and aggressively as its opposite. That the far right is determining the tone of the debate in our country is based on the solid grounds of an unspoken anti-communist consensus. During one of many protests against the attack on the judiciary system by the anti-communist PiS in summer 2017, one could hear voices denouncing the socialist dictatorship (Balcerowicz) and the necessity of completing privatization (Celiński). The nickname of a Bolshevik or a communist is one of the greatest insults that can be given by the Polish liberal opposition to the governing Polish authoritarian right that flirts with the fascists.

Even a broken clock shows the correct time twice per day. Adam Michnik, the chief editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, quite reasonably noticed that Polish opposition in the 1970s and 1980s included those who fought against communism because they were in favour of democracy, and those who were in favour of democracy because they were against communism. For a quarter of a century, the latter have been dominating our public life. Under PiS rule they dropped the democratic corset, as it constrained their true nature. That anti-communism blooms 25 years after the agony of the People's Republic of Poland must seem to be a paradox, but it is by no means surprising. The further from the fall of a system that pleaded for the communist ideals, the more anti-communism is poisoning minds. The syndrome of anti-communism without communists reflects the phenomenon of anti-Semitism without Jews. The similarity is not accidental, because in both cases the real issue is not the struggle against a real opponent but rather a phantasmatic practice. Anti-Semitism and anti-communism are reduced to the managing of fear and frustrations by the means of channeling them into a hatred towards an enemy, created to resemble the radically "other". The most perfect name of that "other", linking neatly two parts of its imagined identity, was the notion of a Jewish-

Communist, formed during the inter-war period. Today the role attributed by this construction to Jews is played by Muslims and the Jewish-communism itself is substituted by Islamist-Leftism. The content and the political function indeed stay unchanged.

It is worthwhile to mention some essential differences between anti-Semitism and anti-communism. What is located at the foundation of fascisms is not anti-Semitism but anti-communism, their dear father, as much historically as logically. The anti-communist hatred preceded the creation of the first communist regime. The bourgeois right was consistently anti-communist and formed itself as such long before it discovered the charms of anti-Semitism. Anti-communist visions of conspiracies, as well as pogroms inspired by them, were born as far back as the 18th century, at the time of the French Revolution – during the terror of the bourgeois Jacobins and the counter-revolutionary Thermidorian Coup their victims were radical proponents of political and economic equality, unacceptable to the forming bourgeois society.

It should also be remembered and repeated indefinitely that in the 20th century terror had the white face of anti-communism. That was the case of the future Nazis drowning the German Revolution in blood (its explosion and success cost the life of few people, its suppression a few thousand murdered by the counter-revolutionaries), as well as the Hungarian and Finnish (also here the peaceful character of the revolution is contrasted with the streams of blood shed by the counter-revolution). Even in Russia it was the civil war enforced by the Whites and powers supporting them that provoked the organized red terror.

In its very essence, anti-communism needs the communist crime and does not protest against its deformations. The state terror, secret police, invigilation and persecutions or tortures and censorship are what deter the anti-communists. In fact, they are elements of their own political program. Their enemy number one is the emancipatory promise of communism, its utopian potential and radical social criticism, in sum everything that is great in the communist project. Hatred towards democracy, towards women's rights and economic equality, towards acknowledgment of the rights of minority internationalism and multi-culturalism, and towards the political subjectivity of the suppressed is what constitutes the essence of the anti-communist position. This is exactly the anti-communism that we see today in Brazil under Bolsonaro. This was the anti-communism that dominated the post-1989 Poland. The “real democracy” has been built on the anti-communist consensus, causing it to be distorted, soaked with nationalism and tilted towards the right from the very beginning as much as it was deprived of its emancipatory, popular spine and social content. In fact it was democracy only formally.

The necessity of cutting oneself from communism (not the historical one, but indeed the utopian one) pacified the left very efficiently, forcing it to look legitimate in the eyes of its political opponents. Today the same thing happens with the liberals, stigmatized by the mark

of “communist”, who thorough such figures as Grzegorz Schetyna are trying to intercept xenophobic language used by PiS in order to earn the name of a trustworthy opposition. The logic of the accusations of communism is nevertheless insensitive towards such efforts. The more you try to prove your anti-communism, the more you prove that there is something suspect about it. Within the frames of the anti-communist consensus there is no place for any progressive ideas. Mere openness, criticism, non-conformism and anti-authoritarianism lose their civil rights. This provides a perfect machine for their exclusion, delegitimization, and eventually criminalization.

For that reason, there is no such thing as a left-wing anti-communism, and the anti-communist liberals will always end up in the proximity of the far right. It is enough to look at the evolution of people such as Jaroslaw Gowin or Leszek Balcerowicz to see that this is how things are. Anti-communism has its own color – it is always brown. The political intentions of anti-communism can be seen properly in the continuous equation between communism and fascism. This gesture, deprived of any historical ground, has only one function. It is a rehabilitation of fascism. Comparing communism with fascism discredits communism, while comparing fascism with communism rehabilitates fascism. From here there is only one step to the normalization of fascism in the name of a national anti-communist consensus. In Poland this normalization happened during the first turn of PiS rule when Roman Dmowski received a monument in Warsaw and gained a place among the heroes of the independence. Today this process is filled with ideas of delegitimizing the Polish Communist Party while simultaneously tolerating the fascist thugs from ONR and MW.

Anti-communism seen as a barrier for entering the public scene became the best guarantee of rightist hegemony. Left-wing formations that allowed themselves to be dragged into this trap (i.e. they decided to prove that they have nothing to do with communism) will never be able to prove the obvious. Thus the first step that should be taken to question the logic of the anti-communist battle is ceasing the practice of self-denouncing communism. This is crucial for at least two reasons. First, since no leftist can avoid rightist imputations of being communist, there is no purpose in losing time and energy to defend against them. Secondly, communism, just like liberalism, socialism, conservatism, or the popular movement, has various incarnations. Just as the liberal tradition cannot be reduced to neo-liberalism, communism cannot be identified with Stalinism. Whether we want it or not, the communist tradition – antiauthoritarian (and thus anti-Stalinist), radically democratic, internationalist, and anti-capitalistic – is part of the tradition that constitutes the left, and cutting oneself off from it too often leads to opportunism towards the rules imposed by the system based on the monopoly of private ownership and class power. The left, if it wants to oppose these rules to any degree, must not be anti-communist. It should thus protest each time when someone is equating communism (also Stalinism) and fascism, when the accusation of communism is

enough to relegate some views or persons from the public debate. What is more, it should reclaim the anti-authoritarian, democratic, and internationalist seed of communism, separating it from the Stalinist chaff. This by no means encourages whitening or glorification. Quite contrary, if communism can be still useful for something, and as we can see it obviously can, it is rather as a movement that abolishes the present state of things than as an eternal return of the same. There can never be enough recalling that the earliest and the greatest critiques of the systems that grew from the October revolution were created by consistent communists – from Rosa Luxemburg, Victor Serge, and Anton Pannekoek to Cornelius Castoriadis, Milovan Djilas, or even Karol Modzelewski and Jacek Kuroń.

Our goal should be not establishing the communist church, but consistent opposition to anti-communism and merciless undermining of the logic it imposes on the public debate in Poland. Essentially, today this is a task synonymous with the defense of democracy. But, as the practice confirms, in the Polish conditions, or more broadly, the Central European conditions, it may be accomplished only by a consistent leftist force that would not be scared to defile the bourgeois sanctities and not surrender to the destructive force of the accusation of being a communist. As long as such an accusation allows people to discredit democratic propositions such as women's rights, the revindication of democracy as such will be futile. The condition of changing this situation is not resignation from women's rights in the name of broadening the electoral base in an allegedly conservative society (as Polish liberals do) but the contrary, neutralization of the defamatory content of the communist imputation.

Breaking with anti-communism is at least as important for liberating the political imagination in Poland as the defeat of anti-Semitism is. As long as the anti-communist consensus is hovering over the Polish political scene, the right will enjoy a structural advantage because any political dispute will take place on its terrain, in its language, and according to the rules imposed by it.

Przemysław Wielgosz – journalist, publicist, publisher, curator, and activist. Chief editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique – edycja polska* magazine, and book series *Le Monde Diplomatique* and *Biblioteka Alternatyw Ekonomicznych*. Author, co-author, and editor of several left-wing books devoted to a critique of capitalism, alter-globalism and future of Europe. His texts were published in *Aspen Review*, *Freitag* and *Guardian*.

CITATION: Wielgosz, Przemysław. 2019. “From the Anti-Communist Consensus to Anti-Communism” *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1(31): 185–189.

DOI: 10.14746/prt.2019.1.12