

Why this Anarchist has Stopped Using the Word Communism (an overlong explanation)

Solarpunk Anarchist

2018/01/22

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In a societal and political landscape shaped, like never before, by social media, the terminology we used to identify ourselves matters more than ever. The -isms, the -ologies, the -ists, and the -ityes. All of the terms we use to signify membership of movements, or adherence to beliefs, form the groundwork of socio-political and socio-cultural discourse, online and off.

While on the internet, you don't have to be face-to-face with a person to have a discussion, debate, or destructive argument with somebody. In some ways, that's great. You can learn things from people way outside your familiar region of residence and region of thought. You can form casual or deep relationships with people which began over a shared love of Phantom of the Opera, Minecraft, obscure techno music, or 19th century Russian political theorists. You become introduced to new universes, each with their own distinct lingo, customs, and values. This can make you feel like part of a club of sorts. The internet provides a sense of communality which transcends physical, and in many cases cultural boundaries. Every -ism you choose to identify with becomes a means of inclusion and belonging.

However, without a flesh-and-blood person in front of you, this also removes a lot of natural desire to be friendly or congenial when we encounter a person and start to talk about touchy subjects: religion, ethics, and politics. For example, throughout my teen years, I had a social worker come and take me out around the place and serve as a sort of unofficial psychotherapist – due to being autistic and living in a remote area where it was difficult to do anything fun – and while he was a lovely guy, we had diametrically opposed values on just about every issue under the sun. I was an atheistic, anarchistic, (at the time) scientistic teen who was obsessed with film and fantasy literature. He was a born-again Christian, culturally conservative, young-Earth creationist who refused to watch television and didn't read fiction. Still, we got along very well. We had debates about our many disagreements, but they were always civil and friendly. If I encountered him on the internet today however, there's a good chance reading his attacks on evolution or abortion would send me into a militant frenzy, accusing him of being a subhuman monster and/or dribbling moron, and he'd in all likelihood respond by calling me a leftist degenerate or something. When all you're responding to is words on a screen, every -ism you choose to identify with becomes a cause of division and enmity.

Over time, I've learned to avoid using certain -isms or -ists in certain company, on the internet and in person. Online, there's a much greater chance of turning people away from interacting with you if you use an -ism or -ist they don't like, due to it being far easier to just walk away from an interaction, and there being a far lower cost associated with insulting them or publicly shaming them. So if I want to keep certain online company, to avoid alienating them, I need to modify the words I use. This doesn't, by the way, mean lying about what I believe or do. It just means choosing a term to describe what believe which is less likely to give people the wrong idea, if they have a negative association with the term I'd use as a default in other contexts.

Sometimes, in a comment section populated by left-liberals, I might describe the problems of “the economic system”, without using the word “capitalism”, as dropping that big scary word can cause alarm bells to go off in their heads. Oftentimes, I’ve explained the ins and outs of how a social anarchist society would work, and people are usually intrigued and even enthusiastic about the proposals: confederations of participatory self-governing municipalities and networks of worker self-managed cooperatives. They tend to either want everything I list, or agree that at least some of those proposals would be a good idea, even if they wouldn’t go as far as dissolving the state or abolishing money. The anarchist political scholar Mark Bray reported similar results from using this tactic in his book *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street*.

But about half the time, when I then say “that’s anarchism”, or (even worse for Americans) “that’s socialism”, then I stop getting friendly replies and the tone of discourse changes to one of suspicion at best or sudden hostility at worst. And many just stop responding at all.

All of the above is a (necessarily) long-winded way of contextualising why I’ve given up using the word communism in reference to my own politics – and why I think other social anarchists should too.

Anarchist Communism Without the Communism?

Don't get me wrong, my politics still are, in every way, consistent with the political tradition known, since the late 1870s, as anarchist communism or communist anarchism. Peter Kropotkin remains one of my all-time favourite political theorists. I still support a stateless, classless, marketless, moneyless society as my long-term aspiration. And I still think "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need" is an ethos to live by, and to put into practice wherever possible.

Among anarchists, for about 150 years, communism has signified the economic equality which serves as a complement to the political freedom social anarchy would offer. It is the proposal of building a liberated world based on the logic of the commons: decentralised cooperation.

The term is, of course, also associated with Marxism and statist interpretations of post-capitalism. To most of the world now, and since the 1920s, communism has not meant a stateless, nonhierarchical, cooperative society of abundance. It's meant just the opposite: a statist, totalitarian, bureaucratic society of bread lines and starvation. Most people know little of communism and next to nothing of anarchism. Thus, it causes most anarchists no end of exasperation to hear ignoramuses of the world all claim anarchist communism "is an oxymoron".

Up until now, most anarchists have tried to get over this problem by carefully explaining that what they mean by communism has nothing to do with the horrific Marxist-Leninist nightmare they have in mind, outlining that anarchist had been using the word for decades before the first "communist" state was founded in 1917. Some also try to distinguish between the two ideas by spelling the word with either a small C or a capital C, depending on which one they're talking about. With a small C, communism refers to stateless nonhierarchical cooperation. With a capital C, Communism refers to totalitarian statism run by Marxist-Leninist dictators.

But, for a number of reasons, I no longer believe it makes strategic sense to continue using the word communism at all (whether with a small or capital c) in association with anarchism; with the exception of referencing anarchist history and talking about historical debates between different economic models of how a post-statist society should operate. I still want everything covered by the term libertarian communism – a moneyless economy with common ownership of productive resources, and nonhierarchical cooperative organisation of production and distribution – but can't recommend social anarchists continue using that term to describe them.

Communism Before Anarchism

Before I explain why, a little refresher on the history of the word communism itself. While there's no definite origin of the word, it first appears to have popped up around the time of the French Revolution at the end of the 1700s. It was used by various radical pamphleteers of the time to refer to a hypothetical future order where *Omnia Sunt Communia* ("all is held in common"). It didn't get much more specific than that. Early use of the word communism seems to follow in a long line of utopian thinking, putting a name to an imagined future in which abundance had replaced scarcity and where loving community had replaced the ruthless avarice of the day.

So, despite popular belief, the word communism is, in fact, older than the word socialism. Socialism was devised a few decades later, first in Britain in the 1820s, to describe the ideology of Robert Owen's cooperatives movement, and later in France, in the 1830s, to describe various post-capitalist ideas which were floating around in between the 1832 Revolution and the 1848 Revolutions across Europe. In France, socialism was used to cover everything from the liberatory communities Charles Fourier proposed building, to the bureaucratic-managerial statism of Saint-Simon. Funnily enough, the French socialists didn't seem to be aware that the term had already been used in Britain as a term for Robert Owen's movement, so it's an odd case of the same word being coined independently in two places, but converging on a roughly similar meaning.

By the time of socialism's coining, the word communism was also, occasionally, used to describe religious settlements in which all people lived in common, in arrangements which reflected what we'd now call collectivist in the negative sense of the word: defined by suffocating conformism and the suppression of individual will. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon used the term in *What is Property?* to describe the opposite extreme of the regime of property he critiqued, describing his mutualism as a synthesis of the best parts of both communism and property as systems. Early marketarian, Gustave de Molinari, lambasts the idea of communism throughout his pamphlet *The Production of Defence* as a hellish opposite to his system of privatised statism.

And then Karl Marx got his hands on communism.

Marx and Communism

When Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote their famous tract, *The Communist Manifesto* (itself “inspired” by *Principles of Socialism: Manifesto of 19th Century Democracy* by Victor Considerant, a supporter of Charles Fourier’s movement) they had both spent the better part of a decade immersed in the then-new world of Central European socialist politics and philosophy.

Looking back at their careers as professional left thinkers, they seem to have spent most of their time attacking just about everyone else in the milieu who wasn’t them. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels devote a section to attacking Max Stirner’s *The Unique and Its Property* which might be longer than Stirner’s book itself. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx devotes considerably elaborate lies to destroying Proudhon’s *System of Economic Contradictions*, a work he would later steal many ideas from when writing *Capital*, while having the audacity to continue slagging off Proudhon in an early footnote. Needless to say, they were eager to make themselves appear distinct and prominent in the left political milieu of their day.

This is part of why, as they say in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, they chose the word communist, rather than socialist, to refer to their particular movement (the word “party” meaning movement in the political terminology of the day). They didn’t regard socialism and communism as two different things; the terms are used as synonyms throughout most of their work. They simply used a rarer term for themselves in order to distinguish their ideas from strains of socialism they regarded as “bourgeois”.

To a large extent, it worked. Throughout much of the literature written by participants in the First International, the term “the communists” was used to refer to the pro-Marx Internationalists, and Mikhail Bakunin used “communism” in a negative sense to refer to state socialism.

What’s ironic though, when you look back at the big picture of left history, is that Marx and Engels had, towards the ends of their lives, moved away from the term communism. By the late 1870s and early 1880s, the word communism had come to be regarded as an “old fashioned” term for socialism, at least in Germany and Britain; where Marxist ideas were most popular. Engels even said that if they could go back in time, they would have called their most famous piece of writing *The Socialist Manifesto*. From the late 1870s on, most Marxists used the terms socialism and social democracy to refer to their politics, not communism.

Funnily enough, it was around this same time that anarchists – now a self-aware and distinct movement – had *started* using the word communism to describe their politics.

The Birth of Social Anarchism and Embrace of Communism

Proudhon and Bakunin, the main progenitors of the ideas which would serve as foundational to social anarchism's birth as a movement, had both used the word communism in a negative sense; the former using it to mean suffocating communitarianism, and the latter using it to refer to Marxian kinds of state socialism. Those anti-authoritarians in the First International who regarded themselves as followers of Bakunin were expelled from the organisation by Marx himself in 1872 were, at first, reluctant to associate with a word which had such strong connections to their main political opponent on the left.

As the 1870s wore on however, many anarchists, especially in France and Italy, had come to reject the Bakuninist method of distributing goods in a post-capitalist society: "from each according to their ability, to their deeds", in other words, rewarding people in proportion to how much work they do, paying those who worked more or worked harder more than those who worked less or worked in less onerous occupations. This proposal, called "collectivism" at the time, had come to be seen as inadequate and lacking to those, like the young Élisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin and Errico Malatesta, who wanted something which more fully embraced the communal spirit of the world they sought to create. Instead of the collectivist maxim "to each according to their deeds", they embraced the older utopian maxim "to each according to their needs". That is, they wanted to abolish money and distribute goods on the basis of who needs them most, rather than who has the most to pay for them.

At the time, most of these radicals following on from Bakunin thought that a period of distribution "according to deeds" would be a necessary transitional phase on the way to a moneyless economy. In his pamphlet on a post-statist society, *Ideas on Social Organisation*, Bakunin's right-hand man James Guillaume argued that this would become more of a possibility in line with advancements in technology and production techniques, eventually allowing production to outstrip consumption. The more abundance, the better the chances of moneyless, needs-based distribution being effective. Carlo Cafiero, in his essay *Communism and Anarchy*, even argued that if technology-aided abundance kept up, we could eventually surpass the principles "from each according to ability, to each according to need", advancing to a society premised on the maxim "from each, and to each, according to their will" (so Cafiero, in a way, could be called the first post-scarcity anarchist).

Given the strong communal nature of this proposal, they felt the word communism, despite earlier misgivings, was the most appropriate word for it. And thus, while Proudhon's mutualism and Bakunin's collectivism were instrumental in laying the foundations for what social anarchism would become, it was the communist vision of the anti-authoritarian Internationalists which would become core to the world anarchist movement. It gained its most famous and celebrated theorist in Peter Kropotkin, who devoted two books – *The Conquest of Bread* and *Fields, Factories, Workshops* – to outlining how an anarchist communist society could function in practice.

The collectivist proposal for distributing goods would compete with communism for several decades to follow, especially in Spain. But by the early 20th century, libertarian communism was more-or-less accepted by anarchists worldwide as the long-term goal of the social anarchist movement. Even the Spanish syndicalist union, the CNT, declared it their official aim in 1920.

So Why Drop it Now?

Anarchist communism continued evolving after the death of its most famous proponent and theorist, Peter Kropotkin, in 1921. In Japan in particular, Shuzo Hatta and the self-described “pure anarchists” of the pre-war era, building on Kropotkin, developed a fascinating body of anarchist-communist theory, examining what was wrong with the capitalist state system with regard to both Japan and the rest of the world, how social struggle should be waged, and how to organise free confederations of free communes in a stateless non-capitalist future.

The tradition of anarchist communism also survived the the arrival of the then-new ideology of anarcho-syndicalism (born in the early 1920s), which placed more focus on the workplace as a site of struggle against capitalism, and had a more worker-direction vision of post-capitalism in mind relative to the community-directed vision of anarcho-communists. A few anarcho-syndicalists in the 1930s even abandoned a commitment to a moneyless system of distributing goods, advocating a return to the old collectivist method of distributing goods “according to deeds” instead of “according to needs”; that is, maintaining incomes and prices, and paying workers in proportion to their labour. Anarcho-communists we’re having none of this backsliding.

Important new additions to anarchist communism in the post-war era were the strategic approach of *specificism* (*especificismo*), developed by South American anarcho-communists, and the theory of social ecology, developed by Murray Bookchin; which reinvigorated anarchist communism’s analyses of nature, technology, hierarchy, and social struggle.

With the word communism still having such an important place within social anarchism today, you may ask, what reason could I have for not using it anymore? Well, I have two main reasons:

Reason 1: Marxists

The first cause of my desire to stop associating communism with anarchism is, in short, due to the worldwide reputation of those most commonly associated with it. If you’ve spent any length of time saying we should replace capitalism with something else, you know what I’m talking about.

As I said above, from the 1870s on, Marxists mostly abandoned the word communism while anarchists took it up, using it to describe a form of socialism which was

specifically stateless, marketless, and moneyless, and based on the free federation of free associations of free individuals. Marxists, when they called themselves something else, called themselves socialists or social democrats. If, in the last two decades of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th, you called for a communist economic system, chances are you were a social anarchist, not a Marxist.

This changed, however, in 1917; when a man called Vladimir Lenin and his party, the Social Democratic Labour Party of Russia – Bolshevik, renamed themselves the “Communist Party”, in order to distinguish their insurrectionary form of Marxism from the social democratic mainstream of Marxism, espoused by people like Karl Kautsky (at the time regarded as the “Pope of Marxism”).

For a time, for their use of the term communism and other reasons, Lenin earned the sympathy of many anarchist communists, with a few (mis)understanding Bolshevism as an anarchistic version of Marxism. While in jail, before he had a full grasp of the situation in Russia, German anarchist communist Erich Mühsam even praised Lenin as a “Bakuninist”. Peter Kropotkin and Emma Goldman both traveled to Russia and met Lenin in person, with both walking away less enthusiastic about the Russian Revolution than when they first returned to their homeland.

Before he died, Kropotkin sent a letter to Lenin, begging him to stop the authoritarian and centralising course he had set the revolution on, saying that if it continued along these lines, the very word communism would become a curse. He was right.

Nearly one hundred years later, after what feels like an eternity of trying to convince people that the communism I say I want isn’t the same thing as the “Communism” they have in their heads when they hear the word, I’m tired. I’m just so sick and tired of the politically ignorant of the world thinking they’re schooling me in exclaiming “anarchist communism!?! LOL! That’s an oxymoron!”; of being told the economic system I want “killed 100 million people!”; and of being lumped together with Marxist-Leninists because we happen to use the same word, a word now far more associated with them than with social libertarians.

I have a hard time trying to use that word: libertarian; a word social anarchists have used for over a century to refer to egalitarian freedom, before marketarians appropriated it to refer to their brand of “free market” fanaticism. But I still, despite the toil and trouble, believe it can be reclaimed for the cause of social liberation, taking it back from the cause of billionaire’s “liberation” from caring about the rest of humanity.

While I used to say the same thing about the word communism, I can’t any longer. Especially, though not exclusively, in my own linguistic part of the world: the anglophone one.

It’s not unfair to say that anti-communism is the secular religion of the United States of America, the most populous and powerful English-speaking country. Since the first red scare in the 1910s – which primarily targeted anarchists and syndicalists, not Marxists and state socialists – and especially since the beginning of the Cold War, it’s been drilled into the heads of every American child of each successive generation that Communism (notice the capital C), is not only bad, but actually evil. A threat

to absolutely everything America stands for. The satanic inversion of America itself, and the freedom-loving ethos it's founded upon. The American child – through formal education, media, movies, and culture – is taught to react to Communism the way 17th century Protestants were taught to react to Catholicism: as the antichrist. Breeding this mass psychology made the US populace willing to support just about any violent or authoritarian thing, at home or abroad, as long as it was done in the name of “protecting the world from Communism”.

Today, even a generation after the end of the Cold War and the implosion of Marxist-Leninism around the world, American culture remains suffused with this mass phobia of anything even vaguely reminiscent of the old “red menace”. Remember, if you will, the abject hysteria of the US right-wing over “socialism” following the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008: near-incessant media freak-outs about how everything Obama did was just a pen-stroke away from instituting a full government takeover of all industry and announcing the first five-year-plan for the United States.

Given the power and prominence of the US as a deciding political, economic, and ideological force in the shaping of social consciousness around the world – in particular in the anglophone regions and on upper-middle classes worldwide – this secular religion has, at least in part, trickled down to the rest of us. In Ireland or Britain for example, there isn't the same “reds under the beds” mania which pervades the United States, but still, if you voice political or economic views which sound a tad too close to (what they imagine) the old Soviet Union was founded on, eyes start rolling and you stop being taken seriously.

No matter how much social anarchists try to distance themselves from the USSR, point out anarchists were in fact persecuted and murdered by Leninist regimes, or explain that the way they use communism has nothing to do with totalitarian statism, it's almost always for naught when trying to talk to the average person without several years of learning the history of the term. Mention the word communism, and all the person will be able to think about is gulags, censorship, poverty, drab architecture, famines, and “100 million dead” – 200 million if you're talking to a real anti-communist fanatic.

Socialism may still have some hope of being rescued from the association with Cold War propaganda (with the exception of Eastern Europe), though not necessarily for a good reason. Among young people, “socialism” is coming to be associated with the welfare-state capitalism of the new “old left”, embodied in centre-left populist politicians like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. The “reds under the beds” brainwashing may be wearing thin, but if this “socialism” is just a return to the social democratic consensus of the mid-1900s, then the left has become an imagination-void in terms of envisioning a better future to work towards. Still, I have an inkling of hope that this dissolution of fear surrounding socialism among my generation, and the generation after mine, may provide an opening to offer a libertarian and decentralist alternative to the resurrected corpse of post-war welfare statism. It's possible we could appeal to

those who are already enthusiastic about the vague idea of socialism, then present a more freedom-enabling variety of it.

But again, I can't say the same for the word communism. Like it or not, the term's association with the travesty that was the Soviet Union, and the other red-fascist dungeon states which followed its example, is near-universal. You can try to convince people until you're blue in the face that "they never actually called their system communism! Real communism is supposed to be stateless and free!", and all they'll think is: *another commie trying to play the "it just wasn't implemented properly" angle, (YAWN)*. It doesn't matter how strong your arguments are, because they've already dismissed you as someone they shouldn't bother taking seriously.

Pretty much the only way I can think of the term communism acquiring positive associations in the eyes of the world populace again is if, another generation or two from now, the reputation of old Communist states is rehabilitated, and Communism becomes seen as a noble lost cause akin to the status of Confederate secessionism in the US south years after the civil war.

And that is not, as a social anarchist, something I want to happen.

Reason 2: Marxists!

The second, and no less crucial cause of my desire for anarchists to abandon the word communism is due to those who live up to the very fears those anti-communists have.

In the last couple of years, as something of a connoisseur of Leftbook (the left-wing pages and discussion groups of Facebook), I've witnessed the simultaneous rise of two groups of political radicals: the alt-right, and what I'm going to call the alt-Leninists. Both of whom scare me witless. Keep in mind that the following is based on personal experience, not scholarly research. So pending a more rigorous sociological analysis, what you're about to read are subjective impressions, and not to be taken as anything resembling social science. If an expert in researching the field of online political attitudes among millennials shows me evidence which disproves my impressions, I'm prepared to yield.

If you're already familiar with the ins and outs of the alt-right (angry and bitter millennial boys cosplaying fascist totalitarians of yesteryear), I won't bore you with the details. I will, on the other hand, ask you to consider what the alt-right would be like if they traded in their SS cosplay for Red Army cosplay. That's the alt-Leninists in a nutshell.

Over the last two years in particular, I've witnessed the online multiplication of younger people, mostly young white men, drawn not only to authoritarian leftism, but to particularly virulent strains of it: Stalinism, Maoism, and Kimism. I can't tell how much of it is meant to be "ironic" – in the way neofascist Richard Spencer claims his

Nazi salutes are “ironic” – but with the growth in the amount of memes praising Joseph Stalin, calling their enemies “kulaks”, and threatening to throw anyone who contradicts them in a gulag, I can’t help but think a not-insignificant chunk of those who like and share such memes do so out of a sincere belief in them. “Truthful hyperbole” as Donald Trump puts it.

Before you try to claim they’re just doing edge humour, and their jokes about throwing people in gulags and murdering kulaks are just a case of frustrated youths blowing off steam, or mocking the stereotypes right-wingers have of left-wingers, I’m willing to say *sure, that may be true for some of them*. But whenever I hear that argument, I’m also reminded of a video of a young supporter of Front National, in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election in France, defending the neofascist party from accusations of race-hatred by claiming its young supporters were merely making “jokes”, pretending to be racists online in order to annoy their anti-racist accusers. At some point, I lose interest in taking these people at their word when they claim they “don’t really mean it”.

As well as having no desire to be lumped in with such people by anti-communists, I also have no desire for authoritarian pro-communists to lump anarchists in with themselves. Even if one argues we want the same thing in the end – and I’m not convinced we do – we have ways of seeking it which are totally incompatible: dissolving the state as a basis for capitalist social relations and creating free egalitarian relations from the bottom-up, versus strengthening the state in the hope of decreeing classlessness into existence from the top-down.

I’ve seen this lack of “left unity” decried as “sectarian” by many Marxists who wish to use the anarchist movement as ballast for their state-seeking ambitions, but I see no more reason seek left unity with authoritarian communists than to seek “libertarian unity” with libertarian capitalists. The former group want something they call “communist”, while the latter want something they call “libertarian”, but that does not make those who want something called “libertarian communism” the allies of either. In this case, the terminology indicates a shared path to walk when it’s really two different paths with the same name.

Am I an “Anti-Communist” Now?

To offer a purely personal account of why I feel this way, I published a post on the Solarpunk Anarchist Facebook page about a year ago which criticised Marxism and urged social anarchists to see themselves as more than just anti-state Marxists. The reason being my having seen many newer anarchists who seem genuinely surprised at seeing anarchists who are critical of Marxism, believing anarchists and Marxists (even Leninists) were meant to be, ultimately, on the same side – just as many anarchists believed in 1917 and again in 1936.

The language I used was, I’ll admit, a little provocative. I wanted to rattle the cage of left discourse a bit and, I hoped, get social anarchists to explore the theory of their own professed tradition a lot more; as there’s a tendency among the newer anarchists I mentioned to take the Marxist lie that “anarchists have no theory” at face value, looking instead to flawed Marxist theorists rather than reading anarchist thinkers in their own words. At times I’ve even seen Marxist-Leninist ideas presented as if they came from anarchism.

I was expecting some blowback. Perhaps a few autonomist Marxists or democratic socialists insisting that not all Marxists were like that, and that I was drawing a crude stereotype. My plan was to then say, yes, not all Marxists are authoritarians; and that there do exist some possibilities for cooperation between social anarchists and non-authoritarian Marxists, even if we disagree on theory. The main problem, I would say, was that too many Marxists do fit the picture I drew of them, and that the non-authoritarians need to do more to distance themselves from the authoritarians – “tankies” in the now-common parlance.

Nothing, however, could’ve prepared me for what happened next.

My post was shared to several Leninist meme groups, and my page was then flooded by about a hundred literal Stalinists. As well as calling me “bourgeois”, an “imperialist”, an “idealist”, a “utopian”, and other insults they don’t know the proper definitions of, I was threatened with political assassination, threatened with imprisonment in one of their gulags, accused of “objectively” being on the side of Hitler for not being against Marxism, and described as working for the CIA to “divide the left”. I was also accused again and again of being an “anti-communist”, as if (A) they, Marxist-Leninists somehow owned the word communist, and (B) anarchists had not themselves been communists since before Marxist-Leninism existed. Thus I was in the odd position of somehow being an “anti-communist” communist.

As well as being a deeply unpleasant experience in itself, it served as the first step into an online world I’m now terrified is coming into existence.

This tankie invasion of my page was a catalyst which led me to do some further research into just how prominent these people are. I remember a few years ago, if a Maoist or Stalinist left a comment on a post or video about radical politics, they'd be dismissed as a kook. While the general tenor of transformative politics wasn't exactly anarchist or social libertarian, it did seem to have a leaning towards decentralism, and the core of discourse could reasonably be categorised as democratic socialist, rather than authoritarian socialist.

Now? Again, I'm no sociologist, but just from some basic looking around, it seems like authoritarian leftists are everywhere online. There's Twitter users, Facebook pages, Facebook groups, YouTube channels, Tumblrs, and blogs all advocating a return to something resembling the "golden years" of Leninist vanguardism.

There's defences of Stalin and Mao on the issues of famines – often dismissing descriptions of said famines with jokes like "LOL Stalin ate all the grain and ordered the clouds not to rain" – and describing any evidence of wrongdoing as "Nazi propaganda", with accusations of supporting Nazism usually following. There's conspiracy theories, such as a frequent assertion I've encountered that Pol Pot was secretly working for the CIA and deliberately making things worse in order to discredit Communism.

I can only hypothesise that young (mostly white, mostly male) people are becoming attracted to authoritarian ideologies of all kinds due to a particular set of political-economic and ideo-cultural factors which primarily affect their generation. These tend to be young men in their late teens, twenties, and early thirties. Most of them were kids in that brief period of "peace" – and neoliberal capitalist hubris – that was the 1990s. Their formative years were sandwiched between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the War on Terror. For that short span of time, it looked as if a new era of ever-increasing stability was on the horizon. As Francis Fukuyama opined, this was the Hegelian "end of history". The great ideological battle between the first world and second world was over. From here on, there would be a gradual but assured drift towards liberal democracy and free market capitalism.

Then 9/11 happened, and the events of the ensuing years have bred a generation which was, at first, promised that "things can only get better", only to have that promise broken in the most cruel manner imaginable. Recall the scene in the movie C.R.A.Z.Y when the protagonist fantasises about buying his bully of a father a rare record he wants, only to smash it in front of him. To a millennial, especially a millennial boy, the current era can feel a lot like how the father felt, only the generations of the characters are flipped.

Millennial men flock to the authoritarian ideologies of the early 20th century because they offer, first: working models of radical alternatives to the status-quo which promise security and stability as an escape from the current chaos and anxiety; and second: a superior-sounding moral and emotional justification for dishing out violence, often genocidal mass violence, upon groups of people they dislike in the present.

On the surface, there may seem to be little that's appealing about authoritarianism. But that's only if you look at it, as most anarchists do, from the perspective of those

over whom the authority is wielded. If you can imagine yourself as the one wielding the authority – in particular the authority to use violence – then authoritarianism can feel liberating and empowering.

So as well as offering a sense of social security as an alternative to social disorder, authoritarianism allows those who think they'll wind up at the reigns of state power a means to coerce, incarcerate, and kill everybody who currently pisses them off. Identifying with regimes and ideologies which, in the past, are responsible for murdering millions of people makes them feel like badasses. Your average millennial alt-rightist or alt-Leninist feels prideful and powerful in being able to communicate the sentiment "I would literally fucking kill you if had the power, and would be legally vindicated in doing so".

These are the people who, online at least, have told me time and again that I, an anarchist, am (pretty much by definition) a "counter-revolutionary" for being unwilling to support the support the creation of another one of their dungeon states; and for being unwilling to support "left unity" between those who want to dissolve government and those who want to make it all-powerful; and for continuing to believe killing, incarceration, and coercion are, in general, bad things to be avoided rather than things which become good when the right people are in charge of administering them. And for my counter-revolutionary crimes of being against "unity" (submission to them), I have seen these people threaten "another Kronstadt" on more than one occasion and threats of a visit to one of their gulags almost incessantly.

At one point, the alt-right seemed like harmless losers (except of course to those women, nonwhites, and queers they harassed) dwelling in the most filth-ridden and obnoxious parts of the web. That was before the ascendancy of Donald Trump and the global rise in far-right populism. Now the political classes, media, and the mainstream left are beginning to take them seriously as an actual threat. Maybe not an immediate threat, but one which may gestate and fester in the generational frustrations of white men of the millennial and zeds generations, in a few years posing a potential threat to liberal peace and quiet – and a living nightmare for the lower orders they want dead, expelled or kept down.

I can't help but see the alt-Leninists as being in the same position now as the alt-right were a few years ago: politically horrific, personally abusive, feeding off young male resentment at their hopes for a fulfilling future life being dashed, but seen as harmless to most who give them a glance, with exceptions of course for those they make into their targets. All it takes is one or a few authoritarian left populist leaders to energise this monster lurking just beneath the surface of mainstream political discourse, and then those who care about freedom and equality will have just as big a problem on their hands as they do now, but from the opposite side of the political aisle.

And long as these people are the ones monopolising the label "communist", not only can I not use it myself, but I must actually accept the label they've now thrown at me countless times: anti-communist.

Alternative Terms to Use

As I've already said, I'm still in favour of anarchists using the word communism in discussions of anarchist history, and in more theory-laden discussions on the political economy of post-capitalist social organisation.

So if not the word communism (whether with a small c or capital c), then what terminology do we use to describe what kinds of socio-economic structures we want?

Most of the time, what I've found works is simply describing the details of an anarchistic future economy without evoking any -isms. For example, saying I want an economy organised through horizontal networks of cooperation, workplace self-management, community self-governance, and decentralist planning of how resources are allocated. That tends to be a good place to start.

Once the basics have been established, a few more details can be expounded, like locality-ownership of productive materials, popular assemblies in neighbourhoods who take major decisions on economic relations, enterprises being run cooperatively through committees of workers, the absence of intellectual property, the encouragement of local self-sufficiency to the greatest degree possible, and – the person's openness allowing – the absence of money and the distribution of goods according to need; achieved by a combination of providing free access to goods which are plentiful, and a rationing system used to distribute scarce goods according to who needs them most, with medicine for instance going to the sickest and the oldest as a priority.

All of which covers what was classically called anarchist communism, but without clouding the newcomer's mind with images of gulags and woolly hats.

I understand that this can, in many cases, be too time-consuming. Especially in contexts where you want to discuss overall features of the system itself, such as when contrasting it with central planning, market competition, or other means of organising an economy. The following are a few alternatives I've been trying out over the past year which may get the job done.

Commons Economy

For the first of these alternative terms, I've started making use of Elinor Ostrom's reevaluated concept of the commons: methods of organising things which use voluntary cooperation in place of either statist or market organisation. Terms like "economy of the commons" or "commons economy" not only get the idea across, but connect the (pretty small) social anarchist project to wider global movements for the commons – in particular those involving indigenous peoples struggling for control of the land they live on. Most of these are made up of people who may not be anarchists, but have many goals in common with anarchists.

So just as the anarchists of the late 19th century saw themselves as part of a broader workers movement, the anarchists of the early 21st century can see themselves as part of a broader commons movement. This could be vital change in outlook for anarchists, as many still remain committed to the stereotypical image of “the worker” as the centre of social struggle, and not the enclosures of the natural, cultural, and technological commons which are now at the core of struggle around the world.

Commons economy also doesn’t sound too dissimilar from communism, so it’s not a total abandonment of terminological tradition.

Free Commons

One potential worry you may have with commons economy is the possibility of social anarchist politics getting diluted by association with other projects for the commons, ones whose aims may be to reaffirm or reconstitute the current political-economic system by assimilating elements of commons into it. And yes, that’s a legitimate concern.

For this reason, it might be helpful to make a distinction between a more general kind of commons economy, and the concept of a “free commons” – a type of commons which is specifically social-anarchistic in its organisation; horizontal, autonomous, and having a continual drive to eliminate hierarchy.

I also like the term free commons for being able to sound like a cooperative alternative to the neoliberal notion of “free market”. With a free commons offering in reality what a free market only offers in theory. We might even be able to use the term to appeal to those few left-leaning marketarians who were only turned on to market “libertarianism” out of the belief it’s the only alternative to both the status-quo and to state socialism, due to never discovering social anarchism.

Free Access Economy

To help enunciate long-term aspiration to replace money as a tool for distributing goods, the term free access comes in handy. It helps get across the openness and user-friendliness of the kind of economy we want, placing the focus on the site of receiving goods, rather than the site of producing goods. This can help when trying to communicate the fact that social anarchists want to create an economy of enjoyments, where people not only have the sources of sustenance freely available to them, but also the sources of pleasure.

After all, it may sound nice to talk about being “workers” who produce things in common and without bosses telling us what to do, but if all we focus on is the act of producing things and not the act of enjoying them, then we only appeal to that small minority of the populace who currently like the work they do, not those who’d like to see their work abolished (if it’s pointless) or automated away (if it’s needed).

Free access economy is most useful in contexts where post-scarcity and labour-automation are key topics. And it serves as a useful supplement to both commons economy and free commons.

In a sense, you could see each of these terms as related and nested within each other: a commons economy contains within it the free commons economy (which operates

anarchistically), and the free commons economy contains within it the free access economy (which operates without a filter on the enjoyment of goods).

In turn, we can see this nesting of economy types as describing the process through which they can be created: as we work together to build a commons economy, we also (at the same time) build the free commons within it, which itself contains the possibility of getting rid of scarcity and expanding the degree to which the things made can be enjoyed without putting a cap on how much each person takes.

Conclusion

To reiterate, I am still, in the original sense of the term, an anarchist communist.

The terms libertarian and socialist may or may not be reclaimable, but I still think anarchists should at least try to reclaim them, even while laying back on using them in contexts where they're liable to be misunderstood. However, due to the term being monopolised by Marxist-Leninists, and near-impossible to use without misunderstanding, I can no longer say the same of communism.

Because I no longer see the word as reclaimable from authoritarian communists, I think it's best for social anarchists to abandon it, making use of it only when talking about anarchist history; in the same way we now talk about anarchist "vanguards" (militant minorities) since the term vanguard was appropriated by Leninists.

This doesn't however mean an end to social anarchism's connection to the ideal of a world organised "in common", as we can easily take up the terminology and rhetoric of the growing movements of the commons around the world, which could have the same importance to anarchists today that the workers movements had in anarchism's early days – but only if we throw ourselves into them, setting aside outdated language and concepts and embracing the existing struggles of the 21st century.

In short, social anarchists need to move from communism to the commons.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



Solarpunk Anarchist
Why this Anarchist has Stopped Using the Word Communism (an overlong
explanation)
2018/01/22

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