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# Anti-Communist communists

## Or: on capitalization and capitalism

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It feels like two years ago but it was probably five. I drove from one side of North Carolina to another side of North Carolina because the "neo-confederates" were planning some kind of armed march through some small town and we needed all the numbers we could get to confront them. It worked, and we outnumbered them, and the people in town seemed grateful for our presence.

After a few hours, it devolved into a strange shouting match alongside a rural road. The confederates on one side of the road, the anti-fascists on the other. We probably called them Nazis. They called us communists.

"It's complicated!" my friend shouted back.

Because… it is.

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The other place I've been involved in shouting matches with my ideological opponents about "communism" is on the internet, of course. I'm regularly accused of anti-Communism when I talk

about the history of authoritarianism and the counter-revolution led by the Bolsheviks in Russia.

The hard truth of it is that I'm anti-Communist. I'm also, when push comes to shove, a communist.

In this case, the capital-C matters quite a lot.

Words have multiple meanings, depending on the context in which they're used, and one of the most mishandled words in history is the word "communist." I don't even want to say it's one of the most "misunderstood," because that implies there's a single correct meaning of the word, and there isn't.

If a communist is someone who seeks a stateless, classless, moneyless society in which decisions are made at the local level by various councils and then larger federations organize that decentralized social structure, then I'm a communist. This is the original sense of the word. About once a year I ponder getting the words "according to ability / according to need" tattooed on my body before I decide that I already have too many words tattooed on me.

If a Communist is someone who supports one-party rule and totalitarian governments that promise to do what's right by "the workers," then I am absolutely opposed to it. If a Communist is someone who believes that only the United States and its allies are capable of evil, and that any government that opposes the US is therefore inherently good, then I am absolutely opposed to it. If a Communist is someone who takes orders from their Party and not from their conscience, then I am absolutely opposed to it.

The conflation of these two concepts, communism (little-c) and Communism (big-C) frankly fucked up a lot of the Left in the 20$^{th}$ century and still does damage today. That conflation started, as best as I can tell, in March 1918, when the Bolshevik Party in Russia changed its name to the Russian Communist Party. From this point forward, to say you were a communist implied you were a Communist. That is to say, you were a party member or in allegiance with that party.

cused of anti-Communism. Even though you're fighting for a stateless, classless society.

I try not to follow a party line, *any* party line. There are things I disagree with "classical anarchism" about. I know what I'd get into a fight with nearly every historical anarchist over. I try to look at any given situation and instead of carving up the world into a chess match between states, I look at the working class, the downtrodden, and try to side with them. Usually, they are fighting against their state. It takes a state, after all, to organize oppression on a mass scale.

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We call them tankies because time and time again, the people of Soviet bloc states tried to break free from Soviet influence. Diverse coalitions, largely of leftists, wanted democratic systems, and the tanks from Russia rolled in to conquer and lay waste. When this happened in Hungary in 1956, a ton of western Communists stopped supporting the USSR, recognizing it was fundamentally anti-democratic.

But not everyone split away. Some people supported the tanks. They were called tankies.

Don't support oppression, under any flag.

It's all just semantics until tanks roll down the street and put down worker uprisings. Side with the workers. Side with the working class. Side with the revolution. Fuck the tanks, fuck the tankies.



One of the greatest swindles perpetrated against humanity was authored by both sides of the cold war–when they convinced people that capitalism and Communism were the only options available to humanity. The west convinced people that capitalism was synonymous with freedom and democracy. The Soviet bloc convinced people that the Communist Party was synonymous with worker's power and equality.

Both sides worked together, though, to convince people that authoritarianism was synonymous with communism. If you hate authoritarianism, accept capitalism. If you hate capitalism, accept authoritarianism.

Frankly, it worked. I don't call myself a communist, nearly ever. Its original definition applies to me, sure, but the word is too tainted by the 20th century for me. Maybe it's because I was born before the fall of the Soviet Union, that I grew up with friends who escaped totalitarianism. Or that I was fed anti-Communist propaganda and it got to me.

To me, there's little point in attempting to recuperate the word communism. Other friends of mine disagree.

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The word "authoritarian" has negative connotations, and it should, but it's also just a technical distinction. For a hundred and fifty years or so, socialism has been divided between "authoritarian" and "libertarian" elements. Between the Communists and the anarchists. (Social democrats form a sort of third position within this, in a way that is complicated because early Marxists were more social democrats, in what's now called "orthodox Marxism" to compare it to the Bolshevik / Leninist methods that developed later, but modern social democrats aren't necessarily as caught up in this lineage. Frankly, I know less about this throughline though.)

When I call Communists authoritarians, I mean it both in a technical sense and a derogatory sense. I believe it is a shameful thing to be.

I dislike calling myself an anti-Communist, I suppose, but it's technically true. Technically, I'm an anti-Communist communist.

Marx claimed time and time again that his approach was scientific. Of course, "scientific" *also* meant something different in his era than it does today, but let's go with it for a second regardless. Marx presented a hypothesis: "if a vanguard party seizes centralized power to create the dictatorship of the proletariat, they will be able to wither the state away and create a communist society–that is, a stateless, classless society." He had some even wackier ideas than that, of course. He believed that you couldn't jump straight to the communist revolution, but that you actually had to have a bourgeois revolution first to empower the capitalists and industrialize society so that you could later have a communist revolution to empower the working class.

But this first hypothesis, that seizing the state will eventually allow the state to wither? The entire 20th century is the history of that experiment being run, again and again. The results of course are different in each instance, but at no point did the state wither away. Power, it turns out, is a hell of a drug.

This is, of course, what the anarchists said would happen all along. Being me, I prefer the critique formulated by JRR Tolkien: power cannot be wielded, it must be destroyed.

This isn't to say that every "Communist" country is the same, nor that none of them made advances in certain areas. Just that none of them moved towards communism. The pedant in me would prefer that these Communists just drop the act and say "I prefer a centrally planned economic system. State capitalism, if you will."



With the fall of the Soviet Union, socialism and the Left in general tended far more anti-authoritarian for decades. Some of this was expressed in the upswing of the anarchist movement, an upswing that caught me at 19 and has never since let me go. Some of it was expressed by the growth of a social democratic movement. Some of it was expressed by new ideas (which frankly are probably the most promising), such as the fusion of anti-authoritarian socialism and indigenous practices in Mexico that led to Zapatismo, or the fusion of Communism, anarchism, and indigenous practices in Kurdistan that led to Democratic Confederalism.

But at least in the US, the 2016 election that brought a more-or-less fascist into power (again, I mean "fascist" in a technical sense, not just "someone I dislike") brought a return of the authoritarian Left. While they're still fundamentally marginal, they are less so than they used to be. The modern "tankies" offer easy answers to complicated problems. The US is bad and therefore every government that is in opposition to the US is good.

This is a nonsensical idea, of course. "More than one thing can be bad at once" should not be a controversial statement. But the tankie mindset is one of rigid black and white.

I don't live in the 20th century. I run a history podcast, so I expend a lot of my energy explaining the horrors of the Bolsheviks (and the US empire, and every other authoritarian entity). But it's the authoritarian elements within the Left here and now that are the most present problem.

Once you know what to look for, tankies are easy to spot. When Russia first invaded Ukraine, tankies supported Russia, which made them unpopular. During the current escalation of genocide in Palestine by the hands of the Israeli state, the tankies support Palestine (as do I, as does anyone with any semblance of ethics) but they tip their hand when they defend Iran in the process.

Simply because a state is opposed to western hegemony doesn't make them good and ethical. But saying as much will get you ac-