

“Throwing Out the Baby”

written by Judy Cox | August 11, 2025



“The world is on fire,” says David Camfield. We are living through a “polycrisis” of entangled and mutually reinforcing crises. Enthusiasm for capitalism is fading away, to put it mildly. One of the things that undermines resistance to the system is the idea, the common sense, the feeling that there is no alternative. Capitalism may be far from perfect, it may generate inequality, climate crisis, imperialist conflict, but all attempts to create a radical society have not only failed—they have made things worse. As Camfield writes, “Defenders of the current social order can still marshal an array of arguments to support the idea that, whatever its flaws, there is no alternative” (2). One of the most important of these arguments is “anti-Communism” (2).

Anti-communism is not simply a relic of the Cold War. In 2023, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution that denounced all forms of socialist policies. The resolution included the claim that “Socialism has repeatedly led to famine and mass murders, and the killing of over 100,000,000 people worldwide ... many of the greatest crimes in history were committed by socialist ideologues, including Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, Pol Pot, Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un, Daniel Ortega, Hugo Chávez, and Nicolás Maduro” (3). Communism is portrayed as the most murderous force in human history. It is deemed “criminal as both ideology and reality, and always identical in all times and in all places,” as historian Enzo Traverso puts it in his critique of anti-Communism (3). Anti-Communism deepens and gives ideological edge to the idea that trying to create a more egalitarian and peaceful world will only lead to extraordinary horrors.

In this context, socialists may be tempted to see something hopeful and progressive in the long-defunct USSR and in similar societies in Cuba and China. This does not imply an uncritical celebration of the Actually Existing Socialist (AES) societies, but it does suggest confusion about what is and is not socialism. In her 2018 book *Why Women Have Better Sex under Socialism*, which has been translated into over a dozen languages, Kristen Ghodsee argues that although “state socialism” ultimately failed, for much of the twentieth century it “presented an existential challenge to the worst excesses of the free market.” “There was a baby in all that bathwater. It’s time we got around to saving it,” Ghodsee concludes (7).

Lea Ypi’s acclaimed memoir of life before and after the collapse of Albania has also been translated into over twenty languages. Ypi is scathing about the society in which she grew up, but she emphatically rejects all attempts to deny that Albania was a genuinely socialist society. As Camfield notes, the soil of what he calls “anti-anti-Communism” can provide fertile ground for a growing enthusiasm for AES societies as a flawed but existing alternative to capitalism. There are “young people in Europe and the United States who want to sound like the old Communists.” So, debates about the nature of AES societies are not confined to history books, they are not doctrinaire and obscure—achieving clarity on the nature of the AES societies is vital for shaping resistance to capitalism today.

Camfield's book is an indispensable intervention in those debates. He argues that transition toward real communism is both possible and desirable, but it will not be achieved by strategies rooted in confusion about what socialism is and is not. Camfield cuts through both sentimental nostalgia and the cherry-picking of progressive policies associated with AES societies. Analysing the nature of these societies is not served by excusing or denying the widespread repression carried out by Stalin's regime in the 1930s when some 1.5 million were executed or died in prisons and labor camps. Camfield argues that AES societies must be interrogated. Were workers exercising direct democracy? Were capitalist social relations being replaced by socialist organisation? If the answer is no, then these societies were not really socialist, whatever rhetoric they used.

Red Flags gives a clear and compelling account of the democratic and liberatory impulses of the Russian Revolution that were stifled by the dire economic situation that immediately confronted the workers' state and the civil war. Hundreds of highly democratic soviets (councils) of workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants were created. Delegates were accountable to their electors and recallable at any time. Having toppled the Tsar, workers also became "determined to overthrow 'autocracy' on the shop floor" (23).

The state that began to take shape under the pressures of this civil war became "a sprawling and ramshackle edifice, the product of no architect's design" (28). The workers' state faced severe objective problems: backward economic development, the aftermath of war, foreign invasion, and counterrevolution. However, Camfield argues, there were also subjective factors at play. The Bolsheviks had long believed that the coming revolution would be a bourgeois revolution. This revolution would destroy feudalism, establish a capitalist democratic republic, and open the road to the unimpeded development of capitalism in Russia and to a future socialist revolution. This outlook changed only at the Bolshevik party conference of April 1917. This meant, Camfield contends, that the Bolsheviks were unprepared for the task of pushing forward to establish socialism.

It could be added that such a lack of preparation is inevitable in a workers' revolution as workers must take power before they can develop their own methods and organizations. A degree of experimentation, trial, and error was both necessary and welcomed by Lenin. And Camfield is absolutely right to emphasize that, "We must not lose sight of the fact that the main reason working-class rule came to an end in 1918 was the catastrophic social conditions" (29).

The Soviet Union was locked into competition with the West under Stalin's doctrine of building "socialism in one country." The industrialization of the USSR was driven through by Communist Party officials who increasingly acted as a distinct social class. This process culminated in the Great Break of 1928, which "stamped out the remaining embers of the revolutionary blaze lit by workers and peasants in 1917. It marked the triumph of counterrevolution in a form never seen before: instead of the overthrow of the Communist Party-State by open opponents of the socialist revolution of 1917, a new ruling class was consolidated that used the language and symbols of that revolution." This was not inevitable. It was a product of the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the failure of other countries to emulate the success of the Bolsheviks (36).

Camfield's account of the dynamics of the Russian Revolution, the counterrevolution of the late 1920s and the establishment of state capitalism is accessible, convincing, and necessary for all other analysis of AES societies. His account of the histories of the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions is equally compelling and necessary. By centering the role of working-class self-activity, Camfield is able to demonstrate that neither in China, nor in Cuba, did self-emancipation drive the revolutionary process forward, and in neither case was the post-revolutionary society shaped by working-class people through their own democratic institutions. Revolutions can inflict severe blows against the dominant imperialist powers, but that does not mean they are socialist revolutions that are beginning a transition to communism. Camfield's analysis arms socialists to resist the widespread

idea that it is state ownership that defines socialism (100).

I found some of the later sections on the alternative tradition to AES societies a little less satisfying. This was not because the arguments were misplaced or unconvincing. On the contrary, the ideas Camfield discusses are fascinating and relevant and deserve more space. I would have liked to read more about the contributions made by Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, William Morris, and Rosa Luxemburg and about the debates associated with the analysis developed by thinkers like C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Karl Korsch.

That does not in any way detract from the power and importance of Camfield's research and his analysis. Camfield is surely right to emphasize how, "In spite of the mighty currents against which it has been forced to swim, anti-Stalinist communism has survived as a diverse living tradition" (131). His book is an important contribution to that tradition. Socialists must refuse all attempts to associate socialism with the Soviet gulags of the past or the dormitories housing Chinese workers today. Painting these societies red discredits the revolutionary project that is based on democracy, freedom, and abundance. Our aim is to overthrow global capitalism, not find ways to compete with it. As Camfield writes, Communism is "a compass with which to navigate, not a map," and crucial to that navigation is the need for meaningful action, action that will build the fight for reforms as part of achieving the final goal of socialism (141).