The History Wars and the New Red Scare

written by Mathew Foresta | June 9, 2023



The views of Left and Right differ regarding the study of history. For the Right it is largely an exercise in building identity and loyalty, an exploration of what makes one's nation and race, and therefore one's self, special. For the Left it's generally a quest for truth, and lessons from the past no matter how unpleasant they may be, in order to achieve justice. This is clear to anyone paying attention to current debates about the legacy of slavery, colonization, and the ongoing reactionary hysterics surrounding "Critical Race Theory." Now we are seeing the opening of a new front in the conflict. A battle over old ground long held to be of prime strategic importance to the Right. The history of Socialism.

Lately, state and federal legislation has been introduced seeking to address the "crimes of Communism." As I've previously covered this has already passed in Florida. Similar bills have seemingly stalled out in New Hampshire, Virginia, and Arkansas. Most prominent among these is H.Con.Res.9, a resolution denouncing Socialism that recently passed the House of Representatives. Ever supine, ineffective, and willing to go along with the Republican narrative, over 100 Democrats, including Nancy Pelosi, voted in favor. Unable to take effective measures to support reproductive rights or rebalance the supreme court, it seems the Dems have resorted to passing something that can only be described as thoroughly hard-right.

"Denouncing the horrors of socialism. Whereas socialist ideology necessitates a concentration of power that has time and time again collapsed into Communist regimes, totalitarian rule, and brutal dictatorships," we are breathlessly told at the resolutions outset before being given a litany of Communist crimes. I will not argue here authoritarian Communist regimes have not committed notable atrocities. Besides a small pack of terminally online zealots, few on the Left would.

The horrors perpetrated by the Soviet Union, North Korea, and other such dictatorships are common knowledge across the political spectrum, the subject of books, articles, novels, documentaries, and YouTube videos. This renders the resolution redundant and cynical, a clear farce. The Republicans, a party that rails against "indoctrination" and for "free speech," is nakedly trying to enforce a state ideology. As more and more young people become disillusioned with Capitalism's economic catastrophes, inequality, abuse, and exploitation, they are seeing alternatives on the left that go beyond what most Democrats are willing to do. Socialism, passionate, egalitarian, and anti-authoritarian is rising in popularity. A young and wonderfully rowdy Left is demanding social, racial, economic, and environmental justice. Thus is born a new red scare that seeks to stem any inkling that there might be an alternative to our post-Capitalist hellscape. For the-Right, this has the added benefit of heading off discussions of the racial and gender inequities seen in Capitalism, such as those finely articulated by writers like Nicole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Here lies a crucial link in the alliance between those seeking to protect exploitation by the rich and the advocates of nationalistic, white racial identity politics.

While this left bashing effort puts forward a narrative, that of Communist barbarity, it also seeks to cover up others. One being the shamefully under-discussed history of Capitalist and Fascist brutality that is on par with anything done under a red banner. The other the long and proud history of the Anti-Authoritarian Left. The ones who reject all forms of oppression in favor of a better world.

Examining what is absent from the resolution is as important as examining what is included. Notice the specter of authoritarianism is invoked when discussing the concentration of power in Communist societies. The same could be said of Capitalism, where power is concentrated in the hands of the economic and political elite. The regimes of right-wing strongmen like Franco, Putin, Orban, Stroessner, and Marcos are among the litany of examples. The intimate relationship between Capitalism and dictatorship is plainly seen in Chilean tyrant Augusto Pinochet's connection with the so-called "Chicago Boys." Acolytes of economist Milton Friedman, they were instrumental in the market reforms that to this day leave Chile a land riven with inequality. All while any opposition was crushed with an iron fist.

We are told that Stalin and Mao committed some of history's greatest crimes. As did Hitler, a fanatical anti-Communist whose relationships with industrial giants like IBM are well established. A monster who fulfilled his promise to crush the German Communist and Social Democratic parties.

The resolution mentions the death and suffering caused by the Holodomor and other famines. True, but there can be no double standard. The British Empire was the primary cause of massive, devastating famines in Ireland and India. In today's America millions suffer from food insecurity. The United States readily used famine as a weapon against Indigenous tribes in its long march of colonization.

The mass murders perpetrated by red dictatorships are enumerated. Absent are Capitalism's sins like the various genocides carried out against Indigenous Peoples and the millions upon millions of Black folks who were murdered as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Lest we forget Belgian Congo, the mass spraying of carcinogenic chemicals in Vietnam, the carpet bombing of Korea, The French brutalization of Algeria, the genocide of the Maya in Guatemala, Rosewood, Tulsa, Rwanda, Bhopal, Apartheid, Amritsar, Nanking, and the Concentration Camps in The Philippines, Kenya, German South-West Africa, Deir ez-Zor, and The United States. Not to mention the seemingly endless parade of genocide, dictatorship, and murder the U.S. supported during the Cold War. I would also add to this list the destruction of the Earth's biosphere and climate. To point this out is not whataboutism. It is a rejection of naked hypocrisy and cynical, exploitative rhetoric that cares nothing for the victims of any state sanctioned horrors.

Cambodia's killing fields are discussed, but not the U.S. bombing that helped give rise to them. We are told North Korea is a "land of destitution" opposite "a land of freedom." That freedom was won by the South Korean people as they brought down the U.S. backed right-wing dictatorship in the late 1980's. That being only the most recent tyranny the U.S. uplifted on the peninsula. America supported The South's Syngman Rhee during the Korean War era whist tens of thousands were executed in a series of anti-leftist massacres. This support for dictatorship was not limited to Asia.

"The Castro regime in Cuba expropriated the land of Cuban farmers and the businesses of Cuban entrepreneurs, stealing their possessions and their livelihoods, and exiling millions with nothing but the clothes on their backs," the resolution says.

Nowhere are we told of the preceding, U.S. backed Batista regime's oppressive rule, corruption, or close relationship with American gangsters.

The resolution goes on to quote Thomas Jefferson. "To take from one, because it is thought that his

own industry and that of his fathers has acquired too much, in order to spare to others, who, or whose fathers have not exercised equal industry and skill, is to violate arbitrarily the first principle of association, the guarantee to every one of a free exercise of his industry, and the fruits acquired by it."

This attempt to use Jefferson as tyranny's foil is laughable. He led a nation where non-whites and women were denied the right to vote. No doubt his many, many slaves would scoff at this plantation aristocrat's notion of industry. The words of Samuel Johnson come to mind, an anchor around the feet of his historical reputation.

"How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"

This Congressional farce ends with "*Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring),* That Congress denounces socialism in all its forms, and opposes the implementation of socialist policies in the United States of America."

The end. A simple tale of abusive, horrid Socialism and sterling Capitalism. This lie does not stand alone. The resolution continues to deceive through omission as it leaves out the vibrant and inspiring history of anti-authoritarian leftism. A history that is too bright to be hidden by these pathetic false dichotomies. A history more people throughout the world should know.

Take for instance the Kronstadt sailors. Naval revolutionaries who rose up against the Czar, and when the Bolsheviks began concentrating power, demanded democracy and civil rights. They bravely held out before succumbing to Bolshevik assaults. Like so many Leftists and Anarchists, they found themselves under the boot of the new regime.

Anarchism, that often maligned and misunderstood ideology. Most take it as simple chaos, a lack of society. Rather, it is a well thought out and grounded critique of hierarchies in general and the modern state in particular. Figures like Kropotkin, Lucy Parsons, and Murray Bookchin are some of its giants. The latter was a great influence on Rojava, an autonomous region in northeastern Syria that was a strong U.S. ally in the fight against ISIS. While not a flawless society, their governing document is smart, humane, deeply committed to justice. Unlike the U.S. Constitution, it explicitly guarantees a healthy environment, the equality of men and women, and the right to housing, health, and education.

To study the history of Anarchism is to see a Leftism that does not devolve into authoritarianism. In addition to the Kronstadt sailors there were the Spanish Anarchists, brave people who established a Socialist, democratic enclave in Catalonia as they rejected Stalinism whilst fighting Franco and his Fascists. Then there was the Ukrainian revolutionary Nestor Makhno, who organized peasants during the Russian Revolution and fought both the Czar and Bolsheviks.

This is a suppressed story. One buried under a mountain of Right-Wing propaganda. One need not go back to before World War II to see that Socialism is more than compatible with freedom and justice. When the white Apartheid government of South Africa was oppressing the Black majority, Leftists like Nelson Mandela and committed Communist Joe Slovo resisted and eventually won liberation. Simultaneously, a young Grover Norquist, now a powerful Right-Wing anti-tax crusader, was traveling to the very same country to lend his support to the racists in power. Right-wingers would have you believe they can claim ownership of Martin Luther King Jr. when in fact he was openly critical of Capitalism and leaned towards Socialism. Socialist ideas have been a positive influence across the globe. Observe the vaunted, left-oriented social safety net programs in Scandinavia which have greatly contributed to making those countries some of the happiest and most free on Earth. The threat to freedom in the world comes not from Communism, but The Right.

It is they after all who attempted to execute a coup on January 6. It was they who in 2017 gathered in Charlottesville to fight for Fascism whilst chanting “Jews will not replace us.” It is the Far-Right parties, virulently anti-immigrant, misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic, that have gained power and subverted democracy across the globe. It is the Police, one of the most reactionary organizations in America, who unjustly seize assets, beat peaceful demonstrators, and shoot down unarmed Black men in the street. I say this as someone who is decisively at odds with a close former police officer relation.

It’s all a lie, all of it, everything the new red scare represents, the false dichotomy, the suppression of stories, the forgetting of atrocities. All of this is part of a broader history war. Or rather, I should say, a war on history. It’s all an attempt to shut down the sort of critical examination, knowledge, imagination, and empowerment that can present us with a future beyond oppression, no matter what guise it appears in. This is a battle that can and must be won by those seeking a better tomorrow, one where justice and liberty prevail. I think here of a quote from George Orwell’s 1984. A deeply imperfect man who, while critical of Stalinism, fought for the Left in Spain.

“And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed—if all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth. ‘Who controls the past’ ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”