

My Childhood Obsession with Communism

Shôn Ellerton, December 15, 2020

My exploration into communism during my younger years has reminded me the importance of keeping an open mind.



The title of the article, alone, could be enough to arrest the attention of my regular readers, but it is true. I have had a childhood obsession with communism. Even today, the concept of communism still holds a fascination with me, albeit in a markedly different way than when I was in my youth. Back in 2017, I wrote a piece entitled, [*What Makes Fortified International Borders so Intriguing?*](#), in which I wrote about my fascination with border walls designed to contain people *in* rather than keep them out.

In this piece, I recite some of the reasons why I became so indebted to understanding communism and how this explains so much to me how others can be taken into such ideologies.

Do socialists have hooved feet?

At the age of five or six, my father drove me through the suburbs of Birmingham (the UK one) on the M6 motorway perched high above the ground on an enormously long dismal grey concrete viaduct. Below, as far as the eye can see were little grey dilapidated terraced homes interspersed with countless yards filled with bits of cars, oil drums and other assorted industrial odds and ends. Across the horizon were enormous brutalist tenement blocks that looked most foreboding indeed. I asked my father who lived down there.

His reply, ‘Socialists live there’

I asked what a socialist was. He then gave me this rundown that they had hooved feet, horns on their heads and arrow-shaped tails. It didn't take me long to deduct that this would have looked remarkably like a devil. Obviously, socialists were something that my father held deep disfavour with. Having a mind that *always* questioned what or why something is, this moment was to linger in my mind for years to come.

Living in the quiet Midwest

Not long after, we moved to Colorado Springs, a typically conservative medium-sized and picturesque city right in the heart of midwestern United States. This is a city surrounded by all sorts of important military establishments, one of which is the iconic NORAD missile warning command centre embedded in Cheyenne Mountain. The city was founded on tuberculosis during the 1800s, or rather, chosen as the location to treat those suffering with it, to take in the pure air at the foot of the iconic mountain, Pikes Peak.

My parents, having been separated not long after we settled, meant that my father would return to the UK and my mother to take up residence in the outlying suburbs of the city where I grew up with my sister. My mother studied and worked hard to support us the best way she could. We rented an average looking cookie-cutter style home in the, once, outer suburbs on the northeast side adjacent to the endless seemingly barren plains of the prairies. Colorado is one-half mountains and one-half prairie, and not the gently rolling attractive grass prairies of Nebraska, but flat, grey, and dusty rectangles of land reeking with the stench of countless stockyards.

I went to one of those typical, red-bricked elementary and junior high schools in a suburb off Academy Boulevard in eastern Colorado Springs. They were clean schools amongst neighbourhoods void of graffiti where everything seemed to be all nice and peaceful albeit a little bit on the bland side. During the vacations, my sister and I were fortunate enough to spend them, when possible, with my father in the UK. My attention was particularly struck how different life was in the UK and Colorado. Going to London was always an amazing experience. The variety of cultures, museums, food, and the sheer ease of getting about on exciting high-speed trains and the Underground [subway train] left a gaping hole of isolation when returning to the quietness and boringness of Colorado Springs. It was too quiet listening to the crickets at night at bedtime. None of my friends knew much about what happened outside the state. Even the news on

television was uninteresting and boring being centred primarily on local and state matters with the occasional snippet of international news from time to time. Later in life, those qualities of being in the open air and having peace and quiet is a good thing for many, but for children, nothing beats the vivacity and liveliness of exploring a large city like London.

Going to school was not one of my favourite pursuits. I befriended a few of my classmates but in large, I was a novelty and an outsider. My British accent discovered the country I lived in during my early years which excluded me from being truly American to others, as dumb as that sounds. There were so few in the city that had an accent other than American, that when I perchance bumped into them, it was almost freakish in nature. You hear the accent of others, not of yourself. However, during my junior high years, I was one of those Grade A students. I did nothing but work my textbooks well in advance. I submitted homework which was not even yet set. I had little interest in the subject of girls, and I did not partake in extracurricular activities apart from the occasional soccer game, taking part in the annual science fair, playing piano or competing with my best friend in chess.

The 80s and the Cold War

The 80s was a decade of, what was seemingly to me at the time, a time when the whole nation was unified against the great common enemy, the U.S.S.R., the Motherland of the Great Bear. The 80s was also a 'harsh and aggressive' decade. The tenets espoused by Gordon Gecko (of Wall Street movie fame) and his dog-eat-dog mentality was all too apparent in day-to-day life during these years. Acclaiming to be the victim of something of another or being disadvantaged was a sign of weakness. If you are not succeeding, you are not trying hard enough, much like a typical Arnold Schwarzenegger saying. Heroic and uplifting rock music, much of it bland to my ears, from the likes of Van Halen and Foreigner reminded all those who listened to them that they lived in the best possible place to live. It was the music of the 'jocks', a clan that I never wanted to join or ask to be joined.

The U.S.S.R. A vast country which, like the United States, had excelled in developing space technology, weaponry, fighter planes; all the stuff which boys of a young age aspired to, but they also produced the most beautiful classical music and always had a serious line-up of chess players; chess, being a pastime I was obsessed with at the time. In Russia and, later, the Soviet Union where

such magnificent composers of classical music like Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, Scriabin and Shostakovich were spawned, the United States seemed to be not quite so inspiring. Apart from the legendary Scott Joplin, there was nothing at all particularly interesting for me to listen to within the sphere of classical music, if one considers the work of Joplin as classical music. In short, from my perspective then, the United States and the Soviet Union were countries trying to push the envelope of technology but as we all knew at the time, it was a race to create the ideal society using the ideologies of capitalism versus communism, concepts which were made clearer as one became more educated about it.

Being imprisoned by your own country

It did not take very long during those years to find out that those living in the Soviet Union and other communist countries like East Germany and China were not allowed to leave their countries. Moreover, they were often not allowed to travel freely *within* their respective countries or be allowed to know anything that happens outside of them. In my early teen years, I visited Germany to see my grandparents and we went to the East/West German border (The Iron Curtain) cutting through the scenic heart of the Harz Mountains. It was a massive strip of death consisting of landmines, electric fences, automatic guns, vicious dogs and armed guards patrolling the strip and manning the watch towers. I became fascinated as to how and why whole nations could possibly be imprisoned and yet, at the same time, media coverage broadcast from the East to the West conveys a people living in contentment, a place where no one goes hungry. Of course, not long after, one learns about the art of propaganda, and having lived a decent proportion of time between Europe and the United States, from an early age, there were interesting discrepancies in the factual nature or ‘emotional content’ of the news which I began to pick up on. During a summer break in the UK, I commented to my father that the BBC seemed to be more factual with less of the co-hosting rapport which tends to pad out American news. He agreed although he said something which became indelibly etched in my memory. ‘Propaganda exists in all news sources, but the BBC are particularly good at it because they are so clever and subtle in purveying it.’ Perhaps this kindled my lifelong mistrust with mainstream news media.

For any country to find it necessary to keep people in, despite the glowing coverage we got fed from official news sources from Soviet Russia, I clearly felt that something may not be right here. Later, when the East Germans were

allowed to ‘play’ with the others in the West when the Iron Curtain fell, stories of being told that the wall was put up there to protect them from the dangers from outside were commonplace. Books we read at school like George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were solemn reminders that a communist lifestyle could be as portrayed as that horrifically grim totalitarian environment in which Winston led his life in the story. Movies of families from East Germany in homemade hot air balloons escaping by flying over the border. National Geographic articles from brave journalists who sneaked pictures and stories of villages closed to Western eyes. What was there *not* to be fascinated with, in a morbid sort of a way?

Exploring communism

Despite this, the concept of communism was still a mystery and a concept which I just had to explore. This was especially true when the next phase of my childhood began. The high school years.

Apart from my twelfth-grade English class, I really did not like my years in high school. The most significant reason was my sudden lack of confidence, because I came to be extremely heavily disfigured with acne, which persisted for many years petering off towards my late 30s. It happened immediately after I suffered extremely badly from contracting chicken pox during my mid-teens. In those days, chicken pox ‘parties’ were not uncommon in those days and I, unfortunately, never got a dose of it at a young age. Being heavily scarred with acne is a fate worse than death for adolescents. I could never be a member of the ‘jock’s club’, the reserved sporting elite, the group that always gets the fame and kudos. I preferred to spend my time on pursuits of solitude including hiking the mountains of Colorado. My grades dropped to a C.

I began to foster a disgust with what I can only describe as outright all-out patriotic Americana. I hated the fact that hardly anyone I knew at school knew anything *but* America. I hated big hair. I hated John Cougar Mellencamp. I hated evangelists (still do). I even hated Reagan, although in many ways, I grew somewhat fonder of him in later years. I began to hate my school, although, to be fair, it had great teachers and a lovely environment when I look back on it now. The kids who did well and placed at the top of the ‘food chain’, were, predictably all good-looking, most of which come from stable, affluent, two-parent families. In general, I hated the ‘beautiful people’.

At first, I envied those who sat at the jock or normies tables, but I realised that sitting amongst the eccentrics and cast-offs comprising mainly of physically unattractive, those of lower social-economic orders, and sadly, those who are not your typical Judeo-Christian white person was a far more enlightening experience. We talked about anti-establishment topics, what really goes on in the world, other religions of the world besides that of Christianity including paganism and atheism (topics one had to be quite courageous to talk about), Monty Python, more Monty Python, and yet, more Monty Python. Less deep and cringeworthy conversations at the 'jock' table tended to be centred on who got laid and by which cheerleader.

Within our little group of 'misfits', the subject of communism was raised from time to time. Now let me make this clear. In those heady days of the 80s, talking about communism in any way in a positive light was usually met with a degree of condemnation by the majority. But we enjoyed talking about alternatives to traditional American principles. We talked about politics of different countries, something very few outside our group would be interested in. Now despite the 'weirdness' of having iron curtains built around communist nations, I became engrossed with some of the others agreeing on the virtuous principles of being able to live in a society where no one is superior to the other.

I could not have had enough of learning more, so I popped off to the city library between bus changes from school back to the house. Colorado Springs had a remarkable library for its size of city. I hope it is still as wonderful as it is now. It had a most diverse range of subjects one could think of. It even had primers on learning how to speak Welsh! I read so much about Russian history, communism, and the Russian language that I became obsessed with it. Moreover, my classical piano repertoire was firmly seated in Russian composers. When we are talking about communism, I am referring to the old-fashioned Soviet-style communism. Not the Chinese variety. Not knowing anything about China's Cultural Revolution back in those days, I did sense that there was nothing much in the way of culture and development progressing very far there. If I was to fast-forward the clock. How wrong could I be? Today, China has turned into the world's powerhouse, if not the world's most powerful nation.

I read a lot about communism in the school library. I took an active interest in the history of the overthrow of the Czar and the rise of the Bolshevik. Whilst writing out an essay on one of the school's Apple IIe computers, this guy

looked at what I was writing about over my shoulder and deemed it necessary to call me a commie bastard and that I should go back to Europe. How charming, I thought. I didn't think much of it considering this guy was well-known in our school for being pro-Nazi in nature and generally, not the most pleasant person I've come across. I wasn't entirely sure if I was calling on the virtues of communism as a greater good or rather, just getting back at the injustices of not being able to be accepted as a normie. Looking back, an adolescent's mind is, indeed, much more prone to such shallow and vengeful thoughts. Those growing up in school who do not fit the common narrative of the school dynamic can go through absolute hell.

The privileges of inner party

Now this is the thing. I knew enough about communism that it never works successfully in real life. Having to imprison one's citizens behind an iron curtain is testimony to that. However, I wondered what it would be like to be one of those working in a privileged position within the communist state, not unlike the character of O'Brien, playing a member of the Inner Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or being an Alpha in *Brave New World*. What would it be like to be in control of the uneducated minions who believe they live in a utopia for the masses? These days, it would not be too far-fetched to equate the leaders of our big tech giants as the new O'Brien's of the world. As for the wealth gap, did that not always exist in Soviet society? Sure, it did.

What's behind the Iron Curtain?

I was curious to know everything about Soviet life and how people adapted to it. Instead of a beach holiday in the sun, I wanted to get hold of an Intourist visa and take an excursion into the U.S.S.R. I was curious why some in the West purposely defected to the East, I presume, on the basis that they had something to offer and they would be treated, not as a common prole, but as a visionary or an intellectual to share the perks given to those within the inner circles the party. Apart from a brief trip into East Germany just when the Iron Curtain fell during my late teens, it was many years later during my thirties that I *did* get to go to Russia, Albania, China and North Korea. Russia and Albania collapsed into oligarchy and North Korea is not, as they claim to be, communist but rather a feudal society governed by a tyrannical ruler who claims he is a demigod. I learned from some obscure source that the closest thing communism becoming

a success was through a network of mountainous missions in ancient Greece of whose name I have forgotten.

The tether is cut

I left for the UK after school and managed to scrape into getting admittance into a London university within the field of civil engineering. Politics and other related matters did not really play much in a role during those years but after finding my first job in a suburban town southeast of London, I had memories of my past experiences with my ‘communist fantasies’.

In Ashford, I rented a very small, seedy and mouldy downstairs flat on a major road. It was the first time I had to truly fend for myself. I had a meagre-paying job working for a design consultant during the 90s recession. Some of my university friends had quite comfortable homes to live in and some did not. Not having been educated very well in the meaning of how to handle money, I lived from day-to-day splurging out unnecessarily on weekends. Incidentally, later in life, I learned that this is not an uncommon trait in the Western world, a society in which the talk of money at the dinner table is deemed dirty, being weaned on credit and living day-to-day. Take this in contrast to the East Asian nations like China and South Korea where the subject of money is spoken frankly and where children are educated at a very early age on how to save and manage money. There are exceptions, of course, to both sides.

I was thoroughly depressed living in this apartment but then moved onto bigger and better things. I worked my butt off. I regained my physical health through strenuous exercise. I played a lot of sport and socialised on weekends with my work colleagues. I applied for other jobs in areas outside of the sphere with which I was trained in and, henceforth, managed to debut into the world of mobile telecommunications which I stayed in for the next twenty-two years.

The great balancing act

Further thoughts of communism died as the years went by but, as far as I was concerned, there was something to be said about the benefits of balancing capitalism and socialism. For example, the UK health service, although not perfect by any means, provided universal health care for all. Nobody without a credit card is going to die in the street. Public transportation was very much superior to that which can be found in most areas of the United States, although

I lamented bitterly when Britain's rail networks became privatised. However, it was the prevailing attitude of the British people, in general, that money is not necessarily everything. However, on the flip side, I was especially unhappy to find there were those not bothering to seek employment as they received all their needs from the government purse including free housing to support larger-than-average families while I was single, working every day, and renting not being able to save up enough to get a deposit to buy a house, despite my being more careful with money.

Down Under

After living seventeen-odd years in the UK, I re-located to Australia, a country described by the highly opinionated but entertaining Jeremy Clarkson, 'A country where the failures of Britain emigrate to'. Unlike the US or the UK, Australia seems to be more egalitarian in nature mixing in many elements from American and British lifestyles. Not everything gets reported but extreme poverty and excessive wealth seems to be less of an issue than in the United States and it is certainly far less class-conscious than the British. Interestingly, I found Australians tend to be reserved, indifferent and far more centrist in their views over politics. Work ethic tends to be quite high when compared to most European countries contrary to popular belief from many around the world believing most Australians fish all day and drink Fosters. And Australians are far more less likely to be conspicuous with their wealth much in the same way that the upper class are in Britain. For example, coming across that scruffy guy with his dog in the backseat of his ageing Volvo 245 who just so happens to be the owner of half an entire English county.

Conclusion

One of the reasons why I wrote this piece is because we recently hosted students at our house and we have had a few occasions where they gather together at the house and talk much of the usual stuff that teenagers and young adults talk about, but when they veer off to more serious topics like politics and the environment, the subjects of socialism and communism, along with the additional topics of equal opportunities and racism reminded me of a time when I was also a young student in heavy discourse with others on how the world can be changed for the better.

It also reminded me to not judge too harshly on our 'radical' youth and to keep an open mind. With age and experience, we do, indeed, acquire wisdom, and often grow out of radical ideologies. However, as we grow older, we often become more obstinate, set in our ways, and become less tolerant to change.