

# Reflections on writing the history of anti-communism

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Some historical phenomena are less easy to grasp than others, and this is certainly the case with anti-communism, which is a complex historical phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the idea of mere opposition to communism. Far from being a subject with strictly defined contours, it covers a wide range of ideas, behaviour and ways of operating. The multiplicity of terms associated with it – anti-sovietism, anti-socialism, anti-marxism, anti-revolutionary – is in itself suggestive of the complexity of this polymorphous notion. The reflections in this article derive from examples drawn from the Swiss and other cases, and offer some thoughts on the uses of anti-communism and its fundamentally polemical character.

Defined as a general hostility towards communism, including its ideological conceptions and the political structures in which it was embodied, anti-communism was for a long time a neglected and even taboo subject for historians. But, following the breakdown of most communist regimes after 1989, anti-communism appeared to emerge as an appropriate analysis and accurate description of communist and Soviet realities. Recording the history of anti-communism would in this case amount to a record of the history of communist crimes, of communism's failure as an ideology, political movement and regime, and of the shrewdness of its opponents.

What this notion neglects, however, is the fact that anti-communism is not – or, in any case, is not only – an analysis: it also constitutes an ideology, which, like communism, encompasses certain identifiable values and beliefs. And it is these ideological considerations, rather than the reality of the communist phenomenon, that gave rise to anti-communism. As Moshe Lewin wrote in his conclusion to *The Soviet Century*,

anti-communism – ‘just like its ramifications’ – is not a matter for research. ‘It is an ideology that claims to be a study: it does not cling to the realities of the “political animal” in question’.<sup>1</sup> While anti-communism claims to take a stand against communism, most often it is based on myths: the myth of an ongoing internal conspiracy; the propagation of a culture of civil war; above all, claims (that may or may not have been well-founded) of foreign interference.<sup>2</sup> Anti-communist discourse is thus a discourse that is out of line with the reality of the phenomenon it seeks to analyse, and the influence it attributes to communists often bears no relation to their real means of action or to their role in history.

### **The shifting target of anti-communism**

Precisely because anti-communism is such an elusive concept, it has had many political uses. One form which its myth-making has often taken has been to attribute to communism a large variety of phenomena that were considered undesirable or a threat. For example, for many years in Switzerland, ‘the official historiography, marked by bourgeois public opinion from 1918, saw [that year’s] General Strike as the fruit of Bolshevik intrigues’.<sup>3</sup> This view, however, has now been completely called into question by historians because, while the Soviet archives often confirm Soviet determination to control the international communist movement, in this particular case they reveal a complete lack of interference by the Russians.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in Germany, recent studies, such as that of Dirk Schumann, reveal that the political violence that characterised the early years of the Weimar Republic was mainly the result of radical right-wing milieux seeking to incite the labour movement as a whole, in order to take back control of the streets and, more generally, public spaces.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the right’s main target was the social democrats and the USPD independents; and from this point of view Germany’s communists served principally as a spectre, that is, as a pretext for challenging the political and social achievements of the November revolution.

Anti-communist ideology was also fuelled by a multitude of fantasies, fears and anxieties about the wider ‘dangerous class’.<sup>6</sup> The image of the bloodthirsty ‘Asian barbarian’ or ‘Jewish conspirator’ – accused of wanting to collectivise women and nationalise children – is recurrent in posters by

cartoonists of the day.<sup>7</sup> This process of demonisation, the content of which was constantly replenished, shaped the image of a particularly repulsive enemy, and thereby assisted in the construction of political and cultural identities through the foregrounding of an absolute counter-model.

This foil worked all the better in having the vaguest of outlines, which could be infinitely extended: the demonisation process was by no means limited to communists alone. What had at first been a defence, albeit perhaps a disproportionate one, against communism, became broadened out into a materialisation of much wider fears. This process can particularly be traced in a Weimar Republic, marked as it was – as Philippe Burrin has described – by a feeling of national resentment.<sup>8</sup> Here, Germany's bourgeois parties deftly conflated anti-communism per se – whose most steadfast and firmest representatives were in fact the social democrats – and anti-marxism understood in its widest sense, as applying to all labour organisations. This conflation of categories has, broadly, been characteristic of the phenomenon of anti-communism in many different times and places. 'Is there any opposition that has not been accused of communism by its opponents in power', wrote Engels in 1872, in the introduction to a new edition of the *Communist Manifesto*.<sup>9</sup> Anti-communism may thus be seen as the specific form taken during the inter-war period by what is more widely referred to as the 'red scare', extending to all those who, throughout history, have questioned the existing social order.

In Switzerland too, the conscious instrumentalisation of the fear of communism allowed the right to marginalise the left and the progressive movement as a whole in order to block any transformation of the economic, social and political order. In France, the far-right organisations that were created in the 1930s – such as the *Croix de feu* under Colonel De La Rocque or the *Parti populaire français* under the former communist Jacques Doriot – went so far as to use the communist threat to discredit not just the non-communist left-wing parties but also the parliamentary right-wing parties: democracy, in their eyes, was the cradle of communism. And in the United States during the cold-war period, anti-communism functioned as an instrument for the legitimisation of social conformity, for example providing cover for the repression of homosexuality.<sup>10</sup> Anti-communism was also extended to national independence movements, and then, during the 1960s, more

broadly still to the students', peace and civil rights movement. Often these were identified with communism, when in reality they frequently had extremely critical and even conflictual relations with the communist movement. The history of anti-communism therefore appears to be one that must also be described as a process of manipulation, and the pursuit of other aims than those of simply standing up against the real or supposed threat of communism.

Sometimes anti-communism was expressed in terms of the defence of democratic values and institutions. Frequently, however, the threat of Soviet dictatorship was employed to legitimise other, non- or anti-communist dictatorships, some of which were among the most brutal of the century. This was the case with the support given by anti-communists to the domination of the European colonial powers, or support for the apartheid regime in South Africa.<sup>11</sup> There was also the longstanding affinity between anti-semitism and anti-marxism, traceable from as early as the mid-nineteenth century, until it led in 1941 to the project of extermination of 'Judeo-Bolshevism' in Eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup> Soviet crimes thus provided justification for behaviour from the proponents of anti-communism that it was difficult to see as compatible with the values that it claimed to defend.

For two decades, since the collapse of communist regimes, the term has gradually been eclipsed, as communism itself as threat and adversary has been eclipsed. In its place, anti-terrorism, originally associated with the fight against anarchists, now fulfils essentially the same functions. Like the label communist, that of terrorist is applied to a multitude of movements, from Nepalese Maoists to radical Islamists, and including alter-globalists. However, the anti-terrorist struggle encompasses numerous political devices, just as anti-communism did, from stigmatisation to the criminalisation of all such challenges, using similar processes of conflation.

### **The plurality and diversity of anti-communism**

Like any 'anti'-ism, anti-communism is not the expression of a clearly defined or consistent antithesis – as is also the case, for example, with anti-fascism, anti-terrorism, and, as René Rémond has shown, anti-cler-

icalism.<sup>13</sup> The relations of anti-communism to communism were thus extremely diverse and extended well beyond any symmetry that might at first sight be suggested. Anti-communism has never been the expression of only one party, class or philosophy. Like anti-fascism it straddles 'all political trends and all social layers'.<sup>14</sup> As Brigitte Studer puts it, while 'Communism refers to a vision of the world, a quite clearly defined programme, and is embodied, particularly during the 20th century, in numerous well-structured political organisations, anti-communism is, conversely, more vague, both in its ideology and in its aims and it does not always feel the need to be organised'.<sup>15</sup> Anti-communism in fact covers a multitude of components, realities, motivations and economic, political, philosophical and religious conceptions. Often these are incompatible with each other, as they embrace the entire political arena, from on anarchists on the far left to the far right.

In a typology drawn up in 2000, the French historian Jean-Jacques Becker distinguished seven types of anti-communism that reflect this diversity both of context and conception.<sup>16</sup> The first of them, the anti-communism of circumstance, has nothing to do with the nature of communism itself; it falls within a logic of warfare (for example, France in 1917 and 1939) or of diplomatic positioning, a motivation that is above all strategic.

Becker's second type, the anti-communism of indifference, is linked to a kind of cultural impermeability to communism, to be found in countries with a liberal tradition. This impermeability often takes on a national character: communist ideas are declared incompatible with the identity and the national culture of the country concerned.

The anti-communism of denunciation, Becker's third type, is that which condemns the communism practised in the USSR. Often this was in the name of freedom and human rights. However, Soviet-style communism could also be condemned in the name of a different form of communism. Here one is thinking of left-wing groups, and sometimes even communists or recent ex-communists. Among the many well-known examples one could cite Boris Souvarine, V.A. Kravchenko, Margareth Buber-Neumann and David Rousset, who were not guided by hostility to communism as a principle, but by their rejection of the communist use of violence.<sup>17</sup>

The fourth type, class-based anti-communism, is the knee-jerk reaction of the 'haves' who fear that communism may change their social status, and who have everything to lose in a revolution.

The anti-communism of the left, the fifth type, is more complex. Among those it refers to all are socialists who criticised the methods of the communists; anarchists, who, despite some rallying in 1917, rapidly criticised the authoritarian drift of the Soviet regime; and, above all, numerous ex-communists. Indeed, the communist movement never ceased to extrude oppositional elements who were immediately classified as anti-communist through exclusions and purges, even though the latter claimed not only that they remained communists, but even that they represented a more 'authentic' communism than that of Moscow.

The sixth type, ideological anti-communism, is that, according to Becker, of the fascist movements and regimes. Despite a certain number of structural similarities and, sometimes, tactical complicity with Soviet communism, these based part of their legitimacy on the fight against communism. Though forcefully articulated, this was not necessarily the most consistent or coherent form of anti-communism, unlike, for example, that of the social democrats. For example, in his thesis on National Bolshevism Louis Dupeux describes the multiple strands of the German far right, which, through hatred of the West, of the 'Diktat of Versailles' and of liberal parliamentarianism, looked towards Soviet Russia with what was sometimes a mixture of hope and fear.<sup>18</sup> Following Walter Laqueur, one might also recall that Hitler was not initially anti-Bolshevik in any way.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the anti-communism of values corresponds to the vision of the world of the bourgeois right and of religious communities. These considered that the fundamental values of western civilisation, such as the family, the state, private property, religion and homeland, were threatened by communism.<sup>20</sup> Since 1945 this has often been presented in the form of anti-totalitarianism, though this concept too, to the extent that it fulfils an 'apologetic function of the western order', is no less ideological than that of anti-communism.<sup>21</sup>

Becker's typology is not exhaustive. It does, however, rightly bring out the diversity of the phenomenon with which we are concerned. It also

reveals the contradictions that may result from these different concepts, which in some cases were completely incompatible with one another.

### **Anti-communism as chameleon**

Thirdly, I want to highlight the way in which anti-communism often made progress in some other guise, through its chameleon tactic: anti-communism was a value not always openly claimed by its protagonists. In Switzerland, for example, there were a number of anti-communist bodies that openly showed their colours: as well as the *Entente internationale anticommuniste*, described by Michel Caillat in the present issue, there were the Swiss National Action against Communism, the Parliamentary Anti-Bolshevik Group and the Anti-Revolutionary League, among others. But there were also numerous bodies that, without openly displaying their links with anti-communist groups, exhaustively relayed the issues and often the documents of the anti-communist associations. Among them one might mention the information bureaux and networks of religious and associated movements, patriotic bodies, student societies, employers', consumers' and listeners' organisations etc.<sup>22</sup>

The strength of anti-communism lay in its ability to penetrate existing structures and to blend in with local culture, and it is this that explains the diversity of the phenomenon. Unlike fascism, it was not meant in any way to compete with the established parties. On the contrary, it wished to endorse the existing order and relied on the traditional elites that it conceived of as the 'legitimate authorities'. Consequently, the *modus operandi* of its principal stakeholders was that of seeking to influence existing structures rather than creating specifically anti-communist institutions.

By these different means, anti-communism in Switzerland succeeded in transcending the field of politics, becoming a basic issue of civilisation on which there could be no legitimate debate. Communism was not seen as an allowable political choice, with all that this usually involves in terms of possibilities of discussion and comparison of ideas. Rather, it was seen as calling into question the identity and the very soul of Switzerland. 'It was for Switzerland', wrote the EIA's Théodore Aubert, 'a duty to be at the forefront of the anti-communist struggle'.<sup>23</sup>

And so it was: the Swiss, often considered recalcitrant in the face of ideologies, maintained an extremely intense relationship with anti-communist ideology, deployed at all times and in all fields. Indeed, in assuming a legal dimension, and thus authorising the criminalisation of communist ideas and groups, anti-communism in this instance set itself up as a quasi-state doctrine.

There are numerous traces of this profound impregnation of Swiss society by anti-communism. In 1964, the 'Gulliver' survey on the state of mind of the Swiss people was carried out at the Swiss National Exhibition in Lausanne. A series of questions were posed in relation to national identity. For example: Can you be a good Swiss and be naturalised? Can you be a good Swiss and not be a good soldier? Can you be a good Swiss and get up at 9 o'clock in the morning? The results of the survey were buried by the Federal Council, which considered the answers too progressive in character. They had also had a question asking – not 'Can you be a good Swiss and be a communist?', which was unthinkable but – 'What is your attitude to communism?' Of the eight answers provided to choose from, six were suggestions for fighting communism more effectively!<sup>24</sup>

### **The impossible bibliography of anti-communism**

A final problem confronting its historians might be termed the impossible bibliography of anti-communism. Because of its multi-faceted character – moving forward in disguise and bedecked in local colours to penetrate social environments and structures of every type – anti-communism has been difficult for historians to identify, and this is clearly evident within the literature to which the phenomenon has given rise.

One might first note that, among books explicitly concerned with anti-communism and referring to it in their title, the overwhelming majority were, until recent years, works published either in communist countries or by communist publishing houses.<sup>25</sup> There were also hagiographical texts from participants in the anti-communist struggle, but the communists were the first to use the term, with the object of discrediting their political opponents, including those who claimed to



be in favour of communism.<sup>26</sup> The epithet of anti-communist in its negative sense was thus applied to rival or dissenting communists such as Trotskyists, Titoists, Maoists and Eurocommunists.<sup>27</sup> Thus the communists, who long held the monopoly on the subject, made their contribution to the variable geometry of the concept of anti-communism, which was always very extendable.<sup>28</sup> It could be said, to some extent, that one is always an anti-communist to someone and a communist to someone else.

For a long time the field of anti-communism was therefore a problematic one for historians. Was it really legitimate within a scholarly context to accept as an objective reality a term that had such strong connotations and whose usages had been essentially polemical, essentially on the part of communists themselves? By making anti-communism the subject of their research, would historians simply be falling into a defamatory logic, as desired by the communists but not, or course, by the stakeholders of anti-communism? It certainly seems significant that most of the work explicitly dedicated to the history of anti-communism has been produced since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the concomitant decline of various communist parties elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

However, while there were very few works not written by communists that were explicitly concerned with this topic, the literature relating to some or other aspect of the phenomenon was a very different matter. Affecting as it did almost all of the main political families, and likewise political events and political cultures, anti-communism, due to its global nature, was indisputably the most widely shared belief in the world after 1917. In the myriad forms considered here, anti-communism has, over a long period, been the position of an overwhelming majority, at least as compared to the active minority who considered themselves communists. In Switzerland at least, it is difficult to see what aspect of twentieth-century history is not at least partially related to anti-communism: almost all works on contemporary Swiss history could be listed in the bibliography, or at least among the secondary sources, for a history of anti-communism.

The same is true of the Swiss archives. Few collections were accessible from specifically anti-communist institutions, at least until about fifteen years ago. On the other hand, there is an enormous body of

scattered sources bearing witness to the vitality, deep-rootedness and permanence of anti-communism, ranging from popular songs to variety shows, newspaper cartoons to political campaign posters, films to lectures, military archives to those of private companies. The Swiss case, like any other, cannot be regarded as entirely typical. But the issues which it crystallises to the point of caricature throw light on the challenges that confront historians of anti-communism in different periods and contexts.

That discussions of anti-communism have for some years now been multiplying is a sign that the problems identified here have been at least partially surmounted. The disappearance or marginalisation of most communist regimes and parties has removed the ideological suspicion that used to hang over the subject. And the gradual opening up of twentieth-century archives has allowed us to pinpoint the repertoires of action employed by the main players in anti-communism despite their chameleon strategy. Above all, and going beyond the narrative of events or the presentation of the different players involved in anti-communism, it has been the methodological renewal of political history, in particular the improved awareness of social setting, cultural representations and political myths, that has stimulated studies in the field of anti-communism, including the work represented in other contributions to this issue of the journal.

## Notes

1. Moshe Lewin, *Le siècle soviétique*, Paris: Fayard - Le Monde diplomatique, 2003, p475.
2. For an example of the internal conspiracy myth, see Jean-François Fayet and Michel Caillat, '9 novembre 1932: la cristallisation du mythe du complot communiste', in Charles Heimberg, Stefanie Prezioso and Marianne Enckell, eds, *Mourir en manifestant. Répressions en démocratie*, Lausanne: Editions d'En Bas, 2008, pp61-85.
3. Marc Vuilleumier, 'Le mouvement ouvrier en Suisse pendant et après la Première Guerre mondiale. Bilan historiographique', *Le mouvement social*, 84, 1973, p98.
4. Willy Gautschi, *Der Landesstreik*, Zurich: Benziger Verlag, 1988; Antoine

- Fleury and Daniella Tosato-Rigo, 'A propos de la représentation diplomatique soviétique à Berne (mai-novembre 1918): un nouvel éclairage à la lumière des rapports de Jan Berzine', *Traverse*, 1995/3, pp29-42.
5. Dirk Schumann, *Politische Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik: Kampf um die Strasse und Furcht vor dem Bürgerkrieg*, Essen: Klartext, 2001.
  6. See for example Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses (1958)*, Paris: Perrin, 2002 edn. The theme of anxiety as a parameter of American anti-communism is discussed in Dennis Schmidt's doctoral thesis, 'Die ängstliche Gesellschaft. Der amerikanische Antikommunismus von 1917-1957 und Angst als Parameter politischen Handelns', University of Leipzig, forthcoming.
  7. Gustave Gautherot, *Le communisme à l'École – En Russie Soviétique – À travers le Monde – En France*, Paris: La Vague rouge, 1929.
  8. Philippe Burrin, *Ressentiment et apocalypse: essai sur l'antisémitisme nazi*, Paris: Seuil, 2004.
  9. Cited Georges Labica and Gérard Bensussan, *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, Paris: PUF, 1982, p40.
  10. David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
  11. For the latter, see for example Sandra Bott, Bouda Etemad and Sébastien Guex, *Les relations économiques entre la Suisse et l'Afrique du Sud durant l'Apartheid (1945-1990)*, Lausanne: Antipodes, 2005.
  12. On the links between the Nazi invasion of the USSR and the final solution, see Omer Bartov, 'L'opération Barbarossa et les origines de la solution finale' in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau et al (eds), *La violence de guerre, 1914-1945. Approches comparées des deux conflits mondiaux*, Paris: Éditions complexe, 2002, pp193-218.
  13. René Rémond, *L'anticléricalisme en France de 1815 à nos jours*, Paris: Fayard, 1976, p8.
  14. Bruno Groppo, 'Fascismes, antifascisme et communismes' in Michel Dreyfus et al, *Le Siècle des communismes*, Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier, 2000, p502.
  15. Brigitte Studer, 'Anticommunisme', *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse*, [www.snl.ch/dhs](http://www.snl.ch/dhs).
  16. Jean-Jacques Becker, 'Aspects de l'anticommunisme: Avant-propos',

- Communisme*, nos 62/63, 2000, pp3-10.
17. Jean-Louis Panné, *Boris Souvarine, le premier désenchanté du communisme*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993; *Le procès Kravchenko. Compte-rendu stenographique*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1949; Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Als Gefangene bei Stalin und Hitler. Eine Welt im Dunkel*, München: Ullstein, 2002 [1. Aufl. 1949]; Lilly Marcou, 'Buber-Neumann (Margarete) - La révolution mondiale, L'histoire du Komintern (1919-1943) racontée par l'un de ses principaux témoins', in *Revue française de science politique*, 1972, Volume 22, Numéro 3, p612-614; Michaela Wunderle (Hrsg.), *A propos de Margarete Buber-Neumann*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 2001; David Rousset, Gérard Rosenthal, Théo Bernard, *Pour la vérité concentrationnaire*, (un procès antistalinien à Paris), Paris, Editions Ramsay, 1990; Emile Copfermann, *David Rousset : une vie dans le siècle*, Paris, Plon, 1991.
  18. Louis Dupeux, *National Bolchevisme. Stratégie communiste et dynamique conservatrice*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2 vols, 1979.
  19. Walter Laqueur, 'Hitler and Russia 1919-1923', *Survey*, nos 44-5, October 1962, pp89-113.
  20. See the contributions of Dianne Kirby and Stéphane Roulin for the religious dimension of anti-communism.
  21. Enzo Traverso, 'Le totalitarisme. Jalons pour l'histoire d'un débat', *Le totalitarisme, un débat dans le siècle*, Paris: Seuil, 2001, p51.
  22. See for example Claude Cantini, *Les Ultras. Extrême droite et droite extrême en Suisse: les mouvements et la presse de 1921 à 1991*, Lausanne: Editions d'en bas, 1992; also Julien Sansonnens, *Le Comité suisse d'action civique*, Vevey: L'Aire, 2012.
  23. Rapport du Bureau permanent de l'E.I.A. pour 1930-1932, Archives de l'EIA, Bibliothèque de Genève.
  24. Luc Boltanski, *Le bonheur suisse*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1989; 'Wer hat Angst vor Gulliver', *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, 18 July 2002.
  25. Examples include *Antikommunismus Feind der Menschheit*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1963; A. A. Аветисян, *Антикоммунизм и его философия духовных ценностей. Очерки по истории религии и атеизма*, Kiev: Наукова Думка, 1967; Andrzej Larski, *Osrodki antykomunistyczne na Zachodzie*, Warsaw: Ksiązka I Wiedza, 1970 ; Jerzy J. Wiatr, *Współczesny antykomunizm a nauki społeczne. Pseje polemiczne*, Warsaw: Państwowe

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26. François Duprat, *La Croisade antibolchevique*, Paris, Les Sept Couleurs, [1974].
27. For a good example linking Trotskyism and Maoism, see Boris Nikolaevitch Ponomarev, *Le trotskisme, instrument de l'anticommunisme*, Moscow : Éditions du Progrès, 1972.
28. From this list? we quote from the work of V. Bolchakov, *L'Anticommunisme, profession des sionistes*, Moscou, Éd. Novosti, 1972,
29. Exceptions are the work of Jean-Jacques Becker and Serge Berstein, *Histoire de l'anticommunisme en France, 1917-1940*, Paris: Olivier Orban, vol. 1, 1987 (a second volume was projected but never appeared); and Michael J. Heale, *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within 1930-1970*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. Works appearing since 1991 include Joel Kovel, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land: Anticommunism and the Making of America*, New York: Basic Books, 1994; Aurelio Lepre, *L'anticomunismo e l'antifascismo in Italia*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997; Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: the History of American Anticommunism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998; Pascal Delwit and José Gotovitch (eds), *La peur des rouges*, Brussels, ULB, 2000 ; 'Aspects de l'anticommunisme',

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