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Why Should Bernie Sanders Apologize for Communism?

American memory politics of the communist past is first and foremost a whip for ideological disciplining.

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U.S. Senator and candidate for president Bernie Sanders. **Gage Skidmore / Flickr**

Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders has said positive things about Cuba, you may have heard.

When asked about Cuba in a 60 Minutes interview, Sanders told Anderson Cooper: "We're very opposed to the authoritarian nature of Cuba. But, you know, it's unfair to say everything is bad. You know, when Fidel Castro came into office, you know what he did? He had a massive literacy program. Is that a bad thing even though Fidel Castro did it?" When Cooper brought up the jailing of Cuban dissidents, Sanders quickly stated "That's right. And we condemned that."

Embed:

Anti-communism has officially entered the U.S. presidential election. Sanders' Democratic rivals are dusting off old-timey tropes, conservative pundits are exchanging their "Never Trump" suits for "Never Bernie" tuxedos and Trump is mobilizing his army to the ideological barricades.

Political analysts are pitting the "sober" older moderate voter against the "naïve" young radical voter. It's a pathetic remake of a bad movie, if only because unlike during the Cold War, today, "communism" really *is* a specter that inhabits the American liberal and conservative mind.

No matter how much Sanders genuflects in the ritual denunciation of communist authoritarianism — and make no mistake it *is* a ritual — he will continue to be treated as if his signature had been alongside Stalin's on NKVD execution orders.

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This is because the ritual isn't about any real memory of the lived experience of communism, rather, it is an exercise in white-washing the U.S.'s social and economic injustice and focusing the lens on imagined dark regimes elsewhere.

Like most memory politics, the American memory politics of the communist past and how it is narrated is first and foremost a whip for ideological disciplining. At a time when the hegemony of the American political center trembles, the thrashes of this lash only intensify.

That communism still haunts our mind and memory, even in the inane forms we see today in American politics and punditry, does raise important questions about what is remembered and what is forgotten.

Memories in the former Soviet space

In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space, the memory of communism has vacillated in the last 30 years from condemnation to romanticism. Attitudes toward the past tend to track how people understand their present. The archival record of mass repression serves as both political weapon and tool for recovering family history. The struggle for consensus on the communist past continues unabated.

At the same time, we must acknowledge the Eurocentrism of our memory politics of communism. Outside of Europe, communism is inseparable from national liberation from colonial rule. For many in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc and China are remembered for their solidarity and material support for anticolonial struggles and nation building.

Even though the Non-Aligned Movement sought to carve out a middle road between the Soviet Union and the United States, socialist states, especially Yugoslavia, nevertheless served as an inspiration and models for experimentation. People who are considered demons in the

United States, like Fidel Castro, are regarded as heroes in the Global South.

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Historical research has buttressed a more complex memory of the communist experience. The opening of archives in the 1990s has allowed historians to paint a more sophisticated picture of life under communism that challenges Cold War binaries of victims and perpetrators and dispel assumptions about atomized societies paralyzed by fear.

Unshackled from the moralism of Cold War politics, historians of the Soviet Union, who I know best, are producing a rich history of cultural, political and creative social tapestries of lives, identities and experiences despite — and in spite of — mass political violence.

While research on purges and gulags continues — and presents richer narratives of those horrors as well — most historians look beyond them. Our historical understanding of really-existing socialism is all the better for it.

American anti-communism

American anti-communism, however, is not really about communism at all. It's a club to discipline America's domestic politics and maintain the status quo. Nor is it about memorializing the victims of communism. It's about silencing the desire for a better world.

Throughout the 20th century, efforts to build a more equitable society were repeatedly attacked as being influenced by "communism" or tarred as a Trojan horse for turning the United States into a communist society. Already in 1919, a mere two years after the Bolshevik Revolution, the American political elite saw, in the words of one historian, the "specter of Bolshevik agitators, Bolshevik ideas, [and] Bolshevik money" behind the African American struggle against Jim Crow, lynching, political disenfranchisement and white supremacy.

Necromancer politicians and pundits have conjured communist demons to ward off the grievances of every American social movement since — whether they were related to labor issues, civil rights, economic justice, gender equality, sexual liberation, environmentalism, antiwar, or now, Medicare for All.

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The irony that Sanders was asked to once again denounce Cuban authoritarianism during the debate in Charleston, South Carolina, seems to have been lost on most. Not only does South Carolina still have 175 monuments to white supremacy, but it engages in a spectrum of practices to suppress the democratic vote and incarcerates people — almost two-thirds of whom are people of color — at a rate higher than the national average.

I can already hear the sarcastic reminder about the old Soviet retort of "But you lynch Negroes" and charges of whataboutism. But, yeah, *what about that*?

This speaks to the larger question of why Bernie Sanders or any person on the left has to answer for communism at all. This ritual where one must constantly apologize for

communism — when there is no personal culpability for its crimes and when this apology is not accepted anyway — gives credence to Kristen Ghodsee's call to embrace anti-anti-communism.

Because why should any left-leaning American apologize for Stalin — a figure that has no relation to contemporary America — when the defenders of the status quo are never required to genuflect and answer for crimes in the service of capitalism that shape the American political condition today?

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