

The Myth of Monolithic Communism

by [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

For decades it was an axiom of conservative faith that international Communism was and must be a monolith, that Communism in all its aspects and manifestations was simply pure evil (because it was "atheistic" and/or totalitarian by definition), and that therefore all Communism was necessarily the same.

For one thing, this meant that all Communist parties everywhere were of necessity simply "agents of Moscow." It took conservatives years to disabuse themselves of this mythology (which was true only during the 1930s and most of the 1940s). Tito's courageous break with Stalin and world Communism in 1948 was considered a trivial exception; and for many years after the bitter China-Russia split, conservatives clung to the fond hope that this split must be a hoax designed to deceive the West. However, now that China has shifted from attacking Russia for not being opposed enough to US imperialism, to urging the United States ever onward to a war with Russia; and now that the Vietnamese Communists have crushed the Cambodian Communist regime in a lightning thrust, this myth of a world Communist monolith has at last had to be abandoned.

Why *should* all Communist parties and groups necessarily form a monolith? The standard conservative answer is that Communists all have the same ideology, that they are all Marxist-Leninists, and that therefore they should necessarily be united. In the first place, this is an embarrassingly naive view of ideological movements. Christians, too, are supposed to have the same religion and therefore should be united, but the historical record of inter-Christian warfare has been all too clear. Secondly, Marx, while eager enough to criticize feudalism and "capitalist" society, was almost ludicrously vague on what the future Communist society was supposed to look like, and what Communist regimes were supposed to do once their revolution had triumphed. If the same Bible has been used to support an enormous and discordant variety of interpretations and creeds, the paucity of details in Marx has allowed for an even wider range of strategies and actions by Communist regimes.

Moreover, ideology is not all. As libertarians should be aware, whenever *any* group, regardless of ideology, takes over a State, it immediately constitutes a ruling class over the people and the land governed by that State. It immediately acquires interests of State, which can readily clash with the interests of other State ruling classes, regardless of ideology. The splits between Yugoslavia and Russia, China and Russia, and now Vietnam and Cambodia, were mixtures in varying proportions of inter-State and ideological clashes. And generally when one of these conflicts launched the fray, the other soon caught up.

But if everyone must now concede that there can be and are clashes and even bitter warfare between Communist states, libertarians have been slow to realize that Communism is not a monolith in yet another sense — in the sort of "domestic" or internal regime that Communist rulers will impose. There are now vast differences among the various Communist regimes throughout the globe, divergences that literally spell the difference between life and death for a large part of their subject populations. If we want to find out about the world we live in, therefore, it is no longer enough for libertarians to simply equate Communism with badness, and let it go at that.

This necessity for grasping distinctions is particularly vital for libertarians: For our ultimate aim is to bring

freedom to the entire world, and therefore it makes an enormous difference to us *in which direction* various countries are moving, whether toward liberty or toward slavery. If, in short, we consider a simplified spectrum of countries or societies, with total freedom at one end and total slavery at the other, different varieties of Communist regimes will range over a considerable length of that spectrum, from the horrifying slave state of Pol Pot's Cambodia all the way to the quasi-free system of Yugoslavia.

Until World War II, Soviet Russia was the only example of a Communist regime. And even it had gone through remarkable changes. When the Bolsheviks assumed power in late 1917, they tried to leap into full "communism" by abolishing money and prices, an experiment so disastrous (it was later dubbed "War Communism") that Lenin, always the supreme realist, beat a hasty retreat to a mere semisocialist system in the New Economic Policy (NEP). During the mid and late 1920s, the ruling Communist apparatus debated within itself what path to pursue in the future. Nikolai Bukharin, Lenin's favorite theoretician, advocated moving forward to a free-market economy, with peasants allowed to develop their land voluntarily and to purchase manufactured goods from abroad. For a while it looked as if Bukharinism would win out, but then Stalin seized power in the late 1920s and early 1930s and brutally collectivized the peasantry and the rest of the economy, ushering in two decades of the classic Stalinist model: collectivized economy, forced industrialization and political terror.

The Case of Yugoslavia

The first break from the Stalinist model was that of Tito, who followed his 1948 political break two years later with a remarkably rapid shift away from the collectivized economy and toward the market. By the late 1960s, Yugoslavia, which had never dared to collectivize agriculture, allowed numerous small private businesses, while the "socially owned sector" had been shifted to producers' coops, owned by the workers in each particular firm. Among these firms, a roughly free-price and free-market system was allowed to operate, and taxes were drastically lowered so that each worker-controlled firm controlled its investments out of its own profits. Along with the shift to the market came the welcoming of foreign investment, the freedom of emigration and return, extreme decentralization for the nationalities within Yugoslavia, and even limited contested elections and limited check by parliament upon the executive.

Even philosophically, the Yugoslavs began to stress the primacy of the individual over the collective; and while political prisoners continue to exist there and free speech is feeble, the contrast with Stalinism is enormous. The Titoites have even decided to take seriously the long-forgotten Marxian promise of the "withering away of the State"; the way to do it, they have concluded, is to start withering. All observers remark that Belgrade and especially Croatian Zagreb are the only Communist cities in the world where the spirit of the people is happy, consumer goods are diverse and plentiful, and life is not simply a dim gray haze of shortages, queuing up, rationing, and enforced silence.

Following Yugoslavia's lead, the rest of Eastern Europe has also gone far along the path to free markets and a price system, although not nearly as far as pioneering Yugoslavia. The least degree of liberalization has occurred in Russia, although even here the status of dissidents today is far better than under Stalin.

This does not mean, of course, that Yugoslavia is "libertarian," or that the free market has been fully established there. But it does mean that there is hope for freedom and for the human spirit when Eastern Europe has come so far in a relatively short time from collectivized misery to at least a semifree system. Conservatives have always believed that once a nation goes Communist it is irrevocably doomed — that collectivism, once adopted, is irreversible. Yugoslavia, and to some extent the remainder of Eastern Europe, have shown that this is not true, that the spirit of freedom can never be extinguished.

The Liberalization of China

For a long while it looked as if China would never be liberalized, that it would remain locked in the super-Stalinism of Maoism. For nearly a decade after their takeover, the Chinese Communists did retain a semi-free-market system, only to extirpate it in two savage thrusts into totalitarianism: the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s (which featured such disastrous economic experiments in self-sufficiency as a steel plant in every rural commune's backyard), and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s (in which the

division of labor was crippled, education was stifled, economic incentives were eliminated, and compulsory communes were strengthened with a repressive apparatus extending into each urban block and rural village). Art, literature, and speech were all brutally suppressed.

It all came apart with the death in 1976 of the founding absolute despot himself, Mao Tse-tung. The "Gang of Four," led by Mao's widow Chiang Ching and leaders of the radical Left, were arrested, to the tune of spontaneous outpourings of joy by the Chinese populace, even in "red" Shanghai. Mao's successors, led clearly over the last year by the twice-disgraced Teng Hsiao-p'ing, have moved with remarkable speed to dismantle totalitarian Maoism and to shift rapidly toward a far freer economy and society. Western culture is now permitted and encouraged. Wall posters are allowed that call for ever-greater democracy and human rights, one even quoting from the American Declaration of Independence. And consumers are permitted to escape the compulsory anthill uniformity of clothing and to buy a variety of consumer goods. Workers are allowed to respond to economic incentives to produce and consume (instead of the "moral" incentives imposed by the bayonet and by Communist Party snoops). A far greater interplay of small-scale private property and free markets is permitted. A rule of law is soon to replace arbitrary whim by *ad hoc* military and party committees. And particularly important is that the Chinese are now telling their people that Mao, and even Marx himself, were not always right, that even Marxism must pass judgment before the bar of truth (now called, in Tengian jargon, "the Norm of Truth"). Foreign investment and trade is being encouraged.

In a sense, China has only now gone as far as Stalinism, although even that is a great improvement over Mao. But there are signs that it will go much further toward the Eastern European system. When Chinese Premier Hua Kung-fo visited Yugoslavia last year, he clapped his hands with glee when he heard that worker-owned firms there can actually go bankrupt. In the October 6, 1978, issue of China's major journal, the *People's Daily*, the veteran economist and historian Hu Chiao-mu, once a secretary to Mao, dumped during the Cultural Revolution, and now president of the new Tengian Academy of Social Sciences, published a highly significant article charting the nation's new economic course — "Observe Economic Laws and Speed Up the Four Modernizations" (*People's Daily*, Oct. 6, 1978; for an analysis, see *China News Analysis*, #1139, Nov. 10, 1978).

Hu called for radical reorganization of the Chinese system, and for "rule by contracts instead of mandatory rule of the economy, with minimum government interference, which would also entail the withdrawal of the Party from running the economy. He advocated division of labor, freer trade, and putting economics above political power. Hu's statement that "experience has shown that socialism cannot guarantee that political power will not do immense damage to economic development" is a remarkable one, considering the source. *China News Analysis* concludes that

What Hu describes is a free economy in which the workers sign a contract with the enterprise, the enterprise makes its own decision in the form of contracts with other enterprises or with the State, and the implementation of the contracts is controlled by the judiciary. What Hu envisages is, though this is not stated explicitly, an independent judiciary competent to adjudicate on contracts not only between individuals but also between the State and individual firms. Similarly the villages are to be left free to decide what to sow, and they are not to come under the authoritative rule of officials.

Again, no one is saying that China is or will soon become a libertarian paradise, but the contrast with anthill Maoism is staggering.

Toward Liberty in Southeast Asia

This brings us finally to Vietnam and Cambodia. With its unfortunate and vicious nationalization of the merchants in the South last year, Vietnam has now taken its place as a typical Stalinist country. But Cambodia ("Democratic Kampuchea") was something else again. It was undoubtedly the most horrendous regime of this century anywhere in the world. Not only did the Cambodian Communists quickly murder millions after taking power, and forcibly evacuate the cities at one blow; not only was death the penalty for the slightest infraction or disobedience to the regime: the key to its diabolic control was its abolition of all money, abolition is also enforced through murder and terror. Even Stalin, even Mao, retained the use of money; and so long as money exists, there is some sort of price system, and people are able to buy goods of their choice and move from

place to place, even if in black markets or in disobedience to government regulations. But if money is abolished, then everyone is helpless, dependent for his very subsistence on the meager rations grudgingly handed to him by the regime in power. From the abolition of money came compulsory rural communalism, including the abolition of private eating, the institution of compulsory marriages, and the eradication of learning, culture, the family, religion, etc. Cambodia was horror incarnate.

The Vietnamese lightning thrust that smashed the Cambodian regime was not solely or even primarily caused by ideological considerations. Undoubtedly uppermost were ancient ethnic hostility between the more prosperous Vietnamese and the more backward Khmers (inhabitants of Cambodia); the desire of the Vietnamese rulers to dominate all of Indochina; anger at long-repeated border incursions by Cambodian troops; and the Vietnamese fear of growing encirclement by the combined forces of the United States and China, supporting Cambodia on its southwestern flank. But there is no denying the horror that even the Vietnamese Stalinists felt for the Cambodian monstrosity. When they entered the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, the Vietnamese described the desolation of that city, and spoke of the deliberate mass murders, the forced evacuations. A top Vietnamese Communist official, Phan Trong Tue, spoke of the late Cambodian regime as having killed masses of people "with hammers, knives, sticks and hoes, like killing wee insects."

And then Tue rose to a pitch of eloquence:

The whole country was reduced to nil; no freedom of movement, no freedom of association, no freedom of speech, no freedom of religion, no freedom to study, no freedom of marriage, no currency, no business, no trade, no more pagodas, and no more tears to shed over the people's sufferings. (D.P.I. dispatch, January 12, 1979)

We may contrast this to the shameful whitewashing of Cambodia by the American media after Cambodia's mentor, China, drew closer to the United States, and to the US defense of Cambodia against Vietnam before the United Nations, coupled with the barest slap on the wrist for its "possible" violations of human rights.

I hasten to add — for the benefit of attentive readers — that I do not condone the Vietnamese violation of the principle of nonintervention, and that if I were a Vietnamese, and in the unlikely event that I could express my dissent freely, I would have opposed the invasion. But now that the invasion has been concluded, we can all surely be permitted to rejoice at the death of the most monstrous, bizarre, and evil State in many centuries. As I tried to make clear at the collapse of the Thieu dictatorship in South Vietnam, one *can* hail the death of a State *without* implying approval of the State that replaces it. The new Vietnamese-backed Salvation Front regime of Heng Samrin has already restored money, freedom of religion, freedom of marriage, freedom to return to cities, and freedom to cook and eat in one's own home (symbolized by the new regime's restoring a cooking pot to each family previously dragooned into communal kitchens). The new Salvation Front regime is indeed a haven of freedom for the individual Cambodian compared to the previous slavery under Pol Pot. But this by no means implies that the new regime is libertarian or that its own statism should not be opposed and combated by the Cambodian people.

But for the people of China and Cambodia, recent events have meant a leap toward freedom that can only bring rejoicing to the hearts of libertarians everywhere.