

John C. Berg

Review

Communism: A History, by Richard Pipes

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When I was growing up, every few years an old Japanese soldier would emerge from the caves of an island in the South Pacific, someone who was still fighting the war twenty years after it was over, not realizing that his side had lost. Richard Pipes is like that, but even worse: he does not realize that his side won.

While the Cold War was on, in book after book, Pipes lied, distorted, and quoted out of context to argue that the Soviet Union and communism were thoroughly evil and must be destroyed at any cost. His efforts won him a place in the National Security Council under President Reagan and a chance to help implement the policies he advocated. The results are history: the Soviet Union collapsed and the communist parties of the world ran for cover, emerging a few years later (if at all) as parties of the democratic left.

Time, one might think, for an old cold warrior to sit back and reflect, to mellow out, to wonder whether his enthusiasm for the fight had led him to overstate his position. Not Pipes. Here he is once more, throwing everything he can find at communism, kitchen sink included.

The essence of the Pipes approach can be seen in his discussion of private property. Early in the book we find the following:

In the oldest civilizations, dating back five thousand years—pharaonic Egypt and Mesopotamia—agricultural land belonged to palaces and temples. Ancient Israel is the first country where we possess firm evidence of private land ownership. . . . But land ownership in ancient Israel was hedged by many religious and clan

restrictions. It is in classical Greece that from the earliest times agricultural land was privately held (pp. 6-7).

Pipes immediately adds a gloss, “In other words, there is no evidence that at any time, even in the most remote past, there existed societies that knew ‘no boundary posts and fences’ or ignored ‘mine’ and ‘thine’—but the quoted passage actually says just the opposite, namely that private property of any kind arose with the beginning of civilization, and individual property much later than that. By the end of the book he has forgotten all about the beginnings of property in ancient Greece, and asserts:

Marxism’s basic contention that private property, which it strives to abolish, is a transient historical phenomenon—an interlude between primitive and advanced Communism—is plainly false. All evidence indicates that land, the main source of wealth in premodern times, unless monopolized by monarchs, had always belonged to tribes, families, or individuals. Livestock as well as commerce and the capital to which it gives rise were always and everywhere in private hands. From which it follows that private property is not a transient phenomenon but a permanent feature of social life and, as such, indestructible (p. 148).

Aside from the self-contradiction, this passage is symptomatic of the readiness with which Pipes resorts to sleight of hand: property was always (except for prehistoric times) privately held (except when it was held by the state, in the form of monarchy, or by the public, organized as tribes), and therefore always will be (an argument by which all modern technology would be impossible).

The sad thing about this is that Pipes neither confronts Marx’s argument about property, nor makes his own best argument in response. Marx attempted (successfully, in my opinion) to show that the capitalist property relation creates a dynamic whereby capitalists are forced to grow at all costs, with poverty, environmental devastation, and war as the inevitable result. Thoughtful liberals have countered that the institution of private property is the only way that individual freedom can be preserved from the tyranny of a power-hungry state.

These conflicting arguments raise serious questions, not only for the left but for humanity. Can we find a way to end exploitation while preserving freedom? The Soviet communists failed to do so, and we can learn a lot by asking where they went wrong, and whether they could have done differently. Such deep thinking is beyond Pipes's powers, however; hence his reliance on dishonest wordplay.

Elsewhere in the book, Pipes

- asserts that, as of 1927, the threat of a war in which the Soviet Union might be invaded was “imaginary” (p. 58)—Germany not only invaded, but overran much of the country;
- also claims that “The short-lived Popular Front governments founded in France (1936-37) and Spain (1936-39) did little to bring the Communist parties into the mainstream of political life” (p. 107)—the Communists in Spain were killed or driven into exile by the fascist regime; those in France formed the background of the Resistance and were the main opposition party through the 1960s;
- criticizes Stalin because in World War II he “bought victory by the lavish expenditure of his subjects' lives” (p. 108)—as opposed to saving lives by surrendering to Hitler, apparently.

I have singled out these howlers because they typify Pipes's argument. Anything bad done by any communist—and there are many such things, regrettably—is taken as inherent to the nature of communism. Since Pipes never explores Marx's analysis of capitalism, he is unable to distinguish between stupid mistakes by sincere revolutionaries, opportunist claimings of the “communist” banner by such tyrants as Stalin, and developments which follow inevitably from Marxist principles.

In short, this is not a book, nor an author to be taken seriously. Modern Library has published *Communism* as part of their “Modern Library Chronicles,” putting Pipes in the company of, among others, Chinua Achebe on Africa, Paul Fussell on World War II in Europe, Frank Kermode on the age

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of Shakespeare, Hans Küng on the Catholic Church, Catharine Stimpson on the university, Steven Weinberg on science, and Gordon S. Wood on the American Revolution. The choice is unworthy.

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