

# globalinequality

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## A secular religion that lasted one century

Death of Fidel Castro made me think again of the idea that I had for a while about our lack of understanding of what is the place of communism in global history of mankind. We have thousands of historical volumes on communism, and similarly thousands of volumes of apologia and critiques of Communism, but we have no conception of what its position in global history was—e.g. whether colonialism would have ended without communism, whether [communism kept capitalism less unequal](#), whether it promoted social mobility, or made transition from agrarian to industrial societies in Asia much faster etc. As Diego Castaneda mentioned in today’s tweet, we probably will not be able to assess communism for a while, probably until the passions that it arose have died down.

Death of Fidel Castro is a useful marker because he was the last canonic communist revolutionary: the leader of a revolution that overthrew the previous order of things, nationalized property, and ruled through a single party-state. We can pretty confidently state that no communist revolutionary in that canonic mould that was so common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao, Liu Shaoqi, Tito and Fidel will arise in this century. The ideas of nationalized property and central planning are dead. In a very symmetrical way, the arrival of Utopia to power that began in glacial Petrograd in November 1917 ended with the death of its last actual, physical, proponent, in a far-away Caribbean nation, in November 2016.

Let me go over some grossly simplified ideas that, perhaps one day, I will expound more fully in a book format.

What was communism? It was the first global secular religion. Its appeal was truly global, both geographically and class-wise: it drew to itself sons of daughters of the rich as well as of the poor, it appealed to the Chinese and Indians no less than to the French or Russians. Like Christianity and Islam, it asked from its followers self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. Like Christianity (as was of course noticed) it had its prophet, dead in semi-obscurity, whose subversive works were propagated by foreigners using the communication means provided by the hegemon whom they tried to undermine and destroy. Unlike capitalism, it was heavily ideological. While the ideology of capitalism is pretty light (and often malleable and pragmatic), the ideology of

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  - ▶ [December](#) (6)
  - ▼ [November](#) (4)
    - [A secular religion that lasted one century](#)
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- ▶ [June](#) (2)
- ▶ [May](#) (4)
- ▶ [April](#) (2)
- ▶ [March](#) (2)
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communism was inflexible. The system took its ideology seriously, no less seriously than (again) Christianity and Islam. But taking it so seriously led to the many splinter movements, doctrinal disputes, conflicts and killings—again similarly to the transcendental religions.

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Although communism was ideologically an economics-based movement whose objective was creation of a classless society of abundance, its features are particularly difficult to understand within the narrow economistic confines. For it combined extreme concentration of political power with large economic equality: modern economists like Acemoglu and Robinson cannot understand that nor fit it in their scheme. Most people today cannot either since they believe that the objective of all political power must be economic.

Communism promoted and achieved social mobility but that [mobility often came with a cost](#): workers escaped from low-paying and hard-working occupations in order to become much better paid bureaucrats bossing around those workers who failed to “escape”. It thus created something akin to a class society although it promised to abolish classes. In its most degenerate form, it created monarchies, like in North Korea and to some extent in China (with princelings).

Why did it fail? In the most general terms, it failed because it opposed two strong human impulses: to be free (in expressing opinions and doing what one likes) and to own property. Both were the desires created or ratified by the Enlightenment. In the pre-modern past, majority of people took political oppression and absence of own property as given. But communism was not a movement arising in the Middle Ages, but in the modern era, a true inheritor of the Enlightenment.

Because it was a secular religion, it promised to deliver the goods on this Earth, which is a fact susceptible of empirical observation. The goods were freedom of labor from the oppression by those who possess property (which it delivered only in part) and economic abundance (which it did not deliver). It increasingly failed to provide economic advancement largely because the nature of technological progress changed: from large centralized network industries to much more decentralized innovations. Communism could not innovate in practically anything that required for success acquiescence of consumers. It thus provided tanks but no ball-point pens, spacecraft but no toilet paper.

Will it come back? We cannot tell it for sure, but today the chances of a comeback of non-private property and centralized coordination of economic activity seem nil. Capitalism, defined as private property of capital, wage labor and decentralized coordination, is for the first time in human history the only economic system that exists across the globe. It could be monopoly capitalism, state capitalism or competitive capitalism, but the principles of private ownerships are as accepted in China as in the United States.

However some ideas of communism, including the religious ones, will always appeal to groups of people: its egalitarianism, internationalism and expectation of self-sacrifice are as intrinsically human as are the impulses it tried to suppress (quest for freedom and property). It will thus permanently find partisans among those who find the greed and acquisitive spirit that inevitably undergird capitalism too distasteful. But seen from today’s perspective, such groups appear condemned to forever remain on the margins of societies, creating their own communities or penning little-read treatises. Exactly where they were in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Posted by [Branko Milanovic](#) at [10:11 AM](#)




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