

# Why is the nationalist right hallucinating a 'communist enemy'?

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**From Trump to Bolsonaro, reactionary leaders are invoking a communism that no longer exists as a way of attacking the left**

How can it be that a presidential election in the US in 2020 is being fought by the Republicans on the febrile ground of anti-communism? Trump claims that the Democratic party, for whom free universal healthcare is too radical, is a Trojan horse for "[wild-eyed Marxists](#)".

The Republican national convention was filled with [anti-communist alarmism](#). According to a [campaign video](#) posted on Trump's YouTube channel, the president is "standing between capitalism and communism". The infamous Tea Party campaigns portraying Obama as a "[socialist](#)" – just like Lenin and Hitler, apparently – have become the licensed conspiracy theory of the White House.

Across the world, today's reactionaries are hallucinating a communist threat. Anti-communism-without-communism has even found fertile ground in the UK. One of the very few blessings of the last general election result is that we will never again have to sit through endless stories about that fictional version of Jeremy Corbyn, the [Marxist eastern bloc spy](#) on his [Maoist bicycle](#), with his revolutionary programme of "[broadband communism](#)" and [nationalised sausages](#).

Farcical as these claims were, they were taken with poker-faced seriousness by the Tory press and even by [senior Tory cabinet ministers](#). For the Brexit right, they helped obstruct dialogue with Labour over negotiations with Europe. As Iain Duncan Smith complained, when May feigned opening discussions with Corbyn, she had legitimised "[a Marxist and rather nasty Labour party](#)". More generally, they offered a shorthand way of representing Corbyn and the left as an existential threat.

Yet, in the global march of anticommunism-without-communism, Britain is scarcely a contender. After all, Corbyn is at least someone of the left who has some regard for Marx. It has also extended far beyond such former redoubts of Stalinism as Poland or Hungary. Wherever the nationalist right has gained ground, it has unfailingly found a "communist" enemy to berate where none exists, or where the enemy is a moderate, business-minded politician, such as Brazil's [Lula](#), or Joe Biden.

Consider the protests against Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff in 2014, leading to the coup against her government and paving the way for Jair Bolsonaro's election four years later. "We do not want a communist Brazil," [protesters proclaimed](#). Bolsonaro claimed that his Workers' party (PT) opponents wanted to turn the country into Cuba or Venezuela. When Bolsonaro was elected, his supporters cried: "[Death to the communists!](#)" When the supreme court [reversed the decision](#) to imprison Lula on what turned out to be politicised charges of corruption, protesters complained: "you are leading the country to [communism](#)". Bolsonaro's son wants to [outlaw communism](#), while the [administration is obsessed](#) with purging the institutions of "leftist" values, particularly "gender ideology", which it says is a manifestation of "cultural Marxism".

This is not a wholly new ideology. Just as Trump is leveraging a deeply rooted national history of anti-communist paranoia, from McCarthyism to [Massive Resistance](#), so Bolsonaro is reviving the anti-communism of the [Brazilian Integralists](#) in the 1930s, and the period of military dictatorship from 1964-1985. But why should the idiom of anti-communism be so powerful today, when communism barely exists?

Communist parties could once, if at a considerable stretch, have been seen as a realistic threat to capitalism. That is no longer the case. The political theorist Jodi Dean has a point when she argues that anti-communism is a [pervasive ideology of capitalism](#), as it serves to demarcate what is acceptable and what is off the table. Free healthcare and public ownership of broadband, for example, have been stigmatised as “communist”. However, the systematically violent anti-communism of the right has an emotional depth-charge, expedited by the [sinophobic fearmongering](#) about China defeating the US and taking American jobs. It is the latter which has become a campaigning issue in 2020.

A clue may lie in the spread of the [antisemitic trope](#) of “cultural Marxism”. Invented on the Nazi fringe and launched into the public sphere in the “manifesto” of Oslo bomber Anders Behring Breivik, this meme has [gained ground](#) across the [right](#), including in the [modern Conservative](#). It has incited “lone wolf” killers, such as the Poway synagogue shooter. In India, an equivalent term, “[urban naxals](#)”, is used to stigmatise dissent.

As Paul Hanebrink’s [bracing history](#) of the myth of “Judeo-Bolshevism” demonstrates, 20<sup>th</sup>-century anti-communism rarely engaged with the reality of communism. It was, instead, driven by racial and nationalist myths. The idea that there was something inherently “Jewish” about communism, that it was a threat to national existence, extended well beyond the fascist right. In 1917, the chief Russia correspondent of the Times blamed the Russian Revolution on the “seething mass of Jewish pauperdom”. Winston Churchill blamed communism on the “International Jew”, who had no loyalty to the nation.

In the US, race theorists such as Lothrop Stoddard regarded Bolshevism as a “traitor at the gate”, subverting racial hierarchies. Woodrow Wilson’s secretary of state, Robert Lansing, fancied that the Russian Revolution proved the veracity of the [Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#). The [Lusk Committee](#) argued that all traditions of socialism were of German-Jewish extraction. Such tropes were commonplace in the battle against civil rights led by White Citizens’ Councils, and the Ku Klux Klan.

Why should anti-communism be so amenable to such racist, conspiracist, and apocalyptic thinking? Perhaps because it works in a similar way. In “black-hole anti-communism”, as Joel Kovel dubbed it, everything that is perceived as threatening can be compressed into a single, treasonous, diabolical enemy: just different tentacles of the same communist kraken. Rather like a racial stereotype, “communism” figuratively represents systemic crises as something external, a demonic plot. It works through what Freud called dreamwork, wherein a single dream image comes to stand for thoughts that cannot otherwise be acknowledged. Those labelled “communists” are thus blamed, not just for the reforms that they demand, but for the crises that call for reform.

The hallucinatory world of anticommunism-without-communism is dangerous and violent. Its partisans believe they face an existential threat, which in principle licenses almost any level of violence. The state, as historian Ellen Schrecker points out, has been the teeth of most anti-communist networks. But it has often been bolstered by private militias, whether they be Minutemen, Klans, squadristi, the Sturmabteilung or Brazil’s Green Shirts. That is the significance of the eruptions of militia violence in the US, the hate mobs in India, and the [Green Shirt revivalists](#) in Brazil. When these people start to see red, blood flows in the streets.

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