Negotiating the Experience of Communism. Rhetorical Strategies and Uses of History in Swedish debates

In this paper I will deal with the concept, or rather conception of totalitarianism from a hermeneutic perspective focusing on meaning and orientation. Totalitarianism is, as you all probably know, an analytic framework that places communism adjacent to Nazism, and is based on the idea that these ideologies or political systems share a number of similarities. Apart from its analytical potential this framework have obvious moral implications, since we from the totalitarianism point of view are likely to reject Nazism and communism, based on our experience of the systems, and adopt what I call the dystopian ideologies anti-Nazism and anti-communism. These dystopian ideologies are characterized by their negative definitions, based on what we absolutely want to avoid rather than on our positive political visions. The dystopian ideologies, in turn, tend to have a mobilizing function in favor of liberal democracy and liberal capitalism, since liberalism is the sole ideology left at the, as Fukuyama would have said, end of history, or at least among the three most predominant ideologies of the 20th century.

From the hermeneutic perspective, focusing on meaning and orientation, two things need to be emphasized. Firstly, that the dystopian ideologies are based on perceptions of the past, i.e. on historical experience. Historical events, like the Holocaust or the Holodomor, are subject to moral evaluation, and based on the outcome of this evaluation the historical events will provide us as human beings with orientation for the future. Retrospective moralization will lead up to ideological conclusions for the future, and in this sense history is really the teacher of our lives. Historia magistra vitae, to coin an ancient and well-known phrase. Secondly, and most importantly in this particular case, is that there is an underlying assumption that the historical events/historical crimes that are condemned may be explained by the ideological intentions behind them. If we, for instance, would regard the Nazi extermination of the Jews not as a consequence of anti-Semitism or overall racist ideas as declared by Adolf Hitler in Mein Kampf but merely as a response to different structural, cultural or contextual traits in German society, there would be no rational core in anti-Nazism any longer. To make sure that there is such a core, history needs to be interpreted intentionally, stating that there is a straight line between on the one hand ideological intention and on the other hand repression or genocide. The Nazi example is perhaps not that controversial since there is a broad consensus
about the way it should be explained, with a great emphasis on ideology. The ways the starvation in Ukraine during the thirties are described as consciously instigated or not, would perhaps have been more illustrative when discussing the question of intentionality or not and its moral implications. Nonetheless, the way I described the Nazi case, indicates that there may be different ways to question this intentionality, and that these ways may be used as moral counter-strategies when historical events are subject to moral evaluation with an aim, outspoken or not, to provide ideological orientation. This also reveals a need to dissect the moral use of history.

My intention here today is to highlight four such counter-strategies that are used when discussing crimes committed by communist regimes, especially the Soviet Union. These strategies tend to question intentionality, but they also tend to focus on a broader historical context in different ways. As illustrations, I will (among other sources) use review articles of the *Black Book of Communism*, edited by Stéphane Courtois and published in 1997, and *Bloodlands* by Timothy Snyder published in 2010. The fact that there are important distinctions between these books, for instance between the outspoken moral ambition to condemn western fellow travelers by Courtois and Snyder’s much more nuanced view, is not that important in this particular case. What is important is the analytic starting point of the books, and most important seem to be that Courtois as well as Snyder places Soviet communism and German Nazism in the same historical context, with or without aspects of interdependence. The review articles used are all Swedish, written by Swedish historians and journalists. This means that the pattern extracted may be regarded as an important aspect of the Swedish historical culture (that in turn may be compared to other national historical cultures). It does not mean however, that the opinions or arguments exposed are representative of all Swedish historians or journalists. Once again, what I want to highlight are a number of arguments or strategies that are used when questioning intentionality or questioning totalitarianism as an analytical framework.

My first example touches upon one of the core questions of scholarly history, i.e. structure vs. agency. An important dynamic when discussing the moral use of history is that a focus on agency also tends to be a focus on ideological intention, whereas emphasizing structural aspects tend to turn the agent, the perpetrator, into a victim of this structure instead. When
Courtois identified Lenin’s ideas and the Leninist era as the starting point of Soviet repression one common objection followed this path. Firstly, Lenin was regarded as a product of a brutalized czarist Russia. Secondly, a great emphasis was laid on the civil war, that in turn was regarded a product of foreign aggression (from former allies and supporters of “the reaction”). The brutality of the czarist society and violence of the civil war formed important cultural and historical contexts, which became vital when describing Lenin as the victim of a structure rather than a perpetrator of ideologically motivated terror. A Swedish historian characterized this repressive structure as a “cocktail of violence”, including capitalist violence within the industries, traditional violence by peasants and the modern violence of the First World War. The same historian also uses this strategy when discussing crimes committed in other communist regimes. I quote:

> How shall the brutality of Russian bolshevism be understood separate from the hurricane of violence during the First World War, or the firmly rooted despotism and every-day-violence of the czarist regime? How can the violence, the dictatorship and the nationalism of the Chinese revolution be grasped, without mentioning western imperialism and the Japanese occupation? Who can understand the almost incomprehensible brutality of the Khmer Rouge-regime in Cambodia, not being aware of the most extensive bombings of civilians ever? [bombings by the US in 1973, my comment]

I think this quote illustrates quite well how the moral counter-strategy, focusing on structures or functionalist modes of explaining repression in communist states rather than ideological intention, works.

Concerning the reception of *Bloodlands*, it may be noted that the perspective of interdependence used by Snyder reveals a somewhat similar dynamic in the sense that interdependence, or entanglement, transform the Nazi and Soviet policies to a chain of mutual structural responses to each other. Even if Nazism and Soviet communism are placed within the same historical context, this turns ideology into something less important. This is at least the case in the Swedish review articles of the book, and I guess this is the reason why there
has been much less controversy about Snyder’s approach than there were about Courtois’ approach a decade earlier.

The second counter-strategy, which put the repression of the Soviet system in a wider context, is to focus on emancipation or welfare. This means that we have now changed our perspective from intentions to consequences, or to be more precise from the distinction between intention and structure to the distinction between intention and consequence. It may be noted that focusing on welfare, or emancipatory consequences of political actions as I call them, not just acknowledge that there may be repressive consequences of the same political actions – the repression may also be regarded as a necessity to reach this emancipation. A lesser evil is counterbalanced by a greater good. When speaking of communist regimes, a good illustration of this dynamic may be the words by Mao Zedong who, when characterizing his fellow communist leader Stalin, characterized him as 30 percent “bad” but 70 percent “good”, leaving a “surplus of goodness”.

The critical review articles of Courtois’ book do not put a lot of focus on the emancipation within the Soviet system, even though some remarks about “reforms after the revolution” or the Stalinist campaigns of fighting illiteracy are made. There is however one important emancipatory consequence without the Soviet system which is frequently mentioned: the defeat of Hitler and German Nazism in the Second World War. The great emancipatory achievement of Soviet communism lies in saving Europe from fascism. This idea is to some extent similar to the argument presented by the late British historian Eric Hobsbawm, who in his book *The Age of Extremes* seems to argue that the Soviet Union served as a threat to the west European bourgeoisie and their governments, a threat that made them willing to accept democracy and social welfare systems to avoid further radicalization of the social democracy or even revolution. This perspective, in sum, means that the emancipatory consequences of Soviet communism are important, but that they to a great extent lay outside the systems own territory, in the welfare states of Western Europe. A final example of this second counter-strategy, emphasizing welfare, is to frame a category of “beneficiaries of the purges”, like for instance Sheila Fitzpatrick has done.
Another counter-strategy that comes natural, especially when discussing *The Black Book of Communism*, is different ways of counting casualties. This means that we have now turned away from emancipation, back to the repression of the Soviet system and different ways of dealing with it. “Body count” is a term usually associated with the political scientist Rudolf J. Rummel, as well as the term democide used by him as a definition of “the murder of any person or people by a government”. In an article Rummel suggests that about 100 million people were killed in communist regimes during the 20th century, and that an additional 30 million may have been killed in wars and revolutions provoked by communists and communist regimes. In the introduction to the *Black Book of Communism* Courtois also mention about 100 million victims, among them 20 million in the Soviet Union. In a Swedish book, published as an answer to the Black Book, the estimations made by Courtois as well as Rummel and even Robert Conquest are all questioned. When Conquest, for instance, declares that there were at least 9 million prisoners in the Gulag camps in the beginning of the Second World War, the Swedish author states that there were never more than 2, 5 million prisoners in these camps. Seemingly unprovoked, he also adds that this number is equivalent to 1 percent of the Soviet population, which may be compared to the 2, 8 percent of the US population being imprisoned in 1997.

This example reveals a common strategy of keeping the death tolls and number of people exposed to the repression of the system (the victims) to a low level. At the same time the death tolls in communist regimes are kept to a minimum, casualties in other regimes are often exaggerated. The best example of this is probably *The Black Book of Capitalism*, written as an answer to Courtois by a number of French sociologists. In answer to Courtios and the 100 million victims of communism he suggests, the French sociologists state that there have been at least 100 million victims of capitalism between 1900 and 1997. In addition to this, the victims of colonialism during the 18th and 19th centuries may also be counted as victims of capitalism. In sum, this means that capitalism has caused mankind more harm than communism. In the same way repression may be counterbalanced by welfare in the examples previously mentioned, the number of victims in one system may be counterbalanced by an even bigger number of victims in another system. In both cases, consequentialism is the guiding moral principle, and a lesser evil may be regarded as “lesser” when compared to a greater good within the system as well as to a greater evil outside the system.
This also exposes some of the traits of the fourth moral counter-strategy which I want to highlight, a strategy which can be understood as basically amoralist in the sense that moral judgements are always made upon the political opponent, and more seldom about your own ideological position and the historical experiences associated with it. As I mentioned in the beginning of my presentation, the analytic framework of totalitarianism tend to have a mobilizing function in advantage of liberalism. The fourth counter-strategy turns this pattern upside down, associating liberalism, or rather liberal capitalism, with other kinds of repression like the “structural violence” of the capitalist system or even imperialism and colonialism. As said, most prominently by Vladimir Lenin himself, imperialism may be regarded as the highest stage of capitalism. This means that in the same way anti-communism tend to have mobilizing function in advantage of liberalism, anti-capitalism tend to have a mobilizing function in advantage of communism. In both cases, the own ideological position is negatively defined, and that is what is most important when using this strategy.

The dynamic of this strategy has to some extent been shown already, for example when repression of communist regimes is regarded as a structural response to the history of colonialism and imperialism. A striking example is also the fact that no “white” book of communism was published as an answer to Courtois, but instead two other “black” books – The Black Book of Capitalism as mentioned, but also The Black Book of Colonialism, edited by Marc Ferro. The idea that western crimes somehow needs to be taken into account also when discussing communism becomes clear from the following quote from a review article of Bloodlands:

Choosing to write just about the areas affected by Nazi and Stalinist destructiveness implicate a dubious political tendency. Writing carefully and in detail about German and Soviet atrocities (without mentioning the rapes and terror bombings by the Western allies), as well as the Soviet control of the satellite states in the Eastern Bloc (without mentioning the British and American intervention in Greece), have far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the Cold War.

To summarize, the ambition of this paper has been to extract a number of different ways of dealing morally with the experience of Soviet communism. One way is to adopt the idea of totalitarianism, stating that there is a straight line between ideological intention and repression. Based on such a retrospective moralization anti-communism seems to be the
rational position that has a guiding potential for the future and is based on experiences of the past. There are, however, ways of questioning this. The first way, or moral counter-strategy as I call it, is to put a great emphasis on structural aspects instead of ideology turning the agent, or “the perpetrator”, into a victim of this structure instead. The second way is to focus on emancipatory consequences or welfare, which the repression may be counterbalanced by. The third way is questioning death tolls, or the number of people exposed to repression, with the underlying ambition to extract a moral quality from a quantity of victims. The fourth counter-strategy is to focus on crimes committed by or associated with someone else, most likely western capitalism and imperialism.

Finally, it may be noted that these four different strategies are not mutually exclusive, they intersect. It may also be noted that the different contexts highlighted by the different strategies in principle are all valid; structural aspects always need to be taken into account when understanding historical events; it is fair to assume that there may be a wider spectrum of consequences of a political system than merely repression, death tolls are hard to fix, and there have been a lot of victims in for instance the former European colonies. The problem that remains unsolved is what these different contexts should be regarded as: As historical contextualization, legitimate and eligible from a scholarly point of view, or as a kind of moral trivialization, usually regarded as illegitimate. Is it even possible to draw a distinct line between intrascholarly contextualization and trivialization? I have no answer to this, and will leave this question open.