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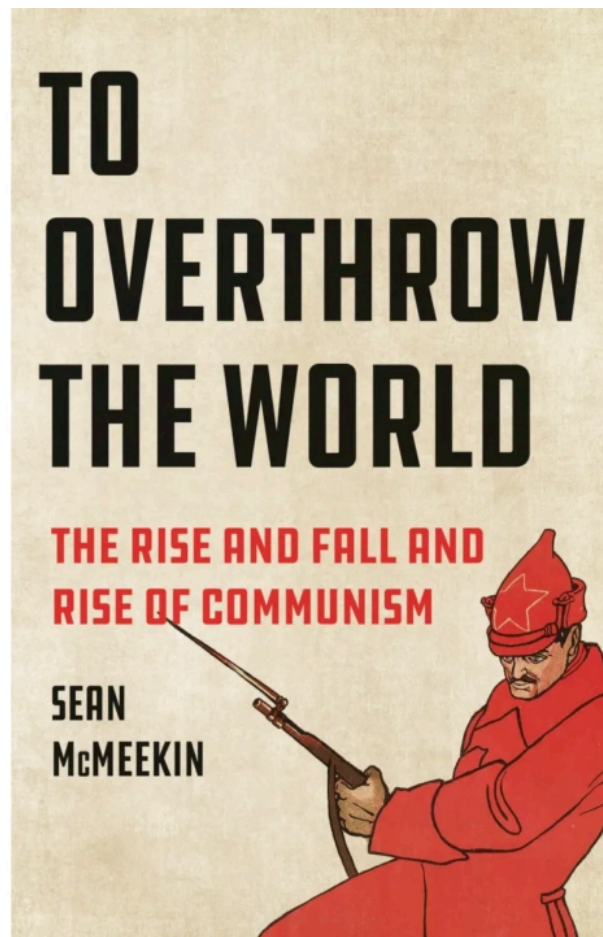
# The Strange Non-Death of Communism: 'To Overthrow the World' Part 2

In part two of this book review, we visit historian Sean McMeekin's study of the alleged death and rebirth of a geopolitical cancer.

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Part 1 of this two-part book recommendation shows how Sean McMeekin's book "**To Overthrow the World: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Communism**" portrays the birth and growth of communism in the 19th and 20th centuries. In Part 2, McMeekin acknowledges that the fall of the Berlin Wall, the rending of the Iron Curtain, the collapse of the USSR, and an unprecedented uprising against the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) in Tiananmen Square, all resembled the death throes of communism in the late 20th century.



A Hong Kong University student cleans a plaque below the "The Pillar of Shame," a monument constructed to honor the dead and shame the Chinese government that refused to apologize for the Tiananmen Square massacre, which killed students on June 4, 1989 in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Mike Clarke/AFP/Getty Images

But as newer, 21st century avatars of communism have proved, that death never arrived. The author adds that as long as "social justice" ambitions linger, "some version of Communism will retain broad

popular appeal, enticing young idealists ... to champion its cause.” Ambitious older politicians, even if unmoved by such idealism, will exercise and relish the control it gives them over such idealistic people. In the bargain, communism only seems to die.

All too briefly, McMeekin examines contemporary ways in which communism is revived, and how it’s fast becoming a “governing template” in respected democracies.

## **Communism’s Abuses**

No, communism isn’t given a free pass. “Chinese human rights abuses have been accorded greater publicity. Those who have been targeted include religious groups, such as Falun Gong; the Uighur population; and, more recently, dissidents in Hong Kong, who have been CCP subjects since 1997.” But left-leaning circles are now more in awe of Chinese industrial or military might in the 21st century than they were of Soviet might in the 20th. In leveraging that might for global influence, “the CCP has been more successful than the Soviets ever were.”



Falun Gong practitioners gathered in front of the UN headquarters in New York City on Sept. 25, 2024, during the annual general assembly meeting, protesting the Chinese Communist Party's ongoing persecution of Falun Gong and the regime's human rights abuses. Sunny Zhao/The Epoch Times

How? Increasingly, many Western governments are aping Chinese governance styles.

Global health agencies meekly adopted the CCP's "social distancing" protocols, earlier used in China alone, "reversing decades of progressively more humane—and scientifically sound—policies on mitigating disease outbreaks. 'Lockdown' had absolutely no basis in the Western tradition."

Many democracies increasingly use something akin to the CCP's "social credit system" that grants or denies access to schooling, travel, banking, or credit, as levers to punish those who don't toe the establishment line or don't amplify the prevailing "social media consensus."

# Praise-Punish Protocols

McMeekin worries that thought-police who now flood decision-making tiers in the public and private sector may soon apply CCP-style praise-punish protocols more widely to those who challenge the status quo on a range of themes: climate, immigration, race, sexual orientation, or gender identification. Ideological bullying may include social media bans, seizure of funds obtained via online crowdfunding platforms, cancellation of passports, or the revocation of visas.

It's true that cruder, more arbitrary communist-style arrests or Gulag-type torture may be some way off, but in the social and intellectual sphere, newer mechanisms may be more insidious. "[M]any victims deprived of their jobs, funds, reputations, or basic civil rights may not even know who their accusers are. Far from dead, Communism as a governing template seems only to be getting started."

On triggers for the rise and fall of communism, McMeekin is clear. First, no communist regime has been democratically elected to power; only violence and force allow leaders to seize, sustain, and spread control. Second, only imploding power structures, political or military, enable the collapse of communist regimes; popular uprisings aren't as pivotal as they're perceived to be.

But McMeekin ignores exceptions that prove his rule.

The world's first democratically elected communist government emerged in 1945 in San Marino, Europe. Communists won elections in India too: 1957 in Kerala, 1977 in West Bengal, 1993 in Tripura. Kerala's voters have re-elected communists every few years for decades, West Bengal's voters allowed uninterrupted communist rule for nearly 35 years; Tripura's voters allowed uninterrupted communist rule first for 10 years, then later for another 25 years.



A tableau in a communist rally in Kerala, India. David Wilmot/CC BY-SA 2.0

Yet, for the most part, McMeekin is right: Democracies almost never vote communists to power. Thankfully, such governments in South Asia bear little in common with regimes in North Korea or Cuba or elsewhere that are marked by the same totalitarian traits worldwide: single-party dictatorship with no legal opposition parties, stiflingly controlled political-economy, all-encompassing regulation, and surveillance governing public life.

India's red parties can hardly be said to be communist, except in name and avowed beliefs. Their leaders observe so little of those beliefs in public. Their relatively benign style of governance makes them

indistinguishable from dozens of democratic parties, with whom they peacefully compete or collaborate.

Still, McMeekin's omission of references to this democratic mainstreaming of communism is significant. First, it precludes understanding of how such otherwise peaceable movements in democracies increase the acceptability of communism, especially when that very acceptability eats away at democracy. Second, it allows communism's most violent, oppressive impulses to continue to sprout elsewhere, advertising the falsehood that communism isn't all bad.

## Atheism

Like it or not, this book isn't only, as McMeekin claims, a dispassionate tale of what happened. In tone and tenor, every page is also a passionate telling of what shouldn't have happened. It's a considered critique of communism.

One hopes that McMeekin, or a historian of similar caliber, will in the future expand on a major gap: communism's relationship with religion. McMeekin alludes to this, but too fleetingly. Witness his reference to Iranian Muslim religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini's wariness of the Soviet Union's abiding atheism.

As a political historian, McMeekin's concern is the political sphere. Fair enough. But why is lack of substantive discussion on religion a major gap in a critique of communism? **Atheism** is a gateway to, not a mere cornerstone of, communism.

True, Marx drew heavily on German thinkers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach. But Hegel was an Orthodox Lutheran Christian who believed that religion bestowed "moral dignity" on humans.



A photograph of Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach. Public Domain

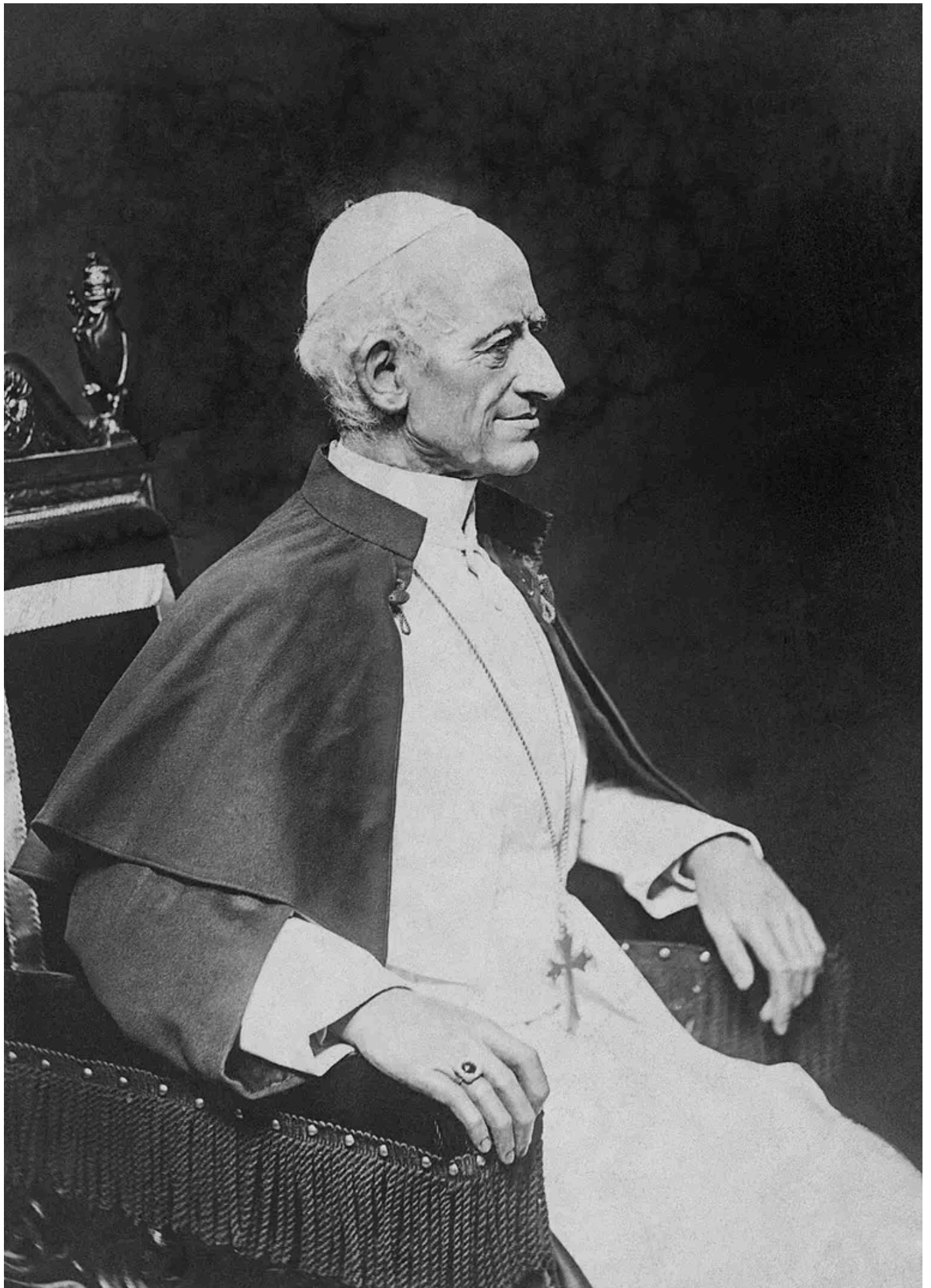
Feuerbach? He was the father of modern atheism. As McMeekin confirms, Marx denounced the market economy only after he'd first denounced religion. His call to foment class struggle channeled Feuerbach, not Hegel. Yet McMeekin refers to Feuerbach only once, Hegel, dozens of times.

Additionally, while McMeekin dwells on how the free world's political figures responded, through war and peace, to communism, he overlooks how its religious figures did. He skips the **Dalai Lama's** long standing, if gentle, defiance of China's CCP.

The author ignores the Vatican's papal encyclicals that constitute a century-old critique of "atheistic" Socialism and Communism: **Rerum Novarum** was published in 1891, before the horrors of Marxism-Leninism revealed themselves. **Divini Redemptoris** was published in 1937, before the horrors of Nazism-Stalinism revealed themselves.



**Centesimus Annus** was published in 1991, soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Pope after pope reinforced how the Catholic Church has always seen atheism as the root, stem, and branch of Communism's devastation.



Shorn of discussion on religion, any critique of communism, no matter how scholarly, is incomplete. The Catholic Church's historically courageous, clear-cut, consistent challenge to communism is also a vital context when sizing up former Argentinian Bishop **Pope Francis's** more ambiguous take on communism.

Anti-communist intellectual **Alexander Solzhenitsyn** echoed Fyodor Dostoevsky's 19th-century wisdom when he said, "Within the philosophical system of Marx and Lenin ... at the heart of their psychology, hatred of God is the driving force, more fundamental than all their political and economic pretensions. Militant atheism is not incidental or marginal and not a side effect, but the central pivot. Communism needs to control a population devoid of religious and national feeling ... this entails the destruction of faith and nationhood."

## New Forms

Over two decades ago other writers had already surveyed communism's history and the havoc it has wrought, in books such as "**Communism: A History**" and "**The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression.**" So, McMeekin might have justifiably shaped at least a few of his chapters on contemporary forms of communism.

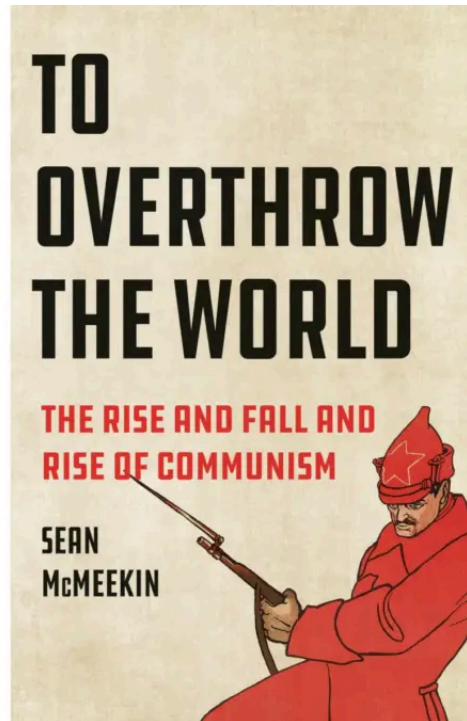
Some scholars argue that **extreme left** thinking has spawned not just tolerance of modern-day terrorism, but a level of enabling that would've been unconscionable even a decade ago, when communism was more sharply defined by the democratic mainstream as a social evil. Today, in some of those same quarters, hazily or not, it's dressed up as a public good.

This is where our medical analogy assumes added significance. Usually, pathologists adopt a zero-tolerance approach when testing for cancer's recurrence. All that a relapse requires is for a lingering or

returning cancer to corrupt one cell, or a handful, for it to then attack healthy bone, tissue, and muscle all over again.

It's in this vein that McMeekin's book is a much-needed education and cautionary tale that warns democracies to be alert. At the slightest suggestion that communism is spreading, they must, as it were, see red. And act.

*Click here to read Part 1.*



"To Overthrow the World: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Communism" by Sean McMeekin takes a hard look at the rise of communism. Basic Books

**'To Overthrow the World: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Communism'**

By Sean McMeekin

Basic Books, Sept. 10, 2024

Hardcover: 544 pages

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