

How Communism Kills Kindness

In 1974, Simon Leys published 'Chinese Shadows' under a pseudonym to protect himself from pro-Maoist intellectuals. The book describes habits of mind that are now alive and well in America.



SOLDIERS OF THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY SHOW THEIR SUPPORT FOR HUA GUOFENG, THEN-LEADER OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY, ON NOVEMBER 5, 1976, IN BEIJING.
(PHOTO BY API/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES)

By Rob Henderson

Communism is on the rise in America. More than that: It is being celebrated.

With the midterm elections just over one month away, at least eight congressional candidates with avowedly socialist perspectives are poised to take office, polling well ahead of their opponents in states from New York to Colorado.

Think there's no connection between socialism and communism? Think again. Nearly half of the members of the Democratic Socialists of America's (DSA) leadership body identify as communists. As Stu Smith reported earlier this summer, "Members with Communist political tendencies now significantly shape the DSA's leadership." In their December 2025 newsletter, members of the DSA's Red Star Caucus celebrated Mao Zedong's 132nd birthday.

All of which raises some natural questions: Where is this revolutionary romance coming from? And as it steadily seeps into our leadership class, where will it lead?

The best guide to understanding these questions is a book published more than 50 years ago under a pseudonym—because the author feared what pro-Maoist intellectuals would do to him if they discovered who wrote it.

Simon Leys, whose real name was Pierre Ryckmans, was a Belgian-Australian scholar of Chinese art and literature. In 1974, he published *Chinese Shadows*, a record of the cultural and political destruction he saw in China in the years just after the Cultural Revolution. The book is full of eerily relevant observations. One of them, which I will get to, is the most haunting thing I've read about what political terror does to the human soul. And nearly all of them describe habits of mind that didn't die with Mao. In fact, they are now alive in America.

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First, some background. The Cultural Revolution began because Mao Zedong wanted to purge rivals at the top of the Communist Party. So he turned to radical students, giving them permission to denounce every authority except his own. Party officials egged on these young militants as they raided the homes of “class enemies” and turned them into social outcasts. What followed was violence, looting, the legitimization of hatred, and the denunciation of family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. When the resulting catastrophe became impossible to deny, Mao and the regime’s officials disavowed their own troops, claiming that an “extreme left” had been responsible for the atrocities.

Sound familiar? Americans witnessed a milder version of this in the summer of 2020. Rioting and looting that year caused between \$1 billion and \$2 billion in damages. As this transpired, prominent voices in politics and media minimized the destruction. And some leading officials quickly insisted that the destruction was not the work of their own residents. Minnesota governor Tim Walz, later the 2024 Democratic nominee for vice president, estimated that 80 percent of those causing damage came from out of state, while Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey declared that “the people that are doing this are not Minneapolis residents.” Jail records showed the opposite.

If the scale is different, the pattern is the same: indulgence first, followed by disingenuous disavowal after the damage is done.

The parallels do not end there. In the 20th century, Leys wrote, communist governments frequently whitewashed their history and

leaders, exhibiting at best a tenuous relationship with the truth. Mao, for example, was raised well-off by his prosperous landowning family, but he was described as a “member of the working classes.” Enemies of the regime, even those who grew up in dire poverty, were always described as having a “wealthy capitalist background.”

Enter Zohran Mamdani, the son of an Ivy League professor and an award-winning filmmaker, who campaigned for mayor as the tribune of New York City’s working class. The socialist movement behind him is powered less by workers than by the highly educated. Class, in these circles, is mostly about the aesthetic costume you wear for political purposes rather than the objective material facts about your life. Mao’s propagandists understood this, as did Mamdani’s social media team.

While parallels between the book and today abound, one particular passage is uniquely worth committing to memory. It comes in a section in which Leys observes that communism transformed Chinese culture from being hospitable, welcoming, and warm to being cold, sanitized, and alienating. The “Maoist regime has only repeated Soviet experiences,” he writes, quoting Soviet writer Nadezhda Mandelstam’s description of life under Joseph Stalin:

“There were once many kind people, and even unkind ones pretended to be good because that was the thing to do. . . . Everything we have seen in our times—the dispossession of the kulaks, class warfare, the constant ‘unmasking’ of people, the search for an ulterior motive behind every action—all this has taught us to be anything you like except kind.”

In other words, kindness has to be cultivated, and this only happens when it is in demand. A regime that rewards denunciation will produce denouncers.

Refuse the small and forgettable reward that comes from joining an online pile-on. Show sympathy for a victim of violence even when you dislike what he stands for.

Why does kindness die under communism? In Mao's China, the first sign was that kindness itself became suspect. Sympathy was allowed, but only for the right people. You could pity a poor peasant, as long as he had no assets. You could not pity a landlord's daughter. In 1942, the Marxist writer Wang Shih-wei criticized the special treatment enjoyed by party leaders in Yen-an. He ended his essay by apologizing for writing so much about "affection" and "human warmth." Was this, he asked, a sign of his "petty-bourgeois sentimentality"? Five years later, he was executed.

The same pattern appeared in Stalin's Soviet Union. In *The Status Game*, the British author Will Storr describes the men sent to strip peasants of their land and possessions in pursuit of forced collectivization. They were told to "throw your bourgeois humanitarianism out of the window and act like Bolsheviks worthy of Comrade Stalin." One of the men, Lev Kopelev, disturbed by the screams of children, scolded himself for feeling pity. As Storr writes, "Status was awarded for actively suppressing natural human sympathy." A society that celebrates cruelty will get more of it.

We now have our own taxonomy of permitted sympathy. After Brian Thompson, the CEO of UnitedHealthcare, was shot in the back on a Manhattan sidewalk in December 2024, 41 percent of voters under 30 said the killing was acceptable. His alleged killer became a hero to them. When Charlie Kirk was assassinated last September, many progressives argued over whether he deserved to be mourned. The logic in both cases was similar to the pattern described by Leys. First, decide who counts as a victim. Then decide who deserves compassion.

If a person falls into the wrong category, cruelty rather than kindness is the right response.

What does Leys suggest we do? He placed his hope in ordinary people. For example, he describes meeting a young museum curator in the backroom of an art shop, where the curator unrolled a dozen forbidden paintings. Shop assistants periodically slipped in to look at the paintings, “as if conscious of taking part in some clandestine ritual.” Leys wanted, he writes, “to thank them for being, simply, what they were”—human beings willing to risk punishment for the sake of appreciating beauty.

Leys even devised a test to see who around him was capable of independent thought. He would ask people where in China they would most like to live. Most gave the approved answer: wherever they could best “serve the people.” Once in a while, though, someone would reply with a region known for its pleasant climate, or a particular town where family members resided. Leys took note of such individuals because they had dared to admit that they loved a place, or a person, for reasons of their own. As George Orwell noted in 1946, caring for ordinary things unrelated to ideology could make “a peaceful and decent future a little more probable.”

Refuse the small and forgettable reward that comes from joining an online pile-on. Show sympathy for a victim of violence even when you dislike what he stands for. Notice and befriend people who have not been captured by ideology. These are all approaches we’d do well to adopt today.

READ

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Leys wrote under a pseudonym for good reason. The largely pro-Maoist, Western intelligentsia of the time was furious at him for recording his honest observations of the regime, and eventually they tracked him down and exposed his true identity. He was not surprised. Western praise for communism, he concluded, was “an abstract ideal projection, a utopia which allows them to denounce everything that is bad about the West without taking the trouble to think for themselves.”

The DSA members who toasted Mao’s 132nd birthday never lived in the country over which he ruled. Leys did. Mao promised to clear away the reactionary forces oppressing the masses. What he actually obliterated were museums, libraries, intellectuals, novelists—and kindness itself.

Leys hid his name to tell the truth about a regime that punished honesty and kindness. Every social order gets the character it rewards. The question worth asking about ours is what we are rewarding now.



This has been Things Worth Remembering, our weekly column in which writers reflect on a cultural treasure that’s worth revisiting. Last week, in the days before Yom Kippur, David Wolpe wrote about how the holiday is a reminder of how to live—a sentiment captured beautifully by Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo’s 1971 poem. Catch up here!

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