

The powers of communism

Wednesday 20 January 2010, by [BENSAÏD Daniel](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2009).

This essay was probably among the last written by Daniel Bensaïd. It appears in the latest issue of *ContreTemps*, the journal where Daniel was one of three publishing editors. The piece is a contribution to a series of essays on the meaning of communism put together as part of a symposium on the same topic being held in Paris on January 22nd and 23rd. Daniel was looking forward to the symposium, and we hope you will be able to attend.

In an 1843 article on “the progress of social reform on the continent,” the young Engels (not yet 23 years old) saw communism as “a necessary conclusion, which cannot be avoided to be drawn from the premises given in the general facts of modern civilisation.” This was a logical communism, then, produced by the 1830 revolution during which workers “referred to the history of the great revolution, and eagerly seized upon Babeuf’s Communism.”

For the young Marx, on the other hand, this communism was still only a “dogmatic abstraction” and a “special expression of the humanistic principle.” The incipient proletariat had “thrown itself into the arms of the doctrinaires of its emancipation, the founders of socialist sects” and the confused souls who “in humanistic style twaddle about... the millennium and universal brotherly love” which represented the “imaginary abolition of class relations.” Before 1848, this spectral communism, lacking a precise program, haunted the air du temps in the “unpolished guise” of egalitarian sects and Icarian delusions.

Going beyond abstract atheism required a new social materialism that was none other than communism: “In the same way atheism, being the supersession of God, is the advent of theoretic humanism, and communism, as the supersession of private property, is the vindication of real human life.” Far removed from any kind of vulgar anti-clericalism, this communism was “the advent of practical humanism,” for which it was no longer just a matter of fighting religious alienation, but also the concrete social alienation and poverty that give rise to the need for religion.

From the formative experience of 1848 to that of the Commune, the “real movement” tending toward the abolition of the established order took shape and gathered strength, casting aside the “characteristic nonsense” and making “the profound tone of oracles of scientific immaculateness” an object of ridicule. In other words, communism, which was initially a state of mind and a “philosophical communism”, was finding political expression. Over a quarter century, it completed its transformation – from its initial philosophical and utopian form into the at long last discovered political form of emancipation.

1. The words of emancipation have not emerged unscathed from the torments of the last century. Like the animals in the Lafontaine fable, “all were attacked, although all did not die.” Socialism, revolution, and even anarchy are not much better off than communism. Socialism had a hand in the assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, in colonial wars and in governmental

alliances where the content has grown thinner as the alliances have grown wider. A methodical ideological campaign has succeeded in making many people associate revolution with violence and terror. But of all the words that once drove forward great dreams and tremendous promise, communism has suffered the greatest damage because of the way it was captured by bureaucratic realpolitik and made subservient to a totalitarian enterprise. The question remains, however, as to whether among all these damaged words there are those worth repairing and setting back in motion.

2. We have to think about what happened to communism in the 20th century. The word and the object cannot be grasped outside of the times and the historical ordeals they were forced to endure. For most people, the massive use of the communist label to characterize the free-market authoritarian state in China will weigh much more heavily and for a far longer time than the fragile theoretical and experimental sprouts of the communist hypothesis. While it is tempting to avoid drawing a critical historical balance sheet, this would entail reducing the communist idea to timeless “invariants” – as if it were a synonym for unspecified ideas of justice and emancipation, and not the specific form of emancipation in the epoch of capitalist domination. The word would lose in political precision whatever it gains in ethical and philosophical traction. One crucial question is whether bureaucratic despotism is the legitimate continuation of the October Revolution — or rather the result of a bureaucratic counter-revolution, as illustrated not only by the trials, purges and mass deportation but also by the upheavals within society and the Soviet state apparatus.

3. A new lexicon cannot be invented by decree. Vocabulary is shaped over time, through use and experience. Yielding to the equation of communism with the Stalinist totalitarian dictatorship would be to capitulate in the face of the temporary victors, to confuse the revolution with the bureaucratic counter-revolution, and thereby to foreclose the possibility of those forks in the road that alone kept hope alive. And that would be to commit an irreparable injustice toward all those defeated women and men, anonymous or not, who lived out the communist ideal with intense passion and breathed life into it against caricatures and impostors. Shame on those who ceased to be communists when they ceased to be Stalinists and who were only communists for as long as they were Stalinists! [1]

4. Of all the ways to name squalid capitalism’s necessary and possible “other”, the word communism is the one that retains the greatest historical meaning and the most explosive programmatic charge. Against generalized predation and the privatization of the world, it is the one that best evokes ordinary sharing and equality; the sharing out of power; solidarity in opposition to selfish calculation and generalized competition; defence of humanity’s natural and cultural common goods; and the extension of a realm of free, decommodified services to include essential goods.

5. It is also the name for a different measure of social wealth than that of the law of value and of market valuation. “Free and undistorted” competition is based on the “theft of alien labour time.” It claims to quantify the unquantifiable; it seeks to reduce the incommensurable relationship between the human species and the natural conditions of our reproduction to its miserable common measure of abstract labour time. Communism is the name for another criterion of wealth, for ecological development that is qualitatively different from the race for quantitative growth. The logic of capital accumulation requires not only production for profit as opposed to social need, but also “the production of new consumption,” the permanent widening of the circle of consumption “through the creation of new needs and the creation of new use values” – and therefore “the exploitation of nature in its entirety” and “the exploitation of the earth in every way.” This devastating excess of capital is the driving force behind the need for a radical eco-communism.

6. In the *Communist Manifesto*, the question of communism primarily concerns the matter of property: “the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property” of the means of production and exchange – not to be confused with individual ownership of goods for personal use. In “all movements,” they “they bring to the front, as the

leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time." Of the ten points that conclude the second chapter, seven are about property forms: abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes; a heavy progressive or graduated income tax; abolition of all rights of inheritance of the means of production and exchange; the confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels; the centralization of credit in the hands of a public bank; the socialization of the means of transport and free public education for all; the creation of state-owned factories and instruments of production and the bringing into cultivation of wastelands.

Each one of these measures tends toward establishing the control of political democracy over the economy, of the primacy of the common good over selfish interests, and of public space over private space. It is not a matter of abolishing all forms of property, but only "modern bourgeois private property", the "mode of appropriation" based on the exploitation of the many by the few.

7. Marx wrote that between two rights – the right of owners to appropriate common goods; and the right to existence of the dispossessed – "force decides". The whole modern history of class struggle is the history of this conflict — from the peasant wars in Germany through the English and French revolutions, to the social revolutions of the last century. The conflict is settled by the emergence of a legitimacy that can be counterposed to ruling-class legality.

As the "at long last discovered political form of emancipation," as the "abolition" of state power, and as the fulfillment of the Social Republic, the Commune illustrates the emergence of this new legitimacy. It inspired the forms of popular self-organization and self-management that have taken shape during revolutionary crises: workers councils, soviets, militia committees, industrial cordons, neighbourhood associations and agricultural communes. All of these tend towards the deprofessionalization of politics, a change in the social division of labour, and the creation of conditions for the withering away of the state as a separate bureaucratic body.

8. Under the rule of capital, any apparent advance is compensated for by regression and destruction. It is ultimately about "a change of form of servitude." Communism requires a different idea and different criteria from those of return on investment and financial profitability. To begin with, there has to be a drastic reduction in mandatory work time and a change in the very notion of work; there cannot be individual fulfillment through recreation and "free time" while the worker remains alienated and beaten down at work. The communist project also requires a radical change in the relationship between men and women: one's experience of the relationship between genders is the first experience of otherness; as long as this relationship of oppression endures, anyone different because of their culture, colour or sexual orientation will be a victim of forms of discrimination and domination. Genuine progress can be found in the development and differentiation of needs which, combined in an original manner, make each man and woman a unique being whose singularity contributes to the enrichment of the species.

9. The *Manifesto* sees communism as "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." As such, it is the watchword for free individual fulfillment – to be confused with neither the mirage of individualism without individuality mired in the conformism promoted by advertising; nor the crude egalitarianism of barracks socialism. The development of the specific needs and talents of each person contributes to the universal development of the human species. Reciprocally, the free development of each person implies the free development of all, because emancipation is not a solitary pleasure.

10. Communism is not a pure idea or a doctrinaire model for society. It is not the name of a state regime or a new mode of production. Rather, it is the name of the movement which continuously goes beyond and does away with the established order. But it is also the goal which, arising from

this movement, guides it and enables us to see what brings us closer to this goal and what takes us further away. It is a shield against unprincipled politics, pointless action and day-to-day improvisation. As such, it is not a form of scientific knowledge of ends and means, but rather a regulating strategic hypothesis. Inextricably and simultaneously, it designates the unwavering dream of another world of justice, equality and solidarity; the continuous movement that seeks to overthrow the existing order in the epoch of capitalism; and the hypothesis that orients this movement toward a radical change in the relations of property and power – a far cry from accommodation to a lesser evil that is in fact the shortest path to the worst of all worlds.

11. We are seeing the social, economic, ecological and moral crisis of a capitalism that can only circumvent its own limitations by going down the path of increasing outrageous excess and unreason, threatening both our species and the planet itself. This puts the “relevance of radical communism” back on the agenda, in the way Walter Benjamin spoke of it when confronted with the dangers of the interwar period.

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P.S.

* Translation from French: Nathan Rao.

* The original French-language version of this essay first appeared in issue 4 of Contretemps (new series), December 2009. On ESSF: [Puissances du communisme](#)

Footnotes

[1] See Dionys Mascolo, *A la recherche d'un communisme de pensée*, Éditions Fourbis, 1993 [reedition in 2000??], p. 113.