Collective Action
Terrain for an Encounter
Social Anarchism and Communisation
2012

Retrieved on 2025-08-27 from <libcom.org/article/terrain-encounter-social-anarchism-and-communisation>

The following was published as an introduction and a primer for an anarchist reading of the following text — 'What is Communisation? — Leon de Mattis — as a result it assumes a certain understanding of concepts within communisation theory (outlined in that text) as well as being a rather cursory presentation of the controversies therein. Nonetheless we reproduce it by itself as a useful starting point for further investigation and debate into the relationship between these revolutionary theories.

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as class counter-power – not as a stated goal of the revolutionary process. Our role is to identify how that content relates to the existing struggles of the class, a process which aims to realise a true, consolidated program as realised **within** and **through** the ongoing experience of the class.

Whether we will indeed see such a "new movement" is completely open to question. We are, of course, while being at the same time hard-headed about the problems that face us, reluctant to entirely accept the negative prognosis of some within the communisation tradition. Capitalism may be a highly adaptive social system, but it is also, as present events make particularly clear, one consumed with crisis. In this context it is the content of communisation – of the call for the direct and immediate resolution of the injustice, humiliation and poverty daily inflicted on proletarians – that is perhaps most pertinent.

References

Bakunin, M. (1870) A Critique of the German Social Democratic Program. *In*: Dolgoff, S. (Ed.) *Bakunin on anarchism.* Black Rose Books, 1971.

Cafiero, C. (1880) *Revolution.* Black Cat Press: Edmonton, 2012

Kropotkin, P. (1892) *Conquest of Bread.* Black Rose Books, 1990.

Noy, B. (2011) *Communisation and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique and Contemporary Struggles.* Minority Compositions: New York

tarians? What processes and interventions play a part in the translation of the tendencies towards communism that exist in many social movements (however minor) and their translation into practice? In response we look to our own tradition of organisationalist anarchism and the role of revolutionary minorities as catalysts within wider struggle. We see this as distinct from the formalist characteristics that *TC* ascribes to the traditional Left and anarcho-syndicalist movement. The problem with these conceptions was not necessarily that they put forward the idea of leadership as a component force within revolutionary struggle; rather it was that this took on a substitutionist role in displacing the proletariat as agent of revolutionary change.

Rather, we see the role of a "party for proletarian self-abolition" emerging **within** the context of the autonomous movements of the class wherever they might appear, seeking to solidify that autonomy and propagating the practices of revolutionary expropriation and communisation as the only sensible response to the onslaught of global capitalism. Most importantly this is a movement that has to emerge within the context of the composition of the class itself and not something inserted by the ideas or organisation of revolutionary minorities. Although this is equally not to downplay the important role that both emergent and existing revolutionary minorities can play in that process of recomposition.

The content of our programme, the anarchist programme, does not seek to replicate the programmatism identified by TC -the reproduction of capitalist identities – principally that of workers – and integration into spheres of capitalist mediation. The anarchist programme is in line with the desire to see the formation of a new movement out of the crisis in programmatism by emphasising the content – social autonomy – over the means. To return to the work of Marx, any practical activity of class conscious workers has to insert itself (if it intends to be socially relevant) within the process of a class acting in itself to a class acting for itself. However, we identify social autonomy as a **medium** of that struggle – concretised

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perhaps inconsistent) vision of communisation as translated into praxis. As Noy (2011) notes, there is a risk with alternate visions that what is essentially being outlined is the necessary content and scale of revolutionary transformation in respect to the current context with little account of the possible or concrete actions leading to this. As he explains,

> "there is a risk that communisation becomes a valorization of only fleeting moments of revolt, of small chinks in which the light of revolution penetrates capitalist darkness; or that it become the promise of a total revolution that will achieve its aim in process, without any substantial account of how that might take place. This is not to call for a return to the 'party' form, or to rehash debates concerning Leninism (debates that might well be important), but rather to suggest that the difficulty in specifying agents of change can also flow into the difficulties in specifying the contents of change. Certainly, communisation was right to critique the formalism of the left, what TC calls its 'programmatism', that could only ever argue that once we had the correct form (Leninist party, workers' councils, etc.) communism would unfold. What is as yet unclear is what forms of struggle will make 'the poetry of the future'." (Noy, 2011: 14–15)

In response to this *Endnotes* only re-affirms that communisation "does not take the form of a practical prescription", but rather what is at stake is "**what the revolution is**". This is a criticism that may expose the limitations of a praxis which aims to create "communisation now", but still leaves open the question of subjectivity and the potential tasks (if any) of revolutionaries.

Our response is to ask more critically: what are the conditions that make communisation a credible and sensible action for prole-

ditions of nineteenth and early twentieth century capitalism, and the problematics evidenced in these are illustrative, e.g. the question of mass participation vs. minority action, the use of political violence etc., but this also has to be an ongoing process. Immediacy and immanence has to translate from a more concrete analysis of capitalism and class as it exists now. As specifists we argue that this is a critical component of the political work of the specific anarchist organisation.

In respect to this, as the article outlines, communisation presents a compelling analysis of the changed nature of both capitalism and the proletariat in a globalised, post-Fordist world. This analysis often takes on a more or less historically determinant role dependant on which particular writer is presenting it; irrespective of this they are still essential readings for contemporary anti-capitalists. This is especially so in respect to the situation of a profound crisis for revolutionary ideas (particularly in the dislocation of working class identity and the collapse of material bases for "workers power") that communisation has as its core, as well as its call to create new modes of thinking about contemporary struggles, things that both strongly resonate with our experience in *Collective Action*.

Areas for debate – organisationalism, the subjective moment and historical determinism

Finally then, we introduce a number of areas for debate in which we see the potential for critical exchange within the context of the ideas that communisation puts forward.

While it must be stated clearly that we have multiple, strong criticisms of the "drop-out" politics advocated by *Tiqqun*, seeing them as flawed, partial and fundamentally removed from the experience and activities of the wider class, credit must be given to (a

Communisation as a conception of the process of revolutionary transformation is intrinsically tied to the history of utopian thought. As a result it is possible to trace many communising sentiments as far back as the pre-modern, agrarian ideals of the Diggers, the writings of Thomas More, Babeuf, Robert Owen and many other early utopian socialists.

However as a current of modern communism, and therefore those ideas born from the experience of the First International (anarchism and Marxism included), communisation is more specifically understood as a product of the so-called French "Ultra-Left" of the 1970s. Communisation, in this sense, developed as a criticism of the orthodox Marxist theory of socialist transition and the role of a "socialist" state, arguing instead that communism was not a "stage" to be reached after the revolution but the essential content of the revolution itself. This, understandably, was informed by the actual experience of "socialist" states – which were authoritarian, imperialist and bureaucratic — but also a concentration on Marx's theory of the commodification of labour and the operation of the law of value as essential to understanding the persistence of capitalist organisational forms during even revolutionary upheavals and the key chain which the proletariat must break. Key writers within this tradition include *Theorie Communiste* (TC) and Gilles Dauvé.

While TC and Dauvé are continuing influences on contemporary communisation theory, collectives such as *SIC* present a far more eclectic understanding of the various theoretical influences that lead to the solidification of a "communisation current". This has even warranted the inclusion of non-Marxist revolutionary traditions. Noys, for example, describes communisation as a "mixing-up of insurrectionist anarchism, the communist ultra-left, post-autonomists, anti-political currents" among others.

The inclusion of anarchism within this list should not come as a great surprise to any individual with a firm understanding of social anarchism. While differences still remain in terms of

principle and general theoretical framework between anarchism and even libertarian traditions of Marxism, the essential content of communisation — the rejection of transition and reformism (often referred to as "programmatism"), attacking the law of value and communisation as revolutionary process – represent very common ground indeed. In fact these are many of the key principles that anarchists have historically held in opposition to Marxists in terms of the debates during and following the collapse of the International. Bakunin (1870), for example, was quick to criticise the supposedly progressive role that Marxists alleged early social democracy was playing on the workers' movement, stating clearly that any who believed a "political revolution" (i.e. the formation of a "socialist" state) could proceed a social revolution were no more than advocates of "bourgeois socialism".

Advocates of anarchist communism in particular had in the experience of its formation to consider exactly these issues in terms of the alternatives to the economic theories principally associated with anarchism – collectivism and co-operativism. Both of these, which argued for the continuation of some form of market mediation in a post-revolutionary society, made it necessary to consider the exact nature and content of the revolutionary process. It was Kropotkin (1892) who argued in opposition to the wages and accounting systems advocated by the collectivists of the dangers of the continuance of any of the existing systems of consumption or production, or partial conquests of the existing system and the need for a process of universal revolutionary expropriation –

> "on the day we strike at private property, under any one of its forms, territorial or industrial, we shall be obliged to attack them all. The very success of the Revolution will demand it."

Communism (or communisation) had to be both a universal and immediate process transforming all aspects of humanity's societal intersubjectivity and its relationship with its environment.

To argue otherwise was to open the door for reaction and counter-revolutionary measures. To put it simply, as Cafiero (1880) did, "anarchy and communism are the two essential terms of the revolution."[1]

It would be unfair, however, to simply characterise communisation as a more general re-affirmation of social anarchist principles (which would open up the question of what stake we do in fact have in this debate). For one thing, as Noy points out, the central claims of communisation are also "sites of dispute" and in this sense it is better to talk of conceptions of communisation than an individual theory. This is particularly the case in respect to the distance between the voluntaristic "drop-out" (referred to as "desertion") politics of *Tiqqun* (to be discussed further below) and the highly structuralist ideas of *Theorie Communiste* (with the British collective *Endnotes* somewhere in between). Picking apart these "disputes" give a much clearer idea of what is valuable in the communisation project for us, as social anarchists, as the essential questions that arise are of common concern – how does the immediacy (communism as a response to global capitalism) and immanence (communism as a relationship emerging from within capitalism) contained in our visions of political change translate into the theory and practice of revolutionaries?

Mixed into this debate is also an equally important question in terms of where these ideas have come from. While classical anarchists could state in a propagandistic sense that anarchist communism was both a desirable and possible alternative to capitalism it is also necessary to situate how and where a movement embodying these ideas can arise through the actions of the popular classes. Anarchists gave their varying answers to this in reference to the con-

[1] For more on Cafiero's understanding of the communist nature of the anarchist revolution see: 'Dadà, A. (1992) 'Anarchist communist theory and strategy and the anti-organizational deviation: The communist origins of anarchism', Comunismo Libertario, Anno 6 n.32 April 1992 http://www.fdca.it/fdcaen/historical/vault/comorig.htm