David Graeber
Communism
2010

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[See Chapter 2 for everyday communism in its various manifestations]

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lation of accounts; except that communism, of course, tends to be resolutely egalitarian in its basis.

Several radical implications follow. I will end with one. If we accept this definition, it gives us a new perspective on capitalism. It is one way of organizing communism. Any widely distributed economic principle must be a way of organizing communism, since co-operation and the trust intrinsic to baseline sociality will always be the foundations of human economy and society. The question for those of us who feel capitalism is a bad way of organizing communism or even an ultimately unsustainable one is what would a more just way of organizing communism look like? One specifically that would discourage the tendency of communistic relations to slide into forms of hierarchy. There are grounds for believing that the more creative the form of labour, the more egalitarian the forms of co-operation will tend to be. So perhaps the key question is: how might we contrive more egalitarian and creative forms of human co-operation that are less hierarchical and stultifying than those we currently know?

Further reading

Blanc, L. (1839) *L'Organisation du travail*. Au Bureau de Nouveau Monde, Paris. [First to say 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs']

Cohn, N. (1972) *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. Oxford University Press, New York. [A classic, but critical approach to medieval communistic movements]

Dawson, D. (1992) *Cities of the Gods: Communist Utopias in Greek Thought*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. [Good summary for the ancient world] Graeber, D. (2010) *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years*. Melville House, New York.

Contents

rely on the other to build their houses, provide ritual services, or bury each other's dead, purely whenever the other has a need.

Communistic relations exist in endless variety, but two common characteristics always leap to the fore. The first is that they are not based on calculation. It would never occur to one side of an Iroquois village, for example, to complain that they had buried six of the other side's dead this year and the other side had only buried two of theirs. This would be insane. When keeping accounts seems insane in this way, we are in the presence of communism. The reason it seems so is because everyone must die and the two sides of the village will always presumably be there to bury one another's dead, so keeping accounts is obviously pointless. This brings out the second point: unlike exchange, where debts can be cancelled out immediately, or in the relatively short term, communism is based on the presumption of eternity. One can act communistically with those one treats *as if* they will always exist, just as society will always exist, even if (as with, say, our mothers) we know at a more cerebral level that this is not really true.

We might thus analyse human relations as tending to take one of three forms: communistic relations, hierarchical relations, or relations of exchange. Exchange is based on principles of reciprocity, but this means that either relations are cancelled out immediately (as in the market, when there is immediate payment), or eventually, when a gift is returned or a debt repaid. Human relations based on exchange are inherently temporary, but egalitarian at least in the sense that when the payment is made, the two parties return to equal status. Hierarchy is not based on a principle of reciprocal exchange but rather of precedent: if one gives a gift to a superior or inferior, one is likely to be expected to do it again under similar circumstances. Hierarchy resembles communism in that it is assumed to be permanent, and therefore tends not to involve the calcu-

tain communism of the senses at the root of most things we consider fun.

Conclusions

The sociology of everyday communism is a potentially enormous field, but one which, owing to our peculiar ideological blinkers, we have been unable to write because we have been largely unable to see the object. Marcel Mauss for instance spoke of 'individualistic communism,' such as exists between close kin such as mothers and their children, usually siblings, but also between close friends or blood brothers. In this sense any 'society' might be imagined as threaded by endless communistic networks. In such relationships, everything might be shared if the need arises. In other relations between individuals, each is limited to only a certain kind of claim on the other: to help them repair their fishnets, aid them in war, or provide cattle for a wedding feast. Still these can be considered communistic if the claim can be exercised whenever there is a need. Similarly, there are groups within which all members can make certain unlimited claims of this sort when in need: mutual aid societies, mutual insurance associations, and the like. Modern insurance firms are, ironically, commercial transformations of an essentially communist principle. Finally any self-organized social group, from a corporation to a football club to a religious confraternity, will have particular rules about which sorts of things must be shared, and about collective access to their common resources. This of course shades into the literature on the collective management of the commons, but it's important to note that often, social groups (starting with clans, villages, or the like) will make entirely artificial rules to create mutual communistic dependence. Anthropologists for example are familiar with the existence of moiety structures, where a community divides itself into two arbitrary divisions, each of which must

Communism may be divided into two chief varieties, which I will call 'mythic' and 'everyday' communism. They might as easily be referred to as 'ideal' and 'empirical' or even 'transcendent' and 'immanent' versions of communism.

Mythic Communism (with a capital C) is a theory of history, of a classless society that once existed and will, it is hoped, someday return again. It is notoriously messianic in its form. It also relies on a certain notion of totality: once upon a time there were tribes, some day there will be nations, organized entirely on communistic principles: that is, where 'society' — the totality itself — regulates social production and therefore inequalities of property will not exist.

Everyday communism (with a small c) can only be understood in contrast by rejecting such totalizing frameworks and examining everyday practice at every level of human life to see where the classic communistic principle of 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs' is actually applied. As an expectation of mutual aid, communism in this sense can be seen as the foundation of all human sociality anywhere; as a principle of co-operation, it emerges spontaneously in times of crisis; as solidarity, it underlies almost all relations of social trust. Everyday communism then is not a larger regulatory body that co-ordinates all economic activity within a single 'society,' but a principle that exists in and to some extent forms the necessary foundation of any society or human relations of any kind. Even capitalism can be seen as a system for managing communism (although it is evidently in many ways a profoundly flawed one). Let me take each of these in turn.

Mythic Communism

This is an idea of a society that either once existed or might exist at some time in the future, which is free of all property divisions and where all things are shared in common. Secondar-

ily, it refers to social experiments, often religious in inspiration, which try to recreate such arrangements on a smaller scale in the present day. Finally, the term has been applied more loosely to mass political movements or regimes that aim to bring such a society about in the future.

Social movements that aimed to abolish all property divisions are occasionally attested for the ancient world, from the Chinese 'School of the Tillers' (c. 500 BCE) to Persian Mazdakites (c. 500 CE), as are smaller sectarian groups (such as certain groups of Essenes) who formed utopian communities based on communistic principles. Owing to the very limited nature of our sources, it's extremely difficult to establish how common such movements really were, let alone to get an accurate picture of their aims and ideologies. Most of human history — especially the history of Africa, the Pacific and the Americas — is simply lost to us. Yet these are precisely the parts of the world where such movements are likely to have been most widespread and successful. Many of the notoriously egalitarian societies of Amazonia and North America, for example, lived on lands that, centuries earlier, had seen complex urban civilizations. Are they better seen as refugees from the collapse of those civilizations or as descendants of the rebels who overthrew them? If the latter, might this suggest that their ideas and practices with regard to land, nature, and property (which inspired many early European conceptions of 'primitive communism' in the first place) are themselves successful revolutionary ideologies of generations past? It seems likely, but we simply do not know. Even African hunter-gatherers like the !Kung, Hadza or Pygmies, so often treated as living fossils of the Paleolithic, or egalitarian pastoralists like the Nuer or Maasai, live in areas where there have been farmers, states and kingdoms for thousands of years. It is not at all clear how much their rejection of individualist property regimes or, for that matter, anything else about their social organization really resembles what was common in the Paleolithic or how much they rep-

we comply without even thinking about it. The same is true if another person's need — even a stranger's — is spectacular and extreme: if they are drowning, for example. If a child has fallen into the subway tracks, we assume anyone who is capable of helping them up will do so.

I call this 'baseline communism,' the understanding that, unless people consider themselves so completely inimical to one another and if the need is considered great enough or the cost reasonable enough, the principle of 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs' will apply. Of course, different communities apply very different standards to the question of what is a reasonable need: in an impersonal urban environment it might be limited to lights and directions; in many human societies, a direct request for food or some other item of common consumption may be impossible to refuse. This is especially true of the most ordinary, everyday sorts of food, which in many societies, for this very reason, become ways of maintaining social boundaries: as for instance in many European and Middle Eastern societies where blood-feuds prevailed, men would hesitate to eat bread and salt with a potential rivals because, if they did, it would no longer be permissible to harm such a person.

Sharing food is indeed still considered to be the foundation of morality, but of course it's also one of the chief forms of pleasure (who would really want to eat a delicious meal by themselves?). Feasts are in most places seen as the apex of sociability. The elaborate games, contests, pageants and performances that mark a popular festival, are, like the structures of exchange that characterize society itself, built on top of a kind of communistic base. In this case the experience of shared conviviality is not only the moral basis of society but also its most fundamental source of pleasure. Solitary pleasures will always exist no doubt, but for most human beings, even now, the most pleasurable activities almost usually involve sharing something: music, food, liquor, drugs, gossip, drama, bed. There is thus a cer-

IBM in Silicon Valley in the 1980s, forming little democratic circles of twenty to forty people with their laptops in each other's garages.

This is presumably also why in the immediate wake of great disasters — a flood, blackout, revolution or economic collapse — people tend to behave the same way, reverting to a kind of rough-and-ready communism. Suddenly, if only for a short time, hierarchies, markets and the like become luxuries that no one can really afford

2. Communism as baseline sociality

Anyone who has lived through such a moment can speak to its peculiar qualities, the way that strangers become sisters and brothers and human society itself seems to be reborn. This is important because we are not simply talking about co-operation. In fact, *communism is the foundation of all human sociability*. This is what makes society possible. There is always an assumption that anyone who is not actually an enemy can be expected to act on the principle of 'from each according to their abilities …' at least to a limited extent: for example, if you need to work out how to get somewhere and a person has the ability to give you directions, then they will.

Conversation is a domain particularly disposed to communism. This is not to deny the importance of lies, insults, putdowns and other sorts of verbal aggression — but most of them are built on a presumption of communism, in the sense that an insult does not sting unless you assume that people normally take others' feelings into consideration; and it's impossible to lie to someone who does not expect you normally to tell the truth. It is surely significant that, when we truly wish to break off amicable relations with someone, we stop speaking to them entirely. The same goes for small courtesies

like asking for a light or even a cigarette. In such cases the costs of providing are clearly considered to be so minimal that

resent a self-conscious rejection of the values of surrounding populations.

To return to what we still like to call, for no particularly good reason, the 'Western tradition,' the idea that property divisions have not always existed recurs often in ancient authors and seems to have been commonly held. It came to be enshrined in Roman Law through certain passages of Justinian's *Digest* which hold that property divisions are not based on the laws of nature but, like war, government, slavery and all forms of social inequality, arose only later through the *ius gentium* (law of nations) — essentially, the usages of war. These passages were widely discussed when Roman law was revived in twelfth-century Western Europe, where attempts were made to square them with biblical accounts of Eden and with the teachings of Jesus, the practices of the Apostles and the writings of some of the early Church Fathers (such as Saint Basil) who opposed the private ownership of wealth. The debate over 'apostolic poverty' that raged throughout the thirteenth century, most famously between the Franciscans and Dominicans, was above all about the legitimacy of private property itself and the feasibility of creating a society without it. Such arguments within the Church echoed those of popular religious movements — now remembered as 'heresies' — that became quite common during the later Middle Ages in Europe, many of which, like the Taborites, whose armies came to dominate much of Central Europe in the fifteenth century, were explicitly communist. Similar movements of religious communism emerged in early modern times, from the Diggers in England to the Anabaptists in Germany, almost always to be harshly suppressed by the authorities. One can find similar Christian communism reflected in movements such as the Taiping rebels who at certain times controlled substantial portions of nineteenth-century China.

It is a notorious feature of popular insurrections in traditional societies that they tend to appeal either to a utopian view

of a past social order or to a messianic view of a future society shown by divine revelation or sometimes, both. The idea that there was once a time when social divisions did not exist ('when Adam delved and Eva span, who then was the gentleman?') and that such a time will come again follows naturally from this messianic vision.

It is not surprising then that a similar historical vision often came to be invoked within the workers' movements of the nineteenth century. It was in this context that the word 'Communism' first came to be employed in its present sense, somewhere between 1835 and 1845. For Marx, Communism was the final end of revolutionary struggle, to be fully achieved only after an indeterminate political conflict, and while he argued that in one sense communism was already immanent in workers' present-day self-organization against capitalism, he saw that struggle as an ongoing process whose end simply could not be imagined using the bourgeois categories that existed in his day. Hence his notorious refusal to describe what communism might be like. In the one, famous instance where he even came close to such a description, in *The German Ideology*, he did not even attempt a science fiction vision but preferred to fall back on images clearly inspired by 'primitive communism' once more:

> *As soon as the division of labour begins, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, fisherman, shepherd or a critic and he must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning,*

division of labour that says some people get coffee and others will not. If someone fixing a broken water pipe says 'hand me the wrench,' their co-worker will not generally say 'and what do I get for it?' even if they are working for Exxon-Mobil, Burger King or Goldman Sachs. The reason — ironically, given the conventional wisdom that 'communism just doesn't work'– is simple efficiency: if you really care to get something done, allocating tasks by ability and giving people whatever they need to do the job is obviously the most efficient way to go about it. What this means of course is that command economies — putting government bureaucracies in charge of co-ordinating every aspect of the production and distribution of goods and services within a given national territory — tend to be much less efficient than other available alternatives. In view of this, it is hard to imagine how states like the Soviet Union could have existed, let alone maintain themselves as world powers. The answer is that even the most totalitarian bureaucracies can only function through informal interpretation of the rules and co-operation between people who work in them (see *Informal Economy*).

One might even say that it's one of the scandals of capitalism that most firms operate internally on communistic principles. True, they tend not to operate particularly democratically. Most often they are organized by military-style top-down chains of command. But still, there is often an interesting tension here, because actually, top-down chains of command are not really very efficient (they tend to promote stupidity among those on top, resentment among those on the bottom). The more one has to improvise, the greater the need for democratic co-operation. Inventors have always known this and start-up capitalists and computer engineers have recently rediscovered the principle: not only with things like freeware, which everyone talks about, but even in the organization of their businesses. Apple Computers is a famous example: it was founded by (mostly Republican) computer engineers who broke from

In order to do so, it seems best to start from the classical definition of communism — 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs' — and then examine those forms of organization or human relationships that are organized according to that principle, wherever one happens to find them. The origin of this phrase, incidentally, is interesting. It is widely, but incorrectly attributed to Karl Marx. It appears to have been a slogan current in the French workers' movement in the first decades of the nineteenth century; and it first appears in print in a book called *L'Organisation du travail* by the socialist agitator Louis Blanc in 1839. Blanc used it to describe the organizational principles of the 'social workshops' he wished the government to set up as a new basis for industry.

Marx only took up the phrase much later, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in 1875, and he used it in his own idiosyncratic way: for the situation that he imagined would take hold in society as a whole once technology had reached the point of guaranteeing absolute material abundance, thereby making genuine human freedom possible. The idea that communism in Louis Blanc's sense, as a certain way of coordinating labour or human activity, might exist in any human society however is not entirely new. Peter Kropotkin, for instance, who is often referred to as the founder of 'anarchist communism,' in *Mutual Aid* (1902) implies something very much like the following analysis when he writes that communism could best be seen simply as human co-operation, and co-operation was the ultimate basis of all human achievement and indeed of human life. However, what I am suggesting is even broader in scope.

1. Communism as co-operation

This is the way almost everyone behaves if they are collaborating on some common project. At least they do unless there is some specific reason not to — for instance, a hierarchical

> *fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic.*

Obviously all this is in a manner of speaking; Marx was not suggesting that after the revolution most people would actually spend their time occupied mainly in hunting and fishing — although he might have used those examples in order to suggest that, under communism, the artificial division we make between (painful) work and (pleasurable) leisure would no longer make much sense. His real point here is that what we call 'private property,' 'the division of labour' and 'social inequality' are all ultimately the same thing; and a free society, therefore, could only be one that abolishes all three of them. This is why he insisted that under Communism we would become, as he put it, a Species Being, defined only by our common humanity, rather than being split into different sorts of person who do different things. A practical manifestation of this would have to be one where we are all free to move back and forth between roles — even, apparently, gender roles, since Marx begins his discussion of the division of labour with the division between men and women — but, by appealing to an obviously fanciful primitive vision, Marx intentionally avoids even speculating about how this might actually work out.

Above all, for Marx, Communism meant overcoming the alienation produced by property regimes, whereby our own deeds return to us in strange unrecognizable forms, making it impossible for human beings to create together a world that we might actually wish to live in:

> *Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e.*

human) being — a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man — the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.

After the release of Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848, the word came to be almost indelibly identified with their specific political project, and the equally specific theoretical analysis of class, capitalism, labour and exploitation on which it was built. Nonetheless, it took some time before 'communist' simply became a word for a kind of Marxist. For instance, the term 'libertarian communist' was often used as a synonym for 'anarchist.' During much of the nineteenth century, references to 'communists' in mainstream literature most probably referred neither to Marxists nor to anarchists but simply to proponents and creators of communes or similar utopian experiments — 'intentional communities' as they would be called today — a form of political action almost uniformly disdained by Marxists. A good example of this usage is Charles Nordhoff's famous study, *The Communistic Societies of the United States*, published in 1875. This usage of 'communism' never completely went away, and has returned in essays like *Call* and *The Coming Insurrection* by the 'Invisible Committee' today, where 'communism' is used to refer simply to the internal organization of communes.

With the success of the Russian revolution this emphasis did largely change, and over the course of the twentieth century 'Communism' has been used more and more to refer to the ideology of Communist Parties and then, by extension, to what came to be known by their opponents in the Cold War as 'Communist regimes.' As a result, for many, if not most of the world's population, 'Communism' has come to mean 'that economic system that prevailed under the command economies of the former Soviet Union and its allies, Maoist China, and other Marxist regimes.' There is a profound historical irony here, since none of those regimes ever claimed to have actually achieved Communism as they themselves defined it. They referred to their own systems rather as 'socialist' — embodying a transitional period of the dictatorship of proletariat that would only be transformed into actual Communism at some unspecified point in the future, when technological advance, greater education and prosperity would eventually lead to the withering away of the state.

Everyday communism

The phrase 'actually existing socialism' was coined as a term of critique: socialist revolutionaries talked incessantly about regimes they wished to create, but in almost no case wished their visions to be judged by the actual achievements of regimes that referred to themselves as 'socialist.' This raises the question: is it possible to speak of 'actually existing' communism? If we view things within a statist framework and look for some unit which can be designated a 'society' organized on communistic principles, then clearly the answer would have to be no. However this is not the only possible approach. I prefer to identify a principle that, in combination with others, can be found in all human societies to a variable degree. Because of its mundane character, making it almost invisible to the normal gaze, I call it 'everyday communism.'