Don't Mourn, Organize!
Is Communism a Pipe Dream—or a Viable Future?

by Gabriel Kuhn

Communism’s reputation plummeted after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. While free-market advocates hailed the “end of history,” Communist parties around the world entered a race to change their name. Awkward paraphrases with the obligatory qualifier “democratic” abounded. The financial crisis of 2007, however, rekindled the interest in alternatives to capitalism. Neoliberalism’s golden age was over, and communism was back on the agenda. In 2009, prominent left-wing intellectuals, including Jean-Luc Nancy, Toni Negri, and Slavoj Žižek, met in London for a conference titled “The Idea of Communism,” which proved hugely popular. The Guardian ran the headline: “Move over Jacko, Idea of Communism is hottest ticket in town this weekend.” Similar events followed across Europe. In Latin America, popular socialist movements turned to Cuban communists for inspiration, and Marxist authors presented us with books such as The Communist Hypothesis (Alain Badiou), The Communist Horizon (Jodi Dean), or The Communist Necessity (J. Moufawad-Paul). Those less inclined to awaken ideological debates of old threw related, yet less controversial terms into the mix: “commons,” “communalism,” or “communitarianism.”

Let us recall the perhaps most concise definition of communism in Marx’s work. In the Economic and Political Manuscripts of 1844, he says:

Communism as the positive abolition of private property as human self-alienation, means the real appropriation of human entity by and for man; thus the complete, conscious return—accomplished inside all the riches of the past development—of man for himself qua social, that is, as a human being. This Communism is, as perfect Naturalism, identical with Humanism, and as perfect Humanism identical with Naturalism; it is the real solution of the antagonism between man and nature, between man and man; the genuine solution of the conflict between existence and essence, between objectivisation and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. It is history’s solved riddle and is conscious of being the solution.

This is somewhat abstract, but it is not difficult to spell out some concrete implications: communal
property; collective production and allocation of goods; legal and political equality; social and ecological sustainability; community instead of egoism; solidarity instead of competition; personal fulfillment instead of alienation. These principles guide leftists to this day, at least if they dare to dream beyond the welfare state and an alternative (any alternative) to Trump. But we must be clear: the realization of these principles requires radical change; that is, a socialization of industries, an expropriation of private fortunes, a collectivization of agriculture, a redistribution of global wealth, land reform, participative democracy, and the end of the nation state. It is no stroll to communism. This might also be the reason its resurrection has come with a twist...

While Marx and Engels opposed any form of utopianism and stressed the scientific foundation of their communist convictions (historical materialism), the current communist revival has a strong utopian bent. People longing to do away with capitalism’s inherent contradictions (exploitation, the gap between the rich and the poor, social hierarchies, and so on) have embraced communism as an abstract ideal, but the effect on real politics has been limited. In some places, nominally communist parties still wield political power. In Cuba, China, and Vietnam, communist one-party systems avoided post-Soviet collapse. In Nepal and the Indian state of Kerala, communists have been voted into government. Greece’s governing party Syriza is the result of a coalition that included several communist organizations. The politics of these parties, however, are not communist. They are characterized either by state-capitalist compromise, or by continuing the social-democratic policies abandoned by social-democratic parties. That the communist revival mainly parades communism as an abstract ideal has been confirmed by one of its most prominent figureheads, the French philosopher Alain Badiou. In 2008, he stated in an article in New Left Review that communism was “an Idea with a regulatory function, rather than a programme.”

The Anarchist Challenge

That communism has lost its practical relevance despite its theoretical resurrection is reflected in the activist culture that has taken hold of the Global North in the past twenty-five years. The collapse of state socialism meant a boost for anarchism. Anarchists had been longtime critics of state socialism, and anarchism was not tainted by the history of political purges, labor camps, and totalitarian rule. Besides, history seemed to have proven anarchist predictions right: conquering state power would not lead to a better world, only to new forms of oppression, and communism would remain far off. (There are, not least in America, anarchist currents that are decidedly anti-communist, but they are not considered in this essay. I refer to the tradition of left-wing anarchism that has always shared the communist ideal and whose quarrels with Marxists concerned questions of strategy.) The anarchist boom received particular recognition after the now legendary “Battle of Seattle” of 1999, in which a broad alliance of trade unionists and social movements succeeded in disrupting the WTO summit. Three years later, the Village Voice, quoting UC Santa Cruz professor Barbara Epstein, called anarchism “the pole that everyone revolves around,’ much as Marxism was in the ’60s,” meaning that “even young activists who don’t identify as anarchists have to position themselves in relation to its values.”
In 2004, David Graeber, author of *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, declared anarchism “the revolutionary movement of the twenty-first century.” This was the heyday of the infamous “movement of movements”: an assemblage of young activists and seasoned organizers, picketers and tree-sitters, urban youth and coal miners, and so forth. People got involved in everything from labor strikes and anti-sweatshop campaigns to urban gardening and animal rights. In particular, young activists who had come of age in the neoliberal era found a home here: you did not have to adhere to any particular ideology, obey party orders, sit through long meetings, do tedious bureaucratic work, or worry about your impulses being tied down by revolutionary discipline. You could simply go to where the action was and get engaged in whatever you felt “inspired to do” or “up for.” There was always something to be done, often with the promise of immediate thrill and satisfaction: a protest, a blockade, a boycott, a free festival. People launched a mind-boggling diversity of projects, celebrated—sometimes ludicrously, often legitimately—as small-scale anticipations of communism. Many of these projects were manifestations of what anarchist author Hakim Bey dubbed a “Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ)”:  

The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it. ... The TAZ is thus a perfect tactic for an era in which the State is omnipresent and all-powerful and yet simultaneously riddled with cracks and vacancies. And because the TAZ is a microcosm of that “anarchist dream” of a free culture, I can think of no better tactic by which to work toward that goal while at the same time experiencing some of its benefits here and now.

Not every TAZ is communist, of course, but many left-wing activists try to use the framework it provides to experiment with communist values: private property and the profit motive are shunned, sharing economies and consensus decision-making embraced. Of course, the idea to provide glimpses of a communist future in the here and now is nothing new. Such initiatives, most notably in the form of cooperatives or communes, have existed for a long time. John Curl, author of *For All the People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation, Cooperative Movements, and Communalism in America*, stresses their importance for realizing that different forms of human relationships are possible:

Many people only experience cooperation outside of their work lives, in their private lives, with family, friends, and associates. But cooperative instincts always remain there inside the human condition like seeds waiting for the right conditions. When an oppressive society reaches a dead end, a new generation rejects the dying husk and reinvents its world, and that creative act is always based on mutual aid and cooperation.

*The Missing Link*

No matter how artificial, limited, and compromised cooperatives, communes, and temporary autonomous zones might be, they must not be written off as insignificant islands of retreat. They provide inspiration and hope, are sites of social learning and experimentation, facilitate teaching and networking, help movements survive in times of crises, and enable discussion and evolvement. Yet
capitalism has always found ways to incorporate them, and it is true that they do not undermine the system at large. Furthermore, in the context of current activist culture, they are often the result of an activism so focused on the immediate, local, and singular that the broader picture—or, indeed, any common goal—is lost. J. Moufawad-Paul has called the result “movementism,” defining it as “the assumption that specific social movements, sometimes divided along lines of identity or interest, could reach a critical mass and together, without any of that Leninist nonsense, end capitalism.”

What we have today is a future communist ideal, and a colorful web of real or alleged micro-manifestations of communism in the here and now. This is also reflected in left-wing organizing. On the one hand, there is the “old left,” tied to the communist ideal, but with an astounding inability to mobilize anyone outside of its own circles. On the other hand, there is the “new left,” so strongly tied to the here and now that mere discussions about goals or strategies are eyed with suspicion. What is missing is the link: an answer to the question of how we can get from the micro-examples to communist societies. German theorist Bini Adamczak, author of *Communism for Kids*, has summarized the problem with regard to the two big revolutionary waves that swept through Europe in the twentieth century. Reflecting on the events of 1917 and 1968, she writes in her latest book, *Beziehungsweise Revolution*: “The communist element was lost twice: once in totality, and once between singularities.”

The Danish revolutionary Torkil Lauesen spent several years in prison in the 1990s due to his involvement in a group that committed some of the biggest robberies in Danish history in order to provide material support for Third World liberation movements. The story has been documented in the book *Turning Money Into Rebellion*. In his autobiography *The Global Perspective*, soon to be released in English, Lauesen distinguishes between three phases of revolutionary struggle: the short term (1 – 5 years), the medium term (5 – 10 years), and the long term (20 – 50 years). It is the medium that he considers most important, but also most neglected:

The *medium term* is the most interesting from a strategic perspective. Here, militants can make a crucial difference if they find the most efficient forms of organizing and develop the right ideas to move forward. Sadly, this term has long been neglected by the left. There are regularly heated discussions about both the short term (“What slogans will we use at the protest tomorrow?”) and the long term (“What does a socialist society look like?”), but the strategic dimensions of political struggle have fallen through the cracks. Yet, the right strategy will decide whether capitalism’s crisis will result in socialism or something much worse.

I agree. If we want to be serious about communism beyond micro-examples, we need to discuss strategy.

*Organizing*

The forms of organization this requires must go further than the affinity group but stop short of the vanguard party. Affinity groups do not answer the demand for mass organizing that mass societies
require. But neither do vanguard parties. They attempt to lead the masses, not organize them, and that’s a big difference. The party model might in general be insufficient for mass organizing today. The networks that movementism gave way to are perhaps more appropriate, but only if they can overcome the assumption that the looser the connections are, the better. This assumption is wrong. Loose connections might suit the needs of an ever more flexible market economy, but not of effective political organizing. To “have contacts” is not enough; you need to do something with them. And you need to stay committed to the projects you initiate. I will try to flesh this out by listing the aspects I consider most important in organizing today.

1. We need to leave sectarianism behind. The left is weak and each additional division weakens it further. In a 2011 article titled “Movement, Cadre, and the Dual Power,” Joel Olson made a simple, yet very important observation: “We believe that the old arguments between communists and anarchists are largely irrelevant today.” This must be our point of departure.

2. We need theory that is adapted to our times. It must overcome the false contradiction between “class struggle” and “cultural struggle.” There is a fruitful debate about a “new class politics” in the German-speaking world. Sebastian Friedrich, one of its main proponents, drew these conclusions in an article published by Counterpunch:

A new class politics does not relegate gender, race, and imperial legacy to issues that are supplementary to class relations. These issues, and the struggles they imply, are an integral part of class relations. In fact, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial struggles are the base on which effective unified class struggles must be launched. ... A new class politics must clarify where and how the specific experiences of workers based on gender, race, citizenship, and other factors converge. It must reveal the overlapping interests of workers as members of the class. This makes common struggles possible.

3. We must not rely on the “objective forces” identified by historical materialism. Subjective forces are important for change. It is easy to underestimate how much neoliberalism shapes the lives even of people opposed to it. In the Global North, political activism has become a leisure activity that people engage in or not, depending on their mood, the identity they are trying to create for themselves, or the road of “self-improvement” they have chosen. In almost all cases, it is secondary to professional careers and personal comforts. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to get anything done. There is nothing wrong with being “voluntaristic.” Radical change is dependent on people wanting radical change, no matter how much Marxists still insist on economic realities determining individual consciousness and, therefore, individuals’ capacity for political action. An organization’s efficiency relies on the individual qualities of its members, that is, responsibility, reliability, and accountability.

_Making Things Concrete_

If we want communism to be more than a pipe dream, we have to be willing to face reality, even if it confuses, challenges, or even frightens us. We cannot ignore struggles that refer to communist ideals,
simply because they aren’t the struggles we’d like to see. If our enthusiasm for communism remains limited to lecture halls and conference rooms, it won’t be anything the powerful will lose sleep over.

The struggle that currently receives most attention among communists of all stripes in the Global North is the one in Kurdistan. In Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), forces affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, PKK, have established a direct-democratic council system, based on the “democratic confederalism” conceived by the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan describes democratic confederalism as “a non-state political administration or a democracy without a state,” and cites Murray Bookchin’s “libertarian municipalism” as a major influence. There are people who celebrate this as a form of anarchism. But as an observant friend of mine noted, an anarchism that is imposed by a leader is a strange kind of anarchism. Besides, there are reports from the ground that challenge the libertarian narrative. The editors of Lower Class Magazine, an online project dedicated to “low budget underground journalism,” travel regularly to Kurdistan and have the following to say:

The Western left sees Rojava as the realization of a democracy “from below”: communes, councils, a confederation; no hierarchies, no party, a spontaneous mass project. Anarchists and “libertarian” communists wax lyrically about the dawn of a direct-democratic Shangri-La. [...] Yes, the change in Rojava comes “from below. It is based on the power of the people, no doubt. Communes and councils are at the heart of decision-making, that is true. But as essential is the following: None of this would be happening if it wasn’t for a vanguard leading the way. The revolution in Rojava proves that Leninist vanguardism is correct, not false.

Another European journalist visiting the region noted that the cadres of the People’s Protection Units, YPG, relate to the councils of Rojava in the same way the Bolshevists related to the councils of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, there are troubling pragmatic alliances, which have included collaboration with the U.S. military. Yet the people behind Rojava Solidarity NYC sum up the situation well:

Rojava, an autonomous region in Northern Syrian, the largest revolutionary territory of the 21st century, has projected anarchist and communist ideas to the forefront of political discourse and into the pragmatic and messy reality of everyday life. ... From communal relationships to the councils and self-defense units, we can assess numerous potential routes by which we can create liberated communities at home, while learning from their possibilities and pitfalls.

Rojava won’t be the answer to our problems. No single struggle ever is. But the developments in Rojava challenge us to discuss real-life strategies for radical change. It is easy to focus on shortcomings, but if this is all we ever do, where will it get us?

Councils are essential for communist projects. Their power, which is based on the direct involvement and active participation of the masses, is curtailed as soon as political interest groups, such as parties, assume control over them. This conviction separated historical council communism, represented by figures such as Otto Rühle and Anton Pannekoek, from the Bolsheviks. Pannekoek wrote:

The councils are no government; not even the most central councils bear a governmental character. For
they have no means to impose their will upon the masses; they have no organs of power. All social power is vested in the hands of the workers themselves.

Unless we want the transition to communism to entail enormous human suffering (which would be utterly absurd), we need to consider the fact that billions of people will need to be fed, sheltered, nursed, provided with access to clean water, and so forth. To produce according to the needs of the people rather than the needs of profit requires enormous efforts in planning, especially if current living standards are to be upheld. (Living standards don’t equal standards of consumption—the standards of consumption in the Global North cannot and should not be upheld, since they are unsustainable.) Furthermore, we must collectively dispose of industrial and nuclear waste, weapons of mass destruction, and ticking environmental bombs. None of this is possible without a level of centralization, no matter how visceral the reactions are that the word might provoke in some circles.

Only a council system can combine the centralization required by the complexity of modern societies with participative democracy. Centralization requires formal structures. Participative democracy requires these structures to be transparent. They need to be bottom-up rather than top-down, and delegates must be directly responsible to their constituencies. The council system is the only administrative framework to provide that.

Romanticizing particular struggles rarely does any good, no matter how council-based they are—or claim to be. If radicals in the Global North fail to address concerns with respect to struggles in the Global South, it is not respectful but condescending. To escape into the intellectual poverty of cultural relativism doesn’t help. We can only evolve from critical engagement. But real-life struggles are our starting point. It makes little sense to demand struggles for communism if we shy away from engaging with the ones that exist. Arundhati Roy put it simply after spending time with Maoist Naxalites in the forests of central India, an experience she chronicled in the book Walking with the Comrades. She said: “I went in because I wanted to tell the story of who these people are.” This informs revolutionary theory and, in turn, improves revolutionary practice. Most importantly, it is crucial for saving communist struggles from betraying their own principles. Everyone can watch failure unfold. The challenge lies in helping to prevent it.

No matter the outcome, each struggle aiming at the manifestation of communist principles is a wake-up call. Don’t mourn, organize!

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