

The Communist Tendency in History

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Originally published on the [Practical History website](http://www.practical-history.com/). They included a note that stated "this essay discusses the meaning of communism with examples from Pierre Clastres, Gerrard Winstanley and Moses Hess. It was written, we believe, by 'M', a member of the French-based communist group L'Insecurite Sociale in the early 1980s." The French original is available at http://www.geocities.ws/hemeis2003/IS_85.html#_Toc111977878 and indicates that this is a transcript of a presentation delivered in 1985.

What are, in the different periods of the history of our species, the tendencies in human behaviour which have been in the direction of what we call communism? To answer this, it is perhaps necessary first of all to specify again what we do and do not mean by communism.

Not a political programme

With regard to the definition which one can give of this term, negatively, communism is not a programme of a series of measures which one opposes in a competitive way to other programmes which exist in society, and which one tries to make victorious either by persuasion or by force of arms.

Therefore, being a communist cannot mean aspiring to capture the State and to substitute a new power which would be a just, fair power, the reasonable rational power of the communists – or of those using the name of communism – in contrast to the unjust power of the bourgeoisie. We do not work for the triumph of a new programme, that is, for the triumph of politics because the triumph of politics and with it the triumph of the State has already been realised before our very eyes – by the capitalist class.

If a communist revolution takes place, it will be the reverse and not the result of this tendency which has taken place under the domination of the bourgeoisie. It is for this reason that we do not use, when describing communism, the terms democracy and dictatorship, which we think are judicial, legal forms, legal definitions which have been associated with different forms of state power which we do not think are adequate for describing communism. In fact, in the societies which we have known, dictatorship, like democracy, has suited the need to maintain a certain social cohesion where this cohesion would not exist by itself, either by coercion, i.e. dictatorship, or by the idealisation of representation where there is a certain harmony between the classes, as in democracy. These forms of dictatorial or democratic organisation have suited societies which, through their own development, have broken the traditional and personal bonds which had existed previously between groups and individuals.

Compared to that, communism does not represent the outcome of one of these tendencies, but the manifestation of other relations between people, generally called the human community. Therefore, the communist revolution cannot be from the outset, the

imposition of false relations between people, whether by democratic or dictatorial measures, but can only be the founding act of this human community. To believe that it is necessary, to arrive at this human community, to reconstitute in a democratic or despotic fashion a fictitious new community, even temporarily, which would replace the fictitious communities which we have already known, would be to establish from the outset this communist movement on the negation of its dynamic: the constitution of new human relationships.

Not an economy

If, for us, communism cannot be a political programme, neither is it a new type of economic organisation, nor a new form of property-holding. In fact, communism will not establish 'common' property, since the very idea of property indicates the monopolisation by one group of people of the possession of some things to the exclusion of other people. In communism, the circulation of goods cannot be done by the methods familiar to the world in which we live (the method of exchange, the exchange of some goods for others).

In a society from which no-one is excluded, exchange cannot exist, buying and selling cannot exist, therefore money cannot exist. There can only be collective or individual use of what the community produces. Therefore a substitution of what we have known, the logic of exchange, by a new logic which would be the logic of sharing combined with the logic of gift.

In a communist society, people would work together to accomplish such and such a task, to share pleasures or emotions and respond to the general needs of the community, without the grouping which they would form taking the form of a State, and therefore of the domination of some people by others, or the form of an enterprise hiring wage-labourers and commercialising production. As a consequence, one cannot talk, for such a society, of economic laws. Such laws are the expression of human relations resting on inequality and domination; inequality and domination which themselves justify these laws through presenting them as inevitable realities or as having existed since time began. By contrast, in communist society, there will exist conscious control of human beings over their own activity, both through the relations existing between them, and more generally through the relations between them and the rest of nature.

To sum up what we mean by the term 'communism', communism is primarily the tendency towards human community, which, in the various forms in which it has expressed itself in course of human history, has always been the search for a world where there will exist neither laws, nor property, nor the State, nor discrimination which divides people, nor wealth which distinguishes some people from others, nor power which oppresses some of them. Therefore to be a communist is first and foremost to consider that the greatest wealth lies in human relationships and that all the rest flows from this.

In history

Starting from this definition, in what sense can one say that there has been a tendency towards communism in the past? To speak of a communist tendency in the past immediately raises a number of obstacles. The first obstacle is the difficulty of sometimes understanding the language which this tendency has adopted in the past. In fact, throughout the different social organisations which human beings have known, the communist tendency has defined itself by vocabularies corresponding to these different organisations.

Thus, in feudal society, this tendency developed a religious language or which today no longer has any meaning. In the same way today we tend to define communism by terms such as world without states, a world without frontiers, a world without money, which in the end comes down to saying only that communism is not capitalism.

Therefore when one speaks of communism in different epochs, one must be aware of the fact that the definitions which are given to it are, to a certain degree, only a reflection of the world in which we ourselves live. A difficulty arises from this for us, who live today in capitalist society at a specific stage, in analysing this tendency in the past, since, like everyone, we tend to think about and describe things in capitalist categories. At this level, it is obvious that there have been many actions by human beings in the past which we have misunderstood. This is the case for example, with the difficulty in understanding the idea of the 'chief' in certain primitive societies or the idea of the gift whether in primitive societies or in later societies up to feudal society. These ideas of the 'chief' and of the gift have had totally different meanings from the ones they have been given today.

Before the state

Here, it is out of the question to draw a complete picture of the communist tendency from the origins of humanity to the present day. I will limit myself to taking just three examples, from different periods in human history, in order to see a little of what are the constants and the common points which one can rediscover throughout these different periods.

The first is as example from Clastres regarding primitive societies, an example which is interesting since it sums up his study of these societies:

Primitive societies are therefore unitary societies (and for that each sought to be one totality): societies without classes – no wealthy exploiters nor poor – societies not divided into dominators and dominated – with no separate organ of power. It is now time to take completely seriously this last sociological aspect of primitive societies. Does the separation between leadership and power mean that the question of power was not posed there, that these societies are apolitical? To this question evolutionist thought – and its less summary variant, Marxism (Engels especially) – replies that this is indeed so and that this is in keeping with the primitive character of these societies, that is to say as the first forms of society. They are the infancy of humanity, the first stage of their evolution, and as such incomplete, unfinished, destined consequently to grow, to become adult, to pass from apolitical to political. The destiny of all society is the State as the organ which knows and expresses the common good for all and which undertakes to impose it.

Such is the traditional, almost general, conception of primitive societies as state-less societies. The absence of the State indicates their incompleteness, the embryonic stage of their existence, their a-historicity. But is it really so? It can easily be seen that such a view is in fact only an ideological prejudice, implying a conception of history as the necessary movement of humanity through social forms which engender themselves and succeed each other mechanically. But let this neo-theology of history and its fanatical continuism be rejected; the primitive societies cease to occupy the bottom rung of history, pregnant as they were supposed to be of all history to come, written in advance in their being. Freed from this innocent exoticism, anthropology can now take seriously the real question for political study: why were primitive societies state-less societies?

As complete, finished, adult and no longer sub-political embryonic societies, primitive societies have no state because they rejected the divisions of the social body into dominators and dominated. The policy of the 'savages' is in fact the constant setting up of barriers in the way of the appearance of a separate organ of power, of impeding the fatal joining up of the institution of chieftanship and the exercise of power. In primitive societies there is no separate organ of power because power is not separated from society, because it is this which keeps the society as one whole, with a view to maintaining its unitary being, to warding off the appearance within it of

the inequality between masters and subjects, between the chief and the tribe.

To hold power is to exercise it, to exercise it is to dominate those upon whom it is exercised; which is exactly what primitive societies do not want, which is why the chiefs are powerless, why power is not detached from the body of the society. Rejection of inequality, rejection of separate power was the same constant concern of primitive societies. They were strongly aware that to give up this struggle, to stop damming up the subterranean forces of the desire for power and the desire for submission and without the liberation from which the eruption of domination and servitude would occur, they knew that they would thereby lose their freedom (Pierre Clastres, 'The question of power in primitive societies', *Interrogations*, no.6, 1976).

Clastres emphasises an important characteristic of these societies, which is that they, or at least some of them, have not only been societies which rejected the State, but also societies which, very practically, even without actually knowing it, struggled against the establishment of the State, which really put up an active and practical resistance to the State.

Critique of Money

Let's make a great historical leap for the second example. It is an extract from "The Law of Freedom" (1651), a text by Gerrard Winstanley, the principal theoretician who participated in the 'True Levellers' or 'Diggers' movement in 17th century Great Britain and who is perhaps one of the first people to provide a theoretical expression, which ranks a turning point, of what we understand by communism:

When mankind began to buy and sell, then did he fall from his innocence; for then they began to oppress and cozen one another of their creation birthright... The nations of the world will never learn to beat their swords into ploughshares, and the spears into pruning hooks, and leave off warring, until this cheating device of buying and selling be cast out among the rubbish of kingly power.

This extract draws its importance from a vision, an extreme lucidity, of the implication of market relations, where there is already a theorisation of communism as something which situates itself in a break with market relations and money.

The last text is an extract from the 'Communist Catechism' (1846) of Moses Hess, where there is a return to the problem of money and market relations. In the chapter discussing, in the form of a questionnaire, money and servitude, the following answers are given:

1. What is money?

It is the value of human activity expressed in figures, the selling price of the exchange of our lives.

2. Can human activity be expressed in figures?

Human activity, just as little as man himself, has no price: because human activity is human life, which no sum of money can compensate, it is invaluable.

3. What is the person who can be sold for money or who sells himself for money?

The person who can be sold for money is a slave and the person who sells himself for money has the soul of a slave.

4. What must we deduce from the existence of money?

We must deduce from this existence enslavement, because money is the very sign of human slavery since it is the value of man expressed in figures.

5. How long will people stay slaves and selling their abilities for money?

This will remain so until society provides and guarantees each person the means necessary for human life and action, so that the individual will not be constrained to obtain these means by his own initiative and to this end to sell his activity in order to buy in return the activity of other men. This human commerce, this reciprocal exploitation, this industry which one calls private, cannot be abolished by any decree; it can only be abolished by the establishment of a communitarian society in which the means will be offered to each to develop and to use their human faculties.

6. In a society thus instituted, is the existence of money possible or imaginable?

No more than the existence of human enslavement. Since men will no longer be obliged to sell to one another their powers and abilities, they will have no more need to calculate their value in figures, they will no longer have any need to account or to pay. In place of human value expressed in figures will appear the true, invaluable human value – in place of usury the flourishing of human faculties and the pleasures of life – in place of competition with unjust weapons, a harmonious co-operation and noble emulation – in place of multiplication tables, the head, heart and hands of free and active beings.

This is the last example of this theoretical expression of communism that I would like to give. Of course many others could be given, but in all the examples which could be given there are certain constants which can always be picked out. The first of these corresponds to the definition of communism given at the beginning, namely to base communism not on politics, nor on economy, but on people and relations between people; also the importance of the egalitarian theme, of equality, in all the theoretical expressions which communism has known. Of course the nearer one gets to societies based on market relations the more the critique is centred around the role of money and going beyond this, from money to the critique of all relations of buying and selling whether of goods or people.

The interest today

To conclude, what is the interest for us today of what we can know of the communist tendency in past history?

First it is the negation of all talk of human nature as the eternity of certain forms of human behaviour, the critique of all talk of the type 'things have always been like that' etc. etc.

Secondly it helps us to better understand finally what are our own aspirations. Because just as the aspirations taken from the past have been partial, often maladroit, our own aspiration today is also partial and maladroit. The putting in common of all this aspiration in human history is also a means of seeing the essential, whatever the social framework in which it finds itself placed at one moment or another in its history.

Thirdly, it perhaps helps us extricate ourselves with regard to the situation which we have today. Because to these different aspirations to communism have corresponded different efforts to struggle against what opposed those aspirations. One knows these efforts, one can see what they have brought, what have been their limits. That can perhaps also help us today in struggling for our own aspirations and combatting the particular forms taken today by all that is opposed to this aspiration to communism.

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