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Communist measures

Thinking a Communist Horizon

Leon de Mattis

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Published in SIC #2 (January 2014). Leon de Mattis considers class struggle, and specifically when and how struggles can have communist content.

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proper extent.

[19] ‘Strategic’ should not be taken to mean that there is a strategy for the extension and the generalisation of communist measures; such a strategy could not exist. ‘Strategic’ means here that the first measures must be as adequate as possible to a given situation, while at the same time being a concrete instance of the use of communism as a means of struggle.

beyond their timid beginnings.

By definition it is impossible to construct a model for the communist measure. But one can nevertheless offer a few hypotheses, so long as one properly understands their function. The point is not to realise a prophecy, but to clarify our current theoretical understanding of communism. Hypotheses concerning communist measures derive directly from the manner in which the current epoch enables us to conceive of communism. All conceptions of this sort are, like the era which has given birth to them, eminently mortal and destined to be overcome.

Likely to be communist, then, are measures taken, here or there, in order to seize means which can be used to satisfy the immediate needs of a struggle. Likely to be communist also are measures which participate in the insurrection without reproducing the forms, the schemas of the enemy. Likely to be communist are measures which aim to avoid the reproduction within the struggle of the divisions within the proletariat which result from its current atomisation. Likely to be communist are measures which try to eliminate the dominations of gender and of race. Likely to be communist are measures which aim to co-ordinate without hierarchy. Likely to be communist are measures which tend to strip from themselves, one way or another, all ideology which could lead to the re-establishment of classes. Likely to be communist are measures which eradicate all tendencies towards the recreation of communities which treat each other like strangers or enemies.

[3] 'Dynamically' means that the survival of a few residual traces, not yet totally dissolved, of the old workers' movement is not a serious objection to the current thesis.

[14] This functioning is not specific to the period of communisation. All widespread forms of social activity, that is all those which traverse the social body, operate in the same way—in contrast to the centralising and unifying activity of hierarchical or Stately structures. The practices of contemporary struggles can already in this way extend and generalise themselves, to their own

Communisation is not a prophecy. It is not the declaration of some future or other. Communisation is nothing but a certain perspective on the class struggles taking place right now. The task is to conceive, starting from those struggles but proceeding beyond their limits and their contradictions, what a communist revolution could be today.

Thinking a communist horizon requires us to begin from the class relation as it is, that is, as it has been transformed by the period of restructuring; and to understand why that which was in the past the bearer of a communist vision cannot today play the same role, in any case in the same way.¹

Up until the end of the 70s the proletariat were seen as the dominated class which, in order to bring about communism, only had to become dominant. Of course, there were many ways of conceiving that, and those various conceptions were often antagonistic towards each other. There were also approaches which wanted to break with this dominant conception, while all the same having to position themselves in relation to it.² And in the end that way of looking at things could not be overcome, not because the ideas of the epoch were universally mistaken but simply because the reality of the times—the affirmation of a proletariat which was socially more and more strong—was obvious to everyone.

¹The ability to think a communist horizon is one of the things at stake within the struggles themselves. To be convinced of that it should suffice to review the history of the last thirty years, a period during which the question of communism as good as vanished from the radar. This obliteration was not a coincidence; it was the direct consequence of a defeat, of the vanquishing of the contestation that took place in the '60s and '70s.

²There is been some controversy lately over the question of the novelty or otherwise of the theory of communisation, in which some play has been made of the fact that what is affirmed in that theory can already be found here and there in previous periods. But the question of novelty cannot be posed for each assertion taken separately, but only of the way in which those elements, perhaps already thought or expressed some time before, are brought into relation with one another and linked to the contemporary period.

The debates which opposed revolution to reform, the immediacy of communism to the transitional period (which could precede or follow the victory of the proletariat) all belong to this shared paradigm. But it is just that which is put into question, dynamically, in the current moment.[3]

The disappearance of a strong affirmation of the class and the erosion of the workers' movement is the symptom of a major turning-point in the class struggle. Class-belonging no longer seems to be the basis of a shared identity or of a possible power, but seems rather, on the contrary, to be an element that is foreign to everyone's life: the hostile embodiment of the dominating power of capital.³

Certain theories have concluded that the notion of class struggle no longer works to characterise the revolt in today's world. The persistence of capitalist social relations and of all their determinations (value, for starters) is however the sign that the classes have certainly not disappeared. The theory of communisation does not, therefore, abandon the theory of classes, but thinks it in the era of the collapse of the workers' movement. To give an overview one could say that communisation advances three essential ideas: first, the immediacy of communism (that is, the absence of any period of transition at all;) second, communism as means and end of struggle; and, lastly, the destruction of the class relation and therefore of the proletariat by the proletariat itself. It is on this last point that one has to place the emphasis in order to understand how the theory of communisation links an element of the current class struggles (the end of the affirmation of the proletariat and the decline of workers' identity) to a conception of the revolution (the destruction of the class relation by the proletariat.) This vision, which is a little paradoxical, nevertheless turns out to be extremely fruitful if one wants to seek out within the current struggles that which, *starting*

³For more details, see 'What is communisation?' *Sic* no. 1, of which this text is a sequel.

ity intensifies, and the more it consists in the production of diverse and multivalent measures, the higher the probability will be that these measures will fulfill the necessities of the global production of communism.

What is more, since this activity really is an activity, it changes the conditions within which it develops. That is: the more that communism is produced, the more it increases the potential for its own production. That is all that is meant by the concept of a communising dynamic. The first communist measures which generalise themselves demonstrate through their generalisation itself that they can be means of struggle; but at the same time they open up possible routes towards the overcoming of the specificity and of the constraints of the struggle itself. Measures which undertake the sharing-out of resources seized from the enemy open the way towards measures which undertake the satisfaction of needs by communist means.[17] Measures involving local co-operation open the way towards co-operation on a larger scale.

This indicates the great strategic importance of the first communist measures.¹⁵ If they succeed in providing an adequate and prompt response to the problems which arise in a particular struggle, and if for that reason they are able to generalise, then a dynamic can be unleashed which makes of their expansion the motor of their ever-greater expansion. The role of communist theory, which devotes itself not to legislating what must be done but to making it possible to name what was done (that is, the undertaking of communist measures) is therefore considerable.

The big mistake would be to imagine any sort of mode of struggle as a 'communist measure'. Communist measures indisputably presuppose a depth and an extension of the class struggle beyond the ordinary extent achieved by the common run of struggles. Communist measures therefore only receive their significance within the framework of a communising dynamic which rapidly draws them

¹⁵Needs themselves transformed by the struggle underway.

it: communism is not what is left over when one can no longer do anything else.

Communism is produced: that means that it is not the effect of a pure act of will, nor the mere consequence of circumstances which make any other outcome impossible. Every communist measure is the effect of a particular will. This will does not at all need to take as its object the creation of communism in its most general sense, but only in its immediate aspect, local and useful for the struggle. So the universal adoption of the communist idea as a kind of general, abstract principle to be realised is not a necessary precondition for the concrete production of communism. On the other hand, the social activity of the production of communism has its own consciousness; that is to say that in a period of communisation, when communist measures are linking up and becoming widespread, the overall pattern of what is being established becomes obvious to everyone.

There are, of course, 'conditions' for the production of communism. There is a struggle, which is class struggle, expressing both the breakdown of the capitalist class relation and the possibility of its regeneration. At the same time included in the negation of capital's fundamental social forms (a negation which those very forms ceaselessly put into play), is the vision of the possibility of its own overcoming. The activity of the production of communism must nevertheless understand itself as an activity, that is as something which is not induced mechanically by its preconditions. There is no necessity within the struggle which imposes the production of communism, leaving no other option.

What makes it possible to make communism effective is activity. At the level of the single communist measure, this activity is necessarily encountered as will, consciousness, project (*collective* will, of course). But the generalisation of communist measures exceeds all will, because even while each measure taken individually is an action, the overall set of communist measures is beyond the grasp of the will of those who undertake them. The more the activ-

from now, could be the harbinger of the destruction of capitalist social relations. The revolution is the destruction of the class relation, which is immediately also the destruction of the proletariat—which is to say that the revolution is the activity of a proletariat in the course of its own self-abolition. And we can already observe, in today's class struggles, situations in which a proletariat which is striving to defend its condition is paradoxically driven to attack it. In this way the class struggle appears in its fundamental ambiguity, a reflection of nothing other than a contradiction internal to the capitalist social forms themselves: the class struggle can just as well be the recapitulation of class relations as their destruction. So—it is by linking these two ideas (that there are aspects of the current class struggle which drive workers to attack their own condition; and the vision of revolution as proletarian action consisting in proletarian self-destruction) that the theory of communisation proposes to think communism.

The role of theory is not to reveal to struggles what they 'are' in their heart of hearts.⁴ The point is not to go about trying to 'raise consciousness'. Thinking revolution and communism is not a magic formula which would transform the current struggles into something they are not. The task is to manage, to link theoretically, current struggles with the possible production of communism, while understanding that this is something that is at stake within struggles, and not a matter only for the future. Without the thinking of revolution, the horizon of struggles is necessarily that of capital. In the course of an ambivalent class struggle, which is at the same time the renewal and the putting into question of the class relation, the absence of a revolutionary horizon obviously contributes to the first pole, to the renewal of the class relation. This

⁴The discussion in this text will often revolve around 'struggles'. This plural, which has a certain currency these days, is one of the things that shows up the end of the period of the proletariat's affirmation. The struggles are so many different aspects of *the* class struggle which today it is necessary to attempt to grasp in its full heterogeneity.

is reflected, in the struggle, in the persistence of mediations which express this renewal (union hierarchies, the media, spokespeople and negotiations, amongst others) or, when those mediations have given way in the face of the intensity of the struggle, by their decisive re-emergence at the moment of the *return to normality*.

Working out a theory of revolution and of communism is therefore an activity carried out on the basis of struggles and for the sake of those struggles. The success of such an activity is obviously not in any degree guaranteed. The generalisation of a contemporary theory of revolution—that is to say its existence beyond a restricted circle of theoreticians and militants—will not take place unless it is adequate enough to what, within struggles, might express the breakdown of the class relation. To the extent that this theory involves taking a stand within the matters at hand, it is necessarily a wager. A rational one, since it involves the production of a certain understanding of struggles by the struggles themselves; but a wager, nevertheless.

Communism as a process, not an alternative world

Communism is no more a prophecy than communisation is. The possibility of speaking about communism is at stake within current struggles. That is why it is indispensable to seek out what, within them, could be the harbinger of communism—rather than dreaming about a state far off in the future which humanity might one day be able to attain. Or, to put it differently: what is essential for the reconstruction of a communist horizon is above all the discovery of the ways in which communism might be able to emerge from the present situation—rather than describing what communism might be as a worked-out form of organisation.⁵

⁵We are not going to get into the controversy over whether or not communism could one day be described as ‘finished’ (even only relatively) or if it will

So there is necessarily a limit point with the generalisation of communist measures, a quickly-achieved tipping point at which the objective of the struggle can no longer be the amelioration or the preservation of a certain condition within capital, but must instead become the destruction of the entirety of the capitalist world—which becomes in this moment, definitively, the enemy.¹⁴ From that point onwards, amongst all the things which are necessary for the production of communism, there is confrontation with State forces vowed to the defence of the old world—then the total destruction of all state structures.

Communist measures and activity

No-one consciously constructs communism in its totality. But communist measures are not undertaken unwittingly: the choice to have recourse to them within a struggle necessarily involves an awareness that they contribute to the destruction of capitalist social relations, and that this destruction will come to be one of the objectives of the struggle. It is the case, of course, that there is no separation between the necessities of the struggle and the construction of communism. Communism is realised on the occasion of the struggle, and within its context. But the choice of a communist measure, considered in isolation, does not impose itself because the struggle has left no other way forward than to undertake

¹⁴As we’ve seen since the beginning of this article, the class struggle is ambivalent. It is simultaneously a struggle within capitalism and a struggle which heralds its destruction, a struggle for the defence of a certain position within capitalism and a struggle against that condition. The proletariat, in its struggle, oscillates between its integration and its disintegration. The communist measure builds towards a break with that ambivalence, and makes of the struggle of the proletariat a struggle against capital as a system; a struggle in the course of which the proletariat bit-by-bit dissolves itself. But it is only when communisation has already become somewhat overt that this dissolution can become obvious. It is not possible really to talk of anticapitalist or revolutionary struggle except from the moment when communism begins to be positively produced.

at the same time it is of course perfectly possible that measures which are not communist at all generalise. One should obviously exclude, here, everything which is an initiative of the capitalist enemy, in the form of laws, prescriptions, orders or coercive state control. But on the side of the revolution itself the various contradictions, which result from the complex segmentation of the proletariat (the unity created in the struggle is always problematic and it can never be taken for granted) and from the often confused and contradictory setting for any particular struggle, can engender counter-revolutionary dynamics which have, nevertheless, the form of the revolution, that is, the form of measures which generalise.¹³ To repeat oneself: no communist measure is communist in itself, and the communist character of a measure derives solely from its overall relationship with the struggle of which it is a part. Some measures long retain, during the chaotic and non-normative process of the insurrection, an ambiguous character. Equally, others which may have been communist at a certain moment can very well become counter-revolutionary in response to the deepening of certain problematics which emerge in proportion to the disintegration of the capitalist social relation. That is how the *revolution within the revolution* can reveal itself: by open combat between measures that are communist and those which are no longer.

Communist measures and insurrection cannot be separated. Communist measures are absolutely opposed to whatever, within the class struggle, enables the integration of the proletariat as a class belonging to capital. Such measures break with legality, with mediating institutions and with habitual, admissible forms of conflict. You can count on the State to react with the violence and the cruelty which is customary to it. Communist measures are a confrontation with the forces of repression, and in this case too victory can be won only by a dynamic of rapid generalisation.

¹³For an uneasy and tormented presentation of these contradictions on the side of the revolution, see the articles of Bernard Lyon (*Meeting* and *Sic* no. 1).

But speaking of communism in the present must not lead us into an error that has a certain currency nowadays, that of taking ourselves to be able to find, here and there in the interstices of capital's society, communism in gestation or even already part-realised. Communism cannot exist by itself in the current world, neither as an existential or a political choice nor as a way of life.⁶

One must, therefore, think communism in the present tense, but not as a present state of things. That is what the theory of communisation lets us do. In communisation, the production of communism and communism itself run together. Communisation is a struggle against capital by communism, that is to say that for it communism appears simultaneously as the means and the end. That is why a vision of the production of communism is for it at the same time a vision of communism itself, but a communism grasped through the prism of its production. We can not respond to the question 'what is communism'? by describing its supposed completed form but only by evoking the forms in which it could be produced.

That said, the theory of communisation does encounter certain difficulties. Since communism is the means of communisation, it is necessary that in a certain fashion it be brought into play from the beginning of the process; but at the same time we're maintaining

never be anything other than the process of its production—for the simple reason that none of that changes a thing. On the one hand it is unavoidable for us to conceive of communism as a stage to be achieved when the destruction of current social relations shall have become definitive; if we did not, we would hardly have any way of differentiating it from an existential choice within capitalism. But on the other hand, in the position we find ourselves in we cannot speak of communism any other way than as a process. There is no doubt that there is an essential difference between the period of the production of communism during the struggle against capital and the period in which capitalism has been destroyed; but we've got no theoretical tools to describe the second period other than vague abstractions.

⁶From which follows the critique of alternativism in general. See 'Reflections concerning the Call', *Meeting* no. 2, reproduced in *Communization and its Discontents*, Ed. Benjamin Noys, Minor Compositions, Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson

that communisation is a process within which communism is produced in the course of period which unfolds over time, and which takes time.

This question was resolved in the traditional Marxist conception by the notion of the 'period of transition'. The social form that was to be produced in the course of the revolution, and as its ultimate result, was not to be directly communism but an intermediary stage, socialism. Communisation breaks with the notion of the period of transition because communism is a means of the struggle itself. So for it communism is necessarily immediate, even if it remains only partial.

Communisation therefore takes on certain seemingly-paradoxical forms: simultaneously immediate and extended in time, simultaneously total and partial and so on. To be able to think communism, it is necessary to find an answer to these questions.

The notion of a communist measure

It is at this point that the notion of a 'communist measure'—an elementary form of the production of communism—comes in.

The production of communism is nothing but the multiplication and the generalisation of communist measures taken at this or that point in the course of the confrontation with capital; measures whose objective is precisely to make of the enactment of communism a means of struggle.

Communism may not be immediate, but within the communist measure it seems to be so. Within the communist measure there are not any stages. There, communism is already in play—even if it cannot be thought of as completely realised. The communist measure makes the gap between the immediacy of communism and the time that is required for its realisation disappear, without in the same moment abolishing the necessity of this time. And this

ity because of the singular capacity of a communist measure to attack everything which makes up capitalist social relations. We know that communism is the overcoming of exchange, value and money; but we do not know how a world without exchange, value or money could function. We know that communism is the abolition of classes, but we do not know how a classless universalism could function. A communist measure does not answer such questions in an overarching or global way, but tries instead to respond to them where they develop, and in the framework of the necessity of struggle.

Thanks to the communist measure, we understand that communism is not something which is all that foreign to us. Communism rests, to a very significant extent, on very simple things many of which are already able to exist: sharing, co-operation, the absence of socially-distributed roles and functions, and immediate and direct social relations, for instance. However, something which exists on a secondary basis does not have the same significance, qualitatively speaking, as that which exists in its generality (one thinks for example of value, and of the way in which its nature was changed by the emergence of the capitalist mode of production). That is why the concept of generalisation is essential. No content is communist in itself (even if, on the other hand, some can very well be anti-communist in themselves). The very same measure could be or could not be communist, according to its context: it is not communist if it remains isolated, but becomes so if it generalises. It is for that reason that it is necessary to understand that an isolated communist measure is not a communist measure, even if it is true that no communist measure is able to break all by itself its isolation; that cannot take place except by the enacting of *other* communist measures by *other* collectives.

Generalisation cannot by any means be the only guarantee of the communist character of a measure. A measure which does not generalise by one means or another, or anyway which does not resonate with other measures underway, cannot be communist. But

course of collapsing under the blows of its own contradictions. And it is only at that level, the level of generalisation, that one can speak of measures ‘imposed by the very necessities of the struggle’,¹¹ or indeed of the revolution as ‘immediate necessity in a given situation’ undertaken by proletarians ‘constrained by their material conditions’.¹² It is in this respect that the theory of communisation is not deterministic and allows us to understand the production of communism as an activity.[14]

Communist measures and the production of communism

The communist measure is the positive aspect of a communism which theoretically we are only able to grasp negatively. Communism is the annihilation of all currently existing forms of domination and exploitation. Communism defines itself as a series of abolitions: abolition of value, of classes, of gender and race dominations and so on. Said otherwise, if it is true that our attempts to describe communism are restricted to weak definitions (we know what it is that communism abolishes, but we do not know what it will concretely resemble) we have however a positive vision of its production: the communist measure.

The communist character of a measure derives from its capacity to reinforce the struggle against capital while all the while being the expression of its negation. It is, therefore, a definite and concrete way of putting into play the overcoming of exchange, money, value, the State, hierarchy, and race, class and gender distinctions—and so on. This list is presented in no particular order of prior-

¹¹ *Sic* no. 1, Editorial.

¹² ‘Crisis and communisation,’ Peter Åström, *Sic* no. 1. In the production of the first issue of *Sic* a debate took place concerning whether or not Åström’s article employed formulas that were too deterministic. It is possible to find traces of this debate on pages 38 and 39 of the journal.

conception lets us avoid thinking about communisation itself as an intermediary period between the present and a communist future.

The term ‘measure’ should not lead us into error.⁷ A communist measure is not a prescription, a law, or an order. It does not install any rule which everyone would have to submit to. It does not decree a general and impersonal norm. The communist measure, by definition, implies from the first moment those who carry it out. And it is not a declaration of intentions, either, or in any case it could not only be that. The communist measure is a deed. Getting off on the sound of your own voice proclaiming the abolition of value, of social class or of capitalism is not a communist measure. Sharing out resources seized from the enemy, or producing in common whatever the struggle against capital needs—that could be.

A communist measure is a collective measure, undertaken in a specific situation with the ways and means which the communist measure selects for itself. The forms of collective decision making which result in communist measures vary according to the measures: some imply a large number of people, others very many fewer; some suppose the existence of means of coordination, others do not; some are the result of long collective discussions, of whatever sort (general assemblies, various sorts of collective, discussions in more or less diffuse groups) while others might be more spontaneous... What guarantees that the communist measure is not an authoritarian or hierarchical one is its content, and not the formal character of the decision which gave rise to it.

The communist measure is an example of the way the production of communism is organised. It is not direct democracy or self-organisation.⁸

⁷ Instead of the expression ‘communist measure’ one could just as well have used ‘communist initiative.’

⁸ There is no way of determining in advance the way in which communist measures are taken. It is by reference to its content as a communist measure that it is possible to assure oneself that it is not a way in which a domination, a hierarchy or an authority might be reestablished—and not by applying some democratic for-

Such a measure does not necessarily have authors, or in any case identifiable ones: communist measures which generalise can very well have been undertaken simultaneously, here and there, since they are, simply enough, possible solutions to a problem which poses itself everywhere, that is to say, generally. Their origin thus rapidly becomes impossible to locate. Any body which arrogates to itself the power to prescribe communist measures for others, by that very act, instantly negates, the possibility that it can undertake a communist measure.

A communist measure is not, all by itself, communism. Communism is not achieved by one solitary measure, nor indeed by a single series of measures. But then again communism is nothing but the effect of a huge number of communist measures—the onset of which characterises the period of communisation—which fold themselves into each other and which ultimately succeed in giving to the overall organisation of the world an altogether different quality. There is not necessarily any kind of continuity; it is perfectly reasonable to anticipate both advances and disordering retreats before a tipping-point is reached when the rupture has become so profound that class society no longer possesses the means to keep itself going. Communism and class society are mutually exclusive. Before the tipping-point, communist measures are by their essence ephemeral: they exist only within the space of the struggle, and are snuffed out if they do not generalise themselves.⁹ They are simply moments when overcoming is possible but not yet secured. The production of communism is not necessarily a story told all

malism or other to the decision-making process. And it is not 'self'-organisation, either. Self-organisation is certainly, in the current moment, necessary for the existence of struggles when they venture beyond the cramped times and forms of legalised and unionised struggles. But the communist measure is a break with self-organisation, since such a measure involves a passage beyond partial struggles which need to organise themselves around their specific objective.

⁹Generalisation of communist measures corresponds in the first place to the generalisation of the struggles within which they were born and without which they cannot survive.

at once. One can perfectly well imagine that one day a communising dynamic will unleash itself, violently recomposing communist measures taken in the course of particularly radical and extended struggles, and that nevertheless this dynamic will be defeated. And that it will be reborn, later and elsewhere, and conclude by destroying class society.

Generalisation does not mean uniformity. There are many ways for a communist measure to extend itself. It can of course be a question of rallying to some or other existing communist initiative (dedicated to production in common or to coordination...) just as it can be of a adoption, sometimes in an adapted form, of measures already put into practice elsewhere. Equally, the communist measure can easily install itself within practices, experiences, and solidarities which pre-exist it—while being at the same time a creative rupture with these inheritances in virtue of the potentiality which the generalisation of the production of communism can bring into being.¹⁰

It is important to understand the process whereby a communist measure generalises. If the communist measure generalises itself, it is because in a given situation it corresponds to whatever the situation demands, and it is thus one of the forms (perhaps not the only possible one) which respond to the necessities imposed by the situation (intense struggle against capital). The moment of communisation is a situation of chaotic confrontation during which the proletarians undertake an incalculable number of initiatives in order to be able to carry out their struggle. If some of these initiatives extend themselves, it is because they correspond to a need which exceeds the different particular configurations of the confrontation underway. Choosing amongst the measures which generalise and the others takes place under the burden of a social relation in the

¹⁰Such a potentiality expresses itself as much in the multiplication of material possibilities (with the destruction of the State and the seizure of the forces of capital) as in the sphere of representations and of the imaginary—all of which are in practice indivisible.