

On “Communisation”: A Response to *Sic* No. 1

We don't live in a materialistic world, far removed from religion (as many scholars believe), but on the contrary, that through an overall system dedicated to economic fetishism, we remain in a world deeply rooted in religion, where religious thought shapes everything. (*Endless Sacrifice: The Birth of Capital and Value from the Religious Cult*, Jean-Pierre Baudet)

For a variety of reasons, I undertake this response to the contents of *Sic* No. 1 (November 2011) with a great deal of hesitancy. To be blunt, if a copy of this “International Journal for Communisation” had not been given to me by a friend, who is someone involved in its production and distribution, I would never have pursued my reading beyond the “Editorial” that begins it. Why? Because there are several, truly serious conceptual flaws with “the problematic of communisation.” (I will address them shortly.) But I continued reading, and thus confronted several other serious problems.

First and foremost, the writing in the eight essays that follow the “Editorial” is almost unreadable: it is some of the driest, least engaging, most abstract, most impersonal, and dullest writing I have ever encountered. I pity the poor translators and proofreaders, whom, I must add, did an excellent job with these blocks of nearly unreadable, jargon-heavy prose.

The second problem is closely related to the first one: the writers are obviously Marxist economists who teach at various universities, and they make no attempt to be comprehensible to people who *aren't* specialists in Marxist economic theory. Note well that the writers do not identify themselves as such, but as members of such groupuscules as Endnotes (UK/USA), Blaumachen (Greece), Théorie Communiste (France), and Riff-Raff (Sweden), and, in the words of the “Editorial,” “certain more or less informal theoretical groups in the US (New York and San Francisco).”

These theorists – that's how they describe themselves, as “theorists” – are almost exclusively interested in economics (they never discuss culture, art or religion, and rarely mention politics). And, as we will see, when they talk about women and gender roles – it seems that it would be better to say

now that they have been *forced* to talk about women and gender roles – they embarrass themselves completely. And yet these writers are quite convinced that they have both asked and answered *all* the important questions.

The third problem (and this is related to the flaws with “the problematic of communisation”) is that these narrowly focused Marxist economists do not address themselves to other Marxists (or even to non-Marxist anti-capitalists). Consequently, there is no attempt to convince anyone of the usefulness or relevance of “communisation.” No: these Marxist economists, unlike the bourgeois “sociologists and economists worth their salt” upon whom they rely for much of their information about the “crisis” in which capitalism now (and forever) finds itself, only address themselves to those who are *already convinced*, and this is what makes their “discussions” of “communisation” the simple repetition of a dogma.

In sum: except for part of one chapter, which concerned the relatively recent wave of “boss-nappings” in France and which was both interesting and useful to me (someone who is not already one of the true believers), all I got from reading the eight essays that followed the “Editorial” was a headache.

According to the “Editorial,” communisation is the revolution, or, rather, “revolution is communisation.” Communisation “is not a period of transition, but rather, revolution itself is *the communist production of communism.*” What is communism? The writer(s) of the “Editorial” do not say; indeed, none of the contributions to *Sic* No. 1 define what communism is or, rather, will be. Communism is only defined negatively, as the complete destruction of capitalism, as “the abolition of the division of labour, of the State, of exchange, of any kind of property; the extension of a situation in which everything is freely available as the unification of human activity, that is to say the abolition of classes, of both public and private spheres.” At the conclusion of these communist “measures,” provided that these measures are allowed to go all the way to their conclusion, communism will be the end result, the “product”: “One does not abolish capital *for* communism but *by* communism, or more specifically, by its production.”

Alright, then: so we now have a new name for the revolution: “communisation.” It seems to me that this is the same revolution as before, only someone has come up with a new way of saying, “you can’t fight alienation with alienated means”; alienation must be fought with unalienated means; etc.

It is very instructive to learn why a new name for the non-alienated revolution had to be found. Or, rather, it *would be* very instructive to learn

why. The “Editorial” doesn’t really tell us why or, rather, it tells us why, but in a really weird way.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a whole historical period entered into crisis and came to an end – the period in which the revolution was conceived in different ways, both theoretically and practically, as the affirmation of the proletariat, its elevation to the position of ruling class, the liberation of labour, and the institution of a period of transition. The concept of communisation appeared in the midst of this crisis.

That’s right: it just “appeared” one day. It didn’t occur in the minds of certain individuals or groups. Instead it had what one might call an immaculate conception: it came from and appeared within the crisis itself.

To continue with what the “Editorial” says:

During the crisis, the critique of all the mediations of the existence of the proletariat within the capitalist mode of production (mass parties, unions, parliamentarism), of organizational forms such as the party-form or the vanguard, of ideologies such as Leninism, of practices such as militancy in all its variations – *all this appeared* irrelevant if revolution was no longer to be an affirmation of the class, whether it be workers’ autonomy or the generalisation of workers’ councils. (Emphasis added).

Another immaculate conception! The irrelevancy of “all this” appeared one day, but not to anyone in particular. Perhaps to the Universal Mind? To History?

Alas, dear reader, it is only 162 pages later – amidst the *mea culpa* and self-inflicted wounds of the essay titled “The Suspended Step of Communisation” and credited to “B.L.” – that you learn the following precious bit of information: “The communising current comes out of the critique and overcoming of left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism.” (The reader of this particular essay and the others in this volume will learn that “the communising current” also “critiques” and “overcomes” workers’ autonomy, workers’ councils, workers’ self-management and workers’ self-organization.) The key word in this statement, which is the only one in the entire volume that provides a socio-historical context for the miraculous “appearance” of “the communizing current,” is “overcoming.”

During and ever since the reappearance of the revolutionary workers' movement, which had been almost completely absent from the historical stage since the 1930s, and especially during and ever since the accomplishments of the years 1968 to 1980 (the general wildcat strike in France, the anti-Soviet uprisings in Czechoslovakia and Poland, the overthrow of despotic regimes in Greece, Portugal and Spain), *left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism have been the best, most effective and most popular theories of anti-capitalist revolution*. Conversely, ever since the 1968 to 1980 period, both traditional Marxism and all the various "Communist" ideologies of the Twentieth Century (Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism) have been massively discredited. It might well be true that, during and ever since the late 1990s (when anarchism surged to the fore of the so-called anti-globalization movement), left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism have lost some of their appeal. But neither traditional Marxism nor the various "Communist" ideologies have ever recovered: they have remained in the dustbin of history.

So, what do you do if you are a traditional Marxist – a traditional Marxist who teaches economic theory – who wants to get out of that dustbin? It would certainly be helpful if you came up with a new buzzword. "Communisation"? It's a very awkward expression, but you estimate that it will do. But a new buzzword won't be enough. No, you've got to find a way to pull the carpet out from beneath the left-communists, the anti-Leninist councilists *and* the anarchists. You've got to find a way to make the left-communists and the anti-Leninist councilists look like "counter-revolutionaries," and you've got to be more anarchist than the anarchists. Then you can have the whole revolutionary anti-capitalist movement to yourself!

It's a two-step process. First, you lie about what the workers' movement was between 1917 and 1968; you intentionally and systematically confuse "the mediations of the existence of the proletariat" – that is to say, the way the proletariat was *represented* by the concentrated spectacle of the Soviet Union and the diffuse spectacle of the bourgeois labor movement in the West – with the proletariat itself. This entails consistently refusing to recognize or remember all those instances and movements when the pre-1968 workers' movement fought against both the capitalists *and* the "mass parties" and "unions" that acted in their name, as well as against the various "ideologies such as Leninism." This step is actually pretty easy: the spectacle in the both the capitalist West and the "Communist" East has already done everything it can to perpetuate those lies and bury those

movements. Indeed, the spectacle is precisely the success that international capitalism has had in these mendacious and self-interested endeavors.

The second step of the process is to cover up your lies with the veneer of scientific objectivity. You use the apparently innocent tool of “periodisation” (“structural historiography”) to do this. Adopting the denunciations of the spectacle of the proletariat that were made by the left-communists and anti-Leninism councilists themselves (delicious!), you proclaim that that whole era and its content are *dead*. It all died “in the late 1960s and early 1970s.” But precisely because you have presented that era as *including* those very same left-communists and anti-Leninism councilists, you can kiss them goodbye too, along with the Leninists against whom they fought.

The ingenuity of this second step is that you can use the “neutral” or “objective” language of bourgeois economists and sociologists to prove that capitalism so completely “restructured” itself during and after the 1970s that it is fundamentally or “qualitatively” different from what it had been previously. Indeed, during this second step, you can present yourself as exactly who and what you are: *academics* who, in the words of the “Editorial,” are devoted to abstract analysis, periodisation, the definition of various things, theory and the “dissemination” of theory (which of course is not autonomous from real class struggle but “practical, primordial activity”). Provided you mention that you are “engaged in class struggles,” without being specific about them (when and where and how you were “engaged”), you can go on producing “writing” and “journals” and having “meetings” – you know, all the cool stuff academics get to do. You don’t need to fuck shit up, get arrested or put in prison. Heavens no!

But you’ve got to be careful with your periodisation and slamming the door on both the capitalism of the past and its critique. You can’t go too far with this gambit, otherwise you might convince your readers that you are no longer dealing with capitalism anymore, but with something else: a post-capitalism. If *that* happens, you’ve demonstrated your own obsolescence and irrelevance; and your denunciations of the left-communists and anti-Leninist councilists will have no bite at all. But if you ease up, and admit that capitalism still hasn’t completely resolved the problems of the post-1973 era, and must completely “restructure” itself yet again (and again and again), well sir, you’ve just opened the door to the idea that the left-communists and anti-Leninist councilists (not to mention dear old Marx!) might *still* have something useful and revolutionary to contribute to the struggles of today. So, how do you keep the door to the past both open and closed? You keep reworking your theories; you keep drafting and redrafting

your texts; you not only publish your own journal, but you contribute to a meta-journal; etc. etc.

Shall we proceed to the eight essays that come after the “Editorial”? Or have you had enough? Well, for those of you who have had enough, I bid you farewell: I believe that you now know what you need to know about “the problematic of communisation.” *It is a power move disguised as theoretical critique.* Those of you who stay with me and read further will be rewarded for your efforts. At the very least, I promise I will not give you a headache!

One of the themes that emerges in these essays is the idea that, during the revolution, there will be no revolutionary organization at all. (This is where the idea of being more anarchist than the anarchists comes into play.) Leon de Mattis’ “What is Communisation?” concludes with the following lines.

An adequate form of organization of this revolution will only be provided by the multiplicity of communizing measures, taken anywhere by any kind of people, which, if they constitute an adequate response to a given situation, which generalize of their own accord, without anybody knowing who conceived them and who transmitted them. [...]

More immaculate conceptions! But to resume:

Communising measures will not be taken by any organ, any form of representation of anyone, or any mediating structure [...] They will be taken by all those who, at a precise moment, take the initiative to search for a solution, adequate in their eyes, to a problem of the struggle. [...] There is no organ to decide on disputed matters. It is the situation that will decide; and it is history that will know, *post festum*, who was right.

And “B.L.” emphasizes in “The Suspended Step of Communisation” that, “In communisation there is no *appropriation* of goods by any entity whatsoever; no state, commune, or council to represent and dominate proletarians in expropriating capital and thus carry out an *appropriation*.”

There are a number of pertinent objections one might make here. It is not a given or an unavoidable fact that every “state, commune, or council” will “represent and dominate” its members. One can easily imagine an

organization that makes decisions and carries out them out without its members being either “represented” or “dominated.” Furthermore, it seems that, absent any and all organization, *might will make right*: not those with the most convincing arguments, nor those with the best plans, but those who are able to impose their sense of what’s “adequate” on all the others. B.L. gives us a glimpse of this *unlimited, generalized war of all against all*.

Limits will be everywhere, and the generalised embroilment of revolution and counter-revolution will manifest itself in multiple and chaotic conflicts [...] The constitution of communism cannot avoid violent confrontations with the counter-revolution, but these ‘military’ aspects do not lead to the constitution of a front [...] The revolution will be both geographic and without any fronts: the starting points of communisation will always be local and will undergo immediate and very rapid expansion, like the start of a fire. Even once extinguished these fires will smoulder under self-management and citizen communities. Communism will arise from an immense fight.

I do not see why the author, his eyes sparkling with the reflected light of these fires (and pyres?), didn’t stay with his metaphor and say, “Communism will arise from an immense conflagration.” But to resume:

The process of communisation will indeed be a period of transition, but not at all a calm period of socialist and/or democratic construction between a chaotic revolutionary period and communism. It will itself be the chaos between capital and communism. It is clear that such a prospect, though well-founded, has nothing exciting about it!

No, I’m afraid that the author’s use of an exclamation mark at the end of that final sentence convinced me quite completely that he is in fact *terribly excited* by the image of the chaos, by the spectacle of all those fires. Burn, baby, burn! Very much the final conflict between God and Satan, isn’t it? As for the pawns on the chessboard, there will be little or no comfort at all in the possibility that “history” *might* reverse the decision that had been made on the field of battle. For what good is it, when you are already dead, that you were “right”? And who is this “history,” after all, if not men and women

who come to agree upon what the judgment of history has been? One might as well say, *let them kill each other off; God will recognize his own.*

But will anyone be alive to make, read or hear the judgment of history? It doesn't seem likely. Malnutrition and starvation exists today, well before the start of the revolution. Have no fear, starving peoples of the world! B.L. assures you that, "at the regional level as much as at the global one, communisation will have an action that one could call 'humanitarian,' even if this term is currently unpronounceable, because communisation will take charge of all the misery of the world." Much like Jesus Christ, it would seem. But unlike Christ, who could turn water into wine and feed hundreds of people with just five loaves of bread and two fish, "communisation" will not undertake to produce any new foodstuffs. No! That would give the devil of capitalism an opening: to B.L., "the simple organisation of the survival of the proletarians" is nothing other than "socialization." To him (yes: I'm confident that B.L. is a man), the "dynamic of accumulation" is "internal to self-management" and thus the self-management of, say, a farm would inevitably lead to "latent or open counter-revolutionary regression."

All that "communisation" will do is pillage the existing stockpiles. "Communisation will never make any gains," Brother B.L. says. "All expropriations that constitute the immediate community will have their character as pure expropriations and wildcat takeovers contested [...] It will be necessary to seize the means of subsistence themselves (something that happened in the case of refrigerated warehouses in Argentina)." *But what happens when the refrigerated warehouses have been emptied?* Neither B.L. nor any of the other writers in this volume ask this question, and they certainly do not answer it. Perhaps, while the final, chaotic battle between "revolutionaries" and "counter-revolutionaries" is being waged, the God of history will feed the starving masses with manna from heaven. Or perhaps they will simply starve to death.

Given what we've just been discussing, you, dear reader, might reasonably think that there must be a certain urgency to "the problematic of communisation." But you'd be wrong. For Peter Astrom, the author of "Crisis and Communisation," everything is safely located somewhere off in the future.

Communism as the real movement, this can by no means be interpreted to mean that communism can be witnessed here and now as existing communist relations. Such relations are completely incompatible with capitalist society. Communism as the real movement has to mean, rather, that it can be *deduced*

from ‘the premises now in existence’, from really existing class struggle.

“Communisation and communism are things of the future,” echoes R.S. in “The Present Moment.” In fact, Peter Astrom informs us, communism might stay in the future forever.

Revolution, communisation, is actually not a necessity here and now, for we can still not witness it. But that doesn’t mean that it can’t be necessary tomorrow! It is easy to become impatient when one sees where the world is heading, and we may all feel trapped inside an ‘absurd determinism.’ The law of determinacy is inexorable however; never can we act in a way which makes ourselves independent from this determinism.

So what is a theorist of revolution to do while he is waiting for “the law of determinacy” – that would be the law determined almost 150 years ago by the scientist of economics named Karl Marx – to summon him into action? Make predictions and forecasts. “It is always hazardous to speak of the future, but the risks are smaller when we are discussing the near future,” Peter Astrom announces. “Let us therefore sketch out the following scenario: the crisis has deepened and enormous quantities of capital have been lost”

Woland agrees. In his or her (mostly likely his) “The Historical Production of the Revolution of the Current Period,” Woland makes the case that those who believe that the revolution or at least revolutionary conditions are present today (*the revolution of everyday life*) are fooling themselves.

The most assertive parts of the movement call themselves revolutionaries when there is no revolution yet and they find shelter in the concept of ‘consciousness’ (the discourse about the need for the consciousness of the individual to be ‘changed fundamentally’) in order to avoid this contradiction. They build immediate (comradely) relations in their struggles while they make an ideology out of these relations – namely ‘revolution now’ – ignoring the fact that communism is not a local issue or an issue for a small group of people.

Not surprisingly, Woland feels quite sure of himself when he subtracts any sense of pleasure or happiness from the experiences of these poor fools.

“Even ‘victories’ do not create euphoria to anyone,” he proclaims, as if “anyone and everyone” is well within the range of phenomena that he is capable of observing, measuring, judging and dismissing.

Here Rocamadur, the author of “The ‘Indignados’ Movement in Greece,” chimes in to agree with Comrade Woland. “It is true that swearing at politicians and cops outside Parliament, spending time with so many other people, eating, drinking, dancing, chatting, and sleeping together is a nice feeling, and a break with the normality of everyday life,” he or she says. But it is, nevertheless, a “fact that the ‘lifestyle of the squares’ cannot be appealing outside them.” Unappealing *to whom?* “Anyone and everyone,” of course.

And that’s all the anarchists of Greece are to people like Rocamadur: *lifestylists*. On the one hand, he or she consistently minimizes or subtracts their presence from the December 2008 riots in Greece, which were conducted by “high school kids, immigrants, and lumpen proletarians” or by “high school kids, young precarious workers and immigrants.” “A lot of people took part in clashes,” he or she insists, “not just anarchists.” On the other hand, Rocamadur doesn’t refer to “anarchist thinkers” or the “anarchist school of thought,” but to the “anarchist/anti-authoritarian milieu.” Not surprisingly, he or she evokes “the weird picture of anarchists and far-rightists jointly throwing stones at the police on June 15.” I wonder where this “picture” exists, that is, *if it exists at all*.

None of the writers who contributed to this volume seem to know anything about basic anarchist tactics. To Woland, “direct action practices manifest themselves in many forms,” including forms that are neither direct nor active, such as “radical unionism” and “citizens’ movements.” To Jeanne Neton and Peter Astrom, co-authors of “How One Can Still Put Forward Demands When No Demands Can Be Satisfied,” wildcat strikes that leave “the unions run[ning] behind the employees” are led by “grassroots unionists.” They write, “the workers who fight for such a wage increase cannot ignore the fact that in so doing the chances increase that the company will relocate or go bankrupt,” as if they know nothing about the *deliberate* attempts of revolutionary workers in Italy during the 1970s to bankrupt *as many firms as possible*. To R.S., author of “The Present Moment,” “black blocks” (they are actually *black blocs*) are not only similar to the non-violent, purely defensive formations of *Tutte bianche*, but both “find themselves rubbing shoulders and even sometimes merging with” tendencies that are “radical-democratic.”

OK, dear reader, we are now ready for the *coup de grace*. Or, rather, *les coups de grace*, because there are two essays left to discuss. The first

one, B.L.'s "The Suspended Step of Communisation," has already been mentioned. As the reader will remember, it was B.L. who reported, "the communizing current comes out of the critique and overcoming of left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism." This sentence is followed by the following remarks.

True to its origins by not addressing this question, this current remained fundamentally anti-feminist in its period of total marginalization. Feminist ideology was interpreted as one of those 'modernisms', which – both facing and acting within the decomposition of the program – poses the triad 'women, the young, and immigrants' as a new revolutionary subject which could take the place of the proletariat. [...] However, even if individual communisation theorists did not raise this question, any suspicion that the theory of communisation was itself androcentric (to say it clearly: macho!) must be rejected, since the revolution was posed as producing immediately social individuals – that is to say, individuals beyond any determination that society would give them in advance. The individual was considered to be immediately social, but the question of the distinction between genders remained a blind spot in the theory. The question was resolved 'ipso facto' without ever having been posed. [...] It was not only the aim (that is, communisation itself) that sustained a blow. In class struggle, in communisation, in the production of this immediately social individual, there can be no blind spot, no problems solved only 'ipso facto' as concerns men and women. We had to re-open the question of the contradiction between proletariat and capital, that of the contradiction between men and women, of exploitation, and of capital as contradiction-in-process.

Yes, I'm sure that the revelation of this "blind spot" hurt, particularly because neither of the two theories of revolution that "communisation" wishes to overcome (left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism) had it or something similar. Precisely because they had not been solely preoccupied with the industrial proletariat, these theories were able to *include* "women, the young, and immigrants" within the ranks of the contemporary proletariat. As a result, women, the young and immigrants found it easy in their turn to embrace left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism.

And so the theorists of “communisation” had to *do something*. One of the things they did was get B.L. to write “The Suspended Step of Communisation,” which explains “and so, this text – written by a participant in the group/journal *Theorie Communiste* – could only have been written once the group was no longer constituted exclusively by men (a minimal change, but an essential one).” I dare say that B.L. was not the right person to have taken on “the women question.” Not only is he not a woman, but he is also not a feminist. As a result, he does even more damage to “the problematic of communisation” than the existence of the “blind spot” was able to do.

He says, “proletarians cannot live on a prayer and, in particular, their wives cannot cook it into the reproduction of labour power,” as if proletarians are men and the only ones who do the cooking are women. As if someone like Margaret Thatcher never existed, he identifies men with the “public sphere” and women with the “private sphere.” As if all women are heterosexual, he claims that “women are assigned” to “the reproduction of labour-power.” As if people like Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons never existed, he claims that “the workers’ program never contemplated the abolition of gender.” He refers to “the abolition of women” several times but never refers to “the abolition of men.” And finally, he says “this life used to be private, but the revolution will be the creation of a new life at once intimate and public, totally feminine because it is no longer feminine at all, insofar as it is the abolition of the family, property and the state,” as if he doesn’t realize that his readers won’t fail to recognize that he has taken the “spiritual androgyny” of heaven as imagined by the Christians and replaced “masculine” with “feminine.”

Screamin’ Alice’s “On Periodisation” concludes the volume. It claims that there are four periods in the development of capitalism: (1) everything up to 1850, during which “the circuits of reproduction of capital and the proletariat” were “external” with respect to each other; (2) 1850 to either 1914 or 1917, during which the relations between those circuits were “spontaneous (or non-institutionalized)”; (3) from 1914 or 1917 to 1973, during which they were “mediated (or institutionalized)”; and (4) 1973 to the present, during which there was both “immediate integration *and* disintegration” (emphasis added: that “and” is the door to the past being closed but left open).

We might legitimately question why the first period doesn’t have any beginning. We might also legitimately question why the Great Depression of 1929 or the New Deal of the 1930s (during which “the capitalist state in the new emerging centre of capital accumulation – the USA – begins to

implement [new] strategies to manage the twin surpluses which are the manifestation of overaccumulation”) *doesn't* appear in this periodisation. I will limit myself to making the following observation: at the end of the fourth period, capitalism has either returned to or essentially remained where it began sometime before 1850. It remains based upon the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of workers from production; it needs workers and yet tries to do without them. And this is why – despite all the dogmatic and self-interested propaganda about the end of the usefulness and relevance of left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism – Screamin' Alice refers over and over again to Marx, who somehow remains the ultimate authority about the “laws” that govern capitalism's development. (Of course, Alice only refers to *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, and not to *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* or to *The Civil War in France*, but, I suppose, that is to be expected.)

Note well that my assertion that all of the proclamations about the uselessness of left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism is nothing but propaganda is proved by Screamin' Alice's own text. On page 194, she once again repeats the dogma about “the disappearance of the workers' movement,” even though, on page 193, she notes that “some regions are experiencing something of a resurgence of intermittent wildcat forms of action, boss-napping, threats to blow up factories, threatened or actual pollution of rivers, [and] factory occupations.” In a footnote, the author says, “It would be interesting to see how the level of current class conflicts compares with the high point at the end [*sic*] of the previous cycle.” Yes, it certainly would.

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