

## 'IS COMMUNISM POSSIBLE?' - COMMENTS

[Note: The piece is an informal response to a draft of Allan Armstrong, Bob Goupillot and Ian Robertson 'Is Communism Possible?' ([republicancommunist.org](http://republicancommunist.org)). The present version and the version posted on the Republican Communist Network website differ slightly in wording.]

The draft article ['Is Communism Possible?'] contains lots of fascinating points; but I am uncertain – in a way that I shall explain – about what its purpose is. Its *overall* purpose is clear and (I agree) very much to the point: renewing debate about how communism may be visualised is a necessary step in giving the left renewed confidence and a sense of perspective. But its *more specific* purpose seems to pull in two directions:

- If the article tackles the question of whether communism is possible, one way of structuring it is to state, and reply to, various common anti-communist objections. And, to an extent, the article follows this course. (Does communism run counter to human nature? No, it doesn't. Does communism presuppose an unrealistic level of abundance? No: everything depends on how 'abundance' is conceived.) But, if the article is to be structured in this way, it is important that *all* anti-communist objections – or, at least, a good many *frequent* anti-communist objections – be addressed. To be sure the article as it stands is unfinished. But a listing of further possible objections is one way in which discussion of the article might be furthered. I return to this.
- If the article attempts to renew the left's vision/perspective, one way of doing this would be to focus on the notion of 'abundance' and give this theme priority in all that is said. In fact, the article might be retitled 'Communism and Abundance' – a title which does justice to what the article as it stands so far says. The polemical force of the article would then be that of recapturing an idea frequently used as a criticism of communism and deploying it in a radical way.

Of the two ways of reading and developing the article, the second strikes me as the most attractive. It does so for two reasons. One is that a piece structured around objections tends to have a “backward-looking” tone; a charismatic and confident tone can be difficult to achieve. The other is that I like very much the idea of developing (and, in developing, redefining) the notion of abundance: shifting it away from the idea of having “as much as you want of everything you want” (bottom of p. 2), that is, and taking it to mean (or, rather, include) sharing 'in another's growth' (top of p. 4). Likewise I like the idea of seeing abundance as having 'literally, the time of our life'

(top of p. 5). These formulations and lines of thought seem to me to go to the centre of “communism” and could be filled out to be the core of an inspiring pamphlet.

I'd like to say a little more about how these lines of thought regarding 'abundance' might be developed – and why I find them attractive. In the history of political theory one can, I think, find two contrasting ideas of liberty (or freedom): freedom can be seen (as it is seen by liberals) as “negative” freedom – which comes down to freedom which exists *in spite of others*. (One is free to the extent that other individuals do not trespass on one's patch.) Or freedom can be seen as existing *through others* or *through interaction with others*: this sort of freedom is commonly enjoyed through a good conversation, through meeting new people, through a love affair, etc., etc. Communism (as understood by Marx) involves – and maximises, makes central – freedom/liberty in the second of these meanings. The two meanings map (so I suggest) on to the article's discussion of abundance: abundance understood in terms of having “as much as you want” (capitalist abundance) links together with freedom *in spite of others*, whereas abundance seen in terms of sharing 'in another's growth' links together with *freedom through*.

I have another (related) reason for liking the discussion of abundance. The theme of *sharing* seems to me central to the notion of communism – not merely in general, but in a specific sense. In seventeenth-century political theory – in, for example, Grotius and Pufendorf and Locke – justifications of private property are frequently based on the circumstance (well, the alleged circumstance) that resources can, at bottom, be *used* only in an individual way. For an apple – say – to be enjoyed, it must be *my* apple. (The justification starts by looking at objects which are destroyed through consumption, and then attempts to generalise to wider and wider sorts of thing: from, say, to apples to livestock to land.) In order to rebut such pro-private-property arguments, the key thing to insist upon is, I think, the notion of *shared* use. What makes use *shared* (rather than merely *individual*) is, I propose, the notion of respecting others' use of the same thing. It's true enough that apples are, mostly, eaten by individuals: but, broadening the focus, orchards need to be used in an other-respecting way. In the words of the article, helping yourself to “as much as you want” – or, in the words of political theory, presupposing a 'negative community of goods' – despoils orchards *and* relates to others as though they didn't exist. In E.P. Thompson's phrase, an individualist use of resources (as distinct from a shared use of resources) overlooks the circumstance that, historically, 'commoners [those using a commons]...were not without common-sense' (*Customs in Common*, Penguin, p. 107).

So – many lines in the article resonate with my own lines of thinking. And I think that infusing the left with a sense of confidence and vision is not just a worthwhile but an *essential* aim! A pamphlet/article attempting to build confidence and vision is, I think, timely. When Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Zizek open their edited volume *The Idea of Communism* with the following declaration – 'The long night of the left is drawing to

a close. The defeat, denunciations and despair of the 1980s and 1990s, the triumphalist “end of history”, the unipolar world of American hegemony – all are fast becoming old news' (*Idea of Communism*, Verso, p. vii) – they strike, it seems to me, exactly the right political note.

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I end by returning to an objection which a pamphlet *designed to rebut objections to communism* might wish to address. In the wake of the Soviet Union's demise, and in a world where neoliberalism has until recently been triumphant, the most frequently heard objection to communism is: communism *doesn't work*, whereas a market-based economy *does*. Such an objection is, in effect, a polemical rehearsal of points regarding “socialist calculation” which were first stated by L. von Mises in the 1920s (see his *Socialism* [current edition Liberty Classics] chs. 5 and 6) and restated by Hayek (e.g. in his *The Road to Serfdom* of 1944, ch. IV). A sample quote from Mises gives the general idea: 'Once society abandons free pricing [i.e. market pricing] of producer goods rational production becomes impossible. Every step that leads away from private ownership of the means of production and the use of money is a step away from rational economic activity' (*Socialism* p. 102). Should “socialism” therefore involve a market? *Can* socialism involve a market? As is well known, generations of communists/socialists have tied themselves in knots on such questions.

I don't attempt to supply an answer to Mises' and Hayek's line of argument here! My only point is that, if the pamphlet/article is to be structured as a series of objections to anti-communist arguments, the Mises/Hayek objection is one which might be addressed. BUT I do have a rather general suggestion about how a Mises-Hayek objection can be answered: the trick is not to let oneself become lost in minutiae about how market socialism/co-operative socialism/etc. may be organised but to draw attention to the circumstance that *pricing through markets is a drastically poor economic and social indicator*. Not only are millions upon millions left out of account, but where markets are in operation they may “go off the rails”. They may “go off the rails” by generating war and inequality and short-term/long-term blinkeredness. If they stay on the rails, relatively speaking or in however estranged a fashion, they do so because they are socially embedded (rather than market principles pulling society's strings). In a word, Mises in effect argues that capitalism works, on the whole, whereas socialism doesn't (and can't). A response to Mises' contentions – a response made with neoliberalism's record in mind – is that capitalism's claims to provide social order are a fake.

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April 2012