

**WHAT DOES
COMMUNISM
EVEN MEAN?**

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Words in politics absorb many meanings used by proponents and their opponents. Words that might have had a cut and dry definition warp under sensationalist accusations and rallying cries. We only need examine the ways in which the word "terrorist" has been abused to tar political enemies and dissidents. Today in Minneapolis an agency under a federal department which shares the name of the old East Germany political secret police roams streets, detains people illegally, and incites widespread fear among the civilian populace yet it's the protesters who are labeled terrorists. Words like leftist and fascist lose meaning and context, rendering them vacuous and disarmed. By looking into the origins of a movement we might discover the essential meaning of its name.

Here, I'm going to define an exceptionally charged word: communism. To define such a contested word, I'll look at what some of the more acclaimed self-described communists had to say about the definition of communism (or at least its contours). In defining this word, I will show that it has dual meanings which are related: first, a movement working toward a specific aim; and, second, the aim of that movement. To clarify terms, the first meaning I'll call a communist movement (or communistic movement, in the case of communistic anarchists who deny the term communist for its connotations) and the second I'll call the communist mode of production¹ or communist society. I will dismiss discussing the word "socialism." Socialism has varied its definition so much, from being a synonym of communism; being a phase of communist society; and eventually, for Stalinists and other revisionist Marxists, a whole mode of production unto itself. Throughout I will rely primarily on the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, though I still would consider some anarchists (e.g. Errico Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Michael Bakunin, and so on) to be communists, activists and revolutionaries working within a movement toward an aim.

To begin with, I will simply ignore the definition provided by any government. That both the USSR and the USA would agree that the USSR was "actually existing communism" reflects their own geopolitical statecraft rather than any serious wrestling with meaning. The sensational and strictly emotional definition of communism claims that it is when the government

1 A mode of production put simply is the productive forces available combined with the social relations regarding said forces. A modern industrial capitalist mode of production has been described by Marxists to be socialized production (alienated collaboration, as illustrated by an assembly line) with private appropriation (whether by an owner, firm, or government. Those obliged to work do not command even the destiny of their product).

“does a lot of stuff” as Richard Wolff amusingly satirizes (it’s a popular meme one can find on YouTube). The prominent picture of communism in the imaginations of a well propagandized American public is the banal cruelties of Orwell’s *1984*, the gulags where dissidents were detained or executed, the cartoonish dogmatism of Marxism as Marxism-Leninism – a state doctrine.

In such a picture, people must still work for wages to afford commodities. From where, then, does the other popular definition come which speaks of no governments or money? Merriem-Webster’s definition focuses on equitable distribution of goods.² The most common definition you might hear from a contemporary communist is that communism is a “stateless, moneyless, and classless society.” Obviously, here it refers to communist society, a society in which the communist mode of production predominates. This is apparently the aim of communists, but does not explain why the aim is a society without the governing of persons, the circulation of money, or the placement of people into social classes.

To begin with, let’s take a moment to see why a communist might point to these various features. For the lack of government, there is the famous line of a “withering away” of the state. What Engels writes in the context is much more illuminating: “The first act by virtue of which the [workers’] State really constitutes itself the representative of the whole of society ... this is, at the same time, its last independent act as a State. ... the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The State is not ‘abolished.’ *It dies out* (his emphasis)” (Engels 321).

What of money? Marx had identified wages as a critical point in what he’d call capitalism. In his *Paris Manuscripts* he’d written “Wages are a direct consequence of estranged labour, and estranged labour is the direct cause of private property. The downfall of the one aspect must therefore mean the downfall of the other.” (Marx, *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, “[Estranged Labour]” paragraph 63) Without money, without economic value determining the circulation of products, what is the regulating principle of this society? Engels asserts “Commodity production, however, is by no means the only form of social production. ... Direct social production and direct distribution preclude all exchange of commodities, therefore also the

² Ironically Marx attacks this conception of communism, locating the fault in finding “distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution.” (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* 60) Common control of productive means ensures control over distribution/consumption.

transformation of the products into commodities (at any rate within the community) and consequently also their transformation into values.” He concludes that “the quantity of social labour contained in a product need not then be established in a roundabout way... Society can simply calculate how many hours of labour are contained” in a given product. “It could therefore never occur to it still to express the quantities of labour put into the products, quantities which it will then know directly and in their absolute amounts, in a third product, in a measure which, besides, is only relative, fluctuating, inadequate, though formerly unavoidable for lack of a better one, rather than express them in their natural, adequate and absolute measure, *time*.” (Engels *Anti-Duhring*, 294, his emphasis) Rather than relying upon the faith of a fiat currency or the gold standard, the labor-time required for an article’s production is expressed directly by average time.

How does this work in practice? Rather than wages the producer “receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such-and-such an amount of labor (after deducting his labor for the common funds), and with this certificate, he draws from the societal supply of means of consumption as much as the same amount of labor cost. The same amount of labor that he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another.” (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* 57-58). This nonfungible receipt of hours of consumption allows for a regulating principle in economic coordination. The principle in this phase of communist society is not the famous motto of “from each by ability and to each by need” but “to each by contribution.”

How does this translate to a classless society? Is it simple enough that once everyone is a co-owner of one expansive firm embracing the whole of humanity, our relations to the means of production the same, we have a classless society? To be without social classes where division of labor is voluntary rather than “natural” or forced (whether by caste or circumstance) and the production of the species is collaborative and open one is an individual rather than a category. Marx and Engels wrote that in the “illusory community” in class society, individuals are unable to develop their capacities and that personal freedom could “[exist] only for the individuals who developed within the relationships of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were individuals of this class.” This illusory community in class society (extending deep through human history’s various modes of production, from capitalism to “pre-history”) takes on its own alien power to confront individuals, and due to the necessity of violent force or its threat to continue

the ruling classes grasp over other classes. This power is the state/government,³ and Marx and Engels wrote that it was a “new fetter” and necessarily oppressive (Marx and Engels 197). This view would explain why Marx chose to name the state “a parasitical excrescence upon civil society” (Marx, “Drafts of the Civil War in France” 484) and a “supernaturalist abortion of society” (Ibid 486) in his drafts for *The Civil War In France*. In a classless society, or what they called a “real community[,] the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association.” (Marx and Engels 197) Instead of growing up to choose one or another career, to fear sinking into the working class, to fear ruination by the anarchy of the market, to lose work and thus safe and healthy foods and shelter, individuals are free to explore and change, free to live and develop on their own terms.

So communist society is a classless society and, because it is classless, lacks money and the state. To make these statements more affirmative and actually descriptive, communist society: (moneyless) tracks and circulates necessities based on the average labor-time needed to produce an article and, optionally but definitely in its first moments, the amount of time an individual has contributed to this social production process; (classless) is composed of individuals able to develop and explore their capacities freely, to voluntarily specialize not merely to survive but because it is fulfilling activity; (stateless) and is free and consensual, an administration over objects rather than people, a voluntary association of free individuals.

As satisfying as all this is, Marx and Engels wrote “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things (all their emphasis).” (Marx and Engels 162) Oddly enough, the “present state of things” is capitalism, and over history it has for the most part been class society. Thus, communism is the abolition of capitalism, and we can see from the prior paragraph a permutation of a communistic state of affairs. This is somewhat unique to the revolutionary socialists of the 19th century who were inspired by Hegel yet approached the world as materialists (this would include, of course, Marx and Engels, but also the anarchist Michael Bakunin). It was necessary for Marx and Engels to clarify this to distinguish themselves from the “utopian socialists” like Fourier who planned communities and compounds to serve as examples of their utopias (similar to hippies in the 1960s founding their often ill-fated

3 I know these terms are only sometimes synonymous. I’m using them interchangeably here and thankfully not defining either of them.

communes). Rather than wish communist society into the world, it would need to be established by class struggle, by a mass movement of workers building their own organs of co-governance and administration while dismantling and dissolving both the state and the laws and social relations of which capitalism consists (namely abolishing commodity production in favor of collaborative production for need).

So communism is a lot of things. It's that state of affairs where everyone can realize their possibilities in a free and consensual commonwealth. It's the movement of class struggle, which aims to abolish the very conditions of class struggle, i.e. class itself. Most fundamentally, the abolition of wages frees the worker from being a worker (along with everyone else from their own particular class restrictions). An individual is free to contribute somehow that might redeem their consumption and may choose this all on their own terms. If class society through its permutations develops various alienating and oppressive forms of daily life, communism is the voluntary and intentional exploration of new forms of life. If capitalism is ultimately the alienation of a worker from both themselves at work and the product of their labor for a capitalist or government to yield a profit or surplus by the product's sale then communism is simply free time and nothing else.

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