

# The communalism of desire

## Notes on the gift economy

Anu Bonobo

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The fear of communism comes with the notion that the State will take away our things, force us to share with unworthy neighbors, and leave us without self-determination. That contributes to why we need to replace communism with communalism.

To avoid old-school communism and the welfare office, the working-class and middle-class servants of post-industrial capitalism willingly suffer all sorts of indignities, while tolerating, for the global underclass, an unprecedented neo-slavery of staggering horror. A unipolar, neoliberal, global capitalism has emerged, and we face the accelerating influence of a global junta motivated by purely mercantile interests. The crushing one-world economic system has resuscitated the need for a revolutionary alternative; to counter the new boss, radicals might create a sustainable, communal opposition. To reclaim the communal alternative, we must un-hinge communism from its authoritarian baggage and purge forever the tendency to form vanguardist bureaucracies when voluntary, horizontal associations are all that we need. Abolishing wage work and private property, socializing all necessities such as food, land, and water: these demands continue the classic precepts of anarcho-syndicalism and libertarian communism. But today, we can extend these classic notions and envision an even more radical gift economy as the only alternative to capitalism.

## Desire Not Duty

In the 1974 post-situationist manifesto *The Right to Be Greedy*, the For Ourselves collective contends that the problem with capitalism is not too much greed, but too little. Through articulated desires, the For Ourselves collective contrasts an ever-expansive social wealth to the narrow wealth of the marketplace. This philosophy of “communist egoism” shares much with Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift*, which describes an economy fueled by a non-commodified hunger, desire, and lust, “an economy of the creative spirit: to speak of the inner gift we accept as the object of our labor, and the outer gift that has become a vehicle of culture.”

Likewise, the problem with communism is not too much sharing but too little. However, when radicals invoke the gift economy, are we somehow motivated by guilt rather than the greed of egoless egoism? Do we feed the hungry and fight against war because we passionately want a world where everyone eats and no one kills? Or do we engage in revolutionary and communal gestures because we think this is what we are supposed to do?

In an essay on Marcel Mauss, an early theorist of the gift economy, anarchist academic David Graeber suggests, “Economists and Christian theologians agree that if one takes pleasure in an act of generosity, it is somehow less generous. They just disagree on the moral implications. To counteract this very perverse logic, Mauss emphasized the ‘pleasure’ and ‘joy’ of giving. In traditional societies, there was not assumed to be any contradiction between what we would call self-interest and concern for others; the whole point of the traditional gift is that it furthers both at the same time.”

While capitalist neo-calvinism renounces personal pleasure in pursuit of profit, state communism denounces pleasure in the pursuit of equality. Stalinist-style communism decreed that people could not root out their own bourgeois tendencies, postulated that desire would always create class antagonism, and finally ordered people to give up joyful autonomy in the name of sacrifice and unity. A gift society would firmly jettison such doctrines of self-denial, seeing radical self-satisfaction in the wealth of relationships, invoking pleasure in what cannot be bought, sold, or bartered as the antidote to economy itself.

The communism of duty is imposed from outside, is dead and dying with the leftovers of leftism. The communalism of desire emerges from within; it's the communism you want because it fulfills all your desires and the desires of those you love. It rejects the mechanistic world view of duty and guilt and instead invokes an animistic one of pleasure and play.

## **Possessions and things, not property and commodities**

When we say we oppose private property, we generally refer to the private usurpation of all that should be shared, like wind, water, and land, especially land held and exploited for profit by absentee landlords.

Some radicals reject personal possessions entirely and choose a completely unattached life, while others enjoy their things, tools, and toys for both utilitarian and ornamental value. Some of us are wary of an ascetic anti-materialism that rejects creature comforts as part of some radical rite of passage. Is it possible to endorse instead an ecstatic materialism that stops far short of the extraordinary excesses of the capitalists?

When confronted with sacrificial, guilt-based politics, Emma Goldman declared, "I insisted that our cause could not expect me to behave as a nun and that the movement should not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it. I want freedom, the right to self expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things."

Indeed, for the gift economy to flourish, we need to have things to give. If never offered for sale, if never packaged in plastic, if never altered with a price tag, if always moving in generosity, possessions acquire an expansive and erotic equality. There's no need to confuse these objects of desire with mere commodities. How might we get such things? For now, some people will continue to buy them. Others might make them, and certainly, many will continue to pilfer them.

Just as some radicals confuse possessions with property, others confuse shoplifting with consumerism and critique it as merely mimicking the commodity system. But today, quite a culture of ethical shoplifting has emerged in radical subcultures.

As Abbie Hoffman put it, "To steal from a brother or sister is evil. To not steal from the institutions that are the pillars of the Pig Empire is equally immoral." While shoplifting remains problematic-especially when simply a thrill-seeking gesture of great risk for dubious return-it's a wrench in the system of buying and selling in lieu of the future of creating and sharing. Consider these pre-emptive strikes to remember the freedom of the past and presage the gift economy of tomorrow.

The gift economy demands not scarcity but abundance. In this spirit, Julian Beck of The Living Theater insisted, "Abundance can only endure if ever larger groups are brought to share in it." Imagine the world where we all have our cake and eat it, too: an economy of creation and appreciation replaces the old axis of production and consumption.

## **Everything for everybody, all the time, and for free**

Of all the utopian contributions of the 1960s counterculture, none may be so great as the all-encompassing revolutionary notion that everything should be free. Revolutionaries knew then that even barter was too conservative and political communism too right-wing. Social wealth is multiplied in relationships, destroyed in miserly restrictions.

For a brief period, this was not the watered-down, hip sub-culture capitalism that we know so well today; in fact, for the original advocates freedom for its own sake, freeing every-thing for everybody embodied "free" as both

noun and verb in the most extreme and extraordinary forms of utopian thinking. This was then translated into the communal actions and distribution networks that fused the forces of resistance under one political and cultural and economic banner.

In the poetic and uncompromising manifestos of Abbie Hoffman; Julian Beck, The White Panther Party, and the San Francisco Diggers, property is transcended. When these pranksterish prophets and their kin put such notions into practice, it looked then as if the old order was crumbling, and the gift economy looked like the new world.

When today's anarchist activists speak of creating community centers, autonomous zones, radical retreats, and counter-institutions, a trend that has steadily continued and mutated since the late 1980s, they update and continue the movement for free clinics, free schools, and free stores instigated in the late '60s and early '70s. Now as then, our anti-economics acknowledges a trans-historical thread; remembering and reclaiming the commons.

Today in North America, remnants of these utopian proclamations, permutations, and practices can be seen at Rainbow Gatherings and the Burning Man Festival and with groups like Food Not Bombs.

Somehow, these values, visions, and practical vistas must supersede the stigma associated with hippie-punk subcultures and become more tangible and available to ever larger groups of people. The time may come all too quickly when our experiments in self-sustenance and our rehearsals for revolution must feed and house our bodies as well as our dreams.

This will be a gamble, but what do we have to lose? As capitalism kicks down another door to destroy the future, the gift economy is "kickin' it" as an ecstatic alternative to collective denial.

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