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## Communizing Currents

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# COMMUNIZING CURRENTS

Jeff Diamanti

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*Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles* edited by Benjamin Noys. London: Minor Compositions, 2011. Pp. 280. \$24.00 cloth, \$21.64 paper.

Despite what sometimes appear as fundamental differences within communization theory, its coherence proceeds from particular claims about class relations today or, more specifically, the forthright negation of standard political protocols to which class formation serves as the first of many steps *towards* communism. At least on paper, today's communization theory finds its precursors certainly in Karl Marx's *Capital*, but more specifically in twentieth-century theorists of the value-form associated with *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (New Marx Reading) in Germany, Jacques Camatte in France, and Amadeo Bordiga in Italy.<sup>1</sup> Though communization's constellation is certainly not limited to these schools or the years surrounding 1968, its collective contribution to Marxism amounts to a position altogether antagonistic to other more gradualist or programmatic leftisms that take either labor or the state, rather than the value-form, as the political horizon of critique and struggle.

Implicit in communization's many valences today is that there is no "towards communism." In this account, a "towards" implies a provisional series of steps or a program, which our recent historical experience provides no reason to trust, much less to think possible. Instead, communization's immediacy, according to the Endnotes collective's

contribution to *Communization and Its Discontents*, means an intensive, generalized “self-abolition of the working class, since anything short of this leaves capital with its obliging partner, ready to continue the dance of accumulation” (26). Although its history under the specific name *communization* stretches back at least to Amadeo Bordiga’s writings in the 1950s, at present communization is most closely associated with the collectively written journals *Endnotes* in the United States and United Kingdom (formerly *Aufheben*), and *Théorie Communiste (TC)* and *Tiqqun* in France. Yet, it would perhaps make no sense as a theory should its own reproduction not depend on rather serious tensions internally and externally. The tensions specific to our historical moment were finally gathered for an English-speaking audience in 2011, under the title *Communization and Its Discontents* and the editorship of Benjamin Noys. Of course, the collection itself is not, as Noys admits, exhaustive. The point, however, is “to find what paths there might be, to not accept the (capitalist) desert as ‘natural phenomenon,’ and to begin to detect the struggles that will (re)make this terrain” (17). While section 2 (“Frames of Struggle”) and section 3 (“Strategies of Struggle”) collect accounts of communization’s logical and historical limits, and

section 4 (“No Future?”) reboots the assumptions carried forward from the volume’s first page, *Communization and Its Discontents* as a collection models precisely the necessary internal contradictions of the theory it addresses.

“The Moment of Communization,” section 1 of *Communization*, gives us three timely reflections on what an analysis of communization would look like in relation to our contemporary moment. For the Endnotes collective in “What Are We to Do?” this means working backwards through a critique of the Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection* (2007) and *Call* (2004)—book-length texts affiliated with the Tiqqun collective and its journal to which the name communization increasingly links itself—in order to highlight crucial differences between a theory of communization that imagines a “we” ready to subvert the rhythms of an enemy typically called Empire, and one instead grounded in the labor theory of value. The discourse of something like a Deleuzian theory of substance, for the Endnotes collective, distracts us from the more systematic, malicious condition of today’s capitalist political economy. With the labor theory of value, however, neither Endnotes nor TC restrict themselves in their contributions to *Communization* to a demands-based strategy limited to the wage

relation, much less a ratification of the proletariat as a class *soon* ready for “*the* revolution.” Yet their reasoning for both maintaining the labor theory of value, and dispensing with the typical political program associated with it, stems from what has become the analytic kernel of contemporary communization theory. In an earlier essay, Endnotes developed Marx’s General Law of Capitalist Accumulation from chapter 25 of *Capital*, volume 1: with each successive crisis of overproduction and overaccumulation, they argue, “a secular crisis emerges, a *crisis of the reproduction of the capital-labour relation itself*” (emphasis mine)<sup>2</sup> wherein the proletariat (understood not just as the industrial working class but as relative and absolute surplus labor—the unemployed and the unemployable) reproduces itself to a point beyond which the market can contain. It’s difficult to overemphasize the theoretical and political implications of this observation, especially for a leftism that has tended in the past to begin and end at the site of production. Here the emphasis is rather on the distinct reproduction of capital and labor outside of their symbiosis at the site of production. Certain factory-based organizational strategies might have made sense in the past, in other words, but are entirely inadequate to the historical nature of the labor–capital relation today—a relation defined

increasingly by rupture rather than continuity.

In their *Communization* contribution, Endnotes consider the ruptured contract between labor and capital a fundamental contradiction of capitalist accumulation and therefore reject communism as a revolutionary project exclusive to the working class. Their hypothesis, however, is not that the revolutionary project should include all classes, but that its aim is rather the abolition of class, as such. The insistence on the contemporary breakdown in the value-form means that

in this period, the “we” of revolution does not affirm itself, does not identify itself positively, because it cannot; it cannot assert itself against the “they” of capital without being confronted by the problem of its own existence—an existence which it will be the nature of the revolution to overcome. (31)<sup>3</sup>

A number of rigorous critiques of this position appear in the later chapters of *Communization*. Alberto Toscano, for example, argues in “Now and Never” that what results from the hypothesis that a revolutionary negation of class, as such, is possible only after the breakdown of the labor–capital relation is an invariant communism all but unwilling to account for mediations in

and the uneven development of capitalism. “Rather than confronting the problems that beset the construction of effective solidarities across polities, and especially across a transnational division of labor,” Toscano suggests,

communization theory takes its account of real subsumption as warrant to sideline all of these problems, thereby ignoring precisely those very real obstacles which demand strategic reflection instead of the rather unscientific presupposition that everything will be resolved in the struggle. (95)

The answer, for Toscano, to the question of transition—“not *whether* communism requires a thinking of transition, but *which* transition” (95)—would likely emerge for Endnotes and TC in specific struggles over the reproduction of the value-form itself, but the precision of the problem emerges elsewhere in *Communization*.

In fact, one such prompt comes from within another variant of communization theory around the point at which TC links the mediation of capital and labor to the same breakdown of which Endnotes speaks. The emphasis in TC’s “Communization in the Present Tense,” the second essay in “The Moment of

Communization” section, is the historically specific limits of self-organization and autonomy as revolutionary programs for the working class.<sup>4</sup> The form these limits take, however, is for TC an immediate and double decoupling today of, on the one hand, “the valorization of capital and the reproduction of labor power and, on the other, a decoupling between consumption and the wage as income” (52). The position here is not, in other words, that a certain fabric of false consciousness forecloses class unification, but rather that the core mechanism by which labor came to recognize itself in capital—namely, the wage relation—has reached a historical, logical limit.

As a hypothesis about the political economy of global capitalism, TC’s provocation takes anticapitalist approaches of all varieties back to their core assumptions. As a political position, TC’s critique of political economy unfolds into a project for freeing up materials in the world from their function as capital. Here we might not have a contradiction between Endnotes and TC (though both TC and Endnotes regularly position themselves against many positions supported by the journal *Tiqun*) but at the very least a crucial addendum:

The attack against the capitalist nature of the means of

production is their abolition as value absorbing labor in order to valorize itself; it is the extension of the situation where everything is freely available, the destruction (perhaps physical) of certain means of production . . . Relations between individuals are fixed in things, because exchange value is by nature material. The abolition of value is a concrete transformation of the landscape in which we live, it is a new geography. The abolition of social relations is a very material affair. (54)

Communization, understood here as a transformation not just of social but of material relations, unfolds in at least two directions. One direction is a commitment to abolishing the material basis for the valorization of capital. Insofar as the “attack against capital” involves “the extension of the situation where everything is freely available,” however, it is, in the other direction, also the drawing up of redistributive plans. The verb “to extend” here reminds us that communization’s moment of negation is already its moment of mediation, where the precise logic by which everyone takes care of everyone sorts itself out amidst the rubble of capitalism.

Elsewhere in *Communization*, Jasper Bernes takes up the

circulation side of valorization within TC and Endnotes’ hypothesis and links it, in “The Double Barricade and the Glass Floor,” to the political economy of post-secondary institutions. As with TC, Bernes takes the limits of previous political modes of organization not as a “failure of will” (160), but as a misrecognition of the technical composition of the labor–capital relation following restructuring during the 1970s and 1980s. Growth during this period, according to Bernes, “occurred primarily in industries involved with the circulation or realization of commodities” (161) rather than in the sphere of production. By *circulation*, Bernes means everything ranging from transport and retail to education and health care, all organized by new data-processing technologies and financialization. Two important points emerge from the intensification of “*unproductive* spheres” (161). First, barriers to communization are both internal to a labor force compressed by increased circulatory efficiency and externalized in the form of the marketplace itself where “these fragmented parts come together—where the working-class is itself reassembled” (162) and where all manner of attacks on the “material coordinates of the current mode of production” unfold. Second, this material limit “renders incoherent all attempts to imagine, as past revolutions did, an egalitarian set

of social relations laid atop the existing means of production” (163)—that is, a “redistributive” communism. Thus, while labor remains imbricated with capital for the time being through “robust institutions” such as banks and universities, the point is that a vanishing “worker’s identity” is the precondition for a new current of communism that is beginning to threaten even those institutions most hoisted by capital (163).<sup>5</sup> “If we want communism,” Bernes remarks, “then we will have no choice but to take our radicalism to the root, to uproot capital not merely as social form but as material sediment, not merely as relations of production but as productive forces” (163). Berne’s contribution to the volume is to highlight the intensity with which capital reorganizes spheres that we tend not to associate with production, an argument underscored by the 2012 student strike in Montreal.

In the final section of *Communization*, Maya Gonzalez elaborates the contradiction featured and intensified in the recent history of capital and labor to its terminus: not merely a rupture in relations of production, but in *reproductive* forces, as such. With great clarity, Gonzalez’s “Communization and the Abolition of Gender” situates gender at the heart of class struggle. “Since the revolution

as communization must abolish all divisions within social life,” Gonzalez argues, “it must abolish gender relations—not because gender is inconvenient or objectionable, but because it is part of the totality of relations that daily reproduce the capitalist mode of production” (220). The emphasis on gender is not in opposition to, but in conjunction with, other relational modes defined and functioned by capital. But gender, specifically its role in the reproductive division of labor, forms “an essential element of the class relation” upon which all other elements rely, and must therefore generate a rupture or a “rift (*l’ecart*), a deviation in the class conflict that destabilizes its terms” (234). What it means to “uproot capital” for Gonzalez, in other words, is to uproot the conditions of the reproduction of labor in any mode defined by or acquainted with capital—that is, gendered modes altogether. Communization’s affinity with Marxist feminism of the 1970s here replaces the problem of gender equality with the more radical commitment not just to better gender relations but to the abolition of gender relations, as such, and the insistence that gender (given its primary function in the reproduction of labor power) form the sine qua non of struggle. So, despite the uneven development of capital and thereby labor relations across the globe, the

gender question implicit in the answer “communization” is indiscriminate to regional particularity. Gonzalez’s contribution to communization theory thus gets to the heart of its international scale.

The internationalization of struggles, which implies a dialectic between the *particular* characteristics of struggles and the *international* division of labor in which struggles are at least formally framed, appears at first as a knot within much communization theory. The political imperatives contained in the breakdown of the value-form within a fully globalized capitalism, however, already implicate a global division of labor. This includes both relative (the unemployed) and absolute (the unemployable) surplus populations whose function within the global labor supply makes local conditions immediate markers of a more general cartography of capital. Readers of *Communization* looking for a theory of communism after globalization, as it were, will have to first confront the collection’s primary refrain that “there will only be a unity of the proletariat in the very movement of its abolition” (20). Communization in its many theoretical variants operates on a register altogether disinterested in the question of internationalization, at least as a conceptual or organizational precondition for so-called true communism.

What most historical versions of communism desire as their end point, in other words, is immanent to all moments of its working out here amidst the historical feature of the *international* breakdown of the value-form. *Communization and Its Discontents*, however, is as much about the former of its title (communization) as it is about the latter (its discontents)—a dialectic whose unfolding is nothing but the unfolding of communization itself.

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#### NOTES

1. For a fuller history of European threads of communization, see “Communisation and Value-Form Theory,” *Endnotes*, no. 2 (2010), <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/4>.
2. “Misery and Debt,” *Endnotes*, no. 2 (2010), <http://endnotes.org.uk/issues/2>.
3. The argument is that all that is contained in a class *in itself* is necessarily ruptured, as are all relations to capital and its reproduction, with the class *for itself*. Classical Marxism is no stranger to this formulation. The difference here, however, derives from the emphasis on rupture in the latter form, a *rupture* in class itself the moment it realizes unity, rather than a *ratification* of unity.

4. TC works out with great detail the historical limits of self-organization and autonomy in the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism in their 2009 pamphlet “Self-Organization is the first act of the revolution; it then becomes an obstacle which the revolution has to overcome” where much of “Communization in the Present Tense” first appears.
5. Indeed, I wrote a portion of this faced off against a three-hour-long police barricade with hundreds of students, faculty, support staff, and service

workers at the University of Alberta (1 February 2012). Perhaps the university’s militant response to “No tuition increases!”—despite the reformism of such a demand—should no longer surprise anyone. At stake is a very precious relation between labor and capital operating in today’s post-secondary institute where student debt, cheap labor, and an unprecedented mass of capital assets form an economic unit altogether indispensable to the capitalist state as it functions now.