

*From Occupation to Communization.*

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I first heard the slogan “Occupy Everything” in 2009 during the anti-privatization protests that shook the University of California, where I have been a graduate student since 2007. During the first weeks of the fall semester, that slogan gradually came to mean something specific, something razor-sharp, in a way that has been diluted in the present wave of protests. On September 24th, when students at UC Santa Cruz occupied the Graduate Student Commons, the words “Occupy Everything” could be seen spray-painted on the side of the building. The same moment saw the publication of pamphlets and websites devoted to theorizing and propagating occupations, bearing the slogan, “Occupy Everything, Demand Nothing.” But it was the slogan of a vanguard, not the broad majority of protesters, and referred to the controversial tactic of forcibly locking down campus buildings with bike locks and barricades without any provision of demands or benchmarks for de-escalation. Occupations were a contentious tactic both inside and outside the organizing coalition, especially since the point wasn’t to force a negotiation with the administration, it was rather to block business as usual—and also, at least in theory, to wrench a parcel of space and time free from the capitalist order. This last point proved to be an Achilles heel for the UC occupations, since the occupiers had to rely on the very structures and temporalities of student protest they aimed to supercede. What they wanted was a commune—to communize, more specifically—but this would remain an elusive horizon during the first two years of campus revolt.

As far as I’m aware, the tactic of no-demands occupations originated in France during the 2006 anti-CPE protests, when the administration of the Sorbonne preemptively blocked access to the campus in order to prevent it from being occupied as it had been in May 1968—a decision that, ironically, prompted the students to occupy. The French roots of the occupation movement go deep; in fact, there’s about a decade’s worth of para-academic French Marxism woven into the tactics and ideas of the first wave of occupiers at the UC and other American universities (the New School’s occupation predated ours by a year)—not only *The Coming Insurrection.*, but also writings by the less well-known (though equally shadowy) collective Théorie Communiste, who argue against the familiar forms of class struggle, trade unionism above all, as possible fixes for the present crisis. These were not the only progenitors of the occupations at the UC; that list is too varied and internecine to recount here. I only want to emphasize that circa 2009, the occupation movement was undergirded at least in part by a specifically Marxist set of ideas about capitalism and class struggle. These ideas seem to have vanished from the present debate over the future of Occupy—to our loss, I’d argue.

Back in 2009, the tactical rejection of demands was meant as a vote of no confidence in the wage system, and also in the instrumentalization of education as a means of reproducing that system. Moreover, the occupations were understood to signal, for some instinctually, for others intellectually, that the horizons of struggle were emphatically not those of ancestral socialism: there is no longer any possibility of going back to the arcadia of the workers’

state; now, revolution will be made by piecing together the apparatus of redistribution on the outside, in the cold of the commons, without wages or benefits. If the refusal of labor was once the endpoint of autonomist struggle, the campus occupiers understood the stakes to have been reversed: the rebels are not the workers but the jobless, the debtors, the underemployed, the precarious, and the socially and economically marginal. These considerations may not directly animate the current wave of occupations, but they are still very much alive in the tactics of the Occupy movement.

As springtime approaches, it will be vital to rethink the tactic of occupations together with the history of capitalism and class struggle. At present, some factions within the movement seem content with an amnesiac view of the camps and assemblies, which they regard as prefiguring a return to postwar progressivism. For example, the OWS Demands Working Group has called for “a massive public works and public service program with direct government employment at prevailing (union) wages, paid for by taxing the rich and corporations, by immediately ending all of America’s wars, and by ending all aid to authoritarian regimes to create 25 million new jobs.” While these are all fine things, they have as their premise the wrong assumption that some version of the welfare state represents a timeless form of the political and economic good. But the welfare state was only ever invented to serve a partisan set of interests—those of capitalists—and could not have been built save during a bygone period of capitalism’s global development, when the costs of welfare and high employment were capable of being offset by the profitability of modernizing production. Yes, the labor movement did force capitalists to internalize many of the costs of workers’ social reproduction, but it did this in an era of spectacular growth. Nothing could be further from the present-day scenario. Bear in mind that the greatest expansion of the welfare state took place during capitalism’s golden age in the 1950s-60s: the point was not to build a good, equal, or just society, but rather to draw workers further into the system of production, extending that system to encompass nearly every aspect of lived experience. If the 20th century was the proletariat’s utopia, it was also its hell.

No amount of wishful thinking will bring back the days of heaven and hell, though. Now there is only hell, bleak and disastrous. Capitalism has been failing since the late 1960s, when its previous temporary fix—the rapid modernization of production in advanced economies, coupled with reasonably generous social welfare—stopped doing the trick. If the welfare state beckons on the horizons of Zuccotti Park, it can only be a mirage, a trick of the light playing on the shields of the riot police. I don’t mean this as a slight to the occupiers, though—far from it. For if anything about Occupy is encouraging, it is that in the first weeks of the present wave of occupations, veritable communes were set up in literally dozens of American cities, distributing food, shelter, and first aid freely and to all comers. Regardless of whether they understood their activities under the rubric of Marxism, these new bands of occupiers have already achieved what we at the UC were unable to pull off in the heady days of 2009, creating living breathing communism in some of the least communal places imaginable.

Critics will say that while these small acts of communism are well and good, they will never be able to provide for the millions who depend on capitalism for daily bread. This is true, but only if one considers the movement as an all-or-nothing gamble: either replace the

capitalist system part for part or else admit defeat. We need not cling to this false opposition, which rests on the supposition that communism will be a change in the ownership of capitalism (from top-down to bottom-up) rather than an attack on the system tout court. While the dictatorship of the proletariat may have seemed viable during the era of centralized industrial production, today the production and circulation of capital is more discontinuous than ever; the forces of labor are cruelly disunited. Now, the winds of revolution blow not from the factories and shipyards but from outside the ranks of waged labor. For workers in the de-industrialized world, it is now a question of surviving the loss of jobs and social services—and, along the cutting edge of class struggle, of abolishing the wage system altogether. This, I would argue, is the role played by the movement of communes relative to capitalism: not to put workers in control of the system of exploitation, but to lay the groundwork for a retreat from that system. It should come as no surprise that the occupations provided havens for the jobless and homeless, and that the police called on to evict the camps are well-paid suburbanites. As the movement of the communes pushes forward, these divisions, between the waged and wageless, the self-policing professionals and the communards, will only widen. This split must not be construed as external or opposed to the movement; it is the movement's clearest form of expression.

As for the practical tasks of the communes, I defer to Théorie Communiste's account of what's to be done and how: The process of communization begins, they argue, with

The destruction of exchange: this means the workers attacking the banks which hold their accounts and those of other workers, thus making it necessary to manage without; this means the workers communicating their 'products' to themselves and the community directly and without market; this means the homeless occupying homes, thus 'obliging' construction workers to produce freely, the construction workers taking from the shops at liberty, obliging the whole class to organize to seek food in the sectors to be collectivized, etc. Let's be clear about this. There is no measure which, in itself, taken separately, is 'communism.' To distribute goods, to directly circulate means of production and raw materials, to use violence against the existing state: fractions of capital can achieve some of these things in certain circumstances. That which is communist is not 'violence' in itself, nor 'distribution' of the shit that we inherit from class society, nor 'collectivization' of surplus-value sucking machines: it is the nature of the movement which connects these actions and underlies them, renders them the moments of a process which can only communize even further, or be crushed.

Though I have difficulty imagining a scenario in which workers voluntarily destroy their own means of subsistence, it seems right to insist that any alternative to the capitalist system will have to begin by abolishing private property. This might mean expropriating goods and spaces or blockading factories, freeways, and refineries, but it can also mean reallocating currently existing property for the use of the commune—unlocking the functional capacities of money, shelter, and technology in order to secure the development and expansion of wageless society. Make no mistake, though: what is "communist" about a commune is not the sum of radical actions carried out in the name of the collective. Feeding and providing shelter to the homeless and jobless are laudable activities, but they are not in themselves anti-capitalist. The same goes for strikes, port blockades, debt abolition, and the

re-occupation of foreclosed homes. Whatever the merits of these actions, the point is that they are negligible qua communism absent a general movement toward the abolition of property and the wage system. The point is not to put the jobless back to work, in other words, but to make it possible to live without a wage or personal wealth. To those critics who respond, “But people want jobs—and besides, without a wage no one would be able to survive,” we should respond that it is the fundamental problem of the capitalist system that the employment of our skills, talents, and resources is forcibly yoked to the engine of capitalist accumulation. It is no utopia of leisure or play that we are proposing, only a society wherein our ability to work is no longer a commodity traded on the market, but is rather the immediate support of our common sustenance.

When we speak of communes, then, we are not interested in intentional communities or retreats into the wilderness. We are simply demanding that the conditions of free life established, if only fleetingly, within the Occupy camps be generalized and volatilized. The term communication does not describe a shift from one economic system (capitalism) to its opposite; instead, it indicates the process (communism) by which capital is converted directly and immediately into the means of social reproduction for everyone—that is, for all those who cannot stand anymore to live under capitalism or who have been excluded from it. The point of the movement of communes is precisely to develop the capacity, or capacities, for disengaging as many people as possible away from the systems of wage labor and private property; this can only be done by way of an additive process, beginning with small acts of communization by which new relations and capacities are developed—for example, distributing food and basic services free of cost, collectivizing the wages and rents/mortgages of those with jobs and homes, establishing general assemblies and other apparatuses of self-governance, organizing the expropriation of unused property and resources, developing and broadening a solidarity economy with local producers and shippers, and so on. The basic formula of communization is simple: by abolishing property, we make free life possible, even if only locally and temporarily; by making free life possible, however, we make the expansion of communes inevitable.

To critics of the movement of communes, we should reply that the only limits to communization are those imposed by forms of thought inherited from capitalism. We are communists whenever we prioritize cooperation over competition, social over individual life. Likewise, we are reactionaries whenever we retreat to the comfortable enclosures of property and domination. The society of accumulation will not be abolished by “taking” and “holding” spaces or resources, it will be abolished when spaces and resources are used in a manner that permits us to live without capitalism. One need have no particular scruples about how this should be done; for example, it is immaterial how one gathers the materials needed to keep the commune going—whether one pays for them, builds them, steals them, or buys them on credit—so long as one enables the commune to grow, to incorporate more capital, like a phagocyte in the economic bloodstream. Nor does it matter whether or not the commune has these means from the get-go; the point is to acquire them, after all, and that takes time. While it is certainly important what spatial form the communes take, the centralized model of OWS is already giving way to more dispersed territorial arrangements. Indeed, it is foreseeable that the geography of communization will oscillate in the coming months between centrality and dispersion, and between visibility and invisibility.

The springtime will bring many new experiments and tactics: new camps, newly occupied homes and buildings, unforeseeable shutdowns of industry and commerce—and too, new modes of reactionary violence directed against the movement. We should remember, though, that we pose no real threat to capitalism if we leave untouched the bonds that tie us to it. We will fail if we merely support the reclamation of foreclosed or abandoned homes without questioning the sanctity of our own property, whether owned or rented. We will fail if our wages are not made into the common resource of communal subsistence. We will fail if debtors are permitted to suffer privately. There can be no movement of communes if protest is merely an extracurricular activity of wage-earners: workers will have to choose whether they stand with the communes or with the bosses and administrators. Make no mistake, though: the machine of communication has merely to be started up; its engine is already primed. The era of the Party is over—long live the communes!