Crisis and communisation

Communisation is not any kind of peaceful experimentation with new ways of life, but the revolutionary answer by the proletariat to an acute social crisis. The text below offers a few observations on this connection in the light of the current crisis.[1]

The class struggle between capital and the proletariat takes place all the time and forms the whole of our existence. In most cases it takes relatively peaceful forms, but throughout history it has given rise to numerous revolutionary movements which have threatened the existence of the mode of production. These movements have always originated in a refusal of unendurable proletarian living conditions, but it is not simply that an 'excessive' exploitation regularly calls capitalism into question. Often it is rather a 'too lenient' treatment of the working class which is the immediate cause behind social unrest. We can take Greece as an example, where the very poor finances of the State (caused, according to the bourgeoisie's representatives, by too generous conditions for many groups of workers) in the end had to be remedied by the blood-letting of the working class. Exploitation and surplus value production are two terms for the same thing, and since the capital relation lives from producing surplus value, i.e. from exploiting the workers, the class contradiction necessarily belongs to its most inner essence. Never can it escape from this contradiction, no matter how much the mode of production manages to mutate. Therefore, the threat that this relation will explode from the inside lurks behind every serious crisis.

Serious crises, such as the one we have been experiencing since 2008, break out in situations where the capitalist class fails to guarantee

[1] This text was first published in *riff-raff* no. 9, 2011.

sufficiently high surplus value production under bearable conditions for the producers of this surplus value (that which in bourgeois jargon is called combining growth with social considerations). The most abstract definition of a crisis for the capitalist mode of production is that its reproduction is being threatened, that is to say the continued reproduction of the antagonist classes. It is on the concrete level, however, that we can see the crisis develop before our eyes: banks and companies that are threatened with bankruptcy and workers who are losing their jobs, are evicted from their homes, or are subjected to wage cuts, reduced pensions, poorer healthcare and so on. When single capitals or groups of proletarians get into straits, the State can intervene in order to ward off an emergency, by bailing out companies or handing out a little extra money to the municipalities and thereby maintaining a certain level of service. But there are never any miracle cures. In such instances, the State indebts itself, and sooner or later the budget has to be balanced, which means that in the end it is the proletariat which has to pay for it. The only mercy that the capitalist class can offer the proletarians of a country in crisis is some form of instalment plan (a mortgage on future exploitation), or they can let the proletarians of another country pay a part of the bill. An example of the former is how Iceland was instructed to compensate Britain and the Netherlands for their losses connected with the collapse of Icesave: 2.8 billion euros plus interest over a period of thirty years. An example of the latter is the Swedish government's vigorous pressure within the EU and the IMF in 2009 in order to prevent a devaluation of the Latvian currency, which would have been devastating for the Swedish banks that had lent out enormous sums to the Baltic countries. The latter's brutal austerity packages were probably completely necessary in order to save the Swedish banking system from collapse, something which explains the extremely tough demands by Sweden and the EU.[2] Acute measures such as emergency loans for the

[2] Only after the height of the storm had passed did the Swedish finance minister dare to speak directly: 'This I have never said so clearly before, but the truth is that Sweden was in very, very big trouble in 2009, virtually over the edge' —Anders Borg, January 19, 2011.

auto industry or nationalisations of mortgage companies do not, however, solve the underlying problem behind the crisis, which is a crisis of investment or rather a crisis of accumulation, i.e. a crisis of exploitation.[3] Order insists that exploitation be deepened.

In the autumn of 2008 we witnessed how the capitalist states coordinated themselves on a world scale (from Washington to Beijing, from Frankfurt to Stockholm) in order to confront the financial crisis, but still they are far from mastering the situation. We've gone from a situation where the banks were at the brink of bankruptcy to one in which whole countries are threatened by insolvency. The public debt crisis is not over yet and if the situation worsens—for instance as a result of renewed struggles in Spain or in other deeply indebted countries, or as a consequence of higher oil prices—this could very well produce a domino effect like the one that the banks were facing in the autumn of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. The international community is already holding a number of countries above water (Iceland, Latvia, Greece, Hungary, Ukraine, Ireland…) and the question is how many more it is able to hold up.

The strength of the capitalist class is—apart from economic compulsion—its State apparatuses and its ability to work together in order to save the capitalist world system. This new spirit of class solidarity within the capitalist class has its basis in global production chains and in the dependence of all countries on a functioning world market. But at the same time, this is its weakness, because a local crisis can today, faster than ever, send a shock wave through-out the capitalist nerve system.

A global crisis of exploitation does not automatically lead to revolution, although the revolution is unthinkable without such a crisis. At the same time, a communist revolution today is one of the most difficult and dangerous things one can imagine, in that it would mean a confrontation with all the State apparatuses of the world. The alternatives must thus be extraordinarily grim for it to be a reality at all. To make the revolution is not to sacrifice oneself to an ideal but to try to reach a solution to immediate pressing needs.

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[3] Cf. Screamin' Alice, 'The breakdown of a relationship? Reflections on the crisis', October 2008.

Riff-raff is part of the communisation current. We maintain that the only revolutionary perspective today is that of communisation, that the communist revolution of today necessarily has to take the form of communisation. As a revolutionary practice this is characterised by the proletariat, in its struggle with capital, immediately taking on the task of abolishing its own conditions of life, i.e. all that which determines the proletariat as a class: property, exchange, work, the State, etc. Such a revolution passes neither through the conquering of political power nor the appropriation of the means of production, not even as a necessary step on the way. On the contrary, the revolutionary process is characterised by that process in which politics and the economy, the value form as a social mediation between individuals, is abolished and replaced by communism. The proletariat thus does not raise itself to become the dominant class, but abolishes itself along with all other classes in the course of the struggle against capital. Communisation does not fall from the sky, nor does it 'arrive from the future'; it is a qualitative leap and a rupture with the form of class struggle that takes place every day (struggles over the wage, working conditions, etc). It breaks out the moment when the proletarians are forced to *take communist measures* against the class enemy: *methods with which capital can be destroyed*.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Marx and Engels defined communism in the following manner: '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. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.' (*The German Ideology*, 1845) Communism as the real movement, this can by no means be interpreted to mean that communism can be witnessed here and now as existing communist relations. Such relations are completely incompatible with capitalist society. Communism as the real movement has to mean, rather, that it can be *deduced* from 'the premises now in existence', from really existing class struggle. And since class struggle has changed—indeed the whole world has changed—the revolutionary perspective necessarily has to look different today. We must honestly ask ourselves what sort of revolution can be imagined from how the world is today.

It is always hazardous to speak of the future, but the risks are smaller when we are discussing the near future. Let us therefore sketch out the following scenario: the crisis has deepened and enormous quantities of capital have been lost. The capitalist class desperately has to increase exploitation in order to restart accumulation anew. The proletariat is resisting and after a while the situation arises, somewhere, where none of the classes can yield, which leads to enormous disturbances in society. The wage loss due to strikes and unemployment along with a currency crisis then creates an acute need for all sorts of provisions at the same time as one can no longer pay for these. The movement thus enters a new phase, when the proletarians stop paying the rent, electricity, water, and start to break into warehouses, occupy farm lands and so on, in short when they take what they need. Now, these encroachments on property rights are not the appropriation of the means of production and of existence; these do not pass over to the workers to become their property. Instead they cease to be property—they become *communised*. In the struggle against capital, the proletarians are strengthened and united by making themselves independent of working for money; *class unity appears thus in the process of the dissolution of classes*—in communisation. To concretely abolish themselves as proletarians is going to be the most difficult thing in the world, but is at the same time the ultimate weapon in the class struggle. With its communising measures the proletariat combats efficiently the class enemy by destroying all the conditions which constantly recreate the proletariat as a class. In the end, the proletariat can only fend off capital by negating itself as a value-creating class and *at the same time*—in one and the same process—producing completely new lives that are incompatible with the reproduction of capital.

Since the communisation process is characterised by the abolition of all social classes, including the proletariat, it leads—if it is completed—to an end of class struggle. It would be a big mistake, however, to imagine this process as one of gradually diminishing class antagonism, concurrently with communist relations pushing aside the capitalist ones. Communisation is a rupture with the everyday class struggle in that it is no longer any kind of defence of labour. Still, it is *from the beginning to the end* a *class practice*. (From having struggled to exist one now struggles for

not having to exist.) Communisation is thus not an alternative way of life; it won't be a social experiment of free individuals. Communisation is on the whole not a *free choice* but again an immediate need in a certain situation, a task which the proletarians impose on themselves, compelled by material conditions, when their situation has become unbearable and incompatible with the accumulation of capital. It is only the struggle with capital which can drive the proletariat to the point where it is compelled to smash the State, abolish capital and itself, in order to escape from its situation. Communisation should thus not be seen as a strategy or a method that can be chosen in an abundance of others, as if the proletariat had been standing in front of a smörgåsbord of possible revolutionary solutions. When we speak of revolution it is instead as material *necessity*, and the object of theory is to define this necessity: the conditions for the abolition of the capitalist mode of production. Only an analysis of the *existing* contradictory relation, of the conditions of its reproduction and of its *non-reproduction*, as well as a careful and detailed analysis of the 'empirical' class struggles that we witness and take part in today, can contribute to this being anything but a pious hope or pure speculation.

There are those who maintain that communism is necessary now: 'To go on waiting is madness. The catastrophe is not coming, it is here. We are already situated within the collapse of a civilization. It is within this reality that we must choose sides.' This you can read in *The Coming Insurrection*, a book which has attracted much attention recently. This is not theory, however, but rhetoric and propaganda. It is a call for action, just like the authors' previous book *Call*. What is assumed here (if not explicitly) is that the objective conditions of the revolution are ready, or rather overripe, and that now only a subjective condition is needed which can smash 'a dying social system [that] has no other justification to its arbitrary nature but its absurd determination—its senile determination—to simply *linger on*…' (*Call*, p. 4.) We do not conceive of the revolution as the coincidence of objective and subjective conditions. Revolution, communisation, is actually not a necessity here and now, for we can still not witness it. But that doesn't mean that it can't be necessary tomorrow! It is easy to become impatient when one sees where the world is heading, and we may all feel trapped inside an 'absurd determinism'. The law of

determinacy is inexorable however; never can we act in a way which makes ourselves independent from this determinism. But as a part of determinism, as *necessarily determined* by class antagonism, we can act *in accordance with what we are—against what we have been—and as a class abolish all classes*, when we are one day brought face to face with this awful task.

Peter Åström, March 2011

A reply to critics

The above text was discussed at the editorial meeting of *Sic* in July 2011, in which it was subjected to various criticisms.

The main criticism was that, in its attempt to respond to various voluntarist views, the text goes too far in the opposite direction and puts a too strong emphasis on proletarians being compelled to act in a certain way. Communisation, it was argued, cannot be understood as a last resort solution imposed on proletarians.

Another point of criticism put forward was that the text lacks a positive dimension, that it grasps only the negative side of the revolutionary process and thus neglects that communisation is a production of new relations between individuals replacing capitalist social relations.

To respond to the first point, I must agree that the text can give the impression of saying that the revolution is a mechanical process when it so strongly emphasises that communisation won't be a free choice and that we will instead be compelled by the material conditions at hand. In my conception, however, the will and the acting is not absent in the revolutionary process but that is something which is only implied in the text. When I say that we are ourselves a 'part of determinism' and that we are 'necessarily determined by class antagonism' I mean that

1. we *do* have a part to play, that we are in fact *determining* the course of events by acting, but that
2. we cannot act independently from the determinacy of the class contradiction, i.e. the material conditions.

Making the revolution is not a free choice because we can only act within a certain framework, within the context of a general crisis (also produced by class struggle). Communisation is the *revolutionary* answer of our time to such a crisis. The text does not deal with the various counter-revolutionary answers that will also be presented, and all the 'struggles within the struggle against capital' that we can expect (see B.L., 'The suspended step of communisation' in this issue). The proletarians will never be compelled to produce communism because of material impoverishment alone. In the face of deteriorating conditions, however, we can assume a re-emergence of the communist movement that will take the form of concrete actions and projects made up of individuals with minds and wants. These individuals (our future selves?) could then take on the task of abolishing capital / producing communism. I'm not saying that we should sit and do nothing until then but it isn't enough to state that capitalism 'obviously' needs to be destroyed and then just do it. As Marx said: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances…' (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852).

The second criticism I find harder to understand. The text focuses on the need to attack and negate the capitalist categories but it also states clearly that the class enemy can only be defeated by 'producing completely new lives that are incompatible with the reproduction of capital'. What those lives might be is not developed in the text, simply because I don't know. All I know is that it is going to be a bloody mess.

Peter Åström, July 2011