

## Letter to Gilles, January 6, 2015

One of the “problems” I have with communisation is that in most of the texts it seems to appear “from nowhere”. I mean, I understand and share what communisation is (or should be): that is, revolution as communism, and not as something that creates the conditions for communism; also the idea of the immediacy, but not instantaneity, of communism, being and not make the revolution etc.

It’s also clear for me that communisation is not an extension of some kind of autonomous spaces within capitalism, or the exclusive product of our will. Communisation can only arise from some kind of general social crisis (not necessarily economical, but political, ecological, etc.). But, in this sense, and as I do not think that there is something that makes necessarily communisation the unique solution to a given social crisis (as an extreme structuralistic reading of TC/SIC would suggest), my question is if is there some kind of social precondition of communisation? I mean, between all the possible exits to a given social crisis (return to capitalist “normality”, war-genocidal-authoritarian solutions, communisation, etc.) are there some material basis that make more probable (but not sure, obviously) one of these exits. Obviously, when I talk of ‘material basis’ I’m not thinking in some technological or economic conditions but some kind of social relations between proletarians (material, but also cultural or “ideological” in a good sense). Also, I’m not thinking in some kind of transition situation. No, I’m thinking during the existence of capitalism. My question is: confronted to a deep social crisis, what makes (if there is anything) that a more or less great number of proletarians outline communisation, even locally, as an exit to the crisis. Maybe the question can be posed in other way: what is the relation between communisation and the struggles of the present??

Following this question, next one is pretty obvious, if there are some preconditions of communisation, is there something that we, as communists, can do to create or favor these conditions?

So, I will try to give you my opinion on both questions as, for me, they are entangled. Briefly, I think that communisation will arise from the “imbrication” of different proletarian struggles happening during some kind of social crisis. I think that communisation is made of self-organisation, autonomy, solidarity, taking decisions in common (not democratically), surpassing the limits of trade, or between workers and unemployed, free disposal of resources, etc. although is also much more than that. I think these are the preconditions on which communisation must take place. Without being communisation, they allow it (but not assure it).

So, it is increasingly clear to me that, until revolution, there is not much we can do as communists except “theory” (writing, translating, debating, etc.), but maybe, in the (necessarily isolated and reformist) class struggles, we can fight, not to “raise the level of consciousness” or to “give a perspective”, but to try to develop these preconditions of communisation, to establish them as a part of a kind of “fight culture” between the proletarians, a way of behaving during any kind of struggles. In a way, it is like trying to make that class struggle express in some forms or ways as similar as possible as communism, understood as a continuation and a break with class struggle, will express during the revolution. I know that “revolution is not about forms” (although I’d like to say that revolution is not only about forms, I think they also matter), so when I use ‘form’ is not in a sense of organizational forms (party vs council or hierarchy vs horizontality) but in the sense of “mode of expression”. So, a pure reformist struggle can be expressed as a self-organized, autonomous struggle which tries to make contact with other proletarians (worker or not) and which use direct action. Or the same demand can be posed through trade-union channels, with a top-down organization, isolated in its own workplace, etc. (I think there are not so pure struggles but usually combine elements from both examples I have described). In a way, I think that the first kind of struggles makes easier communisation as an exit to crisis but the second does not.

However, these forms cannot be all, the content of the struggle is also relevant. Maybe there are some demands more interesting than others (for example, in those struggles in which the temp workers are sacked for the benefit of the permanent workers), etc. For example, during

the Lindsey refinery strikes in 2009, people in the struggle said that the chauvinist racist demands (“British jobs for British workers”) were deactivated in part by the participation of left militants that posed “internationalist” slogans over the table. I mean, the anger with the situation could be expressed against the migrant Italian workers or against the British bosses, and in some cases like this, a tiny intervention could be decisive (in other, obviously it wouldn’t).

So, I think there is a margin of participation for communists in struggles (although probably I would not said that we act *as communists*) trying to defend or pose some demands over others, some tactics or forms over others, etc. I think this participation is also crucial in order to communist theory being enriched by the new forms and contents that must appear in the course of these struggles. Obviously, this scheme has the risk of degenerating in activism, but I think that maybe is a risk we have to take. It seems to me that maybe it is important not to participate and show oneself as communist, but as another proletarian. (I am not telling that we should conceal or condition or deceive the other workers if we are asked, but also we don’t need to go there as representatives of some organization, current or whatever).

Héctor.

## **Letter to Hector, February 10, 2015**

It would be an understatement to say you raise important issues : the questions you ask are vital ones, and partly unanswerable, yet we are forced to deal with them.

**Hector:** “One of the “problems” I have with communisation is that in most of the texts it seems to appear “from nowhere”.”

**Gilles :** That’s how it can appear: merely as plan for tomorrow, so it looks like it separated present and future.

This is inevitable.

And this was *not* the case with Marx. He thought the growth of capitalism brought with it the rise of a worker movement that would seize power and create a community associated producers' world. So, in spite of ups and down in class struggle, he could draw a line (albeit, an indirect one) between present and future.

This was not (and is not) a problem for the German-Dutch Communist Left either. For councilists, today the working class does its best to self-manage its own struggles against capital (and bureaucracy), and this effort paves the way to worker management of society tomorrow. Therefore there is no cut between present and future.

Now, if we think revolution is not the liberation *of* work but *from* work, and that revolution is the self-destruction of the proletarian condition by the proletarians, it is a lot more difficult to see a future revolution as a continuation of present struggles, because it will be at least as much a break as a continuation.

**Hector:** "as I do not think that there is something that makes necessarily communisation the unique solution to a given social crisis (as an extreme structuralistic reading of TC/SIC would give), is there some kind of social precondition of communisation ?"

**Gilles:** Obviously certain struggles qualify as these preconditions, but I am not sure –and nobody knows – exactly which ones. On the contrary, in the past, for Marx or Pannekoek and for the reasons I previously gave, this was relatively clear. For Pannekoek, any large manifestation of worker autonomy in a strike was a (small) forerunner of revolutionary action.

Regarding TC, and not wishing to elaborate on that, I'd say they theorise what they believe to be the impossibility of reformism today – they're not the first.

**Hector:** "between all the possible exits to a given social crisis (return to capitalist "normality", war-genocidal-authoritarian solutions, communisation, etc.) are there some material basis that make more probable (but not sure, obviously) one of these exits ?"

**Gilles:** Not in the sense of a "material" basis.

Looking for a “material” solution was the position of Marxism from late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards: capitalist socialisation of production makes private property impossible and the bourgeois class useless.

Today, the watered-down autonomous critique (Negri, etc.) also believes that contemporary material (which they might call “immaterial”, actually) productive forces (the knowledge economy, networking, mutualism, free software...) come in conflict with production relations and potentially create the basis for a totally different society. For Negri as well as for Kautsky, it's in fact the productive forces that will liberate the proletariat. The proletariat only has to implement a change that is already happening. Socialism/communism is already there, we just have to deliver it.

But, as you write:

**Hector:** “Obviously, when I talk of ‘material basis’ I’m not thinking in some technological or economic conditions but some kind of social relations between proletarians (material, but also cultural or “ideological” in a good sense).”

**Gilles:** Yes. We’re not talking about tools, machines, productive procedures, skills, etc., only about social conditions, which include proletarian reaction and action, but then we don’t know how specific “communism favourable” conditions will arise.

**Hector:** “My question is: confronted to a deep social crisis, what makes it (if there is anything) that a more or less great number of proletarians outline communisation, even locally, as an exit to the crisis. Maybe the question can be posed in other way: what is the relation between communisation and the struggles of the present??”

**Gilles:** My best possible answer to the 1<sup>st</sup> phrasing of the question is : we don’t know. And TC’s fallacy – and therefore appeal - is to make it like they knew. Same with the “now the proles have nothing to ask for any more, because capital does not grant them anything any more, so they’re bound to make a revolution” theory. Same also with “the 2/3 billion wage-less who can’t be integrated into wage-labour, so to survive they have to overthrow wage-labour” theory.

To the 2<sup>nd</sup> phrasing of the question, I'd say : let's see this in concrete terms, for instance the various examples Bruno Astarian has been studying for a few years now: "anti-work", "anti-proletarian" practices, riots like L.A. in 1992, etc. I'd refer you to his texts.

No situation *in itself* carries with it potentials of *communist* insurrection, though on the other hand obviously some situations, and a lot of them, are clearly unfavourable to communist endeavours. I know saying this disqualifies me in the eyes of a lot of persons. A friend once told me (in a friendly way) my writings leave people hungry for answers, a bit dissatisfied: well, better to whet the reader's appetite than to overfeed him. It all depends what kind of meal you prefer. I am not a compulsive eater. Nor a graphomaniac.

**Hector:** "Briefly, I think that communisation will arise from the "imbrication" of different proletarian struggles happening during some kind of social crisis."

**Gilles:** Exactly, and this is probably the best – or the least unsatisfying - answer to the 2<sup>nd</sup> phrasing of the above question. This is what makes Greece 2008 so stimulating : the active intermingling of various proletarian strata, though a limit was the relatively small part played by large factory workers.

**Hector:** " I think that communisation is made of self-organisation, autonomy, solidarity, take decisions in common (not democratically), surpassing the limits of trade, or between workers and unemployed, free disposal of resources, etc. although is also much more than that. I think these are the preconditions on which communisation must take place. Without being communisation, they allow it (but not assure it)."

**Gilles:** I fully agree. Especially with the last sentence: "Without being communisation, they allow it (but not assure it)."

In the so far unpublished *A to Z of communisation* I told you about, the first entry is "Autonomy", and not just because the word begins with the first letter of the alphabet. Autonomy is an indispensable condition, remembering that the proletarians have to do certain things to remain autonomous: wage bargaining, for instance, is incompatible with sustainable autonomy. So we run into is a conundrum here. Autonomy is a necessary component of

communist action... and only some forms of communist action enable people to remain autonomous. Both go together. The egg-and-chicken problem, some people will object... Whatever, there's no way the proletarians can evade it. And theory cannot solve it in advance. No more than Marx could theorise the withering of the State before the Paris Commune, Pannekoek the soviets before 1905, post-1945 radicals the critique of work and the economy before the 50's and 60's proletarian rebellion against work, etc. Communist theory depends on the previous insurrectionary period to try and figure out the next period. Of course those with an over-confidence in the powers of the mind (and their own mind) will always think otherwise. (Yes, I do mean Roland Simon and friends. With academics, it's different: producing theory goes with the job, so they have to keep on solving problems, finding new ones, solving them, and so on.)

**Hector (one or two words seem to be missing):** "So, it is increasingly clear to me that, until revolution, is not much we can do *as communists* except "theory" (writing, translating, debating, etc.), but maybe, in the (necessarily isolated and reformist) class struggles, we can fight, not to "raise the level of consciousness" or to "give a perspective", but to try to develop these preconditions of communisation, to establish them as a part of a kind of "fight culture" between the proletarians, a way of behaving during any kind of struggles."

**Gilles:** Honestly, I would like to be given examples of this being done today: I can't see any. Have you? I'm not being ironical or dismissive: it's a genuine question. So far the only examples I have – in France and the US, among other countries – are inconclusive. They look more like activism ("militantism"). They artificially link communism or even communisation to current events or struggles: communist ideologisation, I am sorry to say. I don't want to give names (unless you wished me too), but I am thinking of several attempts to set up networks, to popularize communist critique, to connect people, etc., which to me neither advance actual organisation nor promote theoretical clarity. If you read French, we did a piece on *The 21<sup>st</sup> century militant* on our DDT 21 blog (also in German on [kommunisierung.net](http://kommunisierung.net)), which unfortunately applies to a number of currently on-going experiences, including some websites. Talking to some of these comrades, because they are comrades and some of them friends as

well, I was surprised (probably I shouldn't have been) to be taken back to discussions about informal/formal party.

That being said, though I can't see much proof of anything relevant being done that way, it does not prove it *cannot* be done. Tell me if you know of anything that fits your description.

**Hector:** "I know that "*revolution is not about forms*" (although I'd like to say that revolution is not *only* about forms, I think they also matter)"

**Gilles:** Quite : revolution *is not* but *has* a problem of organisation.

**Hector:** "So, a pure reformist struggle can be expressed as a self-organized, autonomous struggle which tries to make contact with other proletarians (worker or not) and which use direct action. Or the same demand can be posed through trade-union channels, with a top-down organization, isolated in its own workplace, etc. (I think there are not so pure struggles but usually combine elements from both examples I have described). In a way, I think that the first kind of struggles makes easier communication as an exit to crisis but the second does not."

**Gilles:** I very much doubt it: it would mean that autonomy by itself is enough to be subversive, which is what I disagree with: form does not change content. I know critics will object my form/content distinction is not dialectical enough, or not dialectical at all, and that I am abstractly separating realities that in fact closely related. OK, let's the dialecticians sort it out, still there is a difference. Same with "objective/subjective" conditions: whatever wording one chooses, and my choice of words may be very inadequate, there **is** a difference between what those two certainly inadequate words try to convey.

**Hector:** "Maybe there are some demands more interesting than others (for example, in those struggles in which the temp workers are sacked for the benefit of the permanent workers), etc. For example, during the Lindsey refinery strikes in 2009, people in the struggle said that the chauvinist racist demands ("British jobs for British workers") was deactivated in part by the participation of left militants that posed "internationalist" slogans over the table. I mean, the anger with the situation could be expressed against the migrant Italian workers or against the

British bosses, and in some cases like this, a tiny intervention could be decisive (in others, obviously it wouldn't)."

**Gilles:** An excellent example, which I would not deny. The question is: is it common or exceptional ? "Tiny" interventions by people like you and me with a real positive impact are *very* rare. Or are you suggesting we should intervene more often ? Then I will ask *how*. It is no coincidence or bad luck that the vast majority of such efforts have been fruitless for the past decades (not for lack of trying: good people with lots of true communist ideas have been at it for quite a while). The only time when guys like us can be on the same level as a struggle and bring something positive – something that contributes to help move the struggle forward – is in times of deep intense social crisis, like Greece 2008-2009.

**Hector:** "So, I think there is a margin of participation for communists in struggles (although probably I would not said that we act *as communists*) trying to defend or pose some demands over others, some tactics or forms over others, etc."

**Gilles:** That's the whole point. There certainly is a margin, but in most cases, we will not be able to act *as communists* because **the proletarian participants themselves will not**. What you're saying in that communists "naturally" take part in struggles they encounter or are involved in. Then I agree. In my own limited experience, I was one of the most active persons when a teacher was sacked years ago, and among the initiators of direct action (which I would call militant collective bargaining) to try and save her job. More recently, I happened to be part of a local action for homeless Roma people. Nothing on the level of the Lindsey example, as you can see, and both cases ended in very partial victories, to put it mildly. More seriously, friends have been active in precarious workers' actions, tenants' strikes, squatters' resistance, etc. It would be silly to dismiss these struggles, and to refuse to take part when we happen to be there. But it would be equally pointless to organise ourselves in order to look for opportunities of radical action. This indeed would turn us into activists. You're aware of the risk, and you say: Why not take the risk ? Well, indeed why not, but past and present experience is enough to cast more than a shadow of doubt on the enterprise. Still, there will always be people willing to give it a try.

**Hector:** “It seems to me that maybe it is important not to participate and show oneself as communist, but as another proletarian.”

**Gilles:** Yes: then I agree. But isn't this what we already do ?

That being said, what is a “proletarian”? Were Marx, Pannekoek, Debord, etc., proletarians ? So what struggles do we naturally get in touch with ? I'm not saying we're middle class and out of touch with the “no reserves” condition, but... I know this question would shock quite a few people in our milieu...

**Hector:** “I have more questions, especially about this idea *“The communist party is the spontaneous (i.e., totally determined by social evolution) organization of the revolutionary movement created by capitalism.”* “

**Gilles:** The quote could be read as a summary of the point I have been trying to make. We organise (which implies a conscious deliberate act), but we do so in the conditions that are given to us and compel us to do it. Otherwise it's artificial.