

# Communism, the Word

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Not the word before the notion, but the word as notion and as historical agent.

“Communism” is a word with a strange story. It is very difficult to rigorously trace its origin. Nevertheless, it is sure that the word “communist” existed already in the XIVth century, with the meaning of “people having in common a property belonging to the category of main morte – that is, not being submitted to the law of heritage”: a monastery belongs to the community of the Monks, which is, as community, independent from the individuals. It seems that at the same time and even before, from the XIIth century, the same word designated some aspects of communal law and was linked to the communal movement which expanded as the beginning of a bourgeoisie.

Later, namely in the XVIIIe century, the word appears in a text written by Victor d’Hupay de Fuveau in 1785 – four years before the French revolution. It designates the project or the dream to found a community of life – which precisely is supposed to replace that of the Monks.

Here for example a quotation of d’Hupay :

*Cette union et cette communauté de régime moral économique serait praticable par pelotons, dans tous les états, sans confondre les fortunes, eu égard au juste mérite de divers talents, moyen que n’avaient point encore voulu admettre les Zélateurs de la République de Platon. Elle fortifierait l’amitié humaine dans chaque profession, en excluant toute vaine et extérieure distinction, odieuse dans une même classe de Citoyens: rivalité puérile qui confond et entraîne ensemble tous les états à leur ruine et à tous les crimes. Tèl fut l’abus funeste auquel remédia par*

*ses simples Lois Somptuaires le bon Roi Idomenée, modèle de nos deux Henris. Les Agapes des premiers Chrétiens tendaient au même but, en réunissant les Hommes dans cet esprit de simplicité le plus propre à maintenir la paix et la religion. Il appartiendrait donc à un Prince qui voudrait mieux mériter le titre de Père de la Patrie, que tous ceux encore qui ont favorisé l’établissement des Moines, devenus inutiles aujourd’hui, placent ces vrais et nouveaux Modèles de tous les états, chacun relativement à leur fonction, dans les divers Monastères qui se dépeuplant tous les jours, semblent attendre une meilleure destination.*

D’Hupay was a friend of Restif de la Bretonne’s, who is known to be the first to present, among the several kinds of government, the “communism or communauté.” In his autobiography (Monsieur Nicolas), he expounds it as one among nine types of government and writes this one is only effective for some people of South America, who “work together in the morning and play together in the afternoon” (this is not very different from what Marx says in German Ideology).

A short time later, at the time of the French Revolution, (and this is well known), Gracchus Babeuf, taking part in the first “Commune insurrectionnelle de Paris”, used several times the word “communautariste” in the context of his thought about the Egaux and the phrase communauté nationale.

Beside the explicit use of the word, we have to remember how other nouns designated the same thing, for example in the doctrine of the English “Diggers” of the XVIth century, who spoke of the land as a “common treasure” and who belonged to the time of the first English Revolution, which ended with the creation of the first Republic under the name of Commonwealth which had at the time almost the meaning of res publica.

Actually, those historical data are unable to give us the origin and the meaning – or, even better, the sense – of “communism”. No history, no etymology either, can produce anything like sense.

But there is something we may understand from those data: something has been at stake with this word, with the invention of it and with the attempt or the need which was involved in it. Something – which is still in front of us, which is still to be discovered, or which is still to come.

Communism – the word, again. The word as presence, as feeling, as sense (more than meaning).

To a certain extent, it seems strange that the inquiry or commentary about this word should be so rare. As if it were always considered as self-evident... It is, in a way – but in which way, this deserves a little more reflection ...

Even if history is not enough to explain what we could call the “destiny” of this word, something seems to be positive : community – *koinonia*, *communitas* – emerges at times of profound social transformations and/or trouble or even destructions of social order. This is the case at the time before the Christian era as well as at the final time of feudalism or later at the time of the first industrial revolution. The first time was that of the transformation of the whole social and cultural structure of the antique world – that is, the final achievement of what had opened his antique world itself : the deconstruction of agrarian culture and of theocracy. Such a deconstruction makes clear, or pushes to the foreground what was hidden under or inside the construction : that is, the togetherness of people (admittedly, even of people with every other being like animals, plants, even stars and stones...). Before and out of the Greek – occidental – moment, the togetherness is given first. We call that “holistic society”, supposing that such society understands itself as a holon, that is a whole. To the whole we oppose the parts – as parts taken out of their whole – or a togetherness of several wholes – that is, of individuals. In both representations the same question arises : what becomes of togetherness when a whole is not given, and perhaps even not to be given in any way ?

Thus arises *koinônia* or I would say the drive to it, the drive to community. It comes or it emerges, perhaps it constitutes itself because what it calls, what it names or designates is not or is no longer given.

Certainly, many important features or trends of common life – or, to be more precise, life in common – are already given with the first kind of mankind, as certainly as precisely the first kind of mankind is or has never been an individual but a group, a gathering of many. But as far as we can see, something of the togetherness is given – and is given with or through an aspect of the whole, of totality (which has nothing to do with what has been called totalitarianism).

If togetherness is given without this aspect, that is, if it is given as a society – an association instead of, say, an integration like the family, the tribe, the clan – then the association as such opens a questioning about its own possibility and its own consistency: how is it possible to associate those who seem not to want it or even to reject it. Society then is what its members – the *socii* – have to accept and to justify. *Communitas* on the contrary, or *communio*, is invented as the idea of what

justifies by itself the presence and even the existence of its members.

Communism is togetherness – the *Mitsein*, the being-with – understood as the belonging to existence of the individuals, which means, in the existential meaning, to their essence. Society means an unessential – even if necessary – link between individuals who are, in the final analysis, essentially separate.

(I will not enter into the analysis of the word socialism neither in general nor in Marx’s text. As we know, for several historical reasons but as well – this is my belief – on account of the strength and depth of the meaning of the word (of the image, of the symbol), communism alone took and kept the force of more than a political choice, a political line and a party.

This, for me, is the point : communism says more and says something else than a political meaning. It says something about property. Property is not only the possession of goods. It is precisely beyond (and/or behind) any juridical assumption of a possession. It is what makes any kind of possession properly the possession of a subject, that is properly an expression of it. Property is not my possession: it is me.

But me, I, never exists alone. It exists essentially with other existing beings. The with is no external link, it is no link at all : it is togetherness – relation, sharing, exchange, mediation and immediation, meaning and feeling. The with has nothing to do with what is called collective. Collectivity means collected people : that is, people taken together from anywhere to the nowhere of the collectivity or of the collection. The co- of collective is not the same as that of communism. This is not only a matter of etymology (*munire* versus *ligare*) . This is a matter of ontology : the co- of collectivism is a mere external “side by side” which implies no relationship between the sides or between the parts of this “*partes extra partes*”. The co- of a communism is another one. It is, in the terms used by Heidegger about the *mit* of the *Mitsein*, not a categorical but an existential with (*mit*, *co-*). A categorical one means, in a more or less kantian way, that it is merely formal and does nothing more than distinguish between with and without (you are here with me, but you could be here without me ; it does neither disturb the fact you are here, nor the fact that you are you as I am me). An existential with implies that neither you nor me are the same together or separate. It implies that the with belongs to the very constitution or disposition or as you may wish to call it – say : to the being of us. And there is more to it : only in this case is it allowed to speak of a “we” – or still better : only in this case is it possible that a we comes to be spoken. Or even better: if the we can only and each time be a speech act, then

only a we existentially spoken may perform its significance (what is exactly this significance is another matter : for now, I note only that it implies a relationship, not a mere side-by- side).

(Another parenthesis – sorry ! It is not sure that there is, absolutely, something like “a mere side-by-side”. Side-by-side is already taken in a relationship. But we may discuss this point later.)

By putting together the various arguments I have used so far, I can say : communism is the speech act of existence as it is ontologically being-in-common. This speech act claims (for) the ontological truth of the common, that is the relation – which ultimately is nothing else than sense.

(I can come back later or elsewhere on this identity of sense and relation – as well as the identity of truth and existential co-)

Further : the truth of the common is property. Property does not mean only the possession or the belonging. In a reverse way, one should rather say that possession or belonging may only be truly understood and determined if property is first understood.

Marx wanted to open the way for a property he calls “individual property” just as distinct from “private property” as from “collective property”. Private and collective refer both only to the realm and to the category of law. The law knows only the formal and external links. Individual property means : property which is proper to the proper subject (we may call it “person” or even, as Marx does in this passage “individual”).

Subject means the capacity of what we could call “properness” : the way to enter a relationship or to engage in a link, an intercourse, a communication, which has nothing to do with possessing something (but may be possible as well with things, objects). I am proper in so far as I commit myself as well as I communicate, that is, as the word makes clear, I am in the common (which in English can be the name for the common or communal place), I am made of it, by it, to it. Freud is the best way to understand it: as he states, the I or the ego is only a small disk, almost a point, emerging at the surface of the large it which is the totality of the other being of the world. Even in solitude, I am made of the whole world as it takes with “me” or as “me” a new singular point of sensitivity.

Communism, therefore, means the common condition of all the singularities of subjects, that is of all the exceptions, all the uncommon points whose network makes a world (a possibility of sense). It does not belong to the political. It comes before any politics. It is what gives to politics an absolute requirement: the requirement to open the common space to the common itself – that is neither to the private nor to the collective, neither to separation nor to totality – but without permitting any political achievement of the common itself, any kind of making a substance of it. Communism is a principle of activation and limitation of politics.

At this point it becomes necessary to question the -ism. Any -ism implies a system of representation, and a kind of ideologization (in the marxian meaning as well as in the Arendtian meaning of ideology). Cartesianism is the ideologization of Descartes’s original drive.

I do not want to go into the question of historical or so-called, so oddly called real communism. Communism is still exposed to the jeopardy of becoming an ideology and should lose its -ism. The word is commun without -ism. Not even commun – common, kommune, any thing that could be taken as something like a form, a structure, a representation – but com. The Latin preposition cum taken as the universal pre-position, the presupposition of any existence.

This is not politics, this is metaphysics or, if you prefer, this is ontology : to be is to be cum. (At the very moment I am writing this, I am surrounded by a singing crowd of futbol aficionados on a plaza in Madrid : there is there a multitude of symbols, problems, feelings about the common) But it asks politics this question : how is it to think about society, government, law, not with the aim of achieving the cum, the common, but only with the hope of letting it come and take its own chance, its own possibility of making sense – if, as I wish to suggest, any sense is necessarily common sense or, if not “common sense” in the common meaning of the word, then in the meaning that any sense is made of communication, of sharing or exchange. But of an exchange which is not an exchange of possessions, but an exchange of property : where my property becomes proper by its own commitment ; sometimes this is called “love”, “friendship”, sometimes “faithfulness”, sometimes “dignity”, sometimes “art”, sometimes “thought”, sometimes even “life” and “sense of life” – under all those names there is nothing else than a commitment to the common.

If the question of communism is the question of property – namely, the question of neither collective nor private property but of individual as well as common property, then it raises a double question :

- 1). what does it mean to be both “individual” and “common” ? How are we to understand “the individuality of commonness” and “the community of individualness” ?
- 2). how are we to think of wealth and poverty in the realm of common-individual property?

To the first question I would like to answer by arguing that it has to be taken in terms of singular plural, which has other implications than “individual-common” ; I do not want to address this matter here (I have already written some pages about it) ; but to say the least here I would suggest that singular-plural avoids the jeopardy of the double substantiality which may be involved in “individual-common”)

As far as the second question, namely the one concerning wealth and poverty, the issue is clear as it is obviously presented to us: wealth means to possess more than common life needs, poverty to have less. The first commun(ist) command is obviously that of justice : to give to the common what common life needs. This need at the same time is simple, evident (in a way, it is included in human rights – which nevertheless may be discussed from other points of view) – and it is nevertheless unclear : from the need to the desire or to the wish, there is no simple nor clear difference. It is then necessary to think differently. We shall not only take a first step of “needs” and their “satisfaction” – even if, of course, we shall absolutely consider a level of elementary or minimal satisfaction. But we shall as well consider that infinity is involved in each need and as the very essence of it. Need is to be taken as an impulse to get something (like bread, water or space) but as a drive toward what is not a thing, and maybe is nothing – but infinity.

At this point we are close – again... – to capitalism, that is to infinity taken as endless accumulation of things (which are all equivalent, as measured by the very possibility of accumulating them, whose name is money – money taken itself as the endless process of making money). Capitalism is endlessness instead of infinity, or infinity as endless production of capital itself.

This has been, so to speak, a choice of civilization. At one point (even if this point is extended through some centuries) the western civilization opted for endlessness. This point was the one where infinity as the absolute given in each existence changed into infinity as an endless process toward accumulation.

Of course it has been connected with a change about wealth.

Control, regulation of the market is not enough. The challenge is not only about managing the system of production-consumption

It is about the meaning of wealth. Wealth and poverty may have two quite different uses and meanings. One can be accumulation vs disaccumulation, if I may say so, or getting rich vs. impoverishment. Another can be what I would name glory vs humility. (“The Humble”, the name of a virtue became the name of poor people...).

Possibly glory and humility could not even be called wealth and poverty. They are related to each other not as the plus to the minus but like, let’s say, a monk in his simple frock facing a golden altar. Or myself listening to Beethoven’s quartets.

Possibly this relationship, whose proper name is adoration or worship, which names a kind of prayer as well as a form of love, never took place as such in society or was always already mixed with or transformed in the opposition between wealth and poverty. Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, the couple rich/poor as such and as a philosophical as well as moral and religious theme or topic was formed precisely at the time of pre-capitalism, that is in Antiquity, between Plato – and the critique of money making sophistes – and Christ – with his strong rejection of wealth. This age has been the first, and in a sense maybe the last, time of the critique of wealth, that is of no longer thinking of it as glory. On the contrary, thinking of it as the fake brightness par excellence.

Our civilization is a schizophrenic one that thinks its own value, its main value is fake.

The question of property is the question about the proper property, which belongs to the proper “person” : that is, of the proper “wealth” (or “glory” – or, this is the same in a way, the proper “sense”). Such a proper property may only be common. As private, it makes no sense (sense for a single one is no sense at all) ; as collective it makes the same effect for the collective is a single – mechanical – unity, not the plurality of the common.

Common is the adequate word for the properness of being, if being means ontologically being “in common”.