Critique of Communalism

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Contents

The Limits of Communalism 3
Alternative to Capitalism? 4
Alternative to Communalism 4
So how would a self-managed communalist community build popular power? 5

The Limits of Communalism

When Abad de Santillán read the Confederal Declaration of Libertarian Communism in 1936, he was critical. The Leonese thinker believed it confused communism with communalism: "[The Declaration] speaks to us about everything, and in part with excessive detail, except for the organization of labor." In the anarcho-syndicalist spirit of the time, it was vital to think about how production should be formalized. It's not that the Declaration of Libertarian Communism didn't touch on this, but it lacked specifics.

Today we find ourselves in a similar situation. A current exists that proposes communalism as a way of life. For decades, some sectors of social movements and anarchism have proposed a return to rural life as a way to overcome capitalism. One of the effects of capitalism was precisely the urban concentration caused by dispossession in rural areas. Millions had to seek livelihoods in factories or emigrate overseas because life in their villages had become untenable.

Thus, to reverse this process, the common approach is to embrace a dreamlike life that mixes agricultural work with technical or administrative jobs. That is, one might own a hectare of fruit trees, gather firewood, and simultaneously work as a sound technician or for a local council, conducting workshops or holding a more stable position. This is just one example to illustrate the idea.

Although not everyone shares the same motives, we usually find two types of people: those who grew up in rural areas and return to them, and those from a middle or upper sociocultural background who flee the city due to its problems. In some cases, these urban escapees adopt the communalist idea as a starting point for their socio-political activity.

Communalism emphasizes community and local organization based on cooperation, autonomy, and shared resource use within small communities. Its goal is to promote self-sufficient, self-managed, and sustainable communities based on direct participation and harmonious coexistence with nature. This is why it places heavy emphasis on local economies, cooperativism, autonomy, and decentralization, connecting through more or less informal networks depending on the case. Some networks are practical, others more experiential.

To clarify the difference: communism seeks the abolition of social classes, aiming to establish collective ownership of the means of production and create an egalitarian society where goods are commonly owned and distributed according to each person's needs. This requires a certain level of planning, taking into account existing resources and the capacities for production, consumption, and distribution.

The powerful cultural production of Hollywood and today's "common sense" make it clear that individualism has permeated society at all levels, and that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. According to this common sense, it makes little sense to fight against today's capitalism; better to step aside and live a more or less free life on its margins. Engaging in the socio-political life of small towns might be a way to stay active within militant anti-capitalism. But many towns lack any form of social or communal fabric, and to be politically active one must go to the cities or larger towns.

Alternative to Capitalism?

It is difficult to imagine an alternative to capitalism that doesn't involve a large-scale or structured project. Therefore, I tend to think that communal projects are not an alternative to capitalism understood as a systemic model, but alternatives to urban capitalism through a mix of rural capitalism, cooperativism, exchange, gift economies, and feminist economics. To truly be an alternative to capitalism, something more is required.

First, a territorial model is needed. Not everyone lives in the countryside, nor can we seriously propose that everyone abandon the cities. While communalism usually speaks from a rural perspective, today's villages are not like those of the past; their economies are not entirely agricultural (not even predominantly so). They speak from a romantic perspective of a ruralism that never existed. Today's rural world resembles more a lifestyle dependent on tourism, individual car ownership, and technological comforts—that is, a world fully embedded in neoliberal capitalism with all its social relations.

In this sense, communalism is more an aspiration for something better than a memory of something lived. Following the previous paragraph, it is a change in social relations. However, a political project is required that goes beyond mere lifestyle or microeconomy, which due to its constant need for capital, cannot escape capitalism.

Unfortunately, these networks or networks-of-networks are still fragile, loosely structured, and underfunded, and cannot yet be considered an alternative to present-day capitalism. At most, they offer a better way of living, and even this can be questioned from different perspectives.

The most interesting aspect is the recovery of communal and common goods. This is communalism's strongest point, as it arises from the very territory. In this sense, it converges with traditional practices in some places and re-signifies the value of the commons in our society. It can be seen as a new lifeblood in the defense of territory and the common good. In the past two decades, we've seen the strength of such movements, which have managed to halt major infrastructure projects or even create "liberated zones."

A common critique is the lack of connection between these liberated or communal projects and more urban leftist movements. At best, the latter see those projects as individual (or small group) adventures that, when facing hardship, seek solidarity, and when things go well, remain silent.

Because in life, everything is struggle. Capitalism must be dismantled by the force of class struggle, and in that process a massive popular power must emerge, creating spaces of counterpower. I speak of counterpower beyond the intentional community, moving to the municipality or expanded territory—that is, including local people who didn't arrive from politicized urban settings.

Alternative to Communalism

When people speak of dismantling cities, I picture long lines of cars with all their belongings. Imagine we've made the Revolution. Now imagine that the Supreme Communal Council concludes that Madrid must disappear.

I can't see it as realistic to believe that 5 million Madrid residents can leave all at once without causing enormous problems in infrastructure, distribution, resources, or even security. They

would move to smaller places, with reduced economies incapable of providing jobs or even food for so many.

Therefore, this process would need to take decades to be viable and avoid economic and social chaos. These chaotic periods would generate much dissatisfaction, which is always fertile ground for our adversaries. That is, management must always go hand in hand with planning.

So how would a self-managed communalist community build popular power?

First, by getting involved in local political and associative life. If you have revolutionary ideas, you cannot live disconnected from what happens at your doorstep. So, you must engage in local community life, even if you find it backward or insufficient.

And if nothing exists, it must be created. Logically, there will be locals who view new initiatives with hostility. Maybe they're descendants of fascist Falangists. Maybe they hate the city hippies coming to tell them how to live. Maybe the only existing associations in town have been the Church and the hunters' club. The goal should be to hold the space at all costs and politicize what little youth exists. It could also become a meeting point for people from other regional projects. Politically, the space should be in the village, not in an isolated house requiring a car to reach. If possible, using an existing institution's space is even better.

Popular power is built from social struggles. But if there is no social struggle, we must focus on creating the necessary structures. For instance, in rural areas, agricultural unions or cooperatives often exist. Recently, there have been farmers' protests involving tractor demonstrations. In many places, these were capitalized by the far right, though in some cases by their opposites. Clearly, the lack of class-oriented unions causes some mobilizations to lean reactionary. Can this be reversed? If not, can we create other unions? Implement anarcho-syndicalism?

In some areas, this local rootedness is pursued through political candidacies. It's relatively easy to win over a small municipality. This is often outright rejected by anarchists, but many neo-rural people don't see it as inherently negative. The reality is that you can win an election. There are examples. While it won't change everything—since municipalities often lack authority over truly important matters—it helps stop local corruption and prevent theft from the community.

Once you enter a class struggle dynamic, the connection to cities becomes more obvious. Struggles require resources like lawyers, spaces for assemblies and meetings, and money… Thus, struggle demands new formalities. And if we talk about making revolutions, we need a plan—a program.

There are entities that claim communalism and have a program to reach the post-capitalist society they long for. Still, that program doesn't consider the city, almost as if it would dissolve on its own, or that the capitalist city could tolerate a post-capitalist commune. I couldn't disagree more. To win territory, we must first win over its population. The left's abandonment of working-class neighborhoods led many to total depoliticization, now exploited by evangelical churches, crypto-bros, Stalinists, or neo-fascists. Some of us believe that reclaiming those spaces is a strategic task today. These urban populations will ultimately determine the balance of power.

Because how will the communal resist fascist policies? It's enough to outlaw the commons or eco-villages to dismantle decades of work. The great political battle is in the cities, and it's vital to appeal to the social majority and bring them to our side. This doesn't exclude convergence

with the most interesting rural projects, as long as they aren't bubbles and are connected to the surrounding territory.

To summarize: commons, yes; communal, yes—but within a framework of local rootedness, community building, creating social or labor organizations that aim to organize as many people as possible. No to isolation, no to elitism, no to millenarianism. Instead, we need connection with urban anti-capitalist struggles under a common program aimed not at communalism but at a large-scale libertarian communist society. And for that, clearly, we need planning, congresses, and participation in the broader anti-capitalist movement.

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