



Communicity

Colin Cremin

The Idea of communism, as Alain Badiou (2008: 98) explains, is an historical anchoring point ‘of everything elusive, slippery and evanescent’, a becoming-truth that negates capitalism, the institutions which support it and the ideology of ‘there is no alternative’. A communistic impulse is arguably present in all of us, an impulse for equality, self-determination and justice: an impulse that business and politicians capture in claims about fairness, inclusivity and now sensitivity to the environment. It is an uncanny kind of communism they evoke, one not quite as it seems. When talking of ethical responsibilities they catch us momentarily off guard, but more often than not failing in their attempts to interpellate us with their claims of being kind to the soil and hired hands. To a critical mind, Bill Gates – the exemplary liberal communist described by Slavoj Žižek (2008) – is obviously hypocritical, giving with one hand by taking from others: armies of exploited workers and consumers dependent on industry standard software. But these same critical minds adopt lifestyles, engage and proselytise all kinds of practices that legitimate the myth of an ethical capitalism. This short piece is on the uncanny communism of three left-liberal archetypes¹: Richard Branson (the liberal communist), Wal-Mart (the communistic firm) and Colin – ‘No Impact Man’ – Beavan (the communistic consumer). They each reproduce visual and linguistic signifiers of communism, described here as an image-communism or *communicity* – a term adapted from Roland Barthes’ analysis of an advertisement for the pasta brand Panzani.

Images, according to Barthes, carry a range of different meanings or connotations acquiring a common sense or denotive power by registering with a preformed cultural knowledge. While an artist’s intentionality is often

1 I unpack the notion of left-liberalism in *Capitalism’s new clothes* (2011).

ambiguous, advertisers have only one intention: to sell us things by association. Barthes' deconstruction of the Panzani image showed how various signs operating in conjunction with one another create an affective bourgeois mythology designed to resonate with a target audience. The tableau included a netted shopping bag spilling pasta products and a tomato and mushroom. The predominant colours of green, white and red evoked the Italian flag. Barthes (2009) identified four signs here: 'a return to market', 'a total culinary service', 'a still life' and 'Italianicity', a likeness to Italy. The various signs, visual and linguistic, that evoke a communistic capitalism together signal what I want to call communicity: a likeness to communism. It is a sign that is produced/reproduced by various social actors, corporations and the mass media. The intentionality is clear: to create through various signs an affective association between the producer (those promoting the mythology) and consumer (those identifying through their actions with the mythology) to humanitarian values. Communicity is reproduced in a single image such as a celebrity posing for an aid organisation, a speech such as those made by Bill Gates, a corporate brochure containing information on the company's ethical values and so on. The emotive force of the image depends on a preformed knowledge about what Badiou calls the 'egregious' conditions the capitalist mode of production gives rise to. The various individuals, organisations and institutions that manufacture and reproduce communicity constitute a culture of crisis industry. As with Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry, the term is intended to infer a broad range of cultural producers that aim to provoke and manipulate a desire for mass marketed products. The difference here is that the 'product' is any object or service that evokes communicity and appeals to a demand for a 'solution' to the various significations of 'crisis' reproduced from real life events in popular media. Hence it is no one 'industry' in particular but companies, organisations, political parties and individuals that evoke and embellish products or services whether directly or indirectly with communicity. In buying into myth, literally and metaphorically, the subject is able to get rid of or repress the feelings of guilt such products evoke.

Through images of death and destruction, the culture of crisis industry reminds us of the hardships, suffering and degradations of various kinds, and associates them with objects and practices imbued with the euphoric values of communicity. It connects famines, tsunamis, human rights violations and HIV/AIDS epidemics with a range of intermediaries who provide the means and injunctions for the ordinary consumer with no effective agency to do something. Promising a kind of *jouissance*, the object ('it') is one that we can never get enough of because the image of suffering and need for a common solution never goes away. A need is manufactured for a false kind of politics, one that has no tangible impact and so the object embellished with communicity becomes a

substitute for effective political solutions. The pressure to act on such images extends to (prospective) workers often screened for their 'ethical' credentials, commitments to fairness, inclusivity and so on. The myth of community is pervasive and, in a Gramscian sense, hegemonic, creating a consensus about the need to reduce, say, poverty or carbon emissions even though in practice the correspondence between image and action is limited and often downright contradictory. It is the myth of a humanity coming together to address the most pressing issues of our time, an ideology that penetrates into everyday life, reaching a saturation point with 'capitalism' and 'neoliberalism' readily identifiable (empty) signifiers of a problem. In these respects communistic capitalism is historically distinctive from previous examples of philanthropy.

In short, there is a circular and self-expanding motion that begins with a preformed knowledge about social conditions. These are the raw materials that are mined for the purposes of producing community. A false need for the products, services, lifestyles and so forth is created through the sign that a culture of crisis industry helps manufacture and/or promote. The motion circulates and expands as conditions worsen and the need for action intensifies. The remainder of the short essay examines this process and the relations through the aforementioned exemplars of the mythology, namely Richard Branson, Wal-Mart and Colin Beavan.

Chairman Branson

Community is the sign of communism appropriated for the market, evoked in advertising, on the news, by the entertainment complex and the chief beneficiaries and defenders of free-market capitalism. Figures such as Bill Gates and Richard Branson become the literal human faces of community, the Vladimir Lenin and Chairman Mao of left or communistic liberalism.

In *The man who mistook his wife for a hat*, Oliver Sacks describes the unfortunate case of a woman who, in the vein of a Tourette's sufferer, mimicked the expressions of every person she encountered. 'In the course of a short city-block', Sacks (1986: 117) observed, 'this frantic old woman frenetically caricatured the features of forty or fifty passers-by, in a quick-fire sequence of kaleidoscopic imitations, each lasting a second or two, sometimes less, and the whole dizzying sequence scarcely more than two minutes'. Something akin to this is happening today. In the course of the short period of capitalism, business has learned to mimic and 'congeal' in ever more exaggerated ways the politics of 'dead' revolutionaries. Today's liberal communist is not simply making the odd philanthropic gesture: he is a provocateur, a militant and a radical who speaks

the language of the left. He is the de facto leader of the more dispersed and less articulate 'multitude' offering 'practical' solutions when protesters are merely agitating. Liberal communists, Žižek (2008) explains, endorse anti-capitalist causes; they are against centralised bureaucracy, for cooperation, flexibility and spontaneity; they identify concrete problems they can act pragmatically to resolve. 'While they fight subjective violence', Žižek (2008: 31) writes, 'liberal communists are the very agents of the structural violence which creates the conditions for the explosions of subjective violence'.

We can see why Bill Gates is Žižek paradigm example. At the 2008 World Economic Forum in Davos, Gates played to the neoliberal Janus face, identifying in human nature the dialectic of 'self-interest and caring for others' arguing that

Recognition [of capitalism's victims] enhances a company's reputation and appeals to customers; Above all, it attracts good people to an organisation. As such, recognition triggers a market-based reward for good behaviour. In markets where profits are not possible, recognition is a proxy. In markets where profits are possible, recognition can be an added incentive².

Unlike the affluent consumer who chooses lifestyle ethics rather than revolutionary politics, Gates ontologically on the side of capital within the relations of production can only ever engage in a gestural ethics. His economic power and public status is the means by which he can initiate, finance and promote various campaigns and embellish objects with the sign of communality for mass consumption. His highly publicised philanthropic gestures situate him as both producer and consumer of the mythology, a difference in scale rather than in kind from those active within the circuit on the other side of capitalist relations. He shames by example those without the agency to affect any substantive response to conditions they had no role in creating. He provides the objects in the form of schemes such as Project Red into which the now shamed consumer can offload their guilt and put the poverty of their politics to one side³.

2 See <http://www.microsoft.com/en-us/news/exec/billg/speeches/2008/01-24WEFDavos.aspx>.

3 The fetishisation of guilt is illustrated in Capitalism's new clothes with reference to the Fairtrade chocolate brand Divine. A series of advertisements were produced that contained images of healthy looking black women framed by images evoking African villages. Captions included 'Eat Poverty History' and 'Not so guilty pleasure'. In the former the woman teases us with a piece of chocolate held between her fingers, the 'little' piece of something missing from our lives that incessantly drives our desire to consume and thus get rid of the (image of) poverty (of our politics).

Community is a product of free-market capitalism in a two-fold sense. Capitalism provides the authentic image of deprivation and the (ideological and market-based) means for exchanging the image. No matter how critical the rhetoric, every evocation of community extends the myth that the solution is in the cause. Richard Branson's (2011) anti-capitalist manifesto *Screw business as usual* illustrates the relation and limits of communistic capitalism. Whether intentionally or not, Branson paraphrases Marx and Engels in their admiration of capitalism as a productive force while also condemning its social consequences. He writes:

Capitalism as we know it, which essentially started around the time of the Industrial Revolution, has certainly created economic growth in the world and brought many wonderful benefits to people, but all this has come at a cost that is not reflected on the balance sheet. The focus on profit being king has caused significant negative, unintended consequences... For over a century and a half cheap labour, damaged lives, a destroyed planet and polluted seas were all irrelevant when set against the need for profit...

The only solutions that figures such as Branson can propose are market-based ones, 'a new kind of capitalism' that 'has slowly been gathering force in the last ten or twenty years'. A culture of crisis industry is operationalised:

... not just coming from celebrities and well-known figures in the social sector: this community was a wonderful melting pot of people from all walks of life. What binds them is their willingness to listen to and learn from people on the front line to create new entrepreneurial approaches, and their firm belief that we should never accept the unacceptable⁴.

For the communistic capitalist there really is no alternative to the market, all alternatives are utopian, but what they promote is in itself the answer to a possible refusal of such a pervasive ideology. They promote the possibility of overcoming the symptoms of capitalism thereby rendering critique superfluous. People do not have to be 'duped' by these calls for the operation to be effective. The palliative is ultimately all we have when there appears to be no effective political means for addressing an image that never goes away. Companies are either compelled to recognise this problem because of consumer demand or find in a growing 'market' for ethical products a means to add value to their merchandise. Whether individual CEOs genuinely want to see social change is moot, they have no choice ultimately than to pursue profit. Chains such as Planet Organic are an obvious example of business profiting from such consumer demand/awareness but it is the wider embrace of the ideology that suggests a hegemonic penetration, hence my reason for turning to Wal-Mart.

4 See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2011/nov/18/business-as-usual-cause-economic-problems>.

Wal-Mart

Communiversity relies on cultural knowledge, knowledge of the conditions of those labouring to produce things that Western consumers have come to rely on. However sophisticated though is our knowledge about the manner in which something is produced and about processes through which it came into our possession, most of us ultimately have no choice other than to make purchases according to the monetary price at which objects exchange. This enables companies exposed for their labour practices to continue without seeing profits unduly affected while also having opportunities through such exposures of adding value to the brand through the sign of communiversity. Hence Mike Duke, the president and CEO of Wal-Mart, can say without irony that

Customers do want low prices, but not by sacrificing quality. They want products that are more efficient, that last longer and perform better. And increasingly they want information about the entire lifecycle of a product so that they can feel good about buying it. They want to know that the materials in the product are safe... that it was made well... and that it was produced in a responsible way⁵.

The customer who shops at Wal-Mart because the goods are affordable and the location accessible becomes responsible for the conditions Wal-Mart helps create. The ideological efficacy of the sign is in part due to the fact that neither party can extricate themselves from the conditions they find themselves in. In the case of the consumer, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 139) put it, 'the diner must be satisfied with the menu'. In a staged act of contrition, the business and consumer self-shame themselves into exchanging their guilt for an object that satisfies a need to get rid of the intolerable image of another's suffering. In *The emancipated spectator* Jacques Rancière writes:

For the image to produce its political effect, the spectator must already be convinced that what it shows is American imperialism, not the madness of human beings in general. She must also be convinced that she is herself guilty of sharing in the prosperity rooted in imperialist exploitation of the world. And she must feel further guilty about being there and doing nothing... she must already feel guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt. (2009: 85)

Communiversity relies on a psychic image of exploitation. But the effect it produces is always post-political in the sense that it has no political consequences except perhaps to improve the image of those already benefitting from the conditions such 'politics' wants to expose; the object is only ever an emollient. Short of transforming the underlying structure, communiversity is all we have. Wal-Mart

5 See <http://www.informationweek.com/wal-mart-to-set-sustainability-standards/218501046>.

contributes to a consensus that something has to be done about the egregious symptoms/affective image-effect of capitalism.

Fredric Jameson (2002) reminds us that Marxist dialectical thinking necessarily involves both a negative *and* positive hermeneutic. Jameson (2010) identifies the positive in Wal-Mart's monopoly power. By driving down prices Wal-Mart is exemplary of the efficient market hypothesis and also by becoming a monopoly power its very negation. As one CEO, quoted by Jameson (2010: 30), says on Wal-Mart: 'They have killed free-market capitalism in America'. Ideologically, Wal-Mart demonstrates that there is a popular demand for solutions to problems typically identified by leftists. As part of a broader culture of crisis operation, they remind us that there is a need for political action. Communistic capitalism is in a certain respect doing the mundane job of leftists by highlighting the negative effects of capitalism on people and planet. The principal point though that capital can never make is the dialectical one about the internal relations that show why capitalist ethics is indeed a myth, a point that needs drawing out in the communistic lifestyle practices embodied, proselytised and publicised by certain individuals.

The Beavanites

Antonio Gramsci coined the phrase organic intellectual to describe the segments of certain classes or groups that stand for or embody a general position either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. They are not intellectuals in the scholarly sense but rather in the talking heads sense: the kind today that shares its opinion on current affairs programmes. Richard Branson is an organic intellectual of a hegemonic left-liberal ideology. But there are also those from the lower classes who do their bit of authenticating the ideology through actions and lifestyles promoted to others. A hegemonic power operates via consensus possible only if there is an option for dissent; the image-communism signals the incorporation of what could be described as staged dissent, such as that embodied in the lifestyles that concerned citizens adopt and promote to others. According to Žižek:

The exemplary figures of evil today are not ordinary consumers who pollute the environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those who, while fully engaged in creating the conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, buy their way out of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic food, taking holidays in wildlife preserves, and so on. (2008: 23)

Taken at face value, this statement supports an ideologically indeterminate viewpoint by implicating anyone who buys an organic produce, recycles a bottle

or cycles into work rather than driving a car. The ‘ordinary’ consumer is just as if not *more* guilty according to such a logic than the capitalist firm they purchase ‘ethical’ and ‘ecological’ goods from. The missing qualification is that the ‘worst’ offenders in authenticating the ideology are those who embody *and* proselytise it either as a solution or means simply to ameliorate whatever conditions are being enacted on. Colin Beavan – ‘No Impact Man’ – is an exemplary figure of such ‘evil’.

The no impact project ‘not-for-profit’ environmental group has a mission ‘to empower citizens to make choices which better their lives and lower their environmental impact through lifestyle change, community action, and participation in environmental politics’. Colin Beavan, the self-defined ‘No Impact Man’⁶, fronts the enterprise. He wrote a blog, published a book and made a film chronicling ‘his family’s year-long experiment living a zero-waste lifestyle in New York’. The website contains tips on how to live a sustainable life, campaign tools and information on public events. By relying on the very materials, infrastructure, tools, appliances and so forth that enable such lifestyles, in this case ‘sustained’ for just a year, Beavan illustrates the absurdity of such gestures. It also illustrates that knowledge of environmental degradation or, in a different register, poverty and extreme exploitation, does not necessarily coincide with an understanding of structural relations. Sometimes people really do believe that products magically appear on shelves, houses pop up from nowhere and Fairtrade products are teleported to their destination.

A now established genre of popular books that in various ways denounce capitalism reinforces the ideology⁷, providing the ‘shock’ statistics, vignettes and general information on the cycles of production. They typically propose solutions that invariably involve some kind of change of lifestyle and the call for governments and corporations to adopt more ethical and sustainable codes of practice, perhaps through popular pressure. It is a message that is ideologically consistent with the aforementioned in that the solution is still ultimately in the cause. The No Impact Man type is embodied in the everyday practices of well-meaning individuals who self-consciously reinforce the ethical and eco-myth to friends, family and colleagues. He is embodied in sociologists such as Ulrich Beck, John Urry and Anthony Giddens who identify in the ‘self-reflexive’ businesses, CEOs and consumers the potential for a managed solution to climate change. A Marxist negative hermeneutics should first and foremost demythologise communicability at the everyday level and the ideologies that lend

6 See <http://noimpactproject.org>.

7 *The story of stuff* (2010), *The Wal-Mart effect* (2011) and *Confessions of an eco-sinner* (2008) are popular examples of this genre.

credence to the ethical and ecological efficacy of everyday practices. For it is at the everyday level where the ideology has become embedded and thereby 'invisible'. The positive is in the exception, what such ethics circulate around and founder on.

Conclusion

The essay has examined the denotive power of the uncanny communism of community. It is the image of a superficially communism-friendly capitalism exemplified by Richard Branson, Wal-Mart and 'No Impact Man'. The impossibility of ethics for both business and the individuated individual binds the two in a schizoid relationship, negating and reinforcing the ideology of the other.

The 'duped' buys into the myth, the cynic pours scorn at the dupe snatching her own piece of *jouissance* by refusing to recycle or whatever. In one way or another we are all interpellated into 'resisting' capitalism by enacting on the common sense image from which community is constructed. Perhaps the only way out of this is to adopt the position of 'enlightened false-consciousness', to know the fallacy yet do it anyway with the qualification of proselytising and where possible acting on the need for self-conscious and collective revolutionary action. The critique should centre not on the practice as such but on the ideology that supports it. Critiquing the ideology rather than taking a moral stance against the individual, whether for embracing or 'resisting' the myth, is the first step in formulating and putting into practice a properly ethical response to the problem such gestures disavow. It is a refusal of the question of whether to support such gestures, a question that only makes sense when capitalism is naturalised.

Community is the communism appropriated from the left. The efficacy of the sign lies in the kernel of truth that the left needs to recover. Communistic capitalism prepares the ground for such a recovery signalling the limit of what capital can ideologically appropriate from the left without causing its own demythologisation. Hegemonic in scope, embedded in everyday life, brushing against the 'real' cause without quite connecting with it, ideology as a distorting force has reached the limit of what it can register. Positively, the ideology indicates a humanist normativity that may just serve as a bulwark against fascism as administrations lurch ever closer to a more authoritarian form of control. Positively, those at the top who proselytise ethical capitalism indicate that there may well be divisions within the bourgeois class that the left at some stage may itself be able to exploit (revolutions depend on such divisions).

references

- Adorno, T. and M. Horkheimer (1997) *Dialectic of enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Badiou, A. (2008) *The meaning of Sarkosy*. London: Verso.
- Barthes, R. (2009) 'Rhetoric of the image', in S. Hall and J. Evans, (eds.) *Visual culture: A reader*. London: Sage.
- Branson, R. (2011) *Screw business as usual*. London: Virgin Books.
- Cremin, C. (2011) *Capitalism's new clothes: Enterprise, ethics and enjoyment in times of crisis*. London: Pluto Press.
- Cremin, C. (2012) *iCommunism*. Hants: Zero Books.
- Fishman, C. (2011) *The Wal-Mart effect*. London: Penguin.
- Jameson, F. (2002) *The political unconscious*. London: Routledge.
- Jameson, F. (2010) 'Utopia as method, or the uses of the future', in M. Gordin, H. Tilley and G. Prakash (eds.) *Utopia/dystopia: Conditions of historical possibility*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Leonard, A. (2010) *The story of stuff: How our obsession with stuff is trashing the planet, our communities, and our health – and a vision for change*. London: Constable.
- Pearce, F. (2008) *Confessions of an eco-sinner: Tracking down the sources of my stuff*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Rancière, J. (2009) *The emancipated spectator*. London: Verso.
- Sacks, O. (1986) *The man who mistook his wife for a hat*. London: Picador.
- Wolff, R.P., B. Moore and H. Marcuse (1969) *A critique of pure tolerance*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Žižek, S. (2008) *Violence*. London: Profile Books.

the author

Colin Cremin is senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He is the author of *Capitalism's new clothes: Enterprise, ethics and enjoyment in times of crisis*, published with Pluto Press in 2011, and *iCommunism*, published with Zero Books in 2012. He is currently working on a new book entitled *Eros and apocalypse: The excessive subject and the excesses of capitalism*, forthcoming with Pluto Press.

Email: c.cremin@auckland.ac.nz