

Acid Communism

Matt Colquhoun

Like so many of his neologisms, Mark Fisher's 'Acid Communism' encapsulates a crisis of disambiguation, hurling a provocation into our midst. The phrase – which was to be the title of his next book, now unfinished following his death in January 2017 – has garnered considerable attention as many wonder what kind of variation on Marx's manifesto might be occasioned by this new corrosive qualifier.

In truth, Acid Communism resists definition. The word 'acid' in particular, by invoking industrial chemicals, psychedelics and various sub-genres of dance music, is promiscuous. With so many uses and instantiations in various contexts, it is as difficult to cleanly define as 'communism' is in the 21st century. This textual promiscuity is no doubt what attracted Fisher to the phrase, but this has not stopped recent attempts to concretely define it in his absence.

Jeremy Gilbert, a former collaborator of Fisher's, has led the way, writing a number of articles that turn Acid Communism into a one-dimensional and purely affirmative project, seeking the rehabilitation of the countercultural utopianism of the 1960s and '70s. In the *New Statesman*, Gilbert writes on 'acid' in particular and the way that the word still connotes "the liberation of human consciousness from the norms of capitalist society [as] a desirable, achievable and pleasurable objective."

(Gilbert, 2017). What is absent from Gilbert's summaries is made clear here. Is such a liberation of human consciousness desirable? Certainly. Achievable? Possibly. But pleasurable? Not always; not essentially.

Acid Communism is a project beyond the pleasure principle. It is not only a project for the recuperation of the counterculture's lost potentials but also the expression of a desire for an *experimental* (rather than prescriptively *utopian*) leftist politics. This is a maneuver present within so many expositions of communism. Marx and Engels themselves wrote how "communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things." (Marx & Engels 2017, 102). Acid Communism is, then, a project for seeking 'the outside' of sociopolitical hegemony. As Fisher acknowledged in so many of his writings, this requires an acknowledgement of the fact that to disturb normality is inherently *disturbing*, but "terrors are not all there is to the outside." (Fisher 2016, 9).

In the unpublished introduction to *Acid Communism*, Fisher quotes Michel Foucault explaining that the challenge now is "not to recover our 'lost' identity, to free our imprisoned nature, our deepest truth; but instead [...] to move towards something radically Other." (Foucault 1991, 120). This Other is the spectre that Marx and Engels first conjured out of European history; for Herbert Marcuse, it was "the spectre of a world that could be free." (Marcuse 1998, 93). What haunted Fisher was a similar notion: a collective subject that has long been desired but still resists instantiation. As he wrote in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*, the "required subject – a collective subject – does not exist, yet the crisis, like all the other global crises we're now facing, demands that it be constructed." (Fisher 2009, 66). Here a spectre is not what is left of something dead and lost. It is atemporal; an "eerie entity", as Fisher would say, representing both a failure of absence and a failure of presence. It is desire without absolute lack.

For Marx, "desire" is so often inseparable from the commodity. It is never without object. On the very first page of *Capital*, quoting Nicholas Barbon, Marx defines it in a footnote: "Desire implies want; it is the appetite of the mind, and as natural as hunger to the body." (Barbon 1696, 2-3). In *The Communist Manifesto*, however,

desire becomes insatiable and speculative: “In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes.” (Marx & Engels 2017, 55). The production of politics has had much the same effect, eroticising desire, launching it into unknown and forbidden lands; beyond borders, boundaries and limits. Pleasure becomes, in contrast, fatally associated with the familiar.

Acid, in its promiscuity, allows this speculative desire to flow back through communism in both new and forgotten ways. Writing in 1977, Gilles Deleuze offers the most succinct summary of how such a desire functions, explicitly in contrast to Foucauldian “pleasure”:

[T]here is no subject of desire, and no object either. The objectivity of desire itself is only its flows. There is never enough desire. Desire is the system of a-signifying signs out of which unconscious flows are produced in a social-historical field. Every unfolding of desire, in whatever place it may occur, such as a family or a school in the neighbourhood, tests the established order and sends shock waves through the social field as a whole. Desire is revolutionary because it is always seeking more connections. (Deleuze 2006, 81).

In this way ‘Acid’ is desire, as corrosive and denaturalising multiplicity, flowing through the multiplicities of communism itself to create alinguistic feedback loops; an ideological accelerator through which the new and previously unknown might be found in the politics we mistakenly think we already know, reinstantiating a politics to come.

References

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