

Why does communism produce according to want? - Postliterate - Medium

By Postliterate

Source: <https://medium.com/@postliterate/why-does-communism-produce-according-to-want-eb0d2d2ad0bb>

Among the most commonly repeated communist slogans is the slogan which runs along the lines of “communism produces according to human needs and wants.” It is so often repeated and in such a way that it appears to be assumed by many to be an intuitively desirable political goal, and *eo ipso* is not explained. There is tragedy in this.

In the current age of impending ecological collapse, there is increasing talk of social regulation and control. With the consequences of “free enterprise” becoming more clearly deleterious, it has become intuitive for some that the solution to the problem is to increase regulation and control in the general sense. Such an approach implies the perspective that the unregulated human in the market has become dangerous, and we must restrain him in order to save the global ecosystem.¹ This goes hand-in-hand with the common realization that those of us who enjoy the “imperial mode of living” will have to renounce our hedonistic lifestyles and accept much more modest living standards in order to no longer endanger the health of the planet. That communism strives to satisfy needs and wants thus appears to be a mistake — the reality of things suggests that the very opposite should become the temporary goal of society: we should strive instead to downsize and cut down our want, rather than demand its greatest satisfaction.

Unfortunately, such an analysis has it all backwards. To understand why, it must first be made clear that human needs and wants are not trans-historical in character, but are rather socially determined:

“There is no such thing as a set of natural needs which inevitably override needs, wants and desires stemming from historically specific social relations. The mere fact that 780.000 [sic] people committed suicide in 2015 should make us think twice about postulating the existence of something like an irrepressible need for survival. Human beings regularly display their willingness to sacrifice themselves for all kinds of reasons, and they do dangerous things well aware of the dangers involved” (Mau, 90).

Thus, “*even our so-called basic biological needs for food, shelter and the like, must be seen as specific, socially mediated contents, the principle of whose explanation is not our common physiological nature but the social relations of production, distribution and exchange*” (Soper, 88). The question therefore should not be how we can alter our needs and wants, but rather how we can alter our social conditions which prescribe such needs and wants.

Herein lies the realization that we have had it all backwards. Capitalism as a social formation is not unique in its desire to aggressively serve human want at all costs. It is just the opposite: the current mode of social metabolism which characterizes modernity is unique in *not* basing its material production on the imperatives of want and need. That material production in general exists to serve such imperatives was intuitive to any previous historical epoch; it is capitalism that uniquely *decoupled* production from such imperatives. The historical particularity of this fact corresponds directly to the historical particularity of our ecological crisis — no longer is the process of social metabolism innocuous, but has instead acquired an alienated form under capitalism. This alienated form is the decoupling of

production from its previously historically applicable innocuous imperatives of need and want, in favor of the imperatives of capital (the valorization of value).² This decoupling we call the “metabolic rift.”

Communism thus produces according to want only in the utterly innocuous sense that production no longer has a separate end to itself but instead becomes merely instrumental practice for the wills of free people. It produces according to want in the sense that it no longer acquires a socially exceptional character but instead becomes merely that which it should do without socially assigned vicissitudes. In this sense, communism returns production to its pre-capitalist form as something which is not socially exceptional and which is not an end-in-itself. But, in the historically transcendent sense, it transforms the social mediation of this production into a conscious activity of social determination prescribed by freely associated subjects.

Mau, Søren. *Mute Compulsion: A Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*. University of Southern Denmark, 2019.

Saito, Kohei. *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Soper, Kate. *On Human Needs: Open and Closed Theories in a Marxist Perspective*. Harvester Press, Brighton, 1981.