

Ooooh Baby Ooooh, “I’m Literally a Communist!”



I’VE BEEN SAYING, “I’m a Communist” for many decades, but in recent years this has been greeted with a great deal of scepticism regarding my predilection for luxury, and living high on the hog. This objection doesn’t seem to count when you’re Ash Sarkar, writer, lecturer, activist, and a senior editor at Novara Media who, despite being a literature bore, is anarcho-fabulous, and a Muslim. She’s also a Tottenham Hotspur enthusiast, who walks like a supermodel and fucks like a champion, while calling for “Luxury Communism Now”.

Recently Ash Sarkar burst into the limelight when she challenged Piers Morgan’s slimy certainties on *Good Morning Britain* with the now famous outburst “I’m literally a communist, you idiot.”

An excellent response I thought. But then I saw Ash in conversation with Owen (communism-is-now-all-the-rage) Jones. Ash explained to Owen that

communism was about releasing the “power of the people without being managed by a state”. They both opined upon the importance of not dwelling on the murder and mayhem committed in the name of communism in the past. In fact they got quite jolly when accepting that there has been lot of communist awfulness, including Mao Zedong’s flatulence (and, I have no doubt Joseph Stalin’s halitosis), but they both thought that capitalism has been just as bad, if not worse.

I was reminded of Alexei Sayle’s quip about Stalin’s tyranny: “Well, you can’t make an omelette without twenty million dead”.

There’s something extraordinarily dishonest about these campaigners for a Labour victory, like Ash Sarkar, Owen Jones, or Aaron Bastani, presenting themselves as communists while all the time seeking to distract us from a thorough-going reckoning with the blood-soaked disaster of our common communist tradition.

This exercise in radical amnesia is justified by Ash’s bold assertion that she’s not one of those “vulgar Marxists” because she doesn’t want to trade in “ideological purity” which apparently “fails people”. Here, I think she’s taking one for the team – speaking for comrades from Momentum to the welter of unaffiliated activists gathered around the Corbyn-McDonnell project. They are all committed to dressing up a modest set of social democratic proposals as a revolutionary endeavour; what Tony Benn used to call a permanent and “decisive shift in the distribution of wealth and power”.

“Not much wrong with that” you might say. After all we do ‘literally’ have to resurrect Harold Wilson’s mantra, by being pragmatic. Promoting communism is for Ash, Aaron, Owen, and the thoroughly red enthusiasts in the leadership of Momentum, a cultural enterprise, about optimism, and can-do boldness, in the struggle to shift the centre of political life sharply to the left. This is why they don’t want to be restrained by “ideological purity” or diverted by a detailed

consideration of exactly how and why communism has proved to be such a bloody catastrophe in the past.

So the dishonesty of these new-model communists – the revolutionary-social-democrats in and around the Labour Party – is not deliberate or intentional, it is simply a spontaneous product of their enthusiasm to get things done, rather than be saddled with the wretched failures of the past.

In response, Ash spells out the vision thing:

. . . my communism isn't about authoritarian bureaucracy, suppressing freedom or everyone wearing burlap sacks. It's about the desire to see the coercive structure of state dismantled, while also having fun. It's not about driving everybody down to the same level of abjection, but making aesthetic pleasures and luxuries available to all.

But, then her pragmatism kicks in:

I acknowledge there are more pressing causes than the abolition of private property. This is why I'm a Corbyn supporter.

The difficulty with this sharp distinction between communist aspirations and political support for the Labour Party is that the 'fun-loving' dream of communism promoted by Ash and her comrades appears 'literally' to have no effect, pragmatic or otherwise, on what the Labour Party or the trade unions are actually fighting for. Demands associated with "Libertarian communism and post-scarcity economics" do not inform or help shape the programme or practice of the Labour Party.

To be sure Corbyn and McDonnell want to constrain the power of finance, they want to restrict the role of market forces in health, education, and above all in housing. On the whole they want to limit the tendencies towards atomisation, which a focus on individual consumption presages, in an attempt to

strengthen collective and communitarian goals. I'm not sure whether these are in themselves worthy objectives, but they certainly don't represent a break from the past of the Labour left or a move towards communism in any sense.

Indeed Paul Mason is now calling Corbyn's industrial strategy, "common sense" as it proposes a national revival of manufacturing in acceptance of the drift towards 'deglobalisation':

In a deglobalising world, acting if nothing's changed is like standing in a trench that's been overrun. No matter how much it hurts your pride, the logical thing to do is retreat to the second trench and defend that.

Paul concludes his *New Statesman* article with the following:

To defend what was positive about globalisation we need a controlled, limited and reversible retreat from it. Requiring British warships to be built in Britain, creating a resilient industrial skills base and boosting domestic green energy is not economic nationalism. It is what the Tories used to be famous for, but have abandoned: common sense.

Paul's advocacy of retreat and common sense is in lock step with Labour's traditional pragmatism regarding immigration, the basic rate of income tax, and the need to live within our means. There is not a hint of "libertarian luxury communism", fun-loving or otherwise. Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell are committed to the sensible management of capitalism on behalf of the many, not the few. They are 'literally' on a different wavelength from the dreams dreamed by the folks over at Novara Media.

However, we cannot side-step the inconvenient truth that if communism is to mean anything at all it must be about extending democracy from Parliament

and local councils to the sphere of the economy as a whole. The problem with capitalism is that investment decisions are largely determined by whether the people with the money to put into a business can make a profit. If they can't get a good return by lending their money to a firm, they will simply take their capital elsewhere, even buy antiques, or keep it under the metaphorical mattress.

The capitalist organisation of society means that people with money to invest take most of the decisions about what gets made, and how and where it gets made. The working people who staff all the shops, offices, call centres, warehouses, and factories, don't get a look in when it comes to deciding how society's wealth and energy is employed. This is largely left in the hands of the capitalists. In democratic countries we have some influence in how political arrangements are conducted, but none at all in how the workplace is run.

We get up every morning in a democracy, and go to work in a dictatorship.

Now, I'm sure that Ash Sarkar and her comrades would agree with me that communism means, if it means anything, bringing the whole of economic life under popular or democratic management and control. It would mean instead of decisions being taken by private investors interested in making a profit, decisions would be made by working people in the course of discussions about what we need, rather than being enslaved by market forces and the profit motive.

So far, so good.

The difficulty that immediately arises with this scheme would be the need to commence the progressive abolition of the private ownership of investment capital. The right to private property and inheritance is immediately thrown into jeopardy by the communist project. Now, you might argue that it is easy to distinguish between the private property that we use for our ordinary life, like the house we live in and the car or van we drive, and the private property

of capitalist investors. In practice however, this distinction is not easy to make at all; small business people often mortgage their house to provide working capital, and millions of people's pensions and savings are all tangled up in vast webs of investment capital deployed by wealth management funds.

Indeed the lawlessness, and tyranny of old-style communism was bound up intimately with the destruction of private property. In Soviet Russia for example the process of abolishing private property had by 1930 placed all wealth and power at the disposal of the state and state officials. This deprived millions of working people of any reliable ownership and control of their wages or personal possessions. All became the victims of arbitrary and lawless decisions taken by the communist party and its functionaries.

The huge networks of labour camps, the famines, terror – the ubiquitous political police – and summary executions, were not simply the product of meanness or misdirection by the party or the dictator, but were produced by the system which put all economic power and decision-making in the hands of party officials and managers – old-style communism was horrible because people were deprived of their capacity to take day-to-day economic decisions in their own interests. Everything was subordinated to the state and the individual counted for nothing.

So there is a problem, which we communists cannot and must not attempt to avoid. What do we think about private property, contracts, and inheritance? How can we ensure that everybody retains a large measure of control over their lives at work, and at home with their families and friends? This is what old-style communism failed so conspicuously to do, and it is not a problem that can simply be whisked away with the bold assertions of new-style communists, activists, and journalists, about how audacious, sexy, wacky, fun-loving, and imaginative, they all are.

Nor can we resolve our difficulties by simply supporting programmes of nationalisation, more state

intervention, and rather vague and pious assertions about the value of cooperatives. Surely, if we're serious about communism we're not going to support the old-style nationalisation, advocated by the Labour Party and the trade unions. Surely, we're going to argue for thoroughgoing plans for workers' control and the cooperative management of as many enterprises and services as possible.

Of course, popular elements of economic management and planning cannot be achieved overnight. They would inevitably have to be piecemeal as we elbow more space for democracy within the capitalist economy. We need to struggle for the opportunity for working people to learn and experiment in how to participate in the democratic management of workplaces, and longer-term, how to shape the economy democratically as a whole in a way calculated to benefit the population at large.

The truth is we communists 'literally' do not know how to do any of this. What is more, averting the public's gaze from our tyrannical past, or attempting to pull the wool over people's eyes with optimistic assertions about nationalising the railways or increasing corporation tax, will not make communism any more practical or popular.

For a more detailed discussion of these issues see:
REVOLUTION and the difficulty of overthrowing capitalism at
www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net
or in *Articles 2013* at
www.donmilligan.net