

of Africa, accomplished curers were also important political figures with extensive clienteles of former patients. A would-be follower thus arrives to declare his political allegiance. What complicates the matter in this case is that followers of great men, in this part of Africa, were in a relatively strong bargaining position. Good henchmen were hard to come by; important people were expected to be generous with followers to keep them from joining some rival's entourage instead. If so, asking for a shirt or knife would be a way of asking for confirmation that the missionary does wish to have the man as a follower. Paying him back, in contrast, would be, like Seton's gesture to his father, an insult: a way of saying that despite the missionary having saved his life, he would just as soon have nothing further to do with him.



This is a thought experiment—because we don't really know what the African patients were thinking. The point is that such forms of radical equality and radical inequality do exist in the world, that each carries within it its own kind of morality, its own way of thinking and arguing about the rights and wrongs of any given situation, and these moralities are entirely different than that of tit-for-tat exchange. In the rest of the chapter, I will provide a rough-and-ready way to map out the main possibilities, by proposing that there are three main moral principles on which economic relations can be founded, all of which occur in any human society, and which I will call communism, hierarchy, and exchange.

Communism

I will define communism here as any human relationship that operates on the principles of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.”

I admit that the usage here is a bit provocative. “Communism” is a word that can evoke strong emotional reactions—mainly, of course, because we tend to identify it with “communist” regimes. This is ironic, since the Communist parties that ruled over the USSR and its satellites, and that still rule China and Cuba, never described their own systems as “communist.” They described them as “socialist.” “Communism” was always a distant, somewhat fuzzy utopian ideal, usually

to be accompanied by the withering away of the state—to be achieved at some point in the distant future.

Our thinking about communism has been dominated by a myth. Once upon a time, humans held all things in common—in the Garden of Eden, during the Golden Age of Saturn, in Paleolithic hunter-gatherer bands. Then came the Fall, as a result of which we are now cursed with divisions of power and private property. The dream was that someday, with the advance of technology and general prosperity, with social revolution or the guidance of the Party, we would finally be in a position to put things back, to restore common ownership and common management of collective resources. Throughout the last two centuries, Communists and anti-Communists argued over how plausible this picture was and whether it would be a blessing or a nightmare. But they all agreed on the basic framework: communism was about collective property, “primitive communism” did once exist in the distant past, and someday it might return.

We might call this “mythic communism”—or even, “epic communism”—a story we like to tell ourselves. Since the days of the French Revolution, it has inspired millions; but it has also done enormous damage to humanity. It’s high time, I think, to brush the entire argument aside. In fact, “communism” is not some magical utopia, and neither does it have anything to do with ownership of the means of production. It is something that exists right now—that exists, to some degree, in any human society, although there has never been one in which *everything* has been organized in that way, and it would be difficult to imagine how there could be. All of us act like communists a good deal of the time. None of us acts like a communist consistently. “Communist society”—in the sense of a society organized exclusively on that single principle—could never exist. But all social systems, even economic systems like capitalism, have always been built on top of a bedrock of actually-existing communism.

Starting, as I say, from the principle of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” allows us to look past the question of individual or private ownership (which is often little more than formal legality anyway) and at much more immediate and practical questions of who has access to what sorts of things and under what conditions.⁹ Whenever it is the operative principle, even if it’s just two people who are interacting, we can say we are in the presence of a sort of communism.

Almost everyone follows this principle if they are collaborating on some common project.¹⁰ If someone fixing a broken water pipe says, “Hand me the wrench,” his co-worker will not, generally speaking,

say, “And what do I get for it?”—even if they are working for Exxon-Mobil, Burger King, or Goldman Sachs. The reason is simple efficiency (ironically enough, considering the conventional wisdom that “communism just doesn’t work”): if you really care about getting something done, the most efficient way to go about it is obviously to allocate tasks by ability and give people whatever they need to do them.¹¹ One might even say that it’s one of the scandals of capitalism that most capitalist firms, internally, operate communistically. True, they don’t tend to operate very democratically. Most often they are organized around military-style top-down chains of command. But there is often an interesting tension here, because top-down chains of command are not particularly efficient: they tend to promote stupidity among those on top, resentful foot-dragging among those on the bottom. The greater the need to improvise, the more democratic the cooperation tends to become. Inventors have always understood this, start-up capitalists frequently figure it out, and computer engineers have recently rediscovered the principle: not only with things like freeware, which everyone talks about, but even in the organization of their businesses. Apple Computers is a famous example: it was founded by (mostly Republican) computer engineers who broke from IBM in Silicon Valley in the 1980s, forming little democratic circles of twenty to forty people with their laptops in each other’s garages.

This is presumably also why in the immediate wake of great disasters—a flood, a blackout, or an economic collapse—people tend to behave the same way, reverting to a rough-and-ready communism. However briefly, hierarchies and markets and the like become luxuries that no one can afford. Anyone who has lived through such a moment can speak to their peculiar qualities, the way that strangers become sisters and brothers and human society itself seems to be reborn. This is important, because it shows that we are not simply talking about cooperation. In fact, *communism is the foundation of all human sociability*. It is what makes society possible. There is always an assumption that anyone who is not actually an enemy can be expected on the principle of “from each according to their abilities,” at least to an extent: for example, if one needs to figure out how to get somewhere, and the other knows the way.

We so take this for granted, in fact, that the exceptions are themselves revealing. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, an anthropologist who in the 1920s carried out research among the Nuer, Nilotic pastoralists in southern Sudan, reports his discomfiture when he realized that someone had intentionally given him wrong directions:

On one occasion I asked the way to a certain place and was deliberately deceived. I returned in chagrin to camp and asked the people why they had told me the wrong way. One of them replied, "You are a foreigner, why should we tell you the right way? Even if a Nuer who was a stranger asked us the way we would say to him, 'You continue straight along that path,' but we would not tell him that the path forked. Why should we tell him? But you are now a member of our camp and you are kind to our children, so we will tell you the right way in future."¹²

The Nuer are constantly engaged in feuds; any stranger might well turn out to be an enemy there to scout out a good place for an ambush, and it would be unwise to give such a person useful information. What's more, Evans-Pritchard's own situation was obviously relevant, since he was an agent of the British government—the same government that had recently sent in the RAF to strafe and bomb the inhabitants of this very settlement before forcibly resettling them there. Under the circumstances, the inhabitants' treatment of Evans-Pritchard seems quite generous. The main point, though, is that it requires something on this scale—an immediate threat to life and limb, terror-bombing of civilian populations—before people will ordinarily consider not giving a stranger accurate directions.¹³

It's not just directions. Conversation is a domain particularly disposed to communism. Lies, insults, put-downs, and other sorts of verbal aggression are important—but they derive most of their power from the shared assumption that people do not ordinarily act this way: an insult does not sting unless one assumes that others will normally be considerate of one's feelings, and it's impossible to lie to someone who does not assume you would ordinarily tell the truth. When we genuinely wish to break off amicable relations with someone, we stop speaking to them entirely.

The same goes for small courtesies like asking for a light, or even for a cigarette. It seems more legitimate to ask a stranger for a cigarette than for an equivalent amount of cash, or even food; in fact, if one has been identified as a fellow smoker, it's rather difficult to refuse such a request. In such cases—a match, a piece of information, holding the elevator—one might say the "from each" element is so minimal that most of us comply without even thinking about it. Conversely, the same is true if another person's need—even a stranger's—is particularly spectacular or extreme: if he is drowning, for example. If a child has fallen onto the subway tracks, we assume that anyone who is capable of helping her up will do so.

I will call this “baseline communism”: the understanding that, unless people consider themselves enemies, if the need is considered great enough, or the cost considered reasonable enough, the principle of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” will be assumed to apply. Of course, different communities apply very different standards. In large, impersonal urban communities, such a standard may go no further than asking for a light or directions. This might not seem like much, but it founds the possibility of larger social relations. In smaller, less impersonal communities—especially those not divided into social classes—the same logic will likely extend much further: for example, it is often effectively impossible to refuse a request not just for tobacco, but for food—sometimes even from a stranger; certainly from anyone considered to belong to the community. Exactly one page after describing his difficulties in asking for directions, Evans-Pritchard notes that these same Nuer find it almost impossible, when dealing with someone they have accepted as a member of their camp, to refuse a request for almost any item of common consumption, so that a man or woman known to have anything extra in the way of grain, tobacco, tools, or agricultural implements can be expected to see their stockpiles disappear almost immediately.¹⁴ However, this baseline of openhanded sharing and generosity never extends to everything. Often, in fact, things freely shared are treated as trivial and unimportant for that very reason. Among the Nuer, true wealth takes the form of cattle. No one would freely share their cattle; in fact, young Nuer men learn that they are expected to defend their cattle with their lives; for this reason, cattle are neither bought nor sold.

The obligation to share food, and whatever else is considered a basic necessity, tends to become the basis of everyday morality in a society whose members see themselves as equals. Another anthropologist, Audrey Richards, once described how Bemba mothers, “such lax disciplinarians in everything else,” will scold their children harshly if they give one an orange or some other treat and the child does not immediately offer to share it with her friends.¹⁵ But sharing is also, in such societies—in any, if we really think about it—a major focus of life’s pleasures. As a result, the need to share is particularly acute in both the best of times and the worst of times: during famines, for example, but also during moments of extreme plenty. Early missionary accounts of native North Americans almost invariably include awestruck remarks on generosity in times of famine, often to total strangers.¹⁶ At the same time,

On returning from their fishing, their hunting, and their trading, they exchange many gifts; if they have thus obtained something

unusually good, even if they have bought it, or if it has been given to them, they make a feast to the whole village with it. Their hospitality towards all sorts of strangers is remarkable.¹⁷

The more elaborate the feast, the more likely one is to see some combination of free sharing of some things (for instance, food and drink) and careful distribution of others: say, prize meat, whether from game or sacrifice, which is often parceled out according to very elaborate protocols or equally elaborate gift exchange. The giving and taking of gifts often takes on a distinctly gamelike quality, continuous often with the actual games, contests, pageants, and performances that also often mark popular festivals. As with society at large, the shared conviviality could be seen as a kind of communistic base on top of which everything else is constructed. It also helps to emphasize that sharing is not simply about morality, but also about pleasure. Solitary pleasures will always exist, but for most human beings, the most pleasurable activities almost always involve sharing something: music, food, liquor, drugs, gossip, drama, beds. There is a certain communism of the senses at the root of most things we consider fun.

The surest way to know that one is in the presence of communistic relations is that not only are no accounts taken, but it would be considered offensive, or simply bizarre, to even consider doing so. Each village, clan, or nation within the League of the Hodenosaunee, or Iroquois, for example, was divided into two halves.¹⁸ This is a common pattern: in other parts of the world (Amazonia, Melanesia) too, there are arrangements in which members of one side can only marry someone from the other side, or only eat food grown on the other side; such rules are explicitly designed to make each side dependent on the other for some basic necessity of life. Among the Six Iroquois, each side was expected to bury the other's dead. Nothing would be more absurd than for one side to complain that, "last year, we buried five of your dead, but you only buried two of ours."

Baseline communism might be considered the raw material of sociality, a recognition of our ultimate interdependence that is the ultimate substance of social peace. Still, in most circumstances, that minimal baseline is not enough. One always behaves in a spirit of solidarity more with some people than others, and certain institutions are specifically based on principles of solidarity and mutual aid. First among these are those we love, with mothers being the paradigm of selfless love. Others include close relatives, wives and husbands, lovers, one's closest friends. These are the people with whom we share everything, or at least to whom we know we can turn in need, which is the

definition of a true friend everywhere. Such friendships may be formalized by a ritual as “bond-friends” or “blood brothers” who cannot refuse each other anything. As a result, any community could be seen as criss-crossed with relations of “individualistic communism,” one-to-one relations that operate, to varying intensities and degrees, on the basis of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.”¹⁹

This same logic can be, and is, extended within groups: not only cooperative work groups, but almost any in-group will define itself by creating its own sort of baseline communism. There will be certain things shared or made freely available within the group, others that anyone will be expected to provide for other members on request, that one would never share with or provide to outsiders: help in repairing one’s nets in an association of fisherman, stationery supplies in an office, certain sorts of information among commodity traders, and so forth. Also, certain categories of people we can always call on in certain situations, such as harvesting or moving house.²⁰ One could go on from here to various forms of sharing, pooling, who gets to call on whom for help with certain tasks: moving, or harvesting, or even, if one is in trouble, providing an interest-free loan. Finally, there are the different sorts of “commons,” the collective administration of common resources.

The sociology of everyday communism is a potentially enormous field, but one which, owing to our peculiar ideological blinkers, we have been unable to write about because we have been largely unable to see it. Rather than try to further outline it, I will limit myself to three final points.

First, we are not really dealing with reciprocity here—or at best, only with reciprocity in the broadest sense.²¹ What is equal on both sides is the knowledge that the other person *would* do the same for you, not that they necessarily *will*. The Iroquois example brings home clearly what makes this possible: that such relations are based on a presumption of eternity. Society will always exist. Therefore, there will always be a north and a south side of the village. This is why no accounts need be taken. In a similar way, people tend to treat their mothers and best friends as if they will always exist, however well they know it isn’t true.

The second point has to do with the famous “law of hospitality.” There is a peculiar tension between a common stereotype of what are called “primitive societies” (people lacking both states and markets) as societies in which anyone not a member of the community is assumed to be an enemy, and the frequent accounts of early European

travelers awestruck by the extraordinary generosity shown them by actual “savages.” Granted, there is a certain truth to both sides. Whenever a stranger is a dangerous potential enemy, the normal way to overcome the danger is by some dramatic gesture of generosity whose very magnificence catapults them into that mutual sociality that is the ground for all peaceful social relations. True, when one is dealing with completely unknown quantities, there is often a process of testing. Both Christopher Columbus, in Hispaniola, and Captain Cook, in Polynesia, reported similar stories of islanders who either flee, attack, or offer everything—but who often later enter the boats and help themselves to anything they take a fancy to, provoking threats of violence from the crew, who then did their utmost to establish the principle that relations between strange peoples should be mediated instead by “normal” commercial exchange.

It’s understandable that dealings with potentially hostile strangers should encourage an all-or-nothing logic, a tension preserved even in English in the etymology of the words “host,” “hostile,” “hostage,” and indeed “hospitality,” all of which are derived from the same Latin root.²² What I want to emphasize here is that all such gestures are simply exaggerated displays of that very “baseline communism” that I have already argued is the ground of all human social life. This is why, for instance, the difference between friends and enemies is so often articulated through food—and often the most commonplace, humble, domestic sorts of food: as in the familiar principle, common in both Europe and the Middle East, that those who have shared bread and salt must never harm one another. In fact, those things that exist above all to be shared often become those things one *cannot* share with enemies. Among the Nuer, so free with food and everyday possessions, if one man murders another, a blood feud follows. Everyone in the vicinity will often have to line up on one side or another, and those on opposite sides are strictly forbidden to eat with anyone on the other, or even to drink from a cup or bowl one of their newfound enemies has previously used, lest terrible results ensue.²³ The extraordinary inconvenience this creates is a major incentive to try to negotiate some sort of settlement. By the same token, it is often said that people who have shared food, or the right, archetypal kind of food, are forbidden to harm one another, however much they might be otherwise inclined to do so. At times, this can take on an almost comical formality, as in the Arab story of the burglar who, while ransacking someone’s house, stuck his finger in a jar to see if it was full of sugar, only to discover it was full of salt instead. Realizing that he had now eaten salt at the owner’s table, he dutifully put back everything he’d stolen.

Finally, once we start thinking of communism as a principle of morality rather than just a question of property ownership, it becomes clear that this sort of morality is almost always at play to some degree in any transaction—even commerce. If one is on sociable terms with someone, it's hard to completely ignore their situation. Merchants often reduce prices for the needy. This is one of the main reasons why shopkeepers in poor neighborhoods are almost never of the same ethnic group as their customers; it would be almost impossible for a merchant who grew up in the neighborhood to make money, as they would be under constant pressure to give financial breaks, or at least easy credit terms, to their impoverished relatives and school chums. The opposite is true as well. An anthropologist who lived for some time in rural Java once told me that she measured her linguistic abilities by how well she could bargain at the local bazaar. It frustrated her that she could never get it down to a price as low as local people seemed pay. "Well," a Javanese friend finally had to explain, "they charge rich Javanese people more, too."

Once again, we are back to the principle that if the needs (for instance, dire poverty), or the abilities (for instance, wealth beyond imagination), are sufficiently dramatic, then unless there is a complete absence of sociality, some degree of communistic morality will almost inevitably enter into the way people take accounts.²⁴ A Turkish folktale about the Medieval Sufi mystic Nasruddin Hodja illustrates the complexities thus introduced into the very concept of supply and demand:

One day when Nasruddin was left in charge of the local tea-house, the king and some retainers, who had been hunting nearby, stopped in for breakfast.

"Do you have quail eggs?" asked the king.

"I'm sure I can find some," answered Nasruddin.

The king ordered an omelet of a dozen quail eggs, and Nasruddin hurried out to look for them. After the king and his party had eaten, he charged them a hundred gold pieces.

The king was puzzled. "Are quail eggs really that rare in this part of the country?"

"It's not so much quail eggs that are rare around here," Nasruddin replied. "It's more visits from kings."

Exchange

Communism, then, is based neither in exchange nor in reciprocity—except, as I have observed, in the sense that it does involve mutual expectations and responsibilities. Even here, it seems better to use another