

BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Communism Today: A Comradely Response to Left Universalism, Africentric Essays, by Ato Sekyi-Otu, New York, NY, Routledge, 2019, \$49.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1138-61177-1; \$160.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1138-61178-8

Ato Sekyi-Otu's newest book is equal parts refreshing and provocative. I have chosen to focus on the broad political application of Sekyi-Otu's defence of universalist ethics as it appears in the third chapter, "Ethical Communism and African Thought." For what is, to my mind, most refreshing and heretical in this text – all the more because I write from the USA – is its devotion to *communism* as the position that necessarily follows from a commitment to a robust ethical universalism. This argument is natural enough because, as the title of the chapter indicates, communism is not a mode of production, a political system, or a practical organization of society: it is fundamentally and timelessly an "ethical enterprise" (90). In this way, Sekyi-Otu contributes to the "revival" of communism that has been underway since 2008, working explicitly against the popular idea that communism died as a viable political horizon with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and implicitly against the equally popular notion that the history of communism in the 20th century reveals that it was not a viable political horizon in the first place. We can take these two ideologemes as responses to the questions of communism's *possibility* and its *desirability*, respectively. They are the rhetorical ground that a defence of communism must take, and what distinguishes Sekyi-Otu's argument from others in the same vein is that he claims that communism has *always* been possible because it has *always* been desirable, and that our failure to create an egalitarian society so far should be attributed to a failure of the will rather than to the movement of historical circumstances.

The labour of the argument is equal parts negative and positive. On the one hand, the thrust of Sekyi-Otu's definition is to be radically inclusive such that egalitarian struggles throughout human history are equally contributors to the communist project; on the other hand, it is also necessary to distinguish this notion of communism from the weight of its own narrow history. The productive tensions in this chapter and in this book lie within this pull between the positive and the negative, the universal and the particular.

The most important polemical goal in the chapter has to do with the "enabling conditions" of communism, which, Sekyi-Otu argues, are primarily "conscious choices, decisions, [and] purposes," and *not* "unwilled and determining causes" (106). There are two "unwilled and determining causes" of communism that he is most eager to distinguish himself from: capitalism and abundance. In concrete terms, this entails a critique of the programmatist notion of communist development that obtained in Europe in the 20th century, which can be summarized as the belief that the development of capitalism would necessarily swell the ranks of the industrial

proletariat as increasing demand for labour in these sectors was met by workers expelled from a declining peasantry. Because the dense and cooperative conditions under which industrial labourers worked enabled for the first time a robust class consciousness, all that was necessary was to wait until such workers constituted a majority of the enfranchised population, at which point the capitalist economy could be dismantled by the very liberal democratic institutions it had brought into being. On more abstract terrain, it also entails the rejection of the fairly schematic Euromarxist position that capitalism develops the forces of production to the point that capitalist social relations become a burden, and communist social relations are finally instituted now that they have the abundance that is their precondition. That these things failed to happen, and continue to fail to happen, is the riddle that any new communist project most solve, and what is intolerable about this narrative for Sekyi-Otu is not so much that it is incorrect – although even on its own terrain it is – but rather that it is ethically vacuous and that it downplays quite heavily the possibility of communism in the global south.

Sekyi-Otu describes quite admirably the difficulties that issued from these positions for revolutionary leaders in midcentury decolonial struggles (101–103). For even if you agreed that these societies could be appropriately called capitalist, the history of colonialism had foreclosed on the possibility of abundance on the scale that the programmatists imagined would foster communism. In response to the “scientific” belief that communism would happen naturally emerged the distinct variant of “African socialism” of Nyerere, Senghor, and Nkrumah, which makes “recourse to antecedent moral foundations available for retrieval” in contemporary African society (103). The issue with this ideology for Sekyi-Otu seems to be its delimited historical ground: the particular form of ethics appealed to is constrained to a particular time and place. For this reason, he favours by far the ethical vision offered by Ayi Kwei Armah – the chapter is in fact a very compelling reading of Armah’s provocative *oeuvre* – for whom communism is “ethical in a more underlying existential sense,” one based in a decision that is *made* rather than *found* in the past (103). And this is the rub: that communism requires nothing other than the choice to desire a communitarian over an individualist society. In the words of Armah:

Any society whose members are intelligent enough to plan the democratic sharing of power and resources (scar[c]e and abundant) and committed enough to work out practical methods for implementing such plans, is ready for communism, no matter how poor that society is. Any society whose members are bent each on maximizing his private property and minimizing his personal sacrifices is not ready for communism, no matter how gross its national product may be. (quoted in 106)

I fully agree with Sekyi-Otu and Armah that it is necessary to disarticulate the value of communism from the abundance that it presupposes and offers. The peculiar rhetorical difficulties around this word in the USA have led to the overselling of communism as the means of achieving *true* abundance, over and against the images of three-block breadlines that the idea tends to conjure thanks to Cold War propaganda. This undersells by a wide margin the extent to which the abundance already enjoyed by large segments of the waged working class in the USA is predicated upon the exploitation of the global south, and the very real fact that if the consumption of the

entire world rose to the level of the global north, the planet would become uninhabitable more quickly than it already is. All of which is to say that the disarticulation of communism from the promise and precondition of abundance is vital and effective.


I am also wholly convinced by the argument that communism is not the necessary result of the development of capitalism, and not therefore the reward that falls into the laps of patient communists who simply wait on contradictions within capitalism to work themselves out in the fullness of time. I have more trouble with the concomitant argument that communism does *not* emerge from particular material situations – that, in other words, communism is not founded on the negation of capitalism. At the very least I worry about the implications of believing this. Let me explain by way of thinking through the work that teleology and *telos* perform in the argument. An important component of Sekyi-Otu's reasoning is the familiar anti-communist criticism that scientific and programmatic socialism depends upon the belief that communism is the "teleological consummation of history" (100). The phrase is meant to summon up all manner of Hegelian baggage in order to unite the belief that human history is at all points striving to realize the concept of communism, and in the process of doing so must work through a sequence of stages. In this narrative, belief in the historical necessity of communism is indeed yoked securely to the belief that capitalism is the necessary precondition of communism. But are these two claims necessarily intertwined? If one agrees, as most of us would, that history is not externally mediated by the idea of communism, does this necessarily liberate the possibility of communism from a strictly *capitalist* horizon?

To say that history is teleological is to say that it is striving to realize the parameters of a given concept. Consider this passage from Armah that serves as the epigraph to the chapter: "A social system chooses whether to reinforce individualist or socialist psychology ..." (89). If we take this seriously – and this is the necessary result of Sekyi-Otu's ethical foundationalism – what he has is a society that is teleological at every point insofar as it is the result of a *choice*. Because there is no sense in which an individualist society necessarily entails the development of communist desire, or vice-versa, this does indeed dismantle the possibility of a teleological *history*, but at the cost of suffusing every moment in the history of human society with its own *telos*. I do not believe that Sekyi-Otu would disagree with this paraphrase of his argument, nor would he disagree with the claim itself: all of this is entailed in his definitional claim that communism "has as its aim the realization of an ideal, that of egalitarian justice" (106). The distinction I am drawing here seems to be what he has in mind when he contrasts communism's untenable "teleological warrant" with a more salubrious "teleopoiesis," by which he means the "unending activity of fashioning and attending to ends" by way of education (118). The argument, put simply, is that human society is *always* subordinate to human desire, and that those desires do not change as society changes: they are or can be present at any point, and there is no way to predict what desires will be found in a given place.

As is often the case with arguments that strive for this kind of historical breadth, the price paid for that scope is abstraction. Given the empirical breadth of social and economic arrangements throughout human history – to say nothing of all of those that have only been imagined – the degree of abstraction required to make them all

answer to two categories is substantial, which is why communism is displaced from a concrete state of affairs to the “extended family of visions of egalitarian justice that people all spaces of human experience in time” (112). Concomitant with this is the displacement of communism from an object of desire to the desire for some other object: one no longer wishes for communism, exactly, but rather communism is the name of the wish for egalitarian justice, communitarian society, or some other object that is equally abstract. I do not doubt that one can find a desire for egalitarian justice throughout human history. What I am less convinced of is the utility of identifying this with *communism*, particularly for egalitarian struggles happening *right now*. For if that historically universal desire corresponds to things so heterogeneous that a “family name” is required to yoke them together, this is because the concrete details are so disparate as to be incommensurable with each other: both the mechanisms by which abundance and scarcity will be made and shared and the impediments to those mechanisms have taken a variety of different forms throughout history, and the possibilities and problems that we face today are unique in their particulars. These technical details are not extraneous to the desire for communism but the very fabric of it.

And so, while I can see the rhetorical utility of absorbing the energy of all egalitarian desire into the ambit of communism, and I fully agree with the vigorous critique of the first-world chauvinism that often informs the belief that a given society is “not ready” for communism, I nevertheless think that *right now* every society is ready for communism, that the survival of the human race depends on communism, and that communism will require nothing less than the negation of capitalist social relations. It is not preordained: a necessary precondition is that enough people desire it, and that is no sure thing. While necessary, the presence of communist desire is not sufficient, and if that desire is only for something as abstract as “equality” in a world that is abstractly founded on the equality of buyer and seller, it will not take us very far. The kernel of “scientific socialism” lies not in its belief in the inevitability of communism and the abdication of desire as a necessary factor in its realization. It is rather that the realization of the communist idea requires a concrete understanding of the problems to be solved and the state of affairs to be instantiated. Sekyi-Otu is absolutely correct that to be a communist is to *act* as a communist, but I nevertheless feel that what it means to act as a communist *today* is the most important problem to be solved. The answer does not lie in the past or outside of time, but in the world as we find it today.

Robert T. Collins
University of Wisconsin, Madison
 rcollins6@wisc.edu

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