





THE NECESSITY OF COMMUNIST MORALITY

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THE UTTERANCE of morals or morality within a communist space is one that may, in the best of cases, raise a few eyebrows or, in the worst of cases, summon calls for condemnation or accusations of being unscientific. The subject of communist morality is one that is often ignored within the broader revolutionary left, while at the same time—especially within our current insurrectionary moment—beckons to be engaged with.¹ When I speak with comrades participating in the revolts and rebellions erupting around the world, or those engaging in mutual aid efforts to bridge the failures of the imperial state in their response to the pandemic, I’ve had to confront my own relative discomfort—or, to put it more truthfully, my lack of ontological seriousness—concerning what seems to be the stark empirical tenacity of *good and evil* within our material world. These moral realities, while perhaps eliciting a scoff by Western intellectuals, are an obvious part of the lived experiences of many of the world proletariat.

As the hydra of neoliberalism begins its inevitable collapse, throwing capitalism once more into a global crisis—and thusly its im-

perialist head begins to twist fascistically from the periphery back inward toward the United States and Europe—these categories that before seemed abstract and idealistic suddenly become vivid and tangible. Every crack of the police baton across the back, every rubber bullet or tear gas container lodged into a bike helmet, every lie uttered and inscribed by the cops, every rebel disappeared off the street by the secret police, every choked breath of air laced with tear gas all become imbued with obvious, empirical, evil intent. And these examples do not even delve into the multiplicity of wider evils within the capitalist system, of which the so-called “justice system” acts as its armed and punitive wing. *Evil* is how these injustices are described—in a non-hyperbolic fashion—by those engaged in the frontlines of revolutionary activity. So why is morality eschewed and denounced in left academic discourse? Are morals solely the provenance of the reactionary right or the dreamy idealist?

Famously, Marx wrote very little on morality, at least directly. The reasons for this have been hotly contested, but I will synthe-

size this aversion with a couple of historical examples: the first is due to Marx equating morals with ideology. For Marx, concepts like justice, morality, good, and evil are to be analyzed applying the framework of historical materialism—these concepts are notions suspended within a society’s superstructure wherein they spiral in a dialectical relationship with the means and relations of production, thereby assisting in the stabilization of a society’s base.² Marx recognized that there exists a dialectical double-helix between the material/ideal and the abstract/concrete but, unlike his philosophical mentor Hegel, Marx (and Engels) insisted that this relationship blossoms first from that which is tangible—“in direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven.”³ Additionally, Marx is sometimes accused of being flippant or hostile to the idea that capitalism itself is an unjust system. Indeed, in *Capital*, he seems to describe that the exploitative extraction of profits from the worker by the capitalist is not an unjust social relation at all:



The owner of the money has paid the value of a day’s labour-power; he therefore has the use of it for a day, a day’s labour belongs to him. On the one hand the daily sustenance of labour-power costs only half a day’s labour, while on the other hand the very same labour-power can remain effective, can work, during a whole day, and consequently the value which its use during one day creates is double what the capitalist pays for that use; this circumstance is a piece of good luck for the buyer [the capitalist], but by no means an injustice [Unrecht] toward the seller [the worker].⁴

Despite the word *Gerechtigkeit* (justice) barely appearing in Marx’s writing, he remains far from taking an amoral stance.⁵ His fiery descriptions of capitalism’s injustices erupt from a righteous fury over the apparent immoral character of the entire system of production. In a later passage in *Capital*, he seems to back down from his previous outward amorality:

There is not one single atom of [capital’s] value that does not owe its existence to unpaid labour...even if the [capitalist class] uses a portion of that tribute to purchase the additional labour-power [from the working class] at its full price...the whole thing still remains the age-old activity of the conqueror, who buys commodities from the conquered with the money he has stolen from them.⁶

Marx’s consistent use of morally loaded words like “stolen,” “exploited,” “embezzled,” etc. hint at an internal conflict that have led some Marxist scholars to suggest-

ed a controversial psychological explanation: while Marx may have *believed* that capitalism was immoral or unjust, he did not believe that *he believed* it was so—or perhaps he suppressed these instincts in an attempt to remain positivist or scientific.⁷ It was in unguarded moments within his writing that Marx’s communist morality shined through.

The same could be said in this passage by Engels, who starts with a materialist description of morals but, like his partner Marx, begins to let his guard down:

All moral theories have been hitherto the product, in the last analysis, of the economic conditions of society obtaining at the time. And as society has hitherto moved in class antagonisms, morality has always been class morality; it has either justified the domination and the interests of the ruling class, or ever since the oppressed class became powerful enough, it has represented its indignation against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed.

That in this process there has on the whole been progress in morality, as in all other branches of human knowledge, no one will doubt. But we have not yet passed beyond class morality. A really human morality which stands above class antagonisms and above any recollection of them becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class antagonisms but has even forgotten them in practical life.⁸

Here Engels hints at a higher conception of



morality—one that is disparate from solely class relations and antagonisms—or, as I will argue later, a time in which morals have withered away. He begins to steal a mischievous glance over the horizon toward a communist future, while still remaining grounded in the Marxist resolve that morality is an historical phenomenon produced by human beings and, as such, is entirely dependent upon a society’s material relations.⁹ That said, morality, much like religion, was looked upon by Marx as suspect, as he saw these metaphysical engagements as ultimately serving the bourgeoisie.

However, it becomes hard for me to think of morality as inherently an oppressive tool of the ruling class. After all, we would be hard pressed to find a communist who isn’t drawn to Marxism—or any left tendency for that matter—who doesn’t possess a strong, disciplined moral conviction that guides their actions and assists them in determining what is the right or wrong course of revolutionary action. And the choice that is deemed good/right—whether it is derived from a scientific or utopian framework—tends to be similar no matter the

tendency: a devotion to toppling capitalism, a love for humanity and the drive to assist in the liberation/empowerment of the dispossessed, the desire to bring about and defend communism, a rejection of racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. It is only in the strategies for achieving these morally correct choices that the many left-tendencies begin to diverge. In short, I argue that a communist is foremost a *moral actor* and as such, we draw from an explicit, yet often nebulously defined, *communist morality*. In order to develop this assertion further, I will pivot from thinking with Marx and Engels to thinking with Lenin.

The Dialectics of Communist Morality

The concept of a communist morality is not a novel idea. Lenin confronts the myth that communism is an immoral, or at best amoral, system during a speech to the third All-Russia Congress of The Russian Young Communist League on October 2, 1920. He addresses this falsehood head on: “Is there such a thing as communist morality? Of course, there is.”¹⁰ Lenin argues that morality not only exists for a good communist, but it also serves as a uniting factor within communist organization—particularly in its ability to suss out and defeat who he calls “the exploiters.”¹¹ That said, Lenin remains suspicious of any kind of morality that stands outside of class struggle. Much like Marx, he finds this formulation of morals to be synonymous with a *bourgeois morality*, which often places its moral and ethical positions upon the foundation of re-

ligion—specifically Christianity—and therefore, according to Lenin, these philosophies become part of the undemocratic dominion of the clergy.¹²

Consequently, Lenin saw a *moral* struggle being waged in a similar manner—and upon the same historical stage—as *class* struggle. Bourgeois morality is predicated on exploitation, with its ultimate goal being the annihilation of the working class—both of their spirits and their physical beings. In contrast, proletarian morality exists not only as a class unifier, but also as the motor of history, leading the way toward human liberation. Although Lenin explicitly and repeatedly states throughout his speech that communist morality is subordinated to the interests of proletarian class struggle, I argue that we must also consider additional dialectical relationships between morals and the revolution.¹³ Namely, I argue that we must account for a relational moral dialectic between the proletariat/bourgeoisie, the individual/society, and the semiotic/nature.

Proletariat/Bourgeoisie

This dialectic is perhaps the most obvious to even the most novice student of communist philosophy. The bourgeoisie and the proletariat exist as the two fundamental classes since the Industrial Revolution—locked in an eternal struggle in which neither achieves complete victory until the other is entirely vanquished.¹⁴ Ultimately, in each of these paired relational moral categories, with it being the most pronounced in the case of the proletariat/bourgeoisie, there exists this struggle—this core dialectic—of *oppression* and *subordination*.

To put it simply, bourgeois morality rests on a societal flattening of the world; at its core lies an unnuanced simplification of social categories. Let's take, for example, the classic moral trope of stealing. The "evil of stealing" is often touted as being proof of some kind of a universal moral imperative for humanity. Bourgeois moralists will often preach that throughout history, humanity understood that stealing was wrong, and it is only those that suffer from a pathology of immorality who resort to stealing the property of others. This is often asserted with very little historical evidence to back up such a claim—or the evidence is criminally cherry-picked. Furthermore, cross-cultural subtleties within the concept of "stealing" are often ignored. Relatedly, never have I heard this argument being made using anthropological evidence (probably because the ethnographic data is far too rich, nuanced, and is completely counter to the bourgeois Manichean worldview).

Of course, the great hidden truth in this kind of bourgeois moral proselytizing is that stealing is not inherently wrong in capitalism.¹⁵ It happens every day. The development of the capitalist system itself is predicated on the theft of life and land from Indigenous peoples and the theft of life, labor, and place from the peoples of Africa. For a contemporary example, the United States government regularly rewards thieves, such as in the passing of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008—more colloquially known as the "bank bailout" in which bankers made off with billions of dollars following their deliberate crashing of the economy. Meanwhile, millions of working-class Americans were rewarded with broken lives—lost jobs, fami-

lies, and homes. Today, many of us remain little more than indentured servants to the bourgeois state, drowning in our compounding student loan debt.

Additionally, corruption and bribes are so ordinary within the halls of bourgeois government that they have decided to bring the practice out from behind the curtain of illegality/immorality. To make bribing more palatable to the average American, they employed a modern capitalist tactic called "re-branding"—bribing is now referred to as "campaign contributions."¹⁶ The effect is still the same: businesses pay enormous sums of money to lawmakers who, in turn, act as intermediaries. The businesses themselves employ lawyers to write legislation that would allow them to further pillage Indigenous land, hasten the degradation of the Earth, continue the theft of wages from the working class, and otherwise build a buffer of pilfered wealth to protect themselves from the next inevitable crash of capitalism and the accelerating collapse of the environment. The lawmaker then dutifully delivers this legislation to Congress for passage into law, thus reinforcing that this is a supposed legitimate, effective, and moral practice of governance.

Stealing only becomes a grave moral sin when the bourgeois hegemony is challenged. It is only when the proletariat begins, *en masse*, to expropriate food from groceries and merchandise from department stores that the appeals to (bourgeois) morality begin to flood social media, news networks, and tabloids. Of course, it's also no coincidence that all these commu-



nicative platforms are owned by the same couple of individuals. The last thing a capitalist wants is for the working class to get a very small taste of reclaiming what is rightfully theirs—the fruits of their labor. As has been demonstrated by the popular rebellions of the past ten years, but especially since 2016, the role of the oppressor and the subordinate are not static categories—these are dialectical relationships forged in struggle. The establishment of autonomous zones, the taking over and burning down of police stations, and the expropriation of goods, food, weaponry, and equipment from the state have cracked the apparent monolithic veneer of exclusionary bourgeois morality and illuminated good proletarian morality based on community, self-defense, mutual aid, and equitable justice. Put plainly, the moral actions of the rebels are laying the foundations for a possible communism. These initial forays into *moral proletarian oppression* of the bourgeoisie are necessary first steps toward eroding their hegemony and working toward their eventual eradication as a class.

Individual/Society

The relational dialectic between the individual and society is at the core of communist morality. It is also often the most fraught. The individual is not the society in microcosm, nor is a society just made up of self-interested individuals. The relationship between these two categories is fast-moving and ever-changing—and for that reason, it becomes challenging to attack the hegemony of bourgeois morality. A communist morality must always take as its conceptual point of departure what is best for the collective over the individual. The

word *conceptual* becomes important here as this detail is often ignored by communism's critics, and it's instead taken up as some kind of *absolute*. Many attacks initiated by anti-communists will assert that socialist experiments in the past and present are inherently driven by selfish authoritarian impulses in which the ends always justify the means. In actuality, this is a simple case of psychological projection in which the bourgeoisie implicate their own cruel morals upon their enemies, since a philosophy in which the ends are justified by any means is vital to the survival of capitalism as a system.¹⁷

Often, anti-communists will trot out some perversion of an unsubstantiated quote from Lenin in which he supposedly said that “the rights of the individual are bourgeois fiction.”¹⁸ At best, this is an amalgam pieced together out of context. In fact, Lenin's ideas about the role of the individual in a socialist society were quite nuanced and they shifted considerably over time. First and foremost, Lenin held in high regard the notion of individual *talent*, and in many of his writings he expressed that the establishment of socialism would lead to a blossoming of the individual.¹⁹

This is largely because capitalist conditions necessarily suppress the creativity of individuals, which ends up transmogrifying on a societal scale. Much like in my previous example, this leads to an ironic projection about communism only generating drab, barracks-gray uniformity and dictatorial cheerlessness when, in actuality, these are the precise conditions produced by capitalism. One only needs to drive through any suburb in the United States to see capitalism's sprawling creation of dreary identical

subdivisions and/or spend two minutes negotiating with a landlord or petty despot of a Homeowners Association to experience the cold, irrational logic of capitalism's authoritarian soullessness—but I digress.

I am focusing specifically on Lenin in this subsection because I feel that he was genuinely attempting to grapple with the complexities of the individual/society dialectic, particularly in its relationship with the development of communist morality. There are numerous historical examples for this—for example, his theorizing on the shift from the destructive tasks of revolution toward creative ones or his modification of the accelerated communistic practices of War Communism to the innovations of the New Economic Policy. His ultimate motivation—which may come as a surprise to his critics—has its roots in his deep and undying confidence that the proletariat is more than capable of developing, shaping, managing, and perfecting moral attitudes and mass movements themselves.²⁰

Lenin's commitment to an uncompromising and independent Vanguard Party reached its peak in 1901–02 following his publishing of the influential pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?* However, following the first Russian Revolution in 1905, these ideas began to fade as he quickly recognized that the people themselves may be capable of organizing and carrying out revolution—or at least that a vanguard party might form more organically than he had initially theorized.²¹ By the time he published his *April Theses* on the eve of the July Days and the October Revolution in 1917, he shocked many of his own Bolshevik base because it seemed as if he took an ultra-radical turn. The theses in his *Tasks of the Proletari-*

at in the Present Revolution included such iconoclastic proposals as: the transformation of the “predatory imperialist war” (World War I) into a revolutionary struggle to be launched against the world bourgeoisie; a rigid refusal to work with the Russian Provisional Government; the immediate transference of the entirety of state power to the system of established *soviets* (councils) modeled on the Paris Commune; the abolition of the police, the army, and the bureaucracy; the equitable leveling of all incomes; and the nationalizing of all lands, including banks.²²

Lenin’s *April Theses* laid the possibilities for an actually existing communist morality. While the demands were political, they were founded upon a sense of deep moral justice—reckoning with what would be best for both the individual and the socialist society he demanded be created from the ashes of the Provisional Government.

The moral draw was so powerful that even several anarchist affinity groups heeded

Lenin’s call, drawn to his Bukuninesque appeal for “a break-up and a revolution a thousand times more powerful than that of February.”²³ As an aside, these “Soviet anarchists” fought so fiercely and loyally against the White Armies during the Civil War that Lenin praised them as “the most dedicated supporters of Soviet power.”²⁴

Following the establishment of the Soviet Union, Lenin did not cease trying to develop a communist morality that accounted for both the individual and Soviet society. He singled out the *subbotniks* (literally, Saturdayians), which was a movement initiated “by the workers on their own initiative” that spent Saturdays working without pay on public works projects in cities throughout the Union—in other words, quite literally building socialism.²⁵ In a manuscript entitled *A Great Beginning*, Lenin declares that the *subbotnik* movement is engaged in a struggle “more difficult, more tangible, more radical, and more decisive than the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.”²⁶ Lenin himself was so impressed with this organic attempt at morally transitioning one’s individual relationship to labor within society that he became a *subbotnik* himself, rolling up his sleeves and assisting workers in the shunting yards or helping lay bricks in the streets of Moscow.

Despite the organic success of the *subbotnik* movement, Lenin did not sink into the utopian logic that with the success of revolution came the immediate harmony of a working class for-itself. In his *How to Organize Competition?*, Lenin discusses how a society might organize itself in order to develop comradely competition in order to spark innovation—as well as how to combat those that act against their own/the so-

ciety's interest (he castigates these individuals with a variety of epithets: parasites, hangers-on, spongers, lackeys, etc.).²⁷ While not exclusively, these "hangers-on" metamorphize into the broader problem of the *kulak*, which is discussed and acted upon at great length just a few years later. Lenin and others were working to make sure that *competition* did not become designated "for-capitalist-use-only." Socialist competition, Lenin argued, was more than capable of surpassing the innovations of cutthroat capitalist competition by severing the "financial fraud, nepotism, [and] servility" from competitive practice and allowing workers to "display their abilities, develop the capacities, and reveal those talents, so abundant among the people whom capitalism crushed, suppressed and strangled in thousands and millions."²⁸

Lenin then identified two foundational tenants for the development of a communist morality: (a) trust in the proletariat as an agentive class and (b) placing an emphasis on the development of political education programs to help channel intrinsic talent. He notes: "But every *rank-and-file* worker and peasant who can read and write, who can judge people and has practical experience, is capable of organisational work."²⁹ The great C.L.R. James found enormous inspiration in this sentiment, summing up Lenin's ideas and applying them to the anti-

colonial struggle in his *Every Cook Can Govern*.³⁰ This sentiment further serves as the foundation of revolutionary praxis today and has been a proven moral model historically taken up by a variety of radical movements ranging from the Cuban Revolution to the National Liberation Front in Vietnam to the Black Panthers in the United States.

The project of building a communist morality bridging the individual with society is not without its dangers. One historical example that we can learn from is the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism adopted at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This was an attempt to codify the terms of the re-

lation of a person to Soviet society. However, this deontological method—like the vast array of religious decrees of virtue—is not dialectical nor is it materialist. When morals are inscribed and codified as commandments—particularly within a state structure—they have the potential to lose their ability to shift organically and dialogically as a society's material conditions shift. Without this ability to fluidly respond to, and intertwine with, the material conditions of the society as a whole, the risk of the individual becoming dominated and coerced by the values of the ruling class increases and, consequently, the project of morality becomes unmoored from the communist struggle.



Semiotics/Nature

This last subsection will be less comprehensive than the first two, but this in no way means it is less important. The way that we, as communists, make meaning out of (and with) Nature, both materially and otherwise, is paramount in this age of ecological collapse.

With the intensification of capitalist extraction and the resulting ecological fallout from this abusive relationship, it becomes exceedingly essential for (settler-)colonizers around the world to listen to what Indigenous peoples have been saying since the first European landed on foreign soil, eyes blazing with greed, surveying the land and its people and seeing only resources. The immorality of this semiotic torsion—that nature only exists for its materials—is an Enlightenment tradition that even contemporary Marxists struggle to overcome. Comrades at The Red Nation, the K'é Infoshop in the Navajo Nation, and the Táala Hooghan Infoshop in occupied Flagstaff have helped me considerably in working to overturn these Western biases.



Further afield, one can gain an enormous amount of knowledge regarding semiotics/nature by studying some of the early proletarian scientists, many of whom took the moral stakes of this dialectic quite seriously. Scientists like Vladimir Vernadsky theorized the interconnectedness between human beings and nature. In 1926, he published his seminal work *The Biosphere* in which he essentially outlined a version of the Gaia Hypothesis fifty-three years before James Lovelock released his *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*.³¹ While not succumbing to neo-vitalism, Vernadsky provided a material analysis that illustrated the symbiotic and interconnected nature of our planet.

Vernadsky's legacy on the semiotic/nature dialectic continues to influence contemporary Marxist theory and science. I see his work having elective affinity with Georg Lukács' argument for the necessity of the "double transformation" between human social relations and humanity's relationship with Nature.³² Exemplary work has been done in this regard by Cuban ecologists who—heeding Marx's notion of the "irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism"³³—have been able to increase crop productivity while decoupling damaging industrial agricultural practices, thereby closing this metabolic rift through an alternative method of food production known as agroecology.³⁴

Finally, the naturalist and anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin has given us a wealth of scientific field data illustrating the moral practices of non-human animals, highlighting that vicious self-interest and ruthless competition are not within the "nature" of any animal—human or other-

wise. Instead, these ideas must be taught, entrenched, and stabilized through collective social interaction.³⁵ Kropotkin argues that “animals living in societies are also able to distinguish between good and evil, just as [humans do].”³⁶ From ants to marmots to hedge sparrows, Kropotkin gives observational data illustrating that the entirety of the animal kingdom seems to live by a natural law of solidarity within their own communities, following the dictum “do to others what you would have them do to you in the same circumstances.”³⁷ Many non-human creatures that are caught acting selfishly and devoid of solidarity within their communities regularly receive capital punishment from their comrades.

The Counter-Hegemonic Project of Communist Morality

So—what is to be done?

On the one hand, this is simply a call for the radical left to engage with moral discourse in order to meet our fascistic enemies head-on and not cede any ground to their putrid ideology. The fascists have historically and contemporarily mobilized discourse on morals quite effectively. Moral arguments tend to enliven the North Atlantic base, in part because of a phenomenon I call the *hegemony of the sermon*—embodied elements of theological performance and discourse that have been practiced and emulated within the sphere of Western politics for centuries.

These fascistic moral arguments have mutated rapidly in the past few years and are

now an even more imminent threat to leftists—in particular, I’m thinking here of the evolution of QAnon and am reminded of Comrade Leroy’s short profile on that movement’s effective engagement with morals and the divine.³⁸ At the time of this writing, paramilitary fascists have initiated setting up roadblocks across wildfire evacuation routes under the moral guise that “ANTIFA” has set the fires that are devastating the Western United States. A quick material analysis would illuminate the fact that the intensity and frequency of these wildfires is largely due to capitalist accelerated climate change and human negligence³⁹—but the fact that an irrational fascist moral fad has spread so quickly, and generated such a rapid armed response, demonstrates the need and necessity of a counter-hegemonic communist morality.

In order to contemplate how this might be accomplished, let’s turn to thinking with the theorist who originally developed the idea of cultural hegemony: Antonio Gramsci. One of the most pertinent components of Gramsci’s social theories were his distinctions between what he termed the *war of maneuver* and the *war of position*. The war of maneuver is the classic revolutionary model by way of a (para)military insurrection; but Gramsci argued that this method has been supplemented within late capitalism by a multifaceted, subterranean, *longue durée* cultural struggle—the war of position.⁴⁰ These terms originally emerged as descriptions of war tactics, but they have seen numerous intellectual engagements at the intersec-

tion of military theory and Marxism. Contemporary theorists to Gramsci—such as Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky—have each written on the nature of political strategy and war; as have countless others who were inspired by him, such as Mao Zedong, Vo Nguyen Giap, Che Guevara, Régis Debray, Josip Broz Tito, Kwame Nkrumah, and countless Soviet military theorists.⁴¹

A communist morality, then, must be built within the framework of Gramsci’s war of position. A war of maneuver will not manifest without significant progress being made by a counter-hegemonic war of position. In some ways, this work is already underway. Despite the liberal tepidity of organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America, one thing they have succeeded in doing is introducing the word “socialist” back into the collective consciousness of the United States.

Decades of Red Scare brainwashing arrested even the utterance of the word in many political spaces; but today, numerous comrades in Generation Z seem to exemplify Gramsci’s concept of the *organic intellectual* who—being far enough removed from Cold War propaganda—unflinchingly research and fight that war of position for socialism and communism. Why is this? I believe it has its roots in the base moral motivation for every budding communist: a yearning for the collective good life.

Marx frequently wrote that communism would create a society of abundance—most famously in his oft-quoted summation of the system: “from each according to [their] abilities, to each according to [their] needs!”⁴² Without capitalist alienation and exploitation, goods and services could be organically provided through solidarity and collective ties.⁴³ The demand, for example, of peace, land, and bread is nothing if not a demand for the good life. That deep moral desire is the fuel which feeds a communist’s resolve while engaging in a counter-hegemonic struggle.

Socialist and communist projects have long attempted this counter-hegemonic war of position—through the creation of dual power organizations, food programs, prison outreach and support, etc. However, what our Zoomer comrades teach us—through viral tweets or through TikTok’s one-minute videos extolling poignant moral arguments for why one should be a communist—is that the *political* war of position is not enough; in fact, these political wars of position tend to veer into the realm of a war of maneuver quite often.⁴⁴ We must foster a disciplined focus on engaging in a *moral* war of position.

Our enemies have understood this for longer than we have. Through meme pages, message boards, and discord servers, the right-wing has mobilized easily digestible moral arguments for why fascism is supposedly good and right. At first, these looked to be deranged, on the fringe, and easy material for communists to turn up their nose and laugh. I, for one, am guilty of this shortsightedness. Little did we know, Hitler memes and the appropriation of Pepe the Frog were serving in a fascist war of position to corral and mobilize the latent racist, sexist, white patriarchy. Partially due to this careful—but probably unwitting—subterranean war of position altering the moral bourgeois hegemony, fascists are now able to publicly mobilize as heavily armed paramilitaries while even most liberals remain silent. This would have been unthinkable as recently as the 1990s.⁴⁵

If fascists are already successfully implementing and utilizing Gramsci's theories (albeit perhaps unknowingly), then we have a *moral obligation to wage revolution*. To flip a sentiment from J. Moufawad-Paul—communism, then, is more than an historical and material necessity: it is a moral necessity.⁴⁶

The Withering Away of Morals

By way of a brief conclusion, I wish to indulge in some grounded, speculative thoughts on what might happen to morals post-revolution by using Lenin's *State and Revolution* as a point of departure. The ultimate purpose of this article was to present a series of comradely provocations to initiate

radical discussion (as opposed to a deeply researched article). As such, I feel a conclusion of this nature will fall within the general theme of this piece.

As communists, we are not moral nihilists. Whether we realize it or not, every day, we are using dialectics in order to weigh both tactical and strategic decisions. Likewise, we utilize this framework to deliberate upon individual and collective moral dilemmas. Within our current capitalist system, we must balance the *value* of what we say or do on behalf of communist revolution with the potential moral and political *costs* of those words and actions. If we alienate members of the proletariat with what we say and do, then we are failing to advance toward revolution. This is a delicate dialectic that each of us are tasked with every day of our lives, in addition to eking out an existence—trudging together slowly on this neoliberal treadmill.

But let's indulge in some collective dreaming together. Let's imagine, for example, that we have carried out what Lenin had theorized: we have smashed the bourgeois, capitalist state.⁴⁷ It might seem like I'm baiting, but this should not be a controversial statement. Marx, Engels, and Lenin all agreed that the bourgeois state must be smashed, particularly after they analyzed the demise of the Paris Commune. What follows *after* we smash the bourgeois state is where most anarchists and Marxists tend to butt heads.

Marx, Engels, and Lenin call for the *revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*. Marx saw the wistful beginnings of this from afar during the Paris Commune and named it using the parlance of the time. Initially, this “dictatorship” is where we would see the

proletariat squeeze the bourgeoisie out of existence through, among other methods, redistribution and expropriation. Next, a new “state” apparatus would be built inside the violently molted exoskeleton of capitalism. I put “state” in scare-quotes here because I believe that this core tension between anarchists and Marxists can begin to be resolved through comradely discussion and conceptual reconstitution—especially in the midst of accelerating planetary collapse in the 21st century.

So, I pose this question: should we call a workers’ state, which is tasked with the oppression of the bourgeoisie, a state at all? If this hypothetical workers’ state, which is completely controlled by the proletariat in service to their material conditions—and therefore, *does not act like any state that has ever existed in the history of humanity*—then is it even scientifically responsible to call this a state? If we begin to conceptualize and take seriously this organizational uncertainty as something outside of what we



traditionally think of as a “state,” what dialectical openings might we see emerge? Ultimately, when this level of ambiguity exists within a period of struggle, we would be existing in a revolutionary stage that Lenin named the *withering away of the state*.⁴⁸ *Withering* not because it’s fading—but because it’s so dissimilar and unrecognizable to anything we have ever experienced that it would be like calling a butterfly a cocoon.

Why am I harping on this? In his speech to communist youth, Lenin said that “morality serves the purpose of helping human society rise to a higher level and rid itself of the exploitation of labour [therefore] communist morality is based on the struggle for the consolidation and completion of communism.”⁴⁹ The development of communist morality does not solely serve the purpose of building a counter-hegemonic program and overthrowing capitalism. We must develop a communist morality because it will guide our actions as our material conditions drastically shift both before and *after* the revolution into the lower stage of communism. But then that begs the question: if our material conditions are such that the bourgeoisie has been eradicated and we are drifting toward the higher stage of communism—if our communist morals are no longer in the dialectic of oppression/subordination with bourgeois morals and, therefore, are suddenly not acting like any morals we have ever seen in the history of humanity—then do we still name them morals?

I would like to draw the reader back to the beginning of this essay in which I quoted Engels as he imagined “a really human morality which stands above class antagonisms *and above any recollection of them*.”⁵⁰ I believe Engels was dreaming of a time when

both the state *and* morals had withered away—a time when they had, like a vaporous mirage or rainbow that blends so flawlessly with the sky, transformed into something so new and beautiful and unlike anything any human has ever seen before. That withering isn't a gentle vanishing of these prior conceptions; it is instead a reconstitution of concepts—they morph, they alter, they *wither*—into political objects that are discretely and distinctly unique to whatever objects they used to be. Only following this process of communist dialectical reformation do these oppressive political structures become unnecessary and begin to fade from our recollection.

Money can no longer exist when there is only communal abundance. Rights can no longer exist when there is only justice. Morality can no longer exist when there is only collective love and solidarity.

So, I implore you, comrades: we must, from every recess of our hearts and souls, cry in unison and paint upon our banners:

Smash bourgeois morality! Toward the withering away of morals!

Endnotes

1 One of the most glaring deficits of this piece is a lack of engagement with the rich tradition of liberation theology. Many liberation theologians (as well as a plethora of other traditions on the religious left) have grappled with the concept of morality and have reckoned their religious roots with Marxist philosophy quite skillfully. This is a topic I hope to explore in the future.

2 Marx 1904.

3 Marx and Engels 1998, 42.

4 Marx 1990, 301.

5 Additionally, although the word *Unrecht* is translated as “injustice” above, it has been interpreted in other editions of *Capital* as “a wrong” or “an injury.” This point has also been raised by scholars such as William McBride (2016), who also points to the limited use of the word “justice” in Marx’s work. However, McBride concurs that this does not necessarily prove that Marx was amoral and/or not attuned to capitalism’s inherent injustices.

6 Marx 1990, 728.

7 Cohen 1983. This also begs the question of how one defines empiricism. Would not the conscious disregard of a moral reality as obvious as capitalism’s evil actually be a rather unscientific endeavor? Perhaps not, but this is the concept work I’m attempting to tease out for radical discussion within this essay.

8 Marx and Engels 1987, 87–88.

9 Wills 2011.

10 Lenin 1966, 291.

11 Lenin 1966.

12 *Ibid.* It is especially important to historically contextualize this kind of visceral disgust toward theology. This allergy to any philosophy that utilized religion as its logical foundation was common during the Russian Revolution(s) since Orthodox Christianity was heavily implicated in the Russian state and served as the chief pillar of the tripartite reactionary political program of the imperial Russian Empire since Nicholas I (1796–1855)—that platform being Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality.

13 *Ibid.*

14 That said, it should be mentioned that this analysis leaves out, in particular, the nuanced power dynamics of the colonizer and colonized. For great works that analyze these important and complex histories, see Estes 2019 and Simpson 2014.

15 For a good, succinct argument on how theft is not only the basis of capitalism, but also markets in general, see Graeber 2014, 384–387.

16 I owe this insight to my late friend and mentor David Graeber.

17 Trotsky 1973.

18 Quoted from Gecys 1955. If Lenin ever uttered such a statement, isolating it in this way is most

disingenuous and, as I stated above, most likely horribly out of context. However, if I were to engage with this hypothetically, I could see this kind of position being used in a discussion about the progression of communism and the role of rights within a bourgeois state. Citizens of bourgeois states appeal to individual and collective rights precisely because we do not live under communism—it is because the framework of rights is the sole legal recourse we have under a system rife with inequalities. Granted, this same conceptualization of rights might still be necessary during a transition period—what Lenin named, in *State and Revolution* (utilizing Marx’s formulation in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*), “the first phase of communist society” (i.e. Socialism). However, as the state withers away and the higher phase of communist society (i.e. Full Communism) emerges, there would be no reason for rights to exist because inequalities themselves would cease to exist—hence, individual rights can be seen as a bourgeois fiction because when the working class focuses *all* their attention on using the *bourgeois* political framework of rights, it simultaneously legitimizes the bourgeois state while also closing off communist possibilities for the future. And all of this assumes the bourgeois state is even willing and capable of upholding rights! Their track record since at least the 1790s has been dismal at best.

19 Krutova and Krutov 1970.

20 I am not attempting here to erase Lenin’s commitment to the Party form and vanguard, nor am I attempting to whitewash Lenin’s historical mistakes. However, whether one is a critic or supporter of Vladimir Ilych, commentators tend to focus solely on his contributions to the Party form while ignoring some of his more populist, egalitarian sentiments. Much like the conceptual dialectics he grappled with throughout his life, Lenin the man was open about—and struggled with—his contradictory impulses toward both authoritarianism and egalitarianism. As communists, if we do not also recognize and analyze the complexities of Lenin and his ideas, we will end up teetering on the brink of idealism, threatening to fall out of a materialist analysis.

21 I owe a great deal of this theorizing to George Ciccariello-Maher, Viktoria Zerda, Todd Chretien, and the 50 or so other comrades who regularly attended GCM’s Revolutionary Change seminars that took place in the Summer of 2020.

22 Lenin 1964a.

23 Avrich 1973, 16.

24 *Ibid.*, 20.

25 Lenin 1965, 411.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Lenin 1964b.

28 *Ibid.*, 404.

29 *Ibid.*, 409; Lenin’s emphasis.

30 James 1956.

31 Vernadsky 1997. Vernadsky was a fascinating and influential Soviet scientist. As the title of his book suggests, he was the first to coin the term *biosphere* to mean how we use the concept today. He was a member of the Russian (and then Soviet) Academy of Science and was a chief advisor to the Soviet atomic bomb project. Toward the end of his life, he was one of the most adamant voices arguing for atomic energy and fission research—as well as for increasing Soviet uranium prospecting—but died prior to the establishment of atomic power projects.

32 Lukács 1978, 6.

33 Marx 1991, 949. Marx used the concept of “metabolism” (*Stoffwechsel*) to reference the exchange—and subsequent rupture induced by capitalist industrial agriculture—between human societies and the environment. For more on the concept of “metabolic rift,” see Foster et al. 2010 and Stahnke 2020.

34 Betancourt 2020.

35 Kropotkin 1909; 2002.

36 Kropotkin 2002, 89.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Leroy 2020.

39 In the case of one of the wildfires in California, it was determined that the fire was started by a malfunctioning explosive charge as part of a so-called “gender reveal ceremony.” This painful irony is palpable in that fascists are blaming leftists and Black Lives Matter activists for the fires when in reality it was caused by an oppressive and subjectivizing ritual equating biological sex with gender—a myth that

has been scientifically refuted many times but remains revered by right-wing and liberal traditionalists alike.

40 Gramsci 1971.

41 For more on this, see Egan 2013.

42 Marx 1978, 531.

43 Graeber 2014.

44 This is not necessarily a bad thing. Direct action, skirmishes with police, ICE, DHS, etc. is incredibly important *and should continue*. However, without a contingent of radicals focusing on a counter-hegemonic program to eat away at anti-communism, the war of maneuver will always fail. That said, let us heed this axiom attributed to Hugo Chávez: “let this be a peaceful, not an unarmed, revolution.”

45 While the United States has always operated as implicitly fascist, I implore the reader to remember that in the 1990s, the state waged numerous wars on underground fascist movements, from Neo-Nazis to the Ku Klux Klan. In the 1990s, the same folks who “back the blue” would probably be firing at them from places like Ruby Ridge or Waco.

46 Moufawad-Paul 2014, 31. As a side note, although it’s rather obvious, I chose the name of this article as an homage to JMP’s monograph.

47 Lenin 2014.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Lenin 1966, 294–295.

50 Marx and Engels 1987, 88, my emphasis.

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