

# Stalinist Realism and Open Communism

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**Ian Parker describes the stakes of the difference between an approach that is just a malignant mirror of capitalism and an approach that is for free association as the core of communist politics.**

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This little book [1] is about a false alternative to capitalism, a really influential and attractive false alternative that I call 'stalinist realism'. I explain what it is, why it is influential and why it attracts some people, even when they don't mean to buy into all of its assumptions. The real alternative is 'open communism', a fully democratic alternative to the dictatorship of capital, of capitalism over our lives.

## Stalinism

Stalinist realism is the lingering effect of the old Stalinist states that pretended to be socialist or communist, and their top-down bureaucratic stalinist realist way of doing politics is relayed into our politics today, both through the old communist parties and some new groups that think of themselves as having broken from Stalinism. So, there is a history to this, and that history has its roots in the betrayal of the hopes of the revolutions in Russia and China and the crystallisation of a bureaucracy that distorted Marxism and turned it into a kind of religious faith.



What does that amount to today? We see it in the mistaken idea that the world is divided into separate camps: an imperialist camp and an anti-imperialist camp. That is 'campism'. There is definitely imperialism, but Russia and China are today's capitalist countries and are tied into that global capitalist system and into imperialism. This means that it is a disastrous mistake to think that the enemy of my enemy is my friend; a mistake to divide the world into camps and to support supposedly nice progressives like Putin or Xi Jinping against our own ruling class.

I show in the book how this way of dividing up the world also plays its way out into gender and sexuality. So, Russia and China close down LGBT groups and persecute lesbians and gays, and they do that because they have closed fixed ideas about what men and women are, just as fixed as their

ideas about what the nation-state is. Stalinist realism is the kind of approach to the world that tells us what is real about our bodies, our gender, and our sexuality without letting us decide for ourselves. That's why the stalinist realists are so hostile to trans because trans people disturb and cross bodily boundaries.

Stalinist realists have fixed closed ideas about identity, and hate 'intersectional' approaches to politics that disturb and challenge what we are told about who we are. They attack 'identity politics' because it divides the working class, they say. But they are firmly wedded to a particular kind of 'identity politics' in which they think they can define the working class and treat it as a unified self-same thing. Those who complain about racism and sexism are then labelled by them as pushing identity politics.

And, of course, stalinist realists have top-down bureaucratic ideas about organisation, and don't tolerate disagreement very well. They have their parties and 'front' campaigns that they control. What you should notice about this is that even those who like to say that they are against Stalinism actually replicate assumptions about stalinist realism, forbidding internal disagreement in their organisations, for example. Here even some of our comrades on the revolutionary left who should know better are then suspicious of anti-racist and decolonial and feminist politics.

## Communism

The book is also about a genuine alternative, open communism. To be communist is to be for freedom. Communism is not a form of religion, not a magical idealist blueprint, and not something already in our heads that needs to be made real. We can share ideas about what communism might involve based on what we resist, based on what we refuse in this wretched reality that puts a price on everything, that turns everything into a 'commodity', a thing to be bought and sold. But, in the process, we need to build it now.

This communism means seizing back what was once ours, the 'commons'. Once, we shared the land, hunting and gathering, making use of natural resources. That use of the land began a process of plunder and exploitation, as if the environment and the other animal species we share the planet with are only there to be subject to the needs of human beings.

Communists do not wipe away the past, start from year zero, but conserve and build on what human beings have been able to achieve so far. So, our communism is not a return to a closed, limited pre-industrial world but values the growth of care and creativity over the drive for economic growth and profit.

Open communism is open to new and unexpected connections between people, the world, the ecology of the planet and the species we share the planet with. Open communism is ecosocialist and feminist and anti-racist, attentive to the different ways we unthinkingly treat others as separate and less than us, the way we 'disable' others. These movements are not a threat, they are an invaluable resource, part of our strength.

All who labour, whatever particular 'identity' they choose to describe themselves or feel as they resist oppression, are part of the working class. There are, we know well, traditions of 'communism' that are closed and bureaucratic, with top-down centralised decision-making apparatuses, but there are many traditions of more plural open communism that connect economic struggle with cultural struggle.

How do we get there? It was socialist-feminism that reminded us of a transitional strategy that

linked social change with personal change. Our future society, the socialist-feminists argued, needs to be anticipated in our forms of struggle. How we organise ourselves now will 'prefigure', and have consequences for the kind of society we are trying to build. This 'prefigurative' politics is transitional, focused on what we need to do now to make the transition to communism.

We are open about our politics, saying what we mean, and being clear, for example, that those who opt for reforms instead of revolution are taking a false path. But instead of just denouncing them we engage them in debate, and we may even vote for them to put them to the test, knowing that whatever increases people's confidence and power will enable people to insist that what they have asked for is reasonable and fair.

## **Free Associations**

There is a world of difference between stalinist realism and open communism. I spell that out in the book and I sum up the difference in the subtitle of the book. Stalinist realism is a kind of malignant mirror of the capitalist realism that tells us this is the way the world is and there is no alternative. Stalinist realism tells us that there is an alternative but then leads us into a weird closed mirror world in which there are the old forms of power and oppression.

We need something more from communism, and that is free association. We want a world in which we freely associate with each other and decide how to govern ourselves, and that means free association now, insisting that we anticipate forms of open communism in our forms of organisation and action now.

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**P.S.**

• Anti\*Capitalist Resistance. 13 Oct 2022:  
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/stalinist-realism-and-open-communism-2/>

- We at the Anti\*Capitalist Resistance wish to hear your views, too. If you have an opinion about either this or another piece we have published, please contact us at editorial anticapitalistresistance.org to share your comments, criticisms and ideas. We will consider any email marked for publication for “Letters to ACR” or as a future ACR article.

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://resistancebooks.org/product/stalinist-realism-and-open-communism/>