

— Mark Fisher

# DESIGNER COMMUNISM

*Note: This is the slightly edited transcript of a talk that Mark gave at the Luxury Communism conference that took place on 3 – 4 June 2016 in Weimar, Germany, as part of the Digital Bauhaus Summit series. We are honoured to be able to include it – for the very first time in written form – in this issue of Making & Breaking as it addresses a number of crucial questions that closely relate to the theme of Communal Luxury. This is the video<sup>1</sup> from which the transcript has been made.*

*Mark's work and legacy have been a source of inspiration and guidance for this journal from the moment of its inception and we are delighted to make this small contribution to the dissemination of his thought.*

I came up with the phrase *designer communism* a few years ago partly as a way of reclaiming the concept, a pejorative term used to condemn those on the Left who were interested in the new semiotic and technological machineries that were being rolled out in the 1980s. The term *designer socialism* is a bit like *luxury communism*. The reason why designer socialism was attacked is that it was held that you can't be into this design stuff and be into socialism.

That attack, which took place in the 1980s, a period when the groundwork was laid for what I have called "capitalist realism," was one from which the Left never really recovered.<sup>2</sup> A part of what enabled this victory for the Right was a libidinal claim about history and newness. The Left was caricatured as dreary, bureaucratic,

backward-looking, and thus excluded at one and the same time from access to the new modernity and to what was exciting. To be Left was to be in a moralising position of resistance or objection. What I like about the concept of *luxury communism* is that it tries to put this right. It immediately puts us into another world, a world different from the one in which we now exist. Because it's an oxymoron. Oxymorons are related to paradoxes. Someone once said that paradoxes are emissaries from a world in which things are different, in which even logic itself runs differently. This is part of the power of *luxury communism*: it might not make sense in this world or in the current ideological framework but it gives us a sense of what another world would look like.

What I also like about it is that it gives us a different orientation. It gives us a different focus from anti-capitalism. Part of its power is that it suggests that we had it all wrong when thinking about left-wing struggle as being about anti-capitalism. It's rather that capitalism is fundamentally anti-communist, you could say. From inside itself, with its intricate tissue of the theological niceties of economics, capitalism seems like an economic system. However, from outside it can be seen fundamentally as a political system whose goal is to thwart the emergence of communism. The provocative phrase *luxury communism* poses a perspective which immediately makes us ask: Why can't we have this? What is it that prevents the dissemination of luxury to all? "Everything for everyone" as the slogan from the organisation Plan C has it.<sup>3</sup> Why can't that be the case?

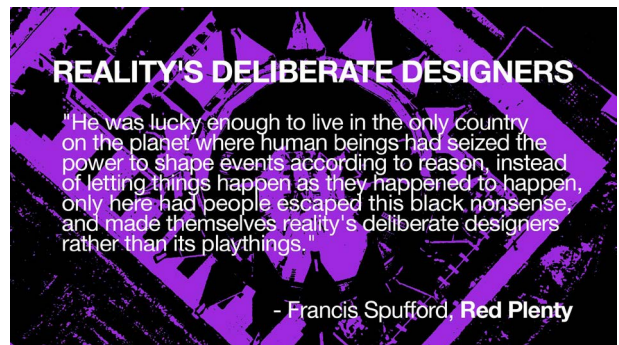
### SCARCITY AND PLENTY

This brings us to the fundamental question, which is that of scarcity. As Bruce Sterling pointed out earlier, the form of luxury that's involved in *luxury communism* can't be a matter of "this is a luxury because I have it and you don't have it."<sup>4</sup> Instead, luxury must involve a sense of plenty or luxuriance. And I think an important part of this concept of luxury is the aesthetic dimension. To use a phrase from Herbert Marcuse, the importance of aesthetics to the left-wing project is not something extraneous, but something fundamental. It must be part of *luxury communism* or what I'm alternatively labeling designer communism. And part of the claim that I want to make today is that this would be about setting right the aesthetic poverty that is so much a feature of late capitalist life.

We can oppose luxury to scarcity in a certain way. You could say that capitalism is a system which produces artificial scarcity in order to generate real scarcity. And the reverse. It produces real scarcity in order to generate artificial scarcity. And the obvious real scarcity is the one which is now staring us in the face, but which capital is always averting its eyes from, i.e. environmental catastrophe. The real depletion of so-called natural resources. Yet the full madness of the situation appears when we realise that it is compounded by a system of immiseration which generates artificial scarcity, and by that, I mean the artificial scarcity of time. We are massively depleting the resources of the planet in order that there can be alligator slippers that nobody wants to buy. I'm using alligator slippers as a random example from my friend Federico Campagna to understand the whole of capitalism by the idea of something like alligator slippers that nobody buys. Think about novelty items of any sort that go unsold. Think about the scale of resources, of time, that goes into these products that are unsold. It's a melancholy prospect but also kind of amusing.

What luxury will be about then is reversing this question of, at least, artificial scarcity. There

are limits to what can be done in terms of scarce natural resources. However, the field is practically unlimited in terms of how differently the artificial resources of culture and time could be distributed or redistributed. A part of the orientation for today's talk is coming from Francis Spufford's book *Red Plenty*.<sup>5</sup> It's a wonderful book, a very unique book, a kind of retro-speculative fiction. It is based on the period when the Soviet Union's economy was growing faster than that of the US. It's a fictional extrapolation of some real situations within the Soviet Union. This is not an apology for the massively misconceived experiment of the Soviet Union because much of this didn't really come off. It's more about a spectre within a virtuality that emerged from within that moment which never achieved actualisation. And one of the great moments in Spufford's book is when he has his character – a version of Nikita Khrushchev – go into an extended take on what full communism, which he thought would arrive by 1980, not as a Twitter meme but as an actually achieved situation, would look like. He conceived of this in terms of a society that is designed and managed, versus the chaotic society.



I think that this is a complete reversal of capitalist realism. Capitalist realism, as I understand it, contains a massive element of fatalism. It is to accept that the fundamental parameters of reality are already set. All we can do is acquiesce in them, accommodate to them. By contrast, the quotation from *Red Plenty* chimes in with a lot of recent discussions of Prometheism. I mean by that the Promethean ambition to completely remake everything or at least to regard nothing as beyond the capacity,

beyond the scope of possible redesign. Here, I think we can see redesign as the same as politics. Nothing is beyond the scope of politics. Another way of looking at this is: nothing is natural. Nothing is fixed and immutable.

### NOTHING/ EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE

What, then is red plenty? Following on from Sarah Sharma's important intervention this morning, we have to put the concept of care at the centre of any serious progressive politics at the moment.<sup>6</sup> And that's one way in which we could define red plenty or luxury communism – as the capacity to care, share and enjoy what is collectively produced. We need to adopt the perspective of why isn't that the case? What is it that capital is always doing to thwart the potential for that collective capacity to care, share and enjoy from erupting? We have to see that it is a constant struggle for capital to block those potentials, to thwart them. This was done really well under neoliberalism. But neoliberalism is now in its final stages of collapse.

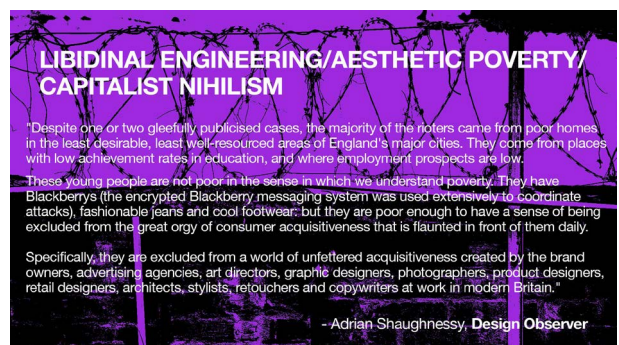
I would like to put out there a slogan that introduces the rest of what I'm saying: washing machines are more important than smartphones! I think they are a better model for the kind of technology of the future. For many of us, if we lost our smartphones or our smartphones were out of action for a few days, we'd be at least partially relieved because of that. I was so relieved when mine broke, I didn't get it back. I got an old Nokia instead. But if our washing machines broke down, there's really no upside to that. You're not going to think: "Oh, I'm relieved, I'll have to hand wash all my clothes!" There isn't that sort of payoff.

Part of the problem with smartphones is that we're compulsively attached to them. And in lots of ways, they are not so much communicative machines as compulsive machines, engines of compulsion. This is part of a generalised kind of simulation by negation or negation by simulation. That's what happened in the current phase of late capitalism with the notion of "the social." Look at British society. It's a kind of experiment on how far you can desocialise before

it completely collapses. While constantly employing terms such as social, creative, freedom.

Management as well! Management is an interesting one, particularly if we compare it with design. Management, like design, is a term which capital has appropriated for itself. Yet from this Khrushchev perspective, we can't say we're in a managed society. Instead, we're in a society dominated by managerialism, which is different. In lots of ways, I would like to have a manager. I have had many notional managers but few of them manage me in a way that I would recognize as management. They Hector me but they don't allow me to organise my time. There's no one there thinking: how much work is Mark doing, is that too much for him? There's nobody like that. Partly because they themselves are in a state of overwork. There's nobody in a position of calmly surveying things, looking at how resources could be allocated in a different way, etc.

So, how could we become reality's deliberate designers instead of being the playthings of an already existing chaotic reality? As an interesting contrast, I'd like to bring your attention to comments made by Adrian Shaughnessy, who is a designer at the Royal College of Arts, in the wake of the London riots.<sup>7</sup> On the Design Observer website, he said that design and designers had a role to play in why those riots had happened.



This strikes me as illustrating the way in which design operates, the dominant way in which design, subordinated to capital, operates in the contemporary moment. These were riots that are fundamentally about being excluded from

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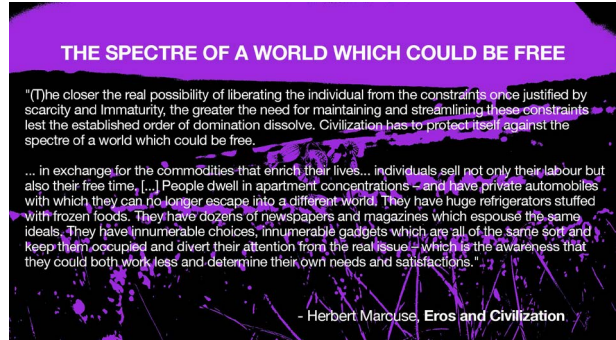
certain kinds of consumer promise that doesn't just pre-exist but is stoked and intensified by what I call libidinal engineers: designers, brand owners, advertising agencies, art directors, graphic designers, photographers, product designers, retail designers, architects, stylists, researchers and copywriters at work in modern Britain. This is the domination of libidinal engineering.

It's impossible to conceive of the neoliberal victory without the emergence of libidinal engineering in the eighties. I can think we can see libidinal engineering as a process of consciousness deflation. Libidinal engineering emerged after the practice of consciousness raising had been developed and theorised by socialist feminism in the seventies. You know, the libidinal engineering is there to make people doubt their own experience. In Britain, we have these £6 baguettes. I know those baguettes are dry and horrible. They're definitely not worth £6, but it must be me. Who's wrong? It must be me who is wrong. Look at this. Look at this delirious commodity world in front of me. It's me who's at fault. Not the actual commodity, the poverty of the commodity itself. So this is part of an effective strategy of consciousness deflation that started in the eighties and has intensified since. This relates to the question of aesthetic poverty. Aesthetic poverty of the environment in contemporary Britain, which relates to capitalist nihilism. It is a boring capitalist nihilism. Britain is a boring dystopia where substantially many things don't work. But still we compensate for the fantasy of our capitalist masters all the time. We sort of overlook the systemic failures. If there's going to be a national anthem for the UK, it should be "Apologies for the inconvenience!"

### CAPITALISM AND FREEDOM

To better understand the *luxury communist* perspective or the perspective of *designer communism*, it's worthwhile bringing back Marcuse. Part of the power of Marcuse's work is that it endlessly poses the question of what it is that capitalism is continually fighting against? Marcuse is particularly interesting in the light of

current debates around Accelerationism because, you know, already in the fifties he had seen the ways in which capitalism would have to block the threat to it posed by automation.



It strikes me that despite the fact that it was written in the fifties, this is very apt particularly for the role of what I call "communicative capitalist realism." Here, I'm putting together Jody Dean's concept of "communicative capitalism" with my concept of "capitalist realism."<sup>8</sup> We are to a massive degree inside the paradigm of communicative capitalist realism. It tells us what is new, it tells us what is contemporary, it tells us what the priorities will be. It imposes this model of increased penetration of digital communication into all areas of life, culture and consciousness. With this kind of threatening gambit that, if you're against this, you're fundamentally against technological progress, you're a dinosaur, or worse. What it closes out is the massive range of things that technology could be doing that are beyond both the digital and the communicative. When the word 'technology' is used now, it's almost invariably used in this very reductive way. First, we reduced things to digital technology, then, within that, we've reduced things to digital communicative technology. It's been a very effective capture system.

The founding moment of communicative capitalist realism was the Ridley Scott Superbowl commercial for Apple.<sup>9</sup> It is the founding text of communicative capitalist realism, which established the kind of libidinal architecture of the next 30 years. Has there ever been a more influential film? It is a genius work of dream engineering that establishes the case

for the obsolescence of the Left while ostensibly pointing to the parallel obsolescence of a certain mode of capitalism. In the commercial, an IBM-style, grey suited capitalism is conflated with the Soviet bloc. The first association that people probably made when they saw the film was that of anti-Soviet imagery. Apple will come to liberate us from this grey, monotonous world. The colourful Apple-individual comes to liberate us. I think a lot of this discourse is around the freedom and flexibility offered by communicative technology. This was seeded in the consciousness of the general population in this film from 1984.

It's a wrench then to try to think about how things could be different. Here is another section from *Red Plenty* which, again, makes the case for *designer communism*:



One of the things to take out of this is the opposition to a capitalist world, understood as barbaric and backward partly because it is chaotic, not consciously arranged, subject to the kind of blind automatism of capital.

There is an interesting echo from one of the things that Alexandra Deschamps-Sonsino said.<sup>10</sup> When I go around depressing shopping malls like Westfield and in London, I often think that capitalism has ended up in dystopian versions of communist visions. Think of those large expanses where people collectively eat, such as the miserable food halls in shopping malls. It seems, as Alexandra was indicating, that these co-living spaces are echoes of that 'free of charge' hotel chain type vision that the Soviet planner Sabsovich had imagined for the future society:



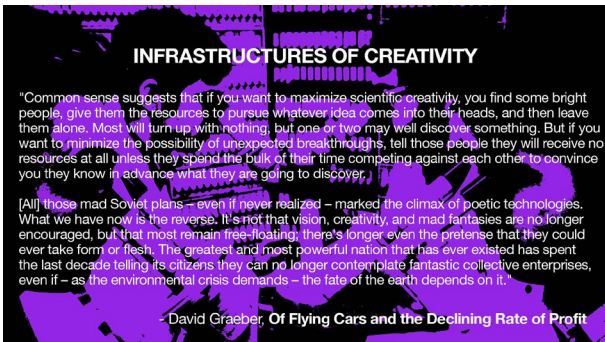
I think we're far from that. We now have only miserable and dystopian versions of it. So how can we move in some modest way towards it?

### CREATIVITY AND STASIS

I think one issue to touch upon is the question of creativity. Certainly, in terms of culture, as I've argued at length in my last book *Ghosts of my Life*, 21st century music culture would probably be the most obvious example of stasis.<sup>11</sup> Under capitalism, music has reached a standstill. It's gone into repetition. There really is nothing in 21st century music culture that could not have been produced in the 20th. There is this great essay by David Graeber "Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit" which extends my analysis of culture to science and technology, arguing that there's the same kind of decadence in science and technology.<sup>12</sup> Why is this the case? Well, to put it quite brutally, such is the case because people are forced to compete against one another. Then they're subject to bureaucratic regimes. The way to get out of this would be to simply give people resources to pursue their own experimental trajectories. Leave them to it. But this is the last thing that happens in capitalism. The analysis that Graeber has in terms of scientific creativity would also go for cultural creativity and also apply to public service broadcasting as much as to science.

I spoke earlier about management, so what would (good) management do? It would precisely ensure that people have the resources where they can pursue the ideas that come into their head, some of which will fail. Some of which won't. Some of which will succeed. This is not what management is doing today.

Instead, it's micromanaging, hectoring at all points, and never leaving people with the resources they require.



I think, part of what it would be to live in a design society is to recover the concept of providence. Frederick Jameson in his book *Antinomies of Realism* makes the case that we should return to the concept of providence without taking it as an essentially religious concept.<sup>13</sup> We should turn that around and say that providence, as conceived of by religion, was a distorted anticipation of a collective and secular version of the providential. So, there would be a shape and a meaning to history, but it would not be prescribed by divine decree. It would be produced by an agent which produced itself, which is the collective subject of history. This would be a materialist providence. Which would be a time of security and novelty versus the kind of capitalist realist time of unpredictability without surprise.

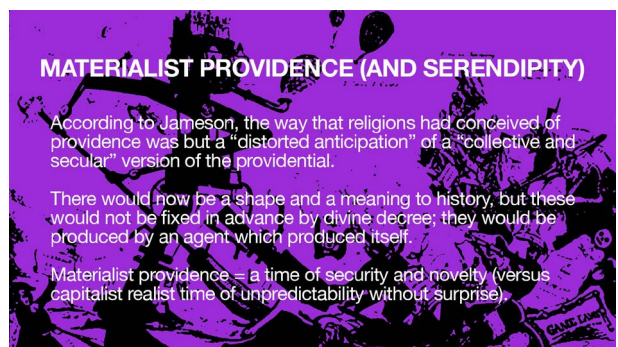
I think we can treat the last 30 years of Neoliberalism in many ways as an experiment: What happens if you reduce security? What are the impacts? What is the impact on creativity? I think there's an underlying metaphysics of neoliberalism, a metaphysics of a kind of cosmic libertarianism that claims that any kind of structuration whatsoever blocks this free creative energy which will only emerge once we deregulate. Instead, the last thirty years have shown very definitively that if you remove security – specifically in the form of welfare platforms but also more abstractly at a level of kind of existential atmosphere (what is precarity, if not this production of an ontological insecurity?) – creativity, the capacity to produce

new stuff, actually goes into decline. That's what I mean about a time of unpredictability without surprise. Where everyday life becomes subject to radical uncertainty but doesn't produce new stuff. It produces a kind of endless repetition of the same.

I think the argument here relates to the one that Sebastian Olma put forth in his book, *In Defence of Serendipity*.<sup>14</sup> There were in fact conditions in place for the production of the new, for the production of novelty. They were in place in Silicon Valley, in the form of a large, funded cybernetics program plus the counterculture. The dominance of Silicon Valley, of communicative capitalist realism has meant that those very conditions cannot exist in the contemporary moment.

### BELONGING

This production of providence, of a managed, shaped time – a time that's going somewhere – has to relate to the more immediate, affective level of belonging, which I think is in many ways the key problem for the Left to solve. Those of us who came to political consciousness after the eighties really had to face up to a world without providence.



Maybe the first generation to have done that, no longer having religious providence, no longer having the belief in the provenance of history as delivered by the Communist Party. Alongside that was the disappearance of a sense of belonging, the kind of belonging made possible by that sense of being part of the movement of history.

It's important, at this time, to drive a wedge

between different senses of belonging as a way of conceiving of the difference between progressive politics and reactionary politics. Belonging beyond identity, what would that be? If identity is a kind of pathological fixation on a fantasy of what we were in the past, left-wing belonging has to be conceived of in terms of an orientation to what we could be in the future. Jodie Dean's recent work goes a long way in reconceptualizing how we can think about belonging.<sup>15</sup> She uses just a lot of interesting examples from people who had been in the Communist Party. It's not just about being in the Communist Party, though. It's about the sense of belonging that being in such an institution with its sustained vision of the future and its attempt to implement a kind of providential view of history could produce. And this answers, I think, to the existential devastation of current modes of capitalism. The title of Jodi's book, *Crowds and Party*, points to the nexus where things can be developed: the crowd that was the energy around the Occupy movement, etc., running into an impasse without the party form. But equally the party form in decadence and collapse without the enthusiasm and the mobilisation of a crowd behind it. What we've seen since 2008 is the Left is in a process of learning. It didn't get stuck with Occupy. Occupy led on to Podemos, and other organized movements. Whatever the limitations and failures of those experiments, they are experiments. They are testing the limits of what is possible now and, in that way, expanding them. This seems to me the way to go, to operate on two levels. First, what can political parties and political organisations immediately do? They can engage in process of imminent resocialisation. Second, what can they do in the longer term? Implement this different sense of dreaming, these different conceptual frameworks, this different vision of a society as once again designed rather than in the chaotic repetitions of blind capitalist automatism. And I'll leave it there.

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## MARK FISHER

Mark Fisher was a celebrated blogger, author, publisher, political activist and teacher. After his untimely death in 2017, he remains one of the most influential thinkers and writers of our time.