

Queer Communism Is an Ethics

Futurology of Exclusion

Georgy: The emancipation of workers, as we remember, is only achievable through the victory of the proletariat in the class struggle. In order to win this victory, the working class has to gain a class consciousness, to become a “class for itself,” to fully comprehend the situation of their oppression and to end it. In other words, only the workers themselves can be the subjects of their own emancipation. What is curious then is that the emancipation of all the other oppressed groups was viewed by many revolutionaries, and primarily by the Bolsheviks, from a different perspective. We could perhaps call this Bolshevik perspective “emancipation without a subject.”

In the visionary and utopian texts of the revolutionary era, emancipation is often connected to the development of the means of production. A vivid example is August Bebel, according to whom the path to women’s liberation from “kitchen slavery” lay through electrification and the scientific organization of food preparation. It was still a woman, however, who engaged in cooking in an electrified kitchen, in accordance with strictly calculated scientific recipes, although such labor no longer resembled slave-like toil, but was rather akin to the work of a scientist in a laboratory. Yet the system of relations, or the ethos, is not revised within this vision of the future. Bebel’s faith in the

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liberating force of technology became the basis of the Bolsheviks' emancipatory project, in which almost all energy was invested in the construction of factory-kitchens while the principle of gendered division of labor itself was never questioned or reviewed.

Or let us take another example: under capitalism, disability carries a stigma and is viewed exclusively as a burden. The state of emancipation and integration of people with disabilities or people with mental-health issues after the October Revolution was, frankly speaking, appalling. Outright eugenics was offered as a "solution." In the revolutionary vision, advances in technology would not emancipate people with disabilities from the capitalist stigma of defectiveness but would rid society of such people. According to Trotsky, for instance, one of the unconditional achievements of socialism would be *artificial selection*, allowing for the cultivation of a new "sociobiological type" of human.

Oksana: Yes, and as we proceed further in time, into postwar science fiction, we observe the same image of the future. All hopes are attached to technology, while humans are seen as its function. Moreover, this technicism is compounded by bio-determinism. This is most obvious in the writings of Ivan Yefremov, who, following the logic of the growth of productive forces, ends up an essentialist.¹ In the future, the earth is only going to be populated by what is beautiful, the very best, healthy—for instance, according to Yefremov and

¹ Ivan Antonovich (Antipovich) Yefremov (1908–1972) was a Soviet paleontologist, science-fiction writer, and social thinker. (All notes are by the translator.)

today's conservatives, the basic, the fundamental, the unchanging. People of the future, in Yefremov's vision, are all beautiful and healthy, while the gender binary is the foundational principle of being.

Far from being about the future, such a vision is entirely about the present (here I agree with Fredric Jameson, who interprets science fiction this way). In order to see the present, one has to estrange it,² and in science fiction, especially of the utopian kind, this estrangement is achieved via a special operation: the present changes its appearance yet still maintains some essential qualities—an axiology, basic principles and values. Here, the most obvious example is the position taken by the Strugatsky brothers.³ They declared that the heroes of the future they depict are based on their contemporaries and friends, “the best people of today.” One of the chapters in their novel *Noon: 22nd Century* (1961) is entitled “Almost the Same.” In other words, people of the future are “almost like us,” they are like “the best people” of the present. Thus the

2 “Estrangement” (in Russian, *ostranenie*) is a term that was introduced by Viktor Shklovsky in 1916. It refers to the artistic technique of presenting the familiar in an unfamiliar or strange way in order to enhance audience’s perception of the familiar and to avoid the “automatism of perception.” The term is sometimes rendered as defamiliarization effect, estrangement effect, distantiating, alienation effect, or distancing effect. This has caused some confusion for those English scholars who mistake the German word for estrangement, *Verfremdung* (introduced by Bertolt Brecht, who almost certainly borrowed it from Shklovsky) with *Entfremdung* (alienation).

3 Arkady (1925–1991) and Boris (1933–2012) Strugatsky were Soviet-Russian science-fiction writers who collaborated throughout most of their careers. Many of their works have been translated into English, including *Hard to Be a God* (1964) and *Beetle in the Anthill* (1980).

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ethical problems of the socialization and enculturation of Soviet men (I cannot say “people,” because all of the Strugatskys’ characters are male) did not exist for these writers.

The ethical problems, orientations, and values that we are able to distill from Soviet science fiction would be labeled exclusionary by intersectional feminism. People with physical disabilities, people with mental conditions, homosexuals, queers, “unattractive” and “unintelligent” people do not exist in the communist future, not because they did not exist in the Soviet present but because they did not “exist,” in the sense that their interests were programmatically ignored.

Science fiction as an axiological constellation excludes all these “deviations” by simple omission. For this type of exclusion one does not need gas chambers, national legislation, or religious fundamentalists. This exclusion is clean and bloodless. It is simply a rewritten world. A “healthy” world—medicalized, ableist, sexist, and so on, following the list of exclusions.

Georgy: Omission functions as repression. It reminds me of a fragment from one of the *Star Trek* movies. The characters from the future find themselves back in the 1980s, in a hospital on Earth. At one point, as they’re being chased, they are blocked by an old woman being wheeled to surgery. The doctor from the *Enterprise* gives her a pill while mumbling disapprovingly, comparing the medical treatment of the twentieth century to the tortures of the Inquisition. The pill instantly cures the old woman. Science fiction here works, in a sense, like magic. The fantastical

pill relieves both the illness itself and its social connotations— isolation, helplessness, and the burden of care that falls on the relatives. The sociological imagination is no longer challenged by the need to question societal conventions—all that is not pleasant will simply disappear with the development of science and technology.

But this is not a Marxist vision at all. In this regard it is useful to turn to early Marx, for whom overcoming alienation is not an effect of anticapitalist revolution (as imagined by many) but one of its most important conditions. It is exactly in the will to overcome alienation—to subject social norms to a radical revision—that a revolutionary subject becomes capable of destroying the hated world order.

Among recently published science fiction, Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *2312* (2012) stands out in this regard. Robinson questions the faith in a technologically driven emancipation without a subject. In the world created within his book people have explored the entirety of the solar system; outer space is connected to the earth by gigantic elevators; life expectancy of the "spacers" (people inhabiting other planets) can reach up to five hundred years; the means exist for overcoming the sexual binary; and asteroids are utilized for the needs of agriculture and as a means of transport within the solar system. Meanwhile, against this backdrop, three billion out of the ten billion earthlings live below the poverty line while five to six billion live just above it. In other words, the present social composition of the world remains intact. Oppression remains, violence continues, inequality only increases.

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Technologies, even the most progressive and advanced, are not sufficient for emancipation. We need a subject who demands a revision of social conditioning and relations, and insists on a completely different set of ethical imperatives.

From Technological Imageries to the Imageries of Relations

Oksana: In and of itself, in the absence of a subject of emancipation, technology is not a “neutral” liberatory force. Women’s needs were never prioritized—that is why technology, to paraphrase Larisa Reisner, “is *not* on our side.” For instance, an effective method for painless birth still has not been invented. This issue is not just insignificant but faces vehement opposition from the conservatives. Despite the developments in medicine, giving birth is still a dangerous, traumatic, painful act for a woman.

However, we are convinced a radical feminist utopia is not simply about safe and painless births, but rather about freeing a woman from the oppression of biology, about extracorporeal conception and extrauterine fetal incubation. Women should not have to give birth. Today this is not a fantasy: major advances have been made in the field of the creation of an artificial womb. At the same time, such technological perspectives pose a number of ethical questions. Some feminists look at the innovations in the sphere of reproductive technologies with reservation, suspecting that ectogenesis can be turned against women’s interests and become yet another instrument of our oppression, alienating women from the “means of reproduction”

of humanity. In short, technology demonstrates both emancipatory and conservative potential, depending on the ethical imperatives of those controlling it.

Not to mention that extracorporeal conception opens up the possibilities for the practice of eugenics, or “artificial selection.” Today, morality is exclusionary and based on segregations of the “healthy” and the “ill”—under such morality these technologies could become the basis for production of “healthy,” “normal” people, without any “defects” or “diseases”—in a sense, producing segregation as such. Meanwhile, “disorder” and “disease” are not objective realities but social constructs and instruments of exclusion.

So what is it that we offer? What should be the focus of a radical imagination today? We affirm that queer communism is primarily an ethics—or a certain type of intersubjective relationship among people. Imageries of the future should turn from the technological imagination toward envisioning new types of relations defined by ethical imperatives of inclusivity and a refusal of quantitative measurements of oppression. We see the world of the future as the realm of a conscious ethical choice, as the space for nonnormative people, where there is no majority because everyone is vulnerable, albeit in different ways. What kind of world is it? In this world, for instance, it is as impossible to imagine a bus without a wheelchair ramp as it is inconceivable nowadays to think of one without doors. In this world no one is bothered by the fact that the ramp is unfolded at each stop. In this world, Braille signage is found in all public spaces, not just at contemporary art exhibitions or in other spaces marked as “special.”

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The world of the future, just like the world of today, will be inhabited by people with physical disabilities, people with mental conditions, people with “diseases,” people of all sorts; but their specificities will not make them a “minority”—isolated, marginalized, bearing the stigma of unhappiness. This is the utopia we want to work toward.

Revolutionary Betrayal

Georgy: I have always been inspired by Walter Benjamin’s position with regard to the link between ethics and politics. Today it seems there is some fatigue regarding this author, yet his idea of revolutionary betrayal is too dear to me to reject for the sake of intellectual fashion. I am referring to the text “The Author as Producer” (1934), in which Benjamin cites Aragon’s words: “The revolutionary intellectual appears, first and foremost, as a traitor to his class of origin.” For me this is a universal formula for solidarity. This imperative is obviously directed to all those who are privileged. Benjamin was addressing the bourgeois writers and artists who wanted to be in the avant-garde of revolutionary culture. Yet if we adhere to the matrix of intersectional feminism, which insists on overlapping structures of oppressions and privileges alike, then the imperative of the betrayal could be addressed virtually to everyone.

It was an unexpected discovery for me to find out that a famous painter of socialist realism—Semyon Chuikov—was just such a revolutionary traitor. An ethnic Russian born in Kyrgyzstan (and therefore implicated in colonialism), in 1936 he curated an exhibition against Russian colonialism. The exhibition

took place in Frunze,⁴ and was dedicated to a Central Asian uprising in 1916 against the Russian Empire. In Semirechye (the territories of contemporary Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) this revolt was especially violent. Thousands of Kyrgyz and Kazakhs had to flee from the tsar's avengers and Cossacks to China. The strife had a clear interethnic character, because in the eyes of the local people all Russians were colonizers. Chuikov was fourteen years old in 1916 and possibly witnessed the event. But in 1936 he found himself on the side of the oppressed, thus betraying his Russian colonialist origins.

I feel that solidarity is a conscious ethical choice—it is always such a radical and painful betrayal. That is why I have always been cautious of groups such as the “gay-straight alliance” or “male feminist allies.” These do not subvert the matrix of oppression but rather reinforce it: the dominant group reasserts its position. Consider, for instance, a group called “bourgeoisie for workers’ rights”—it sounds laughable, right? Why then does “men for the rights of women” sound normal?

That is why, should we make ethics the subject of a utopian imagination, it would not be about “hetero-sexuals for the rights of LGBT,” but, for instance, SVSEM—the Society for the Voluntary Self-Elimination of Men. We wish not only for a classless world, but also for a world without divisions into men and women, but in order for this to happen, men first have to disappear!

4 Frunze was the name of the Kyrgyz capital from 1926 to 1991, when it was renamed Bishkek.

A Feminist Dictatorship

Oksana: Indeed, it is hard to come up with at least one good reason to justify the continued existence of the concept of “man” in a utopian world free of patriarchy. What is a man? When we encounter a person, say, on a street, we do not determine that they are a man by establishing if they possess a certain set of genitalia; instead, we test their gender—clothing, mannerisms, some secondary and tertiary features. “Manhood” is a conceptual construct, implying a set of masculine traits. And this entire package is, without exception, a function and an effect of patriarchy. That is why constructions such as “men for women’s rights” or “straights for queer rights” are in fact analogous to phrases like “bourgeoisie for workers’ rights” or “bees against honey.” It is an attempt to keep one’s privileges. Not revolutionary, but a cosmetic reformist path.

In this sense, the Society for the Voluntary Self-Elimination of Men does indeed sound revolutionary. It correlates with the Marxist idea of the transition from class-based to classless society through an intermediary form—a dictatorship of the oppressed class, the proletariat. By analogy: the path to a free and genderless society is via a feminist dictatorship, or via a radical denial of the privileges of the dominant group.

Our opponents would say that the word “dictatorship” sounds somewhat threatening and violent, and that the “majority” is content with the current gender system. However, our opponents do not notice that they already exist under the conditions of a dictatorship—in a heterosexist, cisgender-normative matrix, that every woman supposedly “freely chooses,”

having passed through the filters of socialization and enculturation, the school of “carrots and sticks,” social censure and approval, which taught her how to feel and what to wish for. Nonetheless, such training (programming one to reproduce the gender-segregated hetero family with children) is not always successful. Adrienne Rich, in her famous essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), wrote about heterosexuality as imposed on women and “maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness”—and the same can be said of the gender model in general. Still, many people do not fit into this system. Rich writes of women who resisted compulsory heterosexuality, “often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty.” These “deviations” from the prescribed model are legion: child-free women, single mothers, LGBTIQ+. The plus sign demonstrates that the number of deviations that an advocate of traditional values has to struggle with is infinite. These are systemically excluded people, to whom the normative axiology denies “happiness” and “self-fulfillment,” and at times humanity itself. What about the insiders? What about those women who have “found happiness in family life”—is each one happy and fulfilled? Without delving too much into the details, we can recall the statistics on domestic violence, or rather, putting aside euphemisms, the statistics regarding the *systemic violence of men against women and children* (in Kyrgyzstan, according to the official figures, around two thousand women become victims each year, while human-rights defenders unanimously agree

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that the real numbers are many times higher). What is this violence if not the routine work of a patriarchal dictatorship's overseers? In other words, loyalty of some amorphous "majority" to the existing order is, at the least, debatable. Not to mention the "multitude of minorities" whom the system punishes without any disclaimers or illusions.

A feminist or rather *queer dictatorship*, is not the dictate of a "majority," but a redistribution of privileges toward the former "minorities" (while women are not a statistical minority, politically they are). A fundamentally different socialization and enculturation—without the imposition of depressing male and female "destinies"—will produce another map for the desires of the "majority," or, to be more exact, will eliminate this very concept ("majority") in relation to sex and sexuality.

We find that the existing system is historically doomed—however, for its demolition we need the consolidated efforts of the oppressed. We do not deny that for many men these frameworks are too narrow because the system is crude and rigid. We welcome the desire of men to join the struggle; however, the representatives of the dominant group must realize the role allocated to them by the system (here we can cite the example of Chuikov, but also of Engels, a representative of the bourgeoisie, who did not try to prove that "the rich also cry")⁵—in order to consciously refuse to play this role. The denial of patriarchy as the systemic power of men

⁵ *Los ricos también lloran* (1979) is the title of a Mexican telenovela that was popular in the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

would not lead to equality; on the contrary, it would gloss over and conserve the mundaneness of violence and discrimination, and it would weaken and undermine feminist struggle. In this sense, the Society for the Voluntary Self-Elimination of Men could become the first step of fearless solidarity.

Radical Solidarity

Oksana: But here we will inevitably face questions about the practices of shedding one's privileges, about the everyday, about the forms of activism, if you wish, *about the culture of betrayal* by the dominant groups. SVSEM sounds awesome, but what does it mean in practice to become a member?

Georgy: There can be no good men, just as there can be no good capitalists. It is not about individual men but the space they occupy within the system of oppression. After all, no one chooses the position of an oppressor voluntarily, so I do not see any reason to hold on to it. The very first step on the path of revolutionary betrayal must be the public rejection of one's masculinity, of one's privileges as an oppressor. You could, for instance, wear a button with the slogan of the movement: "It is shameful to be a man." If you wear such a pin you would certainly turn into an object of constant interest and, at times, aggression. You will have to explain yourself and defend yourself, just like the oppressed groups have to under patriarchy.

Still, revolutionary betrayal will not turn a representative of a dominant group into the oppressed. This is extremely important to remember. A pin is easily removed, while to stop being a woman is not equally

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straightforward. Revolutionary betrayal should not be misconstrued as a recipe for revolutionary transformation akin to the naive liberal imperative to “be the change you want to see in the world.” To give up one’s privileges is but a basic condition, an entry ticket, the first point in our “code of honor for queer communists,” the spark that starts the fire (pardon the expression).⁶ It is a declaration of resolve to face the challenge of equality. Because in order for things to become better for the multitude some will have to forego their comfort. There is no other recipe for a revolutionary redistribution of public goods apart from expropriation—or, in Bulgakov’s words, “to take away and to divide up.”⁷ However, the notion that the expropriated goods could include the resources whose uneven distribution is linked to patriarchal exclusion and oppression—free time, resources of representation, homely comforts, and the like—is not self-evident for many representatives of the dominant groups that advocate equality and the emancipation of the oppressed. Revolutionary betrayal is the declaration of resolve, a utopian (but not idealistic) declaration of intent, which will only be realized in full when an individual gesture turns into a mass revolutionary practice.

Translated from the Russian by Mohira Suyarkulova

6 *Iskra* (The spark) was an illegal revolutionary newspaper founded by Lenin in 1900 in order to unite and organize the workers’ party in Russia.

7 This quote, from Mikhail Bulgakov’s 1925 novel *The Heart of a Dog*, can also be translated as “to subtract and to divide.” These words belong to the book’s main character—a dog who turns into a human—a satirical incarnation of the slovenly and uneducated “new man” born of the revolution.