

building  
acid  
communism



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Radical Reprint #14



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The term “Acid Communism” was coined by author and cultural theorist Mark Fisher as part of his attempts to envision a Left capable of breaking the “no alternative” ideology of Capitalist Realism by unleashing post-capitalist desires. Fisher was writing a book titled **Acid Communism** before his sudden death in 2017. With the aim of exploring Fisher’s concept further and embed it into their practice, the group Plan C, of which he was also a member, designed a thematically related workshop. **Building Acid Communism** was hosted at transmediale 2018 and involved consciousness-raising techniques and group discussions: How can we talk about collective experiences based on collective action and joy today? How can we turn anew to a politics of care? In this article, Plan C members Nadia Idle and Keir Milburn discuss the background, aims and outcomes of the workshop.

Over the last 18 months, the UK has seen an explosion of writing, discussion and even practices taking the concept of *Acid Communism* as departure point. These have included extensive discussions of Acid Corbynism which have linked topics as diverse as club culture, the use of psychedelic drugs, the production of memes, and the role of electoral politics in a rejuvenated UK Left. More recently, there have been attempts to communize meditation and create a more politicized form of mindfulness. In addition, a regular Acid Communism/ Corbynism podcast, #ACFM, is due for launch in September this year.

The phrase *Acid Communism* comes from the name of an unfinished book project that writer and social theorist Mark Fisher was working on before he took his own life in January 2017. Mark was a friend of ours and like us a member of the political group Plan C.

Indeed, some of the inspiration for the *Acid Communism* project lay in Plan C's experimental attempts to reinvent consciousness-raising groups for contemporary conditions. Building on these experiments and driven by a desire to embed Mark's ideas into our ongoing political practice, we designed a workshop called *Building Acid Communism* to run at the 2018 transmediale festival held in Berlin. This article describes the workshop, the ideas behind it, and our initial findings.

We derived our approach from the proposed subtitle for Mark's *Acid Communism* book, "On Post-Capitalist Desire". Mark's most influential book, *Capitalist Realism*, presents a world in which post-capitalist desires have been massively constrained.<sup>1</sup> "Capitalist Realism" refers to the neoliberal project of constricting what seems socially and politically possible, and even conceiv-

able, to a single “reality”, one entirely dominated by capitalist social relations. Post-capitalist desires don’t disappear in the world of Capitalist Realism, but they are made unrealizable by “a pragmatic adjustment”. “Capitalist realism” Mark says, “isn’t the direct endorsement of neoliberal doctrine; it’s the idea that, whether we like it or not, the world is governed by neoliberal ideas, and that won’t change. There’s no point fighting the inevitable.”<sup>2</sup> At first, that sense of inevitability appeared to survive the 2008 financial crisis but the slow, tepid nature of the recovery, particularly in terms of living standards, has gradually cemented the conviction that our economic model is broken. Following the unprecedented political events of 2016, with Brexit and Trump on the Right and the breakthrough of Sanders and Corbyn on the Left, it is evident that the political model that went along with the neoliberal economic model is also defunct.

Capitalist Realism has cracked. Neoliberalism no longer looks immortal. Yet it is far from clear what could replace it.

It is within this problem that we situate Mark Fisher's shift in focus: Away from a concern with outlining Capitalist Realism, a project of critique, towards an engagement with Acid Communism, a project of construction. *Acid Communism* was, an attempt to think through what the Left should look like once it escapes Capitalist Realism. It is an incredibly difficult task because over the last thirty years most Left activism, and nearly all critical theory has operated with semi-conscious assumption that change is not possible. It has been caught within what Wendy Brown calls "Left Melancholy", "a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness".<sup>3</sup> One

<sup>4</sup> strategy for breaking with this attachment to impotence is to return to the

question of post-capitalist desire. For us, this means an active project of identifying those desires which are produced within contemporary society but whose fulfillment cannot be achieved within a world dominated by capitalist social relations. It is from here that we can discover the most potent areas for anti-capitalist politics.

Mark's *Acid Communist* project began with a reassessment of the Western counter-culture of the 1960s and seventies in particular, based on the understanding that "neoliberalism is best understood as a project aimed at destroying—to the point of making them unthinkable—the experiments in Democratic Socialism and Libertarian Communism that were efflorescing at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies."<sup>4</sup> In fact, in recent years, Mark had begun to redefine Capitalist Realism as the outcome of a project

of consciousness deflation. A project aimed at eliminating the kinds of raised and expanded consciousness that had taken root and begun to flourish in the 1970s. He was particularly interested in thinking through the connections and potentials of the various forms through which people's consciousness of the structural constraints of society and their ability to change them were raised and expanded.

Mark identifies three modes of raised consciousness prevalent in the 1970s. The first is the heightened level of class consciousness at that time. The idea that there were different classes with different, and in principal antagonistic, interests was widely accepted during the post-war era. Indeed, it was a presupposition incorporated into the economic and political structures of the

6 time. With hindsight we can see the social movements and counter-culture of

the seventies as, in part, efforts to develop a much more expansive conception of the working class and of working-class culture. In fact, the control exercised by working-class youth over popular culture during the post-war period, with subcultures pioneering new ways of living, can be seen as a huge project to complexify the working class while also warding off the confidence-sapping effects of class subjugation. The neoliberal era saw class consciousness pushed into a fugitive state. Despite our lives being ever more determined by the material and psychological effects of class, it is only recently that the idea of class has returned as a legitimate category of discussion. As a result of this forced exile the conceptions of class we usually operate with are based on a past reality. They are divorced from our everyday experience.

tion for Mark was the consciousness-raising practices that formed the bedrock of second-wave feminism. The practice of consciousness-raising groups consisted of small groups of women meeting regularly to discuss their lives and their problems. In doing so, people quickly came to realize they had similar problems and difficulties. In fact, the commonality of problems led quite naturally to the conclusion that they must have structural causes and couldn't, as might have previously been thought, be the result of individual failings. This in turn led to collectivized action to change the structures causing the oppression in question. Given current conditions we can see the vital role such practices could play in reviving not just feminist consciousness but class consciousness as well. The feminist movement of the 1970s saw consciousness raising groups as a means of creating "women as a class" by overcoming the iso-

lation of women who, lacking a shared workplace, had found themselves and their problems relegated to the private sphere. Today, as those conditions have become common far beyond a particular gender, consciousness raising practices have become a vital opening moment in class formation. Lacking the straightforwardly similar experiences that came with the age of mass workplaces we need common tools to work through personal experience and come to shared understandings of the forces conditioning that experience.

The final arena of consciousness raising, or in this case consciousness expansion, examined by Mark Fisher leads us down a less obvious path for Leftist discourse. Mark points to psychedelic consciousness as an important component of the potential for a new form of politics that was barely beginning to emerge in the 1970s. This is what the “acid” in Acid 9

Communism refers to but it is not just a reference to the direct effects that taking LSD had upon members of the New Left and the counter-culture. Just as important were the more diffuse effects of psychedelia that worked through pop culture to embed a notion of a plastic and changeable reality. The Beatles' experiments with acid, for example, led to a burst of sonic, graphic, and lyrical inventiveness that helped spread a mediated experience of psychedelia into wider society. We can think of psychedelia as containing the potential to expand social and political possibility because it undermines those elements of life that are presented as necessary and inevitable by revealing them as merely contingent and therefore, at least in principle, as changeable. Consciousness raising then encompasses a series of functions. It involves identifying the structural causes of the social constraints that are placed on your life.

It includes the increased confidence and capacity that comes with seeing yourself as part of a powerful collective actor rather than an isolated individual. And it also includes that expansion of social and political possibility that comes when something that has been presented as eternal and inevitable is revealed as merely contingent and plastic.

For us, the *Acid Communism* project involves the reinvention of consciousness-raising techniques for the purpose of identifying where post-capitalist desires are being produced by contemporary life. We think this can help with one of the key tasks of the present moment, which is unveiling and exploring the precise idea of freedom that is motivating the contemporary Left and, as age is currently such a key line of political division, the concept and practices of freedom that will motivate the young.<sup>11</sup> Our workshop at transmediale 2018 was

an attempt to do just that. The structure was simple. After introducing the idea of Acid Communism, we asked a series of questions—introduced one at a time—which participants were asked to discuss in small groups. We then wrote up each group's thoughts and answers on a flip chart for all to see. The questions chosen were intended to test what had changed since the heightened consciousness of the 1970s. Each one was linked to the kind of experiences from which post-capitalist desires were produced in that era.

Firstly, we asked when participants last had time that was truly free from work. In the 1960s and 1970s the "refusal of work" was a prominent political strategy linked to the idea that freedom started when work ended. Judging by the responses in our workshop, it is

12 clear this distinction has broken down. In fact, there was much discussion about

what counted as work and non-work. Undesirable, alienating work was, of course, identified by many people, but for others, there were aspects of work with which they identified much more closely. On the other hand, some leisure activities, going to the gym for instance, felt the same as being at work, while others, such as cooking and gardening, were mainly experienced as non-alienated activity. By the end of the workshop it became obvious that the question of work's relationship to freedom devolved into questions about the level of control you could exercise over your activities. But the mechanisms through which our lives are controlled and constricted have, on the whole, become less direct. If we think about debt, for instance, it acts at more of a distance than managerial command. Its collective effects can therefore be harder to identify.

Secondly, we asked the participants about boredom; when were they last bored and what did it feel like? We had in mind the kind of empty boredom that comes from having nothing to do. The boredom that spurred creativity in the counter-culture and punk rock movements of the seventies and eighties. People found the question of what boredom felt like difficult to address but it gradually became obvious that boredom was attached to very different feelings now. People reported the anxiety of needing to “be seen to be doing something” and the frustration that comes from loneliness. Boredom today comes not from a lack of activity but from over-stimulation. We all know the ennui that comes from compulsive swiping, caught in the gamified algorithms of social media platforms which dole out unsatisfying dopamine hits to keep us engaged. Boredom in the sense of having nothing to do would be a luxury,

one participant reported.

Our third question took a less obvious route. We asked about using style as a weapon. There was a direct inspiration for this question. Ian Penman once described the mod subculture as using style as armour against the inequities of class.<sup>5</sup> What the mods wore today their managers would wear next year. It was an attitude that saw working-class kids claim the right to pioneer new ways of living outside the then-new consumer society. This claim on the future would lead towards revolutionary politics just a few more subcultural turns down the road. From our workshop, it appears that style is still being used as weapon but now more to claim an identity or assert fluidity around sexuality than make a collective claim on the future.

Our last question then returned<sup>15</sup> to the familiar: When did you last expe-

rience collective joy? From music concerts, through political demonstrations, to collective yoga, most participants were able to conjure up an image of collective joy from their life. It was the question we asked that retained the most relevance. Yet, for some this most corporeal of questions provoked the most intellectualized response. An air of suspicion was raised on those experiences. Euphoria is not always good, you know! Nazis can feel joy too!

The exercise done, we revealed the reasoning behind each question, their rootedness in the movements of the seventies and asked what we should have asked if we were to find post-capitalist desires being produced today. The responses revolved around themes familiar to us from our own lives; anxiety, care and community: When did you last  
16 feel fear and how did you overcome it?  
How much of your life is meaningful? Do

you feel you have a community and if so, where is it? When was the last time you exchanged something for free? When was the last time you imagined something new? When was the last time you felt cared for or cared for someone else?

Interestingly, the final suggestion comes very close to the central question of Plan C's previous experiments, which placed the practice of consciousness-raising groups within a wider politics of care. As Mark Fisher explained as he riffed off Plan C's activities: "Consciousness raising opens up the possibility of living, not merely theorising about, a collective perspective. It can give us the resources to behave, think and act differently... The roots of any successful struggle will come from people sharing their feelings, especially their feelings of misery and desperation, and together<sup>17</sup> attributing the sources of these feelings

to impersonal structures.”<sup>6</sup> In this way consciousness raising can be seen as a practice of care and repair, having what Jeremy Gilbert has called a “super-therapeutic” function. By which he means “something more than just fixing people up, repairing some of the damage done by daily life under advanced capitalism so that they can get on with their lives. I mean something which might have those effects but also go beyond them, enabling people to become extraordinarily empowered precisely by enhancing their capacity for productive relationships with others.”<sup>7</sup>

Our transmediale workshop certainly appeared to have functioned this way. As the event ended, participants were very keen to work out how to take the experience forward. They were enthusiastic about keeping the  
18 conversation going. Participants exchanged email addresses and phone

numbers and continued the discussion in the foyer and bar for hours afterward. This simple act of collectively discussing our personal experiences while trying to link them to structural forces that condition us seemed powerfully effective. Was this reaction caused by the specific mix of participants? Can the practice be made reproducible? Could it go viral? We are still not sure but it seems to us that something akin to this will be a likely first move in creating what Mark Fisher called, “a movement that abolishes the present state of things, a movement that offers unconditional care without community (it doesn’t matter where you come from or who you are, we will care for you anyway).”<sup>8</sup>

1. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

2. Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert, (2013), "Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony: A Dialogue," in *New Formations* 80/81 (Autumn/Winter 2013), p. 90.

3. Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *boundary* 226 (1999), Duke University Press, p. 19.

4. Mark Fisher, *k-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)* (London Repeater, 2018).

5. Ian Penman "Even If You Have to Starve" in *London Review of Books* 35 (16) (August 2013), pp. 25-27.

6. Mark Fisher, "Abandon hope (summer is coming)," *k-Punk*, last modified 11.5.2015, <http://www.k-punk.org/aban->

don-hope-summer-is-coming/.

7. Jeremy Gilbert, "Psychedelic Socialism" on openDemocracy, last modified 22.9.2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/jeremy-gilbert/psychedelic-socialism/>.

8. Mark Fisher, "Abandon hope (summer is coming)"



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