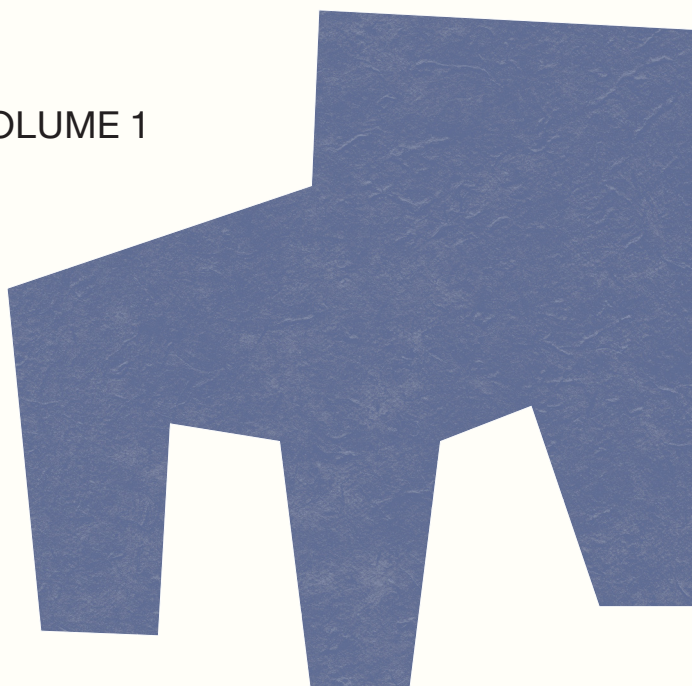


The Contributist Reader



VOLUME 1



PABLO PARABOLA

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To learn more, visit
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What is The Contributist Reader?

The Contributist Reader is an experiment, both in substance and in form.

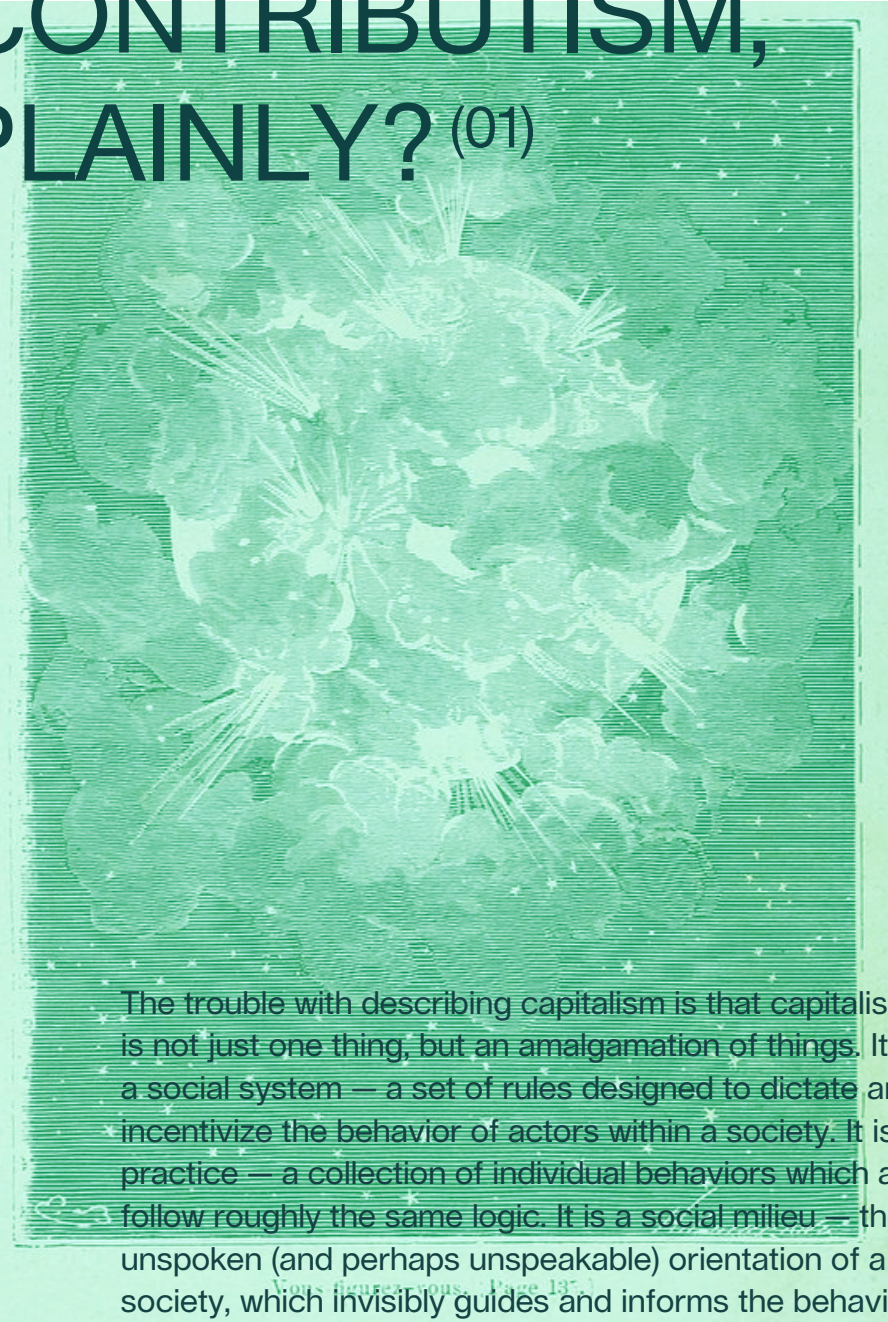
In substance, it is almost inexcusably bold in both its scope and its implication. It aims to trace the contours of a social philosophy that we believe to be a worthy successor to capitalism, as well as the path towards its widespread adoption. We have come to call this idea contributism, and I hope that you will find it compelling enough that you will come to excuse its boldness. Like capitalism, it is a thing too complex to define in a sentence or two, but if pressed, we choose to describe it by its primary emphasis: it is the right of all humanity to give. This reader aims to make plain what contributism is and why I am certain that you should be aware of it.

In form, this reader is experimental because it is not simply an intellectual pursuit, but an artistic one. When developing the ideas behind contributism, it became clear that the primary task of any attempt to see beyond capitalism is to remember what it is to see beyond capitalism. Among many things, capitalism is a learned normative lens — a way of seeing the world which colors our perspective and enables us to make value judgments about ways of being (“everyone should graduate high school,” “this proposed law on parental leave is unfair,” etc.). If we ever hope to see a world beyond capitalism, we must be able to take off this lens, at least momentarily, and gaze, blinking, into a new one — one through which light filters differently, and familiar sights and colors take on curious and surprisingly untested hues.

This work — the work of training the eye to see, unsee, and see anew — is not generally the work of journalists and essayists. It is perhaps more naturally the work of storytellers — of painters, bards, and poets. And so this reader does not aim to be a single work, but a collection of works, spanning many forms. Picture everything that follows as a series of gradually expanding concentric circles, the same central idea captured again and again, but in a diversity of forms — parable, poem, story, essay, etc. — each layer providing a new perspective, not better than, but more and differently detailed than, the last. The final picture will be, like capitalism, an amalgamation of things, but one that you will hopefully agree is a clearer lens through which to see, and a better system by which to organize ourselves, towards a good society.

Finally, in the spirit of contributism, this reader is a collective effort with a unified vision (e pluribus unum), and has not one author, but many. It is written in the tradition of the reader: an anthology intended to teach the audience, through example, the workings of a new language. The goal of a reader is to impart upon its audience the ability not only to read the language, but also to speak it and to write it. This is our goal as well, which means that we are always eager to accept and publish reader contributions, credited or anonymous, though by convention, all works in the reader are formally authored by our collective pseudonym, Pablo Parabola. In this way, The Contributist Reader is a continuous document, a lighthouse built, like anything worthwhile, by many ardent hands, brick by brick.

WHAT IS CONTRIBUTISM, PLAINLY? (01)



The trouble with describing capitalism is that capitalism is not just one thing, but an amalgamation of things. It is a social system — a set of rules designed to dictate and incentivize the behavior of actors within a society. It is a practice — a collection of individual behaviors which all follow roughly the same logic. It is a social milieu — the unspoken (and perhaps unspeakable) orientation of a society, which invisibly guides and informs the behavior of all of its participants.

It is an economic theory — a set of ideas and principles which both interpret and inform social relations, societal rules, and individual practice. And it is, most importantly, a normative lens — a way of seeing the world which colors our perspective and enables us to make value judgments about ways of being. Any shorthand description of capitalism is not necessarily wrong, but it is necessarily incomplete, as it must choose an emphasis and therefore de-emphasize some crucial elements of how it operates on and through its participants.

What's worse, in all of this, capitalism is constantly shifting: new theory informs new practice informs new rules informs new theory informs new orientation informs new value judgments informs new rules, and so on. As such, what counts as capitalism is under constant debate, and there is no clear arbiter to decide who is right and who is hopelessly misguided (the markets, perhaps? Wikipedia?).

The goal of this reader is not to describe capitalism, but to describe an alternative to it. And if that alternative — which I will call contributism — is to be understood as at all similar in scope to capitalism, then we must unfortunately also recognize that any shorthand description of it will be necessarily incomplete, too selective in its emphasis to serve general purpose.

However, I have found that nuance in communication works a bit like fine cologne: applied strategically, it enhances the overall presentation immensely, but add a few too many spritzes, and your audience starts to quietly inch away. And if you insist on pouring on the whole bottle at once, what was meant to add clarity becomes a suffocating muddle, and most people begin to look for polite excuses to avoid your company altogether. So, to keep your company and avoid causing offense — olfactory or otherwise — I will begin with the simplest explanation, and add nuance in layers over time rather than all at once.

What is contributism, plainly? Capitalism is often described in terms of its primary emphasis on private ownership of capital: it is the right of men to own and capitalize property. Private ownership of the means of production births competition, which spurs production and generates plenty.

In these terms, contributism's primary emphasis is participation through contribution: it is the right of all humanity to give. Participatory contribution towards common value births collaboration, which humanizes, spurs production, constrains excess, and distributes wealth.

In a word, contributism is the lens, practice, theory, orientation, and social system which structures itself around the fundamental right to find fulfillment and belonging through participatory contribution.

02. For the Human —



"It is better to give than to receive" because human dignity is found in the act of giving. To give at once asserts one's true independence and one's desire to co-relate — one's capacity to love. This is, perhaps, the central and only point — we must remember that, at our core, we find fulfillment not just in being loved, but in the act of loving.

From this idea directly follows a second, which is just as consequential. If we find fulfillment through orienting ourselves toward others, then all anti-social desires (the desire to cut oneself off from others, to cut others off from oneself, to hoard, and to leech) are thus actually disorders, which are harmful not only to others, but to the self. The contributist position is that those with such disorders can and should be healed of them, and so reconciled. When we speak of the right to give, rather than the obligation to give, we are speaking about this human right to be healed, to be reconciled.

In this way, contributism shifts us towards a more holistic and rigorous understanding of success and health than capitalism's economic lens provides, on both a personal level and a societal level. The contributist's measure of a human's well-being is not simply their net worth, but their ability to contribute and participate — a human who cannot give is a human in need of rehabilitation. And the sign of a society in decline is not a low GDP (otherwise, we would all see America as the pinnacle of societal health), but when it cannot adequately provide its members with the right to give — to contribute constructively to their community. This means that the contributist sees the economic lens as not wrong, but limited — analogous to the perspective of a doctor whose knowledge and practice is limited to one part of the body. If the actors within a society cannot see its health beyond its economic condition — if they can only articulate its health in terms of the riches of its production, the force of its commerce, and the self-interest of its members — then they are in danger of missing important diagnoses, prescribing the wrong treatments, and ultimately, looking on helplessly as the health of their society swiftly declines.

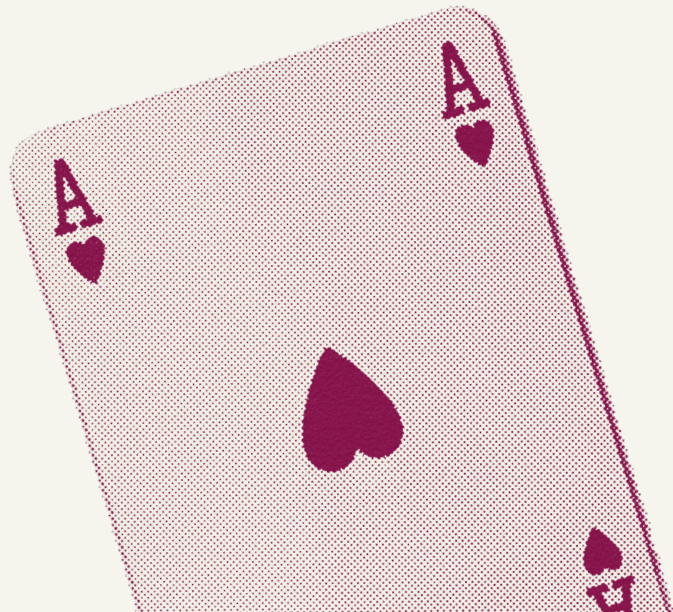


Ironically, capitalism and socialism are each often denounced by their opponents for the same reason: the hoarding of resources (the capitalist's aim) and subsistence on charity (the socialist's shame) are both criticized because they represent an actor's failure to play their fundamental role as a participant in interdependent community. What often goes unnoticed by critics and supporters alike is that both systems unknowingly produce the "tragedy of the commons" that they aim to avoid, because they assert and protect their participants' right to take. The contributist understands that a society (and an individual) can only truly affirm itself when it instead asserts and protects the right to give.

As we will discuss, by diagnosing and addressing the human in their full humanity, rather than reducing them to their role as an economic actor, contributism can be seen as a more caring and careful doctor, one who chooses to take a "view from above" — seeing and addressing in whole where these other social systems only see and address in part. And with this broader lens comes not only new theory, but also new strategy: new ways of acting that can lead to more fulfilled lives, and new approaches to policy that can lead to more fulfilled societies.



A PARABLE —



03.

My mother likes to tell a story about a time when she was playing a children's card game with a few of my siblings. Each card had an ability, and the object of the game was to use your cards' abilities to attack your opponents' cards until they lost their hand. There was one type of card that was particularly valuable, because it made its holder temporarily invulnerable to attack. For this reason, any player who got their hands on one of these cards would treasure it above all else. But one of my sisters played differently. Whenever she came across one of these cards, she found a way to give it away to whichever opponent she thought most needed it.

This strategy mortified my mother. She tried repeatedly to explain the rules of the game to her daughter, to point out to her that she was only sabotaging herself by giving her most valuable cards away. But my sister didn't care; she understood the rules, but she simply liked giving the cards away. She found the way everyone else played the game to be a bit too zero-sum, so she chose to play in her own way. Whether or not the game's rules crowned her the winner, she would be happy, because she found joy in the way she played the game.

In the end, my sister won the game. When my mother tells this story, she kind of just ends it there, with an incredulous expression ("Can you believe it?"). She remains mystified by her daughter's play-style, but you can tell that she was somehow affected by it, because she keeps telling the story. And every time she tells it, she's beaming with pride.



Pablo Parabola's

The Contributist Reader

The Contributist Reader is an experimental journal dedicated to the exploration and development of a new social theory — contributism. Contributism is an alternative to theories like capitalism and socialism, and is structured around the fundamental right to give, or to find fulfillment and belonging through participatory contribution. Contributists hope to make the world a more human-centric place.

It is the right of all humanity to give.

Authors:

Christina Shaw

James Nee

Luke Roberts

Meg Roberts

Michelle Shaw

Obasi Shaw

Siobhan McDonough

(This list is alphabetized and non-exhaustive.
All other contributors have chosen to remain anonymous.)



ABOUT ISA'T ISA

Isa't Isa is a San Diego-based community project that seeks to bring people together and emphasize the wealth of our community by enabling each other to give and grow through a Contributist lens.

Organizers:

Janella Pizarro

Jallene Pizarro

Allison Naui