

# CRISIS & CRITIQUE

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DEMOCRACY AND REVOLUTION  
VOLUME I / ISSUE 1, 2014

Dialectical Materialism Collective

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# **Editorial Note**

**Henrik  
Jøker Bjerre &  
Agon Hamza**

## Why Crisis and Critique?

The publication of the first issue of *Crisis and Critique* undoubtedly imposes the question on us: 'why yet another journal in philosophy?' Furthermore, why a *Marxist* journal of philosophy? This question is in itself complicated, given the 'crisis of Marxism' – not only a crisis which has lost reference to Marx, but one that is inscribed in Marxism itself.

The Left today, in all its orientations and traditions, is caught into a theoretical and political cul de sac: apart from the repetition of old formulas and citations of various authors, as well as in the (re)invention and elevation of trivial figures into the guiding names of our struggle, the Left cannot provide a new vision for humanity. The Left is disoriented, the burden of the failure of the Communist experiments of the previous century and its (mostly) catastrophic outcomes weigh too heavily on our shoulders. In addition, the rise of right-wing forces and religious 'fundamentalism' is equally worrisome. The right wing or populist political parties, across Europe and elsewhere, are ruthlessly appropriating the discourse which traditionally belongs to the left and distorting it according to their own political agenda. The working class is, in this distorted perspective, divided into working people of particular countries, always potentially threatened by immigrants, low wages in neighbouring countries, global market competition, etc., instead of being a united class of people exploited by global capital, i.e. holding the "proletarian position". The same goes for the religious 'fundamentalists' with their insistence on theocracy, who propose a return to the invented tradition, or even worse: the theological-religious struggle, instead of accentuating the emancipatory potential of religions, is becoming a struggle for dress and dietary codes. Against this, we should recall Mao Zedong's dictum: "Marxism comprises many principles, but in the final analysis they can all be brought back to a single sentence: it is right to rebel against the reactionaries."

So, why 'Crisis and Critique', a name which is taken up from the projected journal of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin that never came into existence? In very different times and ideological-political conjunctures, but yet in a similar spirit, this journal, published by the Dialectical Materialism Collective, seeks to establish a philosophical platform for interaction, debate and exchange between different orientations of critical Marxist scholars.

Back in his time, Marx called for 'a ruthless criticism of everything existing' and our task is to turn our critical powers towards the existing Marxism itself. The task of a Marxist philosopher or theoretician is to critically re-think the hitherto existing Marxist theoretical traditions, as well as the practices of the politics of emancipation. Therefore, we will not prioritise or espouse any particular tradition or orientation within Marxism. In this sense, Dialectical Materialism is a Marxist Forum.

We live in the time of crisis, even a double crisis: a crisis of the Left or Marxism, and a crisis of the capitalist mode of production itself. That is to say, on top of our list of current uncertainties - ideological, political and economic, we should add 'theoretical'. We do not have a theory of the present. In this regard, the aim of this journal is to critically examine and comprehend not only the existing conjunctures, but also the possibilities of reinventing the idea of radical emancipation, under the name of Communism.



# **The Impasses of Today's Radical Politics**

**Slavoj Žižek**



## The wound of Eurocentrism

With regard to global capitalism which, although it originated in Europe, is today a global phenomenon where Europe is more and more losing its leading role, one should be especially careful with non-reflected anti-Eurocentrism which can sometimes serve as the ideological cover for the rejection of what is worth fighting for in the European legacy. An exemplary case of succumbing to this danger is Walter D Mignolo's recent critique of my defense of Leftist Eurocentrism:

As a non-European thinker, my senses reacted to the first sentence of Zizek's article: *When one says Eurocentrism, every self-respecting postmodern leftist intellectual has as violent a reaction as Joseph Goebbels had to culture - to reach for a gun, hurling accusations of proto-fascist Eurocentrist cultural imperialism. However, is it possible to imagine a leftist appropriation of the European political legacy? [...]* My response to that paragraph, published in a couple of places, is the following: *When one says Eurocentrism, every self-respecting decolonial intellectual has not as violent a reaction as Joseph Goebbels had to culture - to reach for a gun, hurling accusations of proto-fascist Eurocentrist cultural imperialism. A self-respecting decolonial intellectual will reach instead to Frantz Fanon: 'Now, comrades, now is the time to decide to change sides. We must shake off the great mantle of night, which has enveloped us, and reach for the light. The new day, which is dawning, must find us determined, enlightened and resolute. So, my brothers, how could we fail to understand that we have better things to do than follow that Europe's footsteps.' [...]* we, decolonial intellectuals, if not philosophers, 'have better things to do' as Fanon would say, than being engaged with issues debated by European philosophers.<sup>1</sup>

What Mignolo proposes is thus a version of Baudrillard's battle cry "Forget Foucault!": forget Europe, we have better things to do than deal with European philosophy, even better things than endlessly deconstructing it. The irony here is that this battle cry obviously did not hold for Fanon himself, who dealt extensively and intensively with

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132672747320891.html>.

Hegel, psychoanalysis, Sartre, and even Lacan. So, when I read lines like Mignolo's, I also reach for Fanon – this Fanon:

I am a man, and what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world. I am not responsible solely for the slave revolt in Santo Domingo. Every time a man has contributed to the victory of the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to subjugate his fellows, I have felt solidarity with his act. In no way does my basic vocation have to be drawn from the past of peoples of color. In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a black civilization unjustly ignored. I will not make myself the man of any past. /.../ My black skin is not a repository for specific values. /.../ Haven't I got better things to do on this earth than avenge the Blacks of the seventeenth century? /.../ I as a man of color do not have the right to hope that in the white man there will be a crystallization of guilt toward the past of my race. I as a man of color do not have the right to seek ways of stamping down the pride of my former master. I have neither the right nor the duty to demand reparations for my subjugated ancestors. There is no black mission; there is no white burden. /.../ I do not want to be the victim of the Ruse of a black world. /.../ Am I going to ask today's white men to answer for the slave traders of the seventeenth century? Am I going to try by every means available to cause guilt to burgeon in their souls? /.../ I am not a slave to slavery that dehumanized my ancestors. /.../ it would be of enormous interest to discover a black literature or architecture from the third century before Christ. We would be overjoyed to learn of the existence of a correspondence between some black philosopher and Plato. But we can absolutely not see how this fact would change the lives of eight-years-old kids working in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe. /.../ I find myself in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press 2008, p. 201-206.

What Fanon clearly saw is that today's global world is capitalist, and as such cannot be effectively problematized from the standpoint of pre-capitalist local cultures. This is why the lesson of Marx's two short 1853 articles on India ("The British rule in India," "The Future Results of British Rule in India"), usually dismissed by postcolonial studies as embarrassing cases of Marx's "Eurocentrism", are today more actual than ever. Marx admits without restraint the brutality and exploitative hypocrisy of the British colonization of India, which goes up to the systematic use of torture prohibited in the West but "outsourced" to Indians (really, nothing new under the sun – there were Guantanamos already in the midst of 19<sup>th</sup> century British India): "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked."<sup>3</sup> All Marx adds is that

England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindoo, and separates Hindostan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history. /.../ England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.<sup>4</sup>

One should not dismiss the talk of the »unconscious tool of history« as the expression of a naive teleology, of the trust into the Cunning of Reason which makes even the vilest crimes instruments of progress – the point is simply that the British colonization of India created conditions for the double liberation of India: from the constraints of its own tradition as well as from colonization itself. This is why the quoted passage does

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/06/25.htm>.

not display the same dismissive attitude towards “unhistorical nations” as the one clearly discernible in “The Magyar Struggle,” a newspaper text written by Friedrich Engels and published in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* on January 13, 1849. The historical context of this text is the approaching defeat of the 1848 revolution, when the small Slavic nations (with the exception of Poles) militarily supported the Austrian emperor in his effort to crush the Hungarian uprising (which explains Engels’s furious aggressivity):

Among all the large and small nations of Austria, only three standard-bearers of progress took an active part in history, and still retain their vitality — the *Germans*, the *Poles* and the *Magyars*. Hence they are now revolutionary. / All the other large and small nationalities and peoples are destined to perish before long in the revolutionary world storm. For that reason they are now counter-revolutionary. /.../ There is no country in Europe which does not have in some corner or other one or several ruined fragments of peoples, the remnant of a former population that was suppressed and held in bondage by the nation which later became the main vehicle of historical development. These relics of a nation mercilessly trampled under foot in the course of history, as Hegel says, these *residual fragments of peoples* always become fanatical standard-bearers of counter-revolution and remain so until their complete extirpation or loss of their national character, just as their whole existence in general is itself a protest against a great historical revolution. /.../ But at the first victorious uprising of the French proletariat, which Louis Napoleon is striving with all his might to conjure up, the Austrian Germans and Magyars will be set free and wreak a bloody revenge on the Slav barbarians. The general war which will then break out will smash this Slav Sonderbund and wipe out all these petty hidebound nations, down to their very names. /The next world war will result in the disappearance from the face of the earth not only of reactionary classes and dynasties, but also of entire reactionary peoples. And that, too, is a step forward.<sup>5</sup>

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5 On account of the (obviously) problematic nature of this passage, one should quote it also in original: »Die ganze frühere Geschichte Östreichs beweist es bis auf diesen Tag, und das Jahr 1848 hat es bestätigt. Unter allen den Nationen und Natiönchen Östreichs sind nur drei, die die Träger des Fortschritts waren, die aktiv in die Geschichte eingegriffen haben, die noch jetzt lebensfähig sind - die *Deutschen*, die *Polen*, die *Magyaren*. Daher sind sie jetzt revolutionär. / Alle

These lines sound like Mao's distinction between bourgeois and proletarian nations, but in the inverted sense: there are not just classes struggling within nations, the struggle goes on also between progressive and reactionary nations, with all this implies, namely the destruction of »these petty hidebound nations, down to their very names,« in the revolutionary process. Engels's line of thought relies on a simplified pseudo-Hegelianism: there is historical progress, there are nations which are part of this progress (»historical nations«) and nations which are inert bystanders or even actively oppose it, and the latter are destined to perish. (Engels further embellishes this line of thought with a Hegelian-sounding reflexive twist: how could these nations not be reactionary when their existence itself is a reaction, a remainder of the past?) Engels stuck to this position to the end, convinced that, with the exception of Poles, small Slavic nations are all looking toward Russia, the bullwark of reaction, for their liberation. In 1882, he wrote to Bernstein (who had sympathies for Southern Slaves): »We must co-operate in the work of setting the West European proletariat free and subordinate everything else to that goal. No matter how interesting the Balkan Slavs, etc., might be, the moment their desire for liberation clashes with the interests of the proletariat they can go hang for all I care." And in a letter to Kautsky from the same year, he again asserts the opposition of progressive and reactionary nations: "Thus I hold the view that there are *two* nations in Europe which do not only have the right but the duty to be nationalistic before they become internationalists: the Irish and the Poles. They are internationalists of the best kind if they are very nationalistic. The Poles have understood this in all crises and have proved it on the battlefields

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andern großen und kleinen Stämme und Völker haben zunächst die Mission, im revolutionären Weltsturm unterzugehen. Daher sind sie jetzt kontrerevolutionär. /.../ Es ist kein Land in Europa, das nicht in irgendeinem Winkel eine oder mehrere Völkerruinen besitzt, Überbleibsel einer früheren Bewohnerschaft, zurückgedrängt und unterjocht von der Nation, welche später Trägerin der geschichtlichen Entwicklung wurde. Diese Reste einer von dem Gang der Geschichte, wie Hegel sagt, unbarmherzig zertretenen Nation, diese *Völkerabfälle* werden jedesmal und bleiben bis zu ihrer gänzlichen Vertilgung oder Entnationalisierung die fanatischen Träger der Kontrerevolution, wie ihre ganze Existenz überhaupt schon ein Protest gegen eine große geschichtliche Revolution ist. /.../ Aber bei dem ersten siegreichen Aufstand des französischen Proletariats, den Louis-Napoleon mit aller Gewalt heraufzubeschwören bemüht ist, werden die österreichischen Deutschen und Magyaren frei werden und an den slawischen Barbaren blutige Rache nehmen. Der allgemeine Krieg, der dann ausbricht, wird diesen slawischen Sonderbund zersprengen und alle diese kleinen stierköpfigen Nationen bis auf ihren Namen vernichten. / Der nächste Weltkrieg wird nicht nur reaktionäre Klassen und Dynastien, er wird auch ganze reaktionäre Völker vom Erdboden verschwinden machen. Und das ist auch ein Fortschritt.« The key sentence is sometimes translated "The chief mission of all other races and peoples, large and small, is to perish in the revolutionary holocaust." and, as such, used against Marx as the forefather of holocaust – however, the word "holocaust" is not used in this sentence where it is said that the mission of counterrevolutionary nations is "im revolutionären Weltsturm unterzugehen" (to perish/founder in the revolutionary worldstorn).

of all revolutions. Take away their expectation to re-establish Poland; or persuade them that the new Poland will soon fall into their laps by itself, and they are finished with their interest in the European Revolution.”

As for the Southern Slavs: “Only when with the collapse of Tsarism the nationalist ambitions of these dwarfs of peoples will be freed from association with Panslavist tendencies of world domination, only then we can let them take their fate in their own hands. And I am certain that six months of independence will suffice for most Austro-Hungarian Slavs to bring them to a point where they will beg to be readmitted. But these tiny nations can never be granted the right, which they now assign to themselves in Serbia, Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia, to prevent the extension of the European railroad net to Constantinople.” The great opponent of Engels is here none other than Lenin, who formulated his position in quite unambiguous terms:

The proletariat of the oppressing nations cannot confine itself to the general hackneyed phrases against annexations and for the equal rights of nations in general, that may be repeated by any pacifist bourgeois. The proletariat cannot evade the question that is particularly ‘unpleasant’ for the imperialist bourgeoisie, namely, the question of the frontiers of a state that is based on national oppression. The proletariat cannot but fight against the forcible retention of the oppressed nations within the boundaries of a given state, and this is exactly what the struggle for the right of self-determination means. The proletariat must demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nations that ‘its own’ nation oppresses. Unless it does this, proletarian internationalism will remain a meaningless phrase; mutual confidence and class solidarity between the workers of the oppressing and oppressed nations will be impossible.<sup>6</sup>

Lenin remained faithful to this position to the end: in his last struggle against Stalin’s project for the centralized Soviet Union, he advocated the unconditional right of small nations to secede (in this case, Georgia was at stake), insisting on the full sovereignty of the national entities that composed the Soviet State - no wonder that, on 27 September 1922, in

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<sup>6</sup> V.I. Lenin, »The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination« (January-February 1916).

a letter to the members of the Politburo, Stalin openly accused Lenin of «national liberalism»... But already Marx's text on India diverges radically from Engels' position: Marx's point is not that Indians "are destined to perish before long in the revolutionary world storm,« but almost the exact opposite: getting caught into the universal capitalist dynamics will enable Indians to get rid of their traditional constraints and engage in a modern struggle for liberation from the British colonial yoke. Lenin is also stuck onto this view: after the failure of the European revolution in early 1920s was clear, he saw the main task of the Soviet power to simply bring European modernity to Russia: instead of talking about big goals like building Socialism, one should patiently engage in spreading (bourgeois) culture and civilization, in total opposition to « socialism in one country.» This modesty is sometimes surprisingly open, like when Lenin mocks all attempt to « build Socialism» in the Soviet Union. How different is this stance from Mignolo's view of the anti-capitalist struggle:

as we know from history, the identification of the problem doesn't mean that there is only one solution. Or better yet, we can coincide in the prospective of harmony as a desirable global future, but Communism is only one way to move toward it. There cannot be only one solution simply because there are many ways of being, which means of thinking and doing. Communism is an option and not an Abstract Universal. /.../ In the non-European World, Communism is part of the problem rather than the solution. Which doesn't mean that if you are not Communist, in the non-European world, you are Capitalist. /.../ So the fact that Zizek, and other European intellectuals, are seriously rethinking Communism means that they are engaging in one option (the reorientation of the Left) among many, today, marching toward the prospect of harmony overcoming the necessity of war; overcoming success and competition which engender corruption and selfishness, and promoting the plenitude of life over development and death.<sup>7</sup>

Mignolo relies here on an all too naïve distinction between problem and solution: if there is a thing we really know from history, it is that, while "the identification of the problem doesn't mean that there is only one

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7 Quoted from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132672747320891.html>.



solution,” there also is also only a single identification of the problem. When we encounter a problem (like a global economic crisis), we get a multitude of formulations in what this problem resides, which are its causes (or, to put it in a more postmodern vein, a multitude of narratives): too much state regulation, not enough state regulation, moral roots of the crisis, too great power of the financial capital, capitalism as such, etc. These different identifications of the problem form a dialectical unity with the proposed solutions, or, one can even say that the identification of a problem is already formulated from the standpoint of its alleged/imagined solution. Communism is therefore not just one of the solutions but, first of all, a unique formulation of the problem as it appears within the Communist horizon. Mignolo’s identification of the problem, as well as his formulation of the common goal shared by all proposed solutions, is a proof of his limitation, and is as such worth reading carefully: the common goal – “*marching* toward the prospect of harmony, promoting the plenitude of life”; the problem – “the necessity of war; success and competition which engender corruption and selfishness; development and death.” His goal – harmony, plenitude of life – is a true Abstract Universal if there ever was one, an empty container which can mean many incompatible things (depending on what we understand by plenitude of life and harmony). (One can also add in an acerbic mode that many anti-capitalist movements achieved great results in “overcoming success.”) The fast equation of development and death, as well as the abstract rejection of war, corruption, and selfishness, are no less meaningless abstractions. (And, incidentally, the abstract opposition of war and harmony is especially suspicious, since it can be also read as a call against aggravating social antagonisms, for a peaceful harmony of the social organism – if this is the direction taken, I much prefer to be called a “Left Fascist,” insisting on the emancipatory dimension of struggle.)

What Mignolo offers are not alternate modernities, but a kind of alternate postmodernity, i.e., different ways to overcome European (capitalist) modernity. Against such an approach, one should definitely defend the European universalist legacy – in what precise sense? According to some Indian cultural theorists, the fact that they are compelled to use the English language is a form of cultural colonialism which censors their true identity: “We have to speak in an imposed foreign language to express our innermost identity, and does this not put us in a position of radical alienation – even our resistance to colonization has to be formulated in the language of the colonizer?” The answer to this is: yes - but this



imposition of English (a foreign language) created the very X which is “oppressed” by it, i.e., what is oppressed is not the actual pre-colonial India, but the authentic dream of a new universalist democratic India.

Was Malcolm X not following the same insight when he adopted X as his family name? The point of choosing X as his family name, and thereby signaling that the slave traders who brought the enslaved Africans from their homeland brutally deprived them of their family and ethnic roots, of their entire cultural life-world, was not to mobilize the blacks to fight for the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely to seize the opening provided by X, an unknown new (lack of) identity engendered by the very process of slavery which made the African roots forever lost. The idea is that this X which deprives the blacks of their particular tradition offers a unique chance to redefine (reinvent) themselves, to freely form a new identity much more universal than white people’s professed universality. (As is well known, Malcolm X found this new identity in the universalism of Islam.) The same experience of the unintended liberating dimension opened up by the very enslavement is beautifully retold in Frederick Douglas’ narrative of his life, where he reports on the radical change in his life when he went to live as a slave with the family of Mr. and Mrs. Auld<sup>8</sup>; the latter

had never had a slave under her control previously to myself, and prior to her marriage she had been dependent upon her own industry for a living. She was by trade a weaver; and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery. I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. /.../ My early instruction was all out of place. The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it. She did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face.

Mrs. Auld’s attitude was not primarily an expression of her personal goodness – she simply didn’t really know about slavery, how slavery functioned, and looked at the young Frederick with a pre-lapsarian

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<sup>8</sup> I owe this example to Ed Cadava, Princeton.

innocence, perceiving him as just another human being; so when she became aware that the young boy doesn't know to read and write, she "very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters." This, however, was not enough to put the young Frederick on the path of liberation; Mr. Auld's violent reaction to his wife's effort to teach the young slave reading and writing was crucial. From Mr. Auld's perspective, his wife's pre-lapsarian innocence was in reality the very opposite of what it appeared to be – in his eyes, his wife was unknowingly playing the role of the snake seducing the young Frederick to eat from the prohibited tree of knowledge:

Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, 'If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master - to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now,' said he, 'if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.' These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty - to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his

wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

Note the quasi-humanitarian accent of Mr. Auld's argumentation – the young boy should not learn to read and write not only because this would make him unfit as a slave, and thus of no use to his master, but also *for his own good*: “As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.” The last sentence should not be dismissed as hypocrisy (although it undoubtedly is deeply hypocritical): compared with the life of an uneducated slave who had the luck to be owned by relatively kind masters, engaging in the struggle for emancipation first effectively brings only discontent and unhappiness. The magnificent and precise conclusion of the quoted passage should therefore be taken literally: “In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.” Mrs. Auld did not want to liberate Frederick from slavery – how could she when she was not even fully aware of what it was to be a slave? In short, her reaction was moralistic, not political: the reaction of spontaneous decency and kindness. It was only through the husband's directly racist-paternalist reaction that Frederick became aware of the political-emancipatory (and even properly revolutionary) dimension of what does it mean to know to read and write. Without the husband's brutal intervention, Frederick would become an educated household slave loving and respecting his owners, not the emancipatory symbol he is now.

So, back to India, “reconciliation” means reconciliation with English language which is to be accepted not only as the obstacle to a new India to be discarded for some local language, but as an enabling medium, as the positive condition of liberation. The true victory over colonization

is not the return to any pre-colonial authentic substance, even less any “synthesis” between modern civilization and pre-modern origins, but, paradoxically, the *fully accomplished loss of these pre-modern origins*. In other words, colonialism is not overcome when the intrusion of English language as a medium is abolished, but when the colonizers are, as it were, beaten at their own game - when the new Indian identity is effortlessly formulated in English, i.e., when English language is “denaturalized,” when it loses its privileged link to the “native” Anglo-Saxon English-speakers. It is crucial to know that this role of English language was clearly perceived by many intellectuals among Dalits (the “untouchables”), the lowest cast: a large section of Dalits welcomed English and in fact even the colonial encounter. For Ambedkar (the main political figure of Dalits) and his legates, British colonialism — unwittingly and incidentally at least — gives scope for so-called rule of law and formal equality for all Indians. Before that, Indians had only caste laws, which gave Dalits almost no rights and only duties.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in India, the real endangered tribal groups (like those in the jungles around Hyderabad) do not fight for their traditional values and ties; they engage much more strongly in Maoist struggle (the Naxalite guerilla movement) which is formulated in universal terms of overcoming capitalism. It is high-class and -cast post-colonial theorists (mostly Brahmin), not those who really belong to indigenous tribal groups, who celebrate the perseverance of local traditions and communal ethics as resistance to global capitalism. Back in ancient China, the first to accomplish such a reversal was the king of Qin who ruthlessly united China and, in 221 BC, proclaimed himself its First Emperor; this arch-model of “totalitarian” rule, also relied so heavily on the advice of the “Legalist” philosophers that one can see in him the first case of a state order imposed on a society by a conscious and well-planned decision to break with past traditions and impose a new order conceived in theory:

The king of Qin was not necessarily the brains of the outfit – his advisers, free of the strictures of courtly life, were the ones who had masterminded his rise to power. The plan to install him as the ruler of the world had commenced before he was even born, with the contention of long-dead scholars that the world required

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9 Chandra Bhan Prasad, a leading dalit intellectual, celebrated English by anointing the “Dalit Goddess, English”. See <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/nation/jai-angrezi-devi-maiyya-ki>. I owe this data to my good friend S. Anand (New Delhi).

an enlightened prince. It had proceeded with /.../ an alliance of scholars in search of a patron who might allow them to secure their own political ends. Ying Zheng, the king of Qin, became the First Emperor with the help of great minds.<sup>10</sup>

These Legalists – first among them Han Fei and the great Li Si – emerged out of the crisis of Confucianism. When, in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, China went through the period of the “Warring States,” Confucians perceived as the ultimate cause of this slow but persistent decay the betrayal of old traditions and customs. Most troubling to Confucius was his perception that the political institutions of his day had completely broken down. He attributed this collapse to the fact that those who wielded power, as well as those who occupied subordinate positions, did so by making claim to titles for which they were not worthy. When asked about the principles of good government, Confucius is reported to have replied: “Good government consists in the ruler being a ruler, the minister being a minister, the father being a father, and the son being a son.” In Europe, we call this a corporate vision: society is like a body where each individual has to stay at his proper place and play his particular role. This is the very opposite of democracy: in democracy, nobody is constrained to his or her particular place; everybody has the right to participate in universal affairs, to have his word in the deliberations about where our society goes. No wonder, then, that Confucius’ description of the disorder he sees in society around him – “Rulers do not rule and subjects do not serve” – provides a good description of a democratic society in which the united subjects rule and the nominal rulers serve them.

What “Legalist” did was to drop the very coordinates of such a perception of the situation: for the Confucians, the land was in chaos because old traditions were not obeyed, and states like Qin with their centralized-military organization dismissive of the old customs were perceived as the embodiment of what is wrong. However, in contrast to his teacher Xunzi who regarded nations like Qin as a threat to peace, Han Fei “proposed the unthinkable, that maybe the way of the Qin government was not an anomaly to be addressed, but a practice to be emulated.”<sup>11</sup> The solution resided in what appeared as problem: the true

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10 Jonathan Clements, *The First Emperor of China*, Chalford: Sutton Publishing 2006, p. 16.

11 Clements, op.cit., p. 34.

cause of the troubles was not the abandonment of old traditions, but *these traditions themselves* which daily demonstrated their inability to serve as guiding principles of social life - as Hegel put it in the "Foreword" to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the standard by means of which we measure the situation and establish that the situation is problematic, is part of the problem and should be abandoned. Han Fei applied the same logic to the fact that (the majority of) men are evil by nature, not ready to act for the Common Good: instead of bemoaning it, he saw the human evil as a chance for state power, as something that a power enlightened by the right theory (a theory which describes things the way they really are, "beyond good and evil") can steer by applying on it a proper mechanism:

Where Xunzi saw an unfortunate observation, that men were evil by nature, Han Fei saw a challenge for the institution of stern laws to control this nature and use it to the benefit of the state.<sup>12</sup>

One of the great achievements of contemporary Leftist political theory (Althusser, Balibar, Negri) was to rehabilitate Macchiavelli, to save him from the standard "Macchiavelist" reading. Since Legalists are often presented as ur-Macchiavelists, one should do the same with them, extricating a radical-emancipatory kernel from their predominant image as proto-"totalitarians." The great insight of Legalists was to perceive the wound (to the social body), the disintegration of old habits, as a chance for the new order.

At a more general level, one should bear in mind that global capitalism does not automatically push all its subjects towards hedonist/permissive individualism, and the fact that, in many countries that recently entered the road of rapid capitalist modernization (like India), many individuals stick to the so-called traditional (pre-modern) beliefs and ethics (family values, rejection of unbridled hedonism, strong ethnic identification, giving preference to community ties over individual achievement, respect for elders...) in no way proves that they are not fully "modern," as if people in the liberal West can afford direct and full capitalist modernization, while those from less developed Asian, Latin American and African countries can only survive the onslaught of capitalist dynamics through the help of the crutches of traditional ties, i.e., as if traditional values are needed when local populations are not

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<sup>12</sup> Op.cit., p. 77.

able to survive capitalism by way of adopting its own liberal-hedonist individualist ethics. Post-colonial “subaltern” theorists who see in the persistence of premodern traditions global capitalism and its violent modernization disruptive of traditional ties are here thoroughly wrong: on the contrary, fidelity to premodern (“Asian”) values is paradoxically *the very feature which allows countries like China, Singapore, and India to follow the path of capitalist dynamics even more radically than Western liberal countries*. A reference to traditional values enable individuals to justify their ruthless engagement in market competition in ethical terms (“I am really doing it to help my parents, to earn enough money so that my children and cousins will be able to study...”).<sup>13</sup>

There is a nicely-vulgar joke about Christ: the night before he was arrested and crucified, his followers started to worry - Christ was still a virgin, wouldn't it be nice to have him experience a little bit of pleasure before he will die? So they asked Mary Magdalene to go to the tent where Christ was resting and seduce him; Mary said she will do it gladly and went in, but five minutes later, she ran out screaming, terrified and furious. The followers asked her what went wrong, and she explained: “I slowly undressed, spread my legs and showed to Christ my pussy; he looked at it, said ‘What a terrible wound! It should be healed!’ and gently put his palm on it...” So beware of people too intent on healing other people's wounds – what if one enjoys one's wound? In exactly the same way, directly healing the wound of colonialism (effectively returning to the pre-colonial reality) would have been a nightmare: if today's Indians were to find themselves in pre-colonial reality, they would have undoubtedly uttered the same terrified scream as Mary Magdalene. It is precisely apropos the wound of colonialism that Wagner's *die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur der Sie schlug* holds: the very disintegration of traditional forms opens up the space of liberation. As it was clear to Nelson Mandela and the ANC, white supremacy and the temptation of returning to tribal roots are two sides of the same coin.<sup>14</sup>

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13 I owe this line of thought to Saroi Giri, New Delhi. - We can say something similar about today's China: it is wrong to claim that China faces the choice of becoming a truly capitalist country or of maintaining the Communist rule which thwarts full capitalist development. This choice is a false one: in today's China, capitalist growth is exploding not in spite of the Communist rule but because of it, i.e., far from being an obstacle to capitalist development, the Communist rule guarantees the best conditions for unbridled capitalism.

14 Let us risk another extreme example of such a liberating wound. On October 7 2013, media reported that a “Baby factory” just opened in India, where surrogate mothers will carry Western couples' babies for about 8,000 USD. The factory, built by doctor Nayna Patel, will house hundreds of surrogate mothers in the multi-million-pound complex which will have a gift shop and hotel rooms for people



According to the standard liberal myth, the universality of human rights brings peace, it establishes the conditions of peaceful co-existence between the multiplicity of particular cultures, while from the standpoint of the colonized, liberal universality is false, it functions as a violent intrusion of a foreign culture dissolving our particular roots. Even if he admits some truth in this reproach, a liberal would continue to strive for “universality without wounds,” for a universal frame which would not impinge violently on particular cultures. From a properly dialectical perspective, we should strive for (or, rather, endorse the necessity of) an exactly inverted approach: a wound as such is liberating – or, rather, contains a liberating potential –, so while we should definitely problematize the positive content of the imposed universality (the particular content it secretly privileges), we should fully endorse the liberating aspect of the wound (to our particular identity) as such.<sup>15</sup>

To put it in yet another way, what the experience of English language as an oppressive imposition obfuscates is that the same holds for EVERY language: language is as such a parasitic foreign intruder. Throughout his work, Lacan varies Heidegger’s motif of language as the house of being: language is not man’s creation and instrument, it is man who “dwells” in language: “Psychoanalysis should be the science of language inhabited by the subject.”<sup>16</sup> Lacan’s “paranoiac” twist, his additional Freudian turn of the screw, comes from his characterization of this house as a *torture-house*: “In the light of the Freudian experience, man is a subject caught in and tortured by language.”<sup>17</sup> Not only does man dwell in the “prison-house of language” (the title of Fredric Jameson’s early book on structuralism), he dwells in a torture-house of language: the entire psychopathology deployed by Freud, from conversion-symptoms inscribed into the body

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coming to collect newborn. Women who will make babies for a fee as a way of escaping extreme poverty will be impregnated using sperm and embryos sent by courier, with childless couples visiting India only to pick up their new son or daughter. Dr Patel views her work as a “feminist mission” to bring needy women together with would-be mothers who are unable to conceive – no doubt a statement of brutal cynicism. However, cannot we imagine a situation in which lending a womb to another woman would definitely amount to a feminist act of solidarity which challenges traditional notions of substantial femininity?

15 But what about the opposite experience of our own language as provincial, primitive, marked by pathologies of private passions and obscenities which obscure clear reasoning and expression, the experience which pushes us towards using the universal secondary language in order to think clearly and freely? Is this not the logic of the constitution of the national language which replaces the multiplicity of dialects?

16 Lacan, op.cit., p. 276.

17 Ibid.



up to total psychotic breakdowns, are scars of this permanent torture, so many signs of an original and irremediable gap between subject and language, so many signs that man cannot ever be at home in his own home. This is what Heidegger ignores: this dark torturing other side of our dwelling in language – and this is why there is also no place for the Real of *jouissance* in Heidegger's edifice, since the torturing aspect of language concerns primarily the vicissitudes of libido.

### **A, not G flat**

So if we discard the obscene notion that it is better to be “authentically” tortured by one’s “own” language than by a foreign imposed one, one should first emphasize the liberating aspect of being compelled to use a foreign “universal” language. There was a certain historical wisdom in the fact that, from medieval times till recently, the *lingua franca* of the West was Latin, a “secondary” inauthentic language, a “fall” from Greek, and not Greek with all its authentic burden: it was this very emptiness and “inauthenticity” of the Latin which allowed Europeans to fill it in with their own particular contents, in contrast to the stuffing overbearing nature of the Greek. Beckett learned this lesson, and started to write in French, a foreign language, leaving behind the “authenticity” of his roots. So, to recapitulate: the function of experiencing the foreign language as an oppressive imposition is to obfuscate this oppressive dimension in our own language, i.e., to retroactively elevate our own maternal tongue into a lost paradise of full authentic expression. The move to be accomplished when we experience the imposed foreign language as oppressive, as out of sync with our innermost life, is thus to transpose this discord into our own maternal tongue.<sup>18</sup> Such a move is, of course, an extremely painful one, it equals the loss of the very substance of our being, of our concrete historical roots – as George Orwell put it, it means that, in a way, I have to “alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognizable as the same person.” Are we ready to do it? Back in 1937, Orwell deployed the ambiguity of the predominant Leftist attitude towards the class difference:

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18 But what about the opposite experience of our own language as provincial, primitive, marked by pathologies of private passions and obscenities which obscure clear reasoning and expression, the experience which pushes us towards using the universal secondary language in order to think clearly and freely? Is this not the logic of the constitution of the national language which replaces the multiplicity of dialects?

We all rail against class-distinctions, but very few people seriously want to abolish them. Here you come upon the important fact that every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed. /.../The fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself. Here am I, a typical member of the middle class. It is easy for me to say that I want to get rid of class-distinctions, but nearly everything I think and do is a result of class-distinctions. All my notions—notions of good and evil, of pleasant and unpleasant, of funny and serious, of ugly and beautiful—are essentially *middle-class* notions; my taste in books and food and clothes, my sense of honor, my table manners, my turns of speech, my accent, even the characteristic movements of my body, are the products of a special kind of upbringing and a special niche about half-way up the social hierarchy.<sup>19</sup>

So where is Orwell himself here? He rejects patronizing compassion or any attempt to “become like workers” – he wants workers to wash more, etc. But does this mean he wants to remain middle-class and therefore accepts that class differences are to remain? The problem is that the way Orwell formulates the alternative – “sticking to one’s middle-class values or becoming like workers” is a false one: being an authentic revolutionary has nothing whatsoever to do with “becoming like workers,” with imitating the life style of the poor classes. The goal of the revolutionary activity is, on the contrary, *to change the entire social situation so that workers themselves will no longer be “workers.”* In other words, *both poles of Orwell’s dilemma – sticking to middle-class values or effectively becoming like workers – are typical middle-class options.* Robespierre and Lenin were distinctly middle-class in their private sensibility – the point is not to become like workers, but to change the workers’ lot. Orwell’s insight holds only for a certain kind of “bourgeois” Leftists; there are Leftists who do have the courage of their convictions, who do not only want “revolution without revolution,” as Robespierre put it – Jacobins and Bolsheviks, among others... The starting point of these true revolutionaries can be the very position of the “bourgeois” Leftists; what happens is that, in the middle of their pseudo-radical posturing,

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<sup>19</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), quoted from [http://www.orwell.ru/library/novels/The\\_Road\\_to\\_Wigan\\_Pier/english/e\\_rtwp](http://www.orwell.ru/library/novels/The_Road_to_Wigan_Pier/english/e_rtwp).

they get caught into their own game and are ready to put in question their subjective position. It is difficult to imagine a more trenchant political example of the weight of Lacan's distinction between the "subject of the enunciated" and the "subject of the enunciation": first, in a direct negation, you start by wanting to "change the world" without endangering the subjective position from which you are ready to enforce the change; then, in the "negation of negation," the subject enacting the change is ready to pay the subjective price for it, to change himself, or, to quote Gandhi's formula, to be himself the change he wants to see in the world.

Is "to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognizable as the same person" not an event of radical self-transformation comparable to rebirth? Orwell's point is that radicals invoke the need for revolutionary change as a kind of superstitious token that should achieve the opposite; i.e., *prevent* the change from really occurring – today's academic Leftist who criticizes the capitalist cultural imperialism is in reality horrified at the idea that his field of study would really break down. Think about big international art biennales, a true capitalist venture as a rule sustained by "anti-capitalist" ideology whose predominant form is a mixture of anti-Eurocentrism, critique of modernity ("we live on a post-Kantian universe"), and warnings on how even art events are moments of the circulation of capital – to which one cannot but reply with a version of the old Marx brothers' quip: "They say today's art scene is part of capitalist machinery, but this shouldn't deceive you – it really is part of capitalist machinery!" (In the morass of such ideological denegations, one cannot but find refreshing, subversive even, a direct assertion of "bourgeois" values, as with Robert Pippin who recently claim that his entire philosophical project is to defend the bourgeois way of life. If one is consequent enough in this assertion, one soon discovers inconsistencies in the bourgeois way of life, inconsistencies which compel us to move beyond this way of life precisely in order to save what is worth saving in it.)

Is then a conference on the idea of Communism also destined to become this kind of pseudo-event, a Communist biennale? Or are we setting in motion something that has the potential to develop into an actual force of social transformation? It may appear that one cannot act today, that all we can really do is just to state things. But in a situation like today's, just to state what can be is much stronger than all calls to action which are as a rule just so many excuses NOT to do anything. Let me quote Alain Badiou's provocative thesis: "It is better to do nothing

than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent." Better to do nothing than to engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run smoother (acts like providing the space for the multitude of new subjectivities, etc.). The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active," to "participate," to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, "do something," academics participate in meaningless "debates," etc., and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from it. Those in power often prefer even a "critical" participation, a dialogue, to silence – just to engage us in a "dialogue," to make it sure our ominous passivity is broken. This is why the title of the fourth The Idea of Communism meeting in Seoul, September 27-29 2013, was fully justified: "Stop to think!"

And there are events which point in this direction here in Korea – I have in mind the widespread workers' resistance to the rapid passage into a post-historical society. As far as I can judge, this resistance reaches far beyond a simple workers struggle for better wages and working conditions – it is a struggle for an entire way of life, the resistance of a *world* threatened by rapid modernization of Korea. "World" stands here for a specific horizon of meaning, for an entire civilization or, rather, *culture* with its daily rituals and manners which are threatened by the post-historical commodification. Is this resistance conservative? Today's mainstream self-declared political and cultural conservatives are not really conservatives: fully endorsing capitalist continuous self-revolutionizing, they just want to make it more efficient by supplementing it with some traditional institutions (religion, etc.) to contain its destructive consequences for social life and maintain social cohesion. A true conservative today is the one who fully admits the antagonisms and deadlocks of global capitalisms, the one who rejects simple progressism, and is attentive to the dark obverse of progress. In this sense, only a radical Leftist can be today a true conservative.

But where is the potential for change in such a stance? It may appear that one cannot act today, that all we can really do is just to state things. But in a situation like today's, just to state what is, a constatif, can be the strongest performatif, much stronger than all calls to action which are as a rule just so many excuses NOT to do anything – such a subversive constatif was described long ago by John Jay Chapman (1862-1933), a today half-forgotten American political activist and essayist<sup>20</sup> who wrote

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20 A bizarre episode from Chapman's life demonstrates that he was well aware what a true

The radicals are really always saying the same thing. They do not change; everybody else changes. They are accused of the most incompatible crimes, of egoism and a mania for power, indifference to the fate of their own cause, fanaticism, triviality, want of humor, buffoonery and irreverence. But they sound a certain note. Hence the great practical power of consistent radicals. To all appearance nobody follows them, yet everyone believes them. They hold a tuning-fork and sound A, and everybody knows it really is A, though the time-honored pitch is G flat. The community cannot get that A out of its head. Nothing can prevent an upward tendency in the popular tone so long as the real A is kept sounding.<sup>21</sup>

One should emphasize here the moment of passivity and immobility: in Kierkegaard's terms, a radical is not a creative genius but an apostle who just embodies and delivers a truth – he just goes on and on with repeating the same message (“class struggle goes on”; “capitalism engenders antagonisms”; etc. etc.), and although it may appear that nobody follows him, everyone believes him, i.e., everybody secretly knows he is telling the truth – which is why he is constantly accused “of the most incompatible crimes, of egoism and a mania for power, indifference to the fate of their own cause, fanaticism, triviality, want of humor, buffoonery and irreverence.” And what this means is that, in the choice between dignity and risking to appear a buffoon, a true political radical easily renounces dignity.

The motto that united the Turks who protested on Taksim Square was »Dignity!« – a good but ambiguous slogan. The term »dignity« is appropriate insofar as it makes it clear that protests are not just about particular material demands, but about the protesters' freedom and emancipation. In the case of Taksim Square protests, the call for dignity did not refer only to corruption and cheating; it was also and crucially directed against the patronizing ideology of the Turkish Prime Minister. The direct target of Gezi Park protests was neither neoliberal capitalism

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engagement means: in 1887, when he was a law student, Chapman assaulted and beat a man for insulting his girlfriend, Minna Timmins; tormented by remorse, he punished himself for this act by putting his left hand into fire - it was so badly burnt that it had to be amputated.

21 John Jay Chapman, *Practical Agitation*, New York: Charles Scribner & Sons 1900, p. 63-64.

nor Islamism, but the personality of Erdoğan: the demand was for *him* to step down – why? Which of his features was experienced as so annoying that it made him the target of secular educated protesters as well as of the anti-capitalist Muslim youth, the object of a hatred that fused them together? Here is Bülent Somay's explanation:

Everybody wanted *PM Erdoğan* to resign. Because, many activists explained both during and after the Resistance, he was constantly meddling with their lifestyles, telling women to have at least three children, telling them not to have C-sections, not to have abortions, telling people not to drink, not to smoke, not to hold hands in public, to be obedient and religious. He was constantly telling them what was best for them ('shop and pray'). This was probably the best indication of the neo-liberal ('shop') soft-Islamic ('pray') character of the JDP rule: PM Erdoğan's utopia for Istanbul (and we should remember that he was the Mayor of Istanbul for four years) was a huge shopping mall and a huge mosque in Taksim Square and Gezi Park. He had become 'Daddy Knows Best' in all avenues of life, and tried to do this in a clumsy patronising disguise, which was quickly discarded during Gezi events to reveal the profoundly authoritarian character behind the image.<sup>22</sup>

Is "shop and pray" not a perfect late-capitalist version of the old Christian *ora et labora*, with the identity of a worker (toiling peasant) replaced by a consumer? The underlying wager is, of course, that praying (a codename for the fidelity to old communal traditions) makes us even better "shoppers," i.e., participants in the global capitalist market. However, the call for dignity is not only a protest against such patronizing injunction to »shop and pray«; dignity is also the appearance of dignity, and in this case the demand for dignity means that I want to be duped and controlled in such a way that proper appearances are maintained, that I don't lose my face – is this not a key feature of our democracies? Walter Lippmann, the icon of American journalism in the XXth century, played a key role in the self-understanding of the US democracy; in *Public Opinion* (1922)<sup>23</sup>, he wrote that a "governing class" must rise to face the

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<sup>22</sup> Bülent Somay, »*L'Orient n'existe pas*« (doctoral thesis, Birkbeck School of Law, London 2013).

<sup>23</sup> See Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*, Charleston: BiblioLife 2008.

challenge - he saw the public as Plato did, a great beast or a bewildered herd – floundering in the “chaos of local opinions.” So the herd of citizens must be governed by “a specialized class whose interests reach beyond the locality” – this elite class is to act as a machinery of knowledge that circumvents the primary defect of democracy, the impossible ideal of the “omni-competent citizen”. This is how our democracies function – with our consent: there is no mystery in what Lippmann was saying, it is an obvious fact; the mystery is that, knowing it, we play the game. We act *as if* we are free and freely deciding, silently not only accepting but even *demanding* that an invisible injunction (inscribed into the very form of our free speech) tells us what to do and think. As Marx knew it long ago, the secret is in the form itself. In this sense, in a democracy, every ordinary citizen effectively is a king – but a king in a constitutional democracy, a king who only formally decides, whose function is to sign measures proposed by executive administration. This is why the problem of democratic rituals is homologous to the big problem of constitutional democracy: how to protect the dignity of the king? How to maintain the appearance that the king effectively decides, when we all know this is not true? What we call “crisis of democracy” does not occur when people stop believing in their own power, but, on the contrary, when they stop trusting the elites, those who are supposed to know for them and provide the guidelines, when they experience the anxiety signaling that “the (true) throne is empty,” that the decision is now *really* theirs. There is, thus, in “free elections” always a minimal aspect of politeness: those in power politely pretend that they do not really hold power, and ask us to freely decide if we want to give them power - in a way which mirrors the logic of a gesture meant to be refused. So, back to Turkey, is it only this type of dignity that the protesters want, tired as they are of the primitive and openly direct way they are cheated and manipulated? Is their demand “We want to be cheated in a proper way, make at least an honest effort to cheat us without insulting our intelligence!”, or is it really more? If we aim at more, then we should be aware that the first step of liberation is to get rid of the appearance of false freedom and to openly proclaim our unfreedom. Say, the first step towards feminine liberation is to throw off the appearance of the respect for women and to openly proclaim that women are oppressed – today's master more than ever doesn't want to appear as master.<sup>24</sup>

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24 When, in the Summer of 2013, Western European states grounded Evo Morales' presidential plane with which he was returning from Moscow to Bolivia, suspecting that Edward Snowden was hidden in it on his way to the Bolivian exile, the most humiliating aspect was the Europeans' attempt to retain



## Towards a new Master

In the very last pages of his monumental *Second World War*, Winston Churchill ponders on the enigma of a military decision: after the specialists (economic and military analysts, psychologists, meteorologists...) propose their multiple, elaborated and refined analysis, somebody must assume the simple and for that very reason most difficult act of transposing this complex multitude, where for every reason for there are two reasons against, into a simple “Yes” or “No” - we shall attack, we continue to wait... This gesture which can never be fully grounded in reasons, is that of a Master. It is for the experts to present the situation in its complexity, and it is for the Master to simplify it into a point of decision.

Such a figure of a Master is needed especially in situations of deep crisis. The function of a Master here is to enact an authentic division – a division between those who want to drag on within the old parameters and those who are aware of the necessary change. President Obama is often accused of dividing the American people instead of bringing them all together to find broad bi-partisan solutions – but what if this, precisely, is what is good about him? In situations of deep crisis, an authentic division is urgently needed – a division between those who want to drag on within the old parameters and those who are aware of the necessary change. Such a division, not the opportunistic compromises, is the only path to true unity. Let us take an example which surely is not problematic: France in 1940. Even Jacques Duclos, the second man of the French Communist Party, admitted in a private conversation that if, at that point in time, free elections were to be held in France, Marshal Petain would have won with 90% of the votes. When de Gaulle, in his historic act, refused to acknowledge the capitulation to Germans and continued to resist, he claimed that it is only he, not the Vichy regime, who speaks on behalf of the true France (on behalf of true France as such, not only on behalf of the “majority of the French”!), what he was saying was deeply true even if it was “democratically” not only without legitimization, but clearly opposed to the opinion of the majority of the French people... And Margaret Thatcher, the “lady who is not for turning,” WAS such a Master sticking to her decision which was at first perceived as crazy, gradually

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their dignity: instead of openly admitting that they were acting under US pressure, or pretending that they simply followed the law, they justified the grounding on pure technicalities, claiming that the flight was not properly registered in their air traffic control. The effect was miserable – European not only appeared as US servants, they even wanted to cover up their servitude with ridiculous technicalities.



elevating her singular madness into an accepted norm. When Thatcher was asked about her greatest achievement, she promptly answered: “The New Labor.” And she was right: her triumph was that even her political enemies adopted her basic economic policies – the true triumph is not the victory over the enemy, it occurs when the enemy itself starts to use your language, so that your ideas form the foundation of the entire field.

So what remains today of Thatcher’s legacy today? Neoliberal hegemony is clearly falling apart. The only solution is to repeat Thatcher’s gesture in the opposite direction. Thatcher was perhaps the only true Thatcherite – she clearly believed in her ideas. Today’s neoliberalism, on the contrary, “only imagines that it believes in itself and demands that the world should imagine the same thing” (to quote Marx). In short, today, cynicism is openly on display. Recall again the cruel joke from Lubitch’s *To Be Or Not to Be*: when asked about the German concentration camps in the occupied Poland, the responsible Nazi officer “concentration camp Erhardt” snaps back: “We do the concentrating, and the Poles do the camping.” Does the same not hold for the Enron bankruptcy in January 2002 (as well as all financial meltdowns that followed), which can be interpreted as a kind of ironic commentary on the notion of risk society? Thousands of employees who lost their jobs and savings were certainly exposed to a risk, but without any true choice - the risk appeared to them as a blind fate. Those, on the contrary, who effectively did have an insight into the risks as well as a possibility to intervene in the situation (the top managers), minimized their risks by cashing in their stocks and options before the bankruptcy – so it is true that we live in a society of risky choices, but ones (the Wall Street managers) do the choosing, while others (the common people paying mortgages) do the risking...

As we have already pointed out, one of the weird consequences of the financial meltdown and the measures taken to counteract it (enormous sums of money to help banks) was the revival in the work of Ayn Rand, the closest one can come to the ideologist of the “greed is good” radical capitalism – the sales of her *magnum opus Atlas Shrugged* exploded again. According to some reports, there are already signs that the scenario described in *Atlas Shrugged* – the creative capitalists themselves going on strike – is enacted. John Campbell, a Republican congressman, said: “The achievers are going on strike. I’m seeing, at a small level, a kind of protest from the people who create jobs /.../ who are pulling back from their ambitions because they see how they’ll be punished for them.” The ridicule of this reaction is that it totally misreads the situation: most of

the gigantic sums of bail-out money is going precisely to the Randian deregulated “titans” who failed in their “creative” schemes and thereby brought about the meltdown. It is not the great creative geniuses who are now helping lazy ordinary people, it is the ordinary taxpayers who are helping the failed “creative geniuses.”

The other aspect of Thatcher’s legacy targeted by her Leftist critics was her “authoritarian” form of leadership: her lack of the sense for democratic coordination. Here, however, things are more complex than it may appear. The ongoing popular protests around Europe converge in a series of demands which, in their very spontaneity and obviousness, form a kind of “epistemological obstacle” to the proper confrontation with the ongoing crisis of our political system. These effectively read as a popularized version of Deleuzian politics: people know what they want, they are able to discover and formulate this, but only through their own continuous engagement and activity, so we need active participatory democracy, not just representative democracy with its electoral ritual which every four years interrupts the voters’ passivity; we need the self-organization of the multitude, not a centralized Leninist Party with the Leader... It is this myth of non-representative direct self-organization which is the last trap, the deepest illusion that should fall, that is most difficult to renounce. Yes, there are, in every revolutionary process, ecstatic moments of group solidarity when thousands, hundreds of thousands, together occupy a public place, like in Tahrir square 2 years ago; yes, there are moments of intense collective participation where local communities debate and decide, when people live in a kind of permanent emergency state, taking things into their own hands, with no Leader guiding them... but such states don’t last, and “tiredness” is here not a simple psychological fact, it is a category of social ontology. The large majority – me included – WANTS to be passive and just rely on an efficient state apparatus to guarantee the smooth running of the entire social edifice, so that I can pursue my work in peace. Walter Lippmann wrote in his *Public Opinion* (1922) that the herd of citizens must be governed by “a specialized class whose interests reach beyond the locality” – this elite class is to act as a machinery of knowledge that circumvents the primary defect of democracy, the impossible ideal of the “omni-competent citizen”. This is how our democracies function – with our consent: there is no mystery in what Lippmann was saying, it is an obvious fact; the mystery is that, knowing it, we play the game. We act as *if* we are free and freely deciding, silently not only accepting but even

*demanding* that an invisible injunction (inscribed into the very form of our free speech) tells us what to do and think. “People know what they want” – no, they don’t, and they don’t want to know it, they need a good elite, which is why a proper politician does not only advocate people’s interests, it is through him that they discover what they “really want.”

Following the spirit of today’s ideology which demands the shift from traditional hierarchy, a pyramid-like subordination to a Master, to pluralizing rhizomatic networks, political analysts like to point out that the new anti-globalist protests all around Europe and US, from OWS to Greece and Spain, have no central agency, no Central Committee, coordinating their activity – there are just multiple groups interacting, mostly through new media like Facebook or Twitter, and coordinating their activity spontaneously. This is why, when the police apparatuses of power look for the secret organizing committees, they miss the point – in the Slovene capital Ljubljana, 10000 protesters gathered in front of the Parliament and proudly proclaimed: “The protest is attended by 10000 organizers.” But is this “molecular” spontaneous self-organization really the most efficient new form of “resistance”? Is it not that<sup>25</sup> the opposite side, especially capital, already acts more and more as what Deleuzian theory calls the post-Oedipal multitude? Power itself has to enter a dialogue at this level, answering twitter with twitter – Pope and prime ministers are now on Twitter. Plus those in power know how to use the web to spread obscene rumors which they cannot afford to put in circulation officially – but if an anonymous twitter makes some hints... We should not be afraid to go the end in this line of reasoning: the opposition between centralized-hierarchic vertical power and horizontal multitudes is inherent to the existing social and political order, none of the two is a priori “better” or more “progressive.”<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, as to the molecular self-organizing multitude, against the hierarchic order sustained by the reference to a charismatic Leader,

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25 As Wendy Brown noted at a public debate at Birkbeck College.

26 As to “direct democracy,” the case of Switzerland often mentioned in this context is instructive: Switzerland is often celebrated as “the closest state in the world to direct democracy,” yet it is precisely because of its forms of “direct democracy” (referenda, local people’s initiatives, etc.) that Switzerland gave vote to women only in 1971, that it prohibited construction of minarets a couple of years ago, that it resists naturalization of immigrant workers, etc. Plus the way a referendum is organized has a peculiarity: together with the paper on which to write one’s decision, each voter gets a leaflet containing the government’s “suggestion” about how to vote. Not to mention the fact that Switzerland, this model of direct democracy, has one of the most non-transparent mechanisms of decision-making: big strategic decisions are made by councils out of public debate and control.

note the irony of the fact that Venezuela, a country praised by many for its attempts to develop modes of direct democracy (local councils, cooperatives, workers running factories), is also a country whose president was Hugo Chavez, a strong charismatic Leader if there ever was one. It is as if the Freudian rule of transference is at work here also: in order for the individuals to “reach beyond themselves,” to break out of the passivity of representative politics and engage themselves as direct political agents, the reference to a Leader is necessary, a Leader who allows them to pull themselves out of the swamp like Baron Munchhausen, a Leader who is “supposed to know” what they want. This is why, in their book of dialogues, Alain Badiou and Elisabeth Roudinesco were right to point out how horizontal networking does undermine the classic Master, but it simultaneously breeds new forms of domination which are much stronger than the classic Master; Badiou's thesis is that a subject needs a Master to elevate itself above the “human animal” and to practice fidelity to a Truth-Event:

*“Roudinesco – In the last resort, what was lost in psychoanalytic societies is the position of the Master to the benefit of the position of small bosses.*

*Aeschimann – What do you mean by ‘master’?*

*Roudinesco – The position of the master allows transference: the psychoanalyst is ‘supposed to know’ what the analysand will discover. Without this knowledge attributed to the psychoanalyst, the search for the origin of suffering is quasi impossible.*

*Aeschimann – Do we really have to go through the restoration of the master?*

*Badiou – The master is the one who helps the individual to become subject. That is to say, if one admits that the subject emerges in the tension between the individual and the universality, then it is obvious that the individual needs a mediation, and thereby an authority, in order to progress on this path. The crisis of the master is a logical consequence of the crisis of the subject, and psychoanalysis did not escape it. One has to renew the position of the master, it is not true that one can do without it, even and especially in the perspective of emancipation.*

*Roudinesco – When the master disappears, he is replaced by the boss, by his authoritarianism, and sooner or later this always ends in*

fascism – unfortunately, history has proven this to us.«

And Badiou is not afraid to oppose the necessary role of the Master to our “democratic” sensitivity:

I am convinced that one has to reestablish the capital function of leaders in the Communist process, whichever its stage. Two crucial episodes in which the leadership was insufficient were the Paris Commune (no worthy leader, with the exception of Dombrowski in the strictly military domain) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (Mao too old and tired, and the ‘group of the GPCR’ infected by ultra-Leftism). This was a severe lesson.

This capital function of leaders is not compatible with the predominant ‘democratic’ ambience, which is why I am engaged in a bitter struggle against this ambience (after all, one has to begin with ideology). When I am dealing with people whose jargon is Lacanian I say ‘a figure of Master.’ When they are militants I say ‘dictatorship’ (in the sense of Carl Schmitt). When they are workers I say ‘leader of a crowd,’ and so on. It is so that I am quickly understood.<sup>27</sup>

But is this effectively the case? Is the only alternative to the Master the (potentially “totalitarian”) “boss”? In psychoanalysis, Master is by definition an impostor, and the whole point of the analytic process is to dissolve the transference to the Master *qua* “subject supposed to know” – the conclusion of analysis involves the fall of the subject-supposed-to-know. While Jacques-Alain Miller (as an analyst) endorses this fall, he nonetheless agrees with Badiou that the domain of the politics is the domain of the discourse of the Master; their difference resides in the fact that, while Badiou opts for full engagement, Miller advocates a cynical distance towards the Master: a psychoanalyst

occupies the position of ironist who takes care not to intervene into the political field. He acts so that semblances remain at their places while making it sure that subjects under his care do

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27      Personal communication (April 2013).

not take them for *real*. /.../ one should somehow bring oneself to remain *taken in by them* (fooled by them). Lacan could say that 'those who are not taken in err': if one doesn't act as if semblances are real, if one doesn't leave their efficiency undisturbed, things turn for the worse.<sup>28</sup>

One should reject this shared premise: the axiom of radical emancipatory politics is that Master is NOT the ultimate horizon of our social life, that one can form a collective not held together by a Master figure. Without this axiom, there is no Communist politics proper but just pragmatic ameliorations of the existing order. However, we should at the same time follow the lesson of psychoanalysis: the only path to liberation leads through transference, and this is why figure of a Master is unavoidable. So we should fearlessly follow Badiou's suggestion: in order to effectively awaken individuals from their dogmatic "democratic slumber," from their blind reliance on institutionalized forms of representative democracy, appeals to direct self-organization are not enough, a new figure of the Master is needed. Recall the famous lines from Arthur Rimbaud's "*A une raison*" ("To a Reason"):

A tap of your finger on the drum releases all sounds and initiates the new harmony.

A step of yours is the conscription of the new men and their marching orders.

You look away: the new love!

You look back, — the new love!

There is absolutely nothing inherently "Fascist" in these lines – the supreme paradox of the political dynamics is that a Master is needed to pull individuals out of the quagmire of their inertia and motivate them towards self-transcending emancipatory struggle for freedom. What we need today, in this situation, is thus a Thatcher of the Left: a leader who would repeat Thatcher's gesture in the opposite direction, transforming the entire field of presuppositions shared by today's political elite of all main orientations. This is also why we should reject the ideology of what

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted from Nicolas Fleury, *Le reel insense. Introduction a la pensee de Jacques-Alain Miller*, Paris: Germina 2010, p. 93-94.

Saroj Giri called “anarchic horizontalism,” the distrust of all hierarchic structures, of the very idea of “vanguard” when one part of a progressive movement assumes leadership and mobilizes other parts:

If consensus and horizontalism are not to remain stuck in nursing quasi-liberal egos, then we must be able to delineate how they can contribute towards a more substantive notion of politics – one which involves a verticalism. Perhaps this would be a better way to revive a communist politics instead of taking politically correct vows of horizontalism and consensus.<sup>29</sup>

Giri takes the example of the Spokes Council in Oakland OWS movement, as a body separate from the General Assembly, “a separate body, which was not to be confused with the movement, taking key decisions and implementing them: was this (incipient) verticalism violating democratic decision making or was it the natural working of horizontalism, giving us a verticalism which is the unfolding of horizontalism, horizontalism’s truth? [...] *the minority providing the line of march to the movement does not amount to a reified subjectivity.*”<sup>30</sup> The same goes for so-called “extreme” tactics which can be counterproductive, but they can also radicalize a broad circle of supporters: “such practices that are the actions of a radical minority do not lead to disunity but to a higher revolutionary unity.”<sup>31</sup>

### “The right of distress”

So what is the elementary gesture of this Master? Surprisingly, Hegel pointed out the way here - let us begin with his account of the “right of distress Hegel pointed the way here in his account of the “right of distress (*Notrecht*)”<sup>32</sup>:

29 Saroj Giri, “Communism, Occupy and the Question of Form,” *Ephemera* volume 13(3), p. 594.

30 Giri, op.cit., p. 595.

31 Op.cit., p. 590.

32 I owe this reference to Hegel's *Notrecht* to Costas Douzinas who developed it in his intervention “The Right to Revolution?” at the Hegel-colloquium *The Actuality of the Absolute* organized by the Birkbeck School of Law in London, May 10-12 2013. Passages from Hegel's Philosophy of Right are quoted from [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/prconten.html](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/prconten.html).

“§ 127 The particularity of the interests of the natural will, taken in their entirety as a single whole, is personal existence or life. In extreme danger and in conflict with the rightful property of someone else, this life may claim (as a right, not a mercy) a right of distress [*Notrecht*], because in such a situation there is on the one hand an infinite injury to a man’s existence and the consequent loss of rights altogether, and on the other hand only an injury to a single restricted embodiment of freedom, and this implies a recognition both of right as such and also of the injured man’s capacity for rights, because the injury affects only this property of his.

*Remark:* The right of distress is the basis of *beneficium competentiae* whereby a debtor is allowed to retain of his tools, farming implements, clothes, or, in short, of his resources, i.e. of his creditor’s property, so much as is regarded as indispensable if he is to continue to support life – to support it, of course, on his own social level.

*Addition:* Life as the sum of ends has a right against abstract right. If for example it is only by stealing bread that the wolf can be kept from the door, the action is of course an encroachment on someone’s property, but it would be wrong to treat this action as an ordinary theft. To refuse to allow a man in jeopardy of his life to take such steps for self-preservation would be to stigmatize him as without rights, and since he would be deprived of his life, his freedom would be annulled altogether. /.../

§ 128 This distress reveals the finitude and therefore the contingency of both right and welfare of right as the abstract embodiment of freedom without embodying the particular person, and of welfare as the sphere of the particular will without the universality of right.

Hegel does not talk here about humanitarian considerations which should temper our legalistic zeal (if an impoverished father steals bread to feed his starving child, we should show mercy and understanding even if he broke the law...). The partisans of such an approach which constrains its zeal to fighting suffering while leaving intact the economic-legal edifice within which this suffering takes place, “only demonstrate that, for all their bloodthirsty, mock-humanist yelping, they regard the social



conditions in which the bourgeoisie is dominant as the final product, the *non plus ultra* of history» - Marx's old characterization which perfectly fits today's humanitarians like Bill Gates. What Hegel talks about is a basic legal right, a right which is as a *right* superior to other particular legal rights. In other words, we are not dealing simply with the conflict between the demands of life and the constraints of the legal system of rights, but with a right (to life) that overcomes all formal rights, i.e., with a *conflict inherent to the sphere of rights*, a conflict which is unavoidable and *necessary* insofar as it serves as an indication of the finitude, inconsistency, and "abstract" character of the system of legal rights as such. "To refuse to allow a man in jeopardy of his life to take such steps for self-preservation /like stealing the food necessary for his survival/ would be to *stigmatize him as without rights*" – so, again, the point is not that the punishment for justified stealing would deprive the subject of his life, but that it would exclude him from the domain of rights, i.e., that it would reduce him to bare life outside the domain of law, of the legal order. In other words, this refusal deprives the subject of his very *right to have rights*. Furthermore, the quoted *Remark* applies this logic to the situation of a debtor, claiming that he should be allowed to retain of his resources so much as is regarded as indispensable if he is to continue with his life not just at the level of bare survival, but "on his own social level" – a claim that is today fully relevant with regard to the situation of the impoverished majority in the indebted states like Greece. However, the key question here is: can we universalize this "right of distress," extending it to an entire social class and its acts against the property of another class? Although Hegel does not directly address this question, a positive answer imposes itself from Hegel's description of "rabble" as a group/class whose exclusion from the domain of social recognition is *systematic*: "§ 244, *Addition*: Against nature man can claim no right, but once society is established, poverty immediately takes the form of a wrong done to one class by another." In such a situation in which a whole class of people is systematically pushed beneath the level of dignified survival, to refuse to allow them to take "steps for self-preservation" (which, in this case, can only mean the open rebellion against the established legal order) is to *stigmatize them as without rights*. In short, what we get in such a reading of Hegel is nothing less than a Maoist Hegel, a Hegel which is telling us what Mao was telling to the young at the outset of the Cultural Revolution: "*It is right to rebel!*" This is the lesson of a true Master.

A true Master is not an agent of discipline and prohibition, his message is not “You cannot!”, also not “You have to...!”, but a releasing »You can!« - what? Do the impossible, i.e., what appears impossible within the coordinates of the existing constellation – and today, this means something very precise: you can think beyond capitalism and liberal democracy as the ultimate framework of our lives. A Master is a vanishing mediator who gives you back to yourself, who delivers you to the abyss of your freedom: when we listen to a true leader, we discover what we want (or, rather, what we always-already wanted without knowing it). A Master is needed because we cannot accede to our freedom directly – for gain this access we have to be pushed from outside since our “natural state” is one of inert hedonism, of what Badiou called “human animal.” The underlying paradox is here that the more we live as “free individuals with no Master,” the more we are effectively non-free, caught within the existing frame of possibilities – we have to be pushed/ disturbed into freedom by a Master.

There was a trace of this authentic Master’s call even in Obama’s motto from his first presidential campaign: “Yes, we can!” A new possibility was thereby opened – but, one might say, did Hitler also not do something formally similar? Was his message to the German people not “Yes, we can...” – kill the Jews, squash democracy, act in a racist way, attack other nations? A closer analysis immediately brings out the difference: far from being an authentic Master, Hitler was a populist demagogue who carefully played upon people’s obscure desires. It may seem that, in doing this, Hitler followed Steve Jobs’ infamous motto: »A lot of times, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them.« However, in spite of all one has to criticize in the activity of Jobs, he was close to an authentic Master in how he understood his motto. When he was asked how much inquiry into what customers want Apple uses, he snapped back: »None. It’s not the customers’ job to know what they want... we figure out what we want.«<sup>33</sup> Note the surprising turn of this argumentation: after denying that customers know what they want, Jobs doesn’t go on with the expected direct reversal “it is our task (the

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33 In India, thousands of impoverished intellectual workers are employed in what is ironically called “like-farms”: they are (miserably) paid to seat the whole day in front of a computer and endlessly press the button “like” on pages which ask the visitors or customers to click on “like” or “dislike” for a product in question. In this way, a product can artificially appear as very popular and thereby seduce ignorant prospective customers into buying it (or at least checking-up on it), following the logic of “there must be something in it if so many customers are satisfied by it” – so much about the reliability of customer reactions... (I owe this information to Saroj Giri, New Delhi.)

task of creative capitalists) to figure out what customers want and then ‘show it to them’ on the market.” Instead, he continues “we figure out what we want” – this is how a true Master works: he doesn’t try to guess what people want; he simply obeys his own desire so that it is to the people to decide if they will follow him. In other words, his power stems from his fidelity to his desire, from not compromising it. Therein resides the difference between a true Master and, say, a Stalinist leader who pretends to know (better than the people themselves) what people really want (what is really good for them), and is then ready to enforce this on them even against their will.

Hegel’s solution to the deadlock of the Master – to have a Master (like a King) reduced to its Name, a purely symbolic authority totally dissociated of all actual qualifications for his job, a monarch whose only function is to sign his name on proposals prepared by experts – should not be confused with the cynical stance of “let’s have a master about whom we know he is an idiot” – one cannot cheat in this way since one has to make a choice: either we really don’t take the master figure seriously (and in this case the master simply doesn’t function performatively), or we take the master seriously in our acts in spite of our direct conscious irony (which can go up to actually despising the master). In the latter case, we are simply dealing with a case of disavowal, of “I know very well, but...”: our ironic distance is part of the transferential relation to the master figure, it functions as a subjective illusion enabling us to effectively endure the master, i.e., we pretend not to take the master seriously so that we can endure the fact that the master really is our master.

A similar mechanism of cheating is to accept the need for the figure of a political master, but to claim that such a figure should only be allowed to rise up after a process of collective deliberation: the master cannot directly be called to bring the solution when people find themselves in a deadlock – in such a case we only get a dictator who himself doesn’t really know what to do. People first have to unite their will around a determinate project, only then can they allow a master-like figure to lead them along the way outlined in their project... Logical as it may appear to be, such a notion as it were puts the cart ahead of the horse: a true leader does not do what people want or plan; he tells the people what they want, it is only through him that they realize what they want. Therein resides the act of a true political leader: after listening to him, people all of a sudden realize what they always-already knew

they wanted, it clarifies to them their own position, it enables them to recognize themselves, their own innermost need, in the project he proposes to them.



# **Socialist Democracy with Chinese Characteristics**

**Roland Boer**

Socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics: does it exist today and, if so, how does it work? I have of course glossed the phrase “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” coined by Deng Xiaoping in 1982.<sup>1</sup> This slogan has generated its own controversy, with some decrying it as a screen for reintroducing capitalism and others seeing it as a consistent development of Mao’s emphasis on the “sinification” of Marxism.<sup>2</sup> That is not my direct concern here, although I do wish to keep open the ambiguity of the term, for it signals the sheer experiment that continues in China and is part of the immense complexity of constructing communism once one has seized power.

As for “socialist democracy,” the choice is quite deliberate, for it seeks to counter two common rhetorical moves made by proponents of bourgeois democracy. The first is to remove the epithet, to speak of “democracy” as a universal human right. As Lenin pointed out some time ago, this universalisation of “democracy” and “freedom” conceals the specific class and national interests of those who advocate it. That such “democracy,” along with “freedom,” is an imperialising slogan should be obvious, a slogan besmirched with the hypocrisy of its proponents and met with cynicism by those subjected to the propaganda.<sup>3</sup> The second move is to propose that “Chinese democracy” is opposed to the realities of China. In this sense, it is the catch-all name of a disparate movement,

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1 “In carrying out our modernization programme we must proceed from Chinese realities. Both in revolution and in construction we should also learn from foreign countries and draw on their experience, but mechanical application of foreign experience and copying of foreign models will get us nowhere. We have had many lessons in this respect. We must integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete realities of China, blaze a path of our own and build a socialism with Chinese characteristics – that is the basic conclusion we have reached after reviewing our long history.” Deng 1982.

2 “China must assimilate on a large scale the progressive culture of foreign countries, as an ingredient for enriching its own culture. Not enough of this was done in the past. We should assimilate whatever is useful to us today not only from the present-day socialist and new-democratic cultures but also from the older cultures of foreign countries, for example, from the culture of the various capitalist countries in the Age of Enlightenment. However, we absolutely cannot gulp down any of this foreign material uncritically, but must treat it as we do our food—first chewing it in the mouth, then subjecting it to the working of the stomach and intestines with their juices and secretions, and separating it into essences to be absorbed and waste matter to be discarded—before it can nourish us. So-called wholesale Westernization is wrong. China has suffered a great deal in the past from the formalist absorption of foreign things. Similarly, in applying Marxism to China, Chinese Communists must fully and properly integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution, or, in other words, the universal truth of Marxism must have a national form if it is to be useful, and in no circumstances can it be applied subjectively as a mere formula.” Mao 1940 [2005]-c, pp. 367–68. The debate over scientification/Westernisation versus sinification/indigenisation continues in political science today; see Guo 2013. See also Kluver 1996, p. 63.

3 “In a word, the insistence on democratization for all, and right now, has led to a clichéd intoning of the words freedom, human rights, and democracy, which provide ever more ragged clothing for the export of formulaic Western political values throughout the world.” Ogden 2007, p. 50.

of a theoretical elaboration, of a situation that is yet to come. The effect is to characterise China as “undemocratic.” Dictatorial, totalitarian, despotic – these and other terms do their best to ensure that democracy and modern China are kept as far apart as possible.<sup>4</sup>

My agenda is quite different, for I wish to explore the subtle issue of socialist democracy, with the epithet and with a focus on China. The following argument has three stages, the first of which reprises Lenin’s core reflections on democracy and freedom, of both bourgeois and socialist types. The second investigates the core texts by Mao Zedong, particularly “On New Democracy” and “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship.”<sup>5</sup> I distinguish three key categories: new democracy, democratic centralism, and democratic dictatorship, each of which is not yet socialist democracy. With these categories in mind, I explore, finally, whether any of them are still relevant in contemporary China. Here we find that democratic centralism remains the official position, albeit still on the path to socialism. Not convinced, I ask what this means both for Mao’s own analysis and for socialist democracy itself. Is it perhaps multiple, appearing in various forms, rather than singular and yet to come?

### **Lenin and the Partisanship of Democratic Freedom**

I begin with the Lenin, for in many ways he sets the scene for the development of Mao’s thoughts on democracy. Lenin offers the first effort to redefine democratic freedom after a successful communist revolution. The key is real or actual freedom, which is the ability to effect “*radical* change in the entire political system.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, a crucial question remains: what happens after the exercise of real freedom, after the revolution? The beginning of an answer is that the revolution is not merely the moment – with however long a process leading up to that moment – when the old order has been overthrown and power has been seized by the revolutionaries. It includes that vital and far more difficult period after the

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4 Fung 2000; Wu 2013. For a telling counter, see Wang 2006; Ogden 2007.

5 Mao 1940 [2005]-c, 1949 [1961]-b.

6 Lenin 1912 [1964], p. 418. This is over against formal freedom, in which freedom is constituted by systematic exclusions generated by the unexamined framework of the bourgeois system. Both Lenin and Trotsky deployed this terminology: Lenin 1918 [1965]-b, p. 74, 1918 [1965]-c, p. 246, 1919 [1965]-e, p. 380, 1919 [1966], pp. 111-12, 1920 [1965], p. 408, 1920 [1966]-a, p. 145, 1920 [1966]-b, pp. 393, 395; Trotsky 1976, pp. 113-14.



revolutionary overthrow when all things have to be made anew.<sup>7</sup>

The full answer requires a through reformulation of real freedom and democracy. A beginning may be made with what at first may appear to be a jarring juxtaposition: democratic freedom is partisan. Is this not precisely the accusation hurled at the bourgeoisie, that their prattle about “freedom” conceals specific class interests? Does it not become another version of formal freedom? Not at all, but let us see why. Already in 1905, Lenin wrote, “They who serve the cause of freedom in general without serving the specific cause of proletarian utilisation of this freedom, the cause of turning the freedom to account in the proletarian struggle for socialism, are, in the final analysis, plainly and simply, fighters for the interests of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>8</sup> This is a bold claim: “freedom in general” is to serve the cause of proletarian freedom, for only in this way will actual freedom be realised.

Six factors play a role in Lenin’s argument.

1) In the appropriation of Western political terminology during the revolutionary process after February 1917, “democracy” became associated with the labouring masses of workers and peasants, who were the “people” (*demos* and thereby *narod*). The opposite of democracy was not the autocracy or dictatorship, but the classes of the old aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Thus, terms such as “democratic elements,” “democratic classes,” “revolutionary democracy”, along with “democracy” itself, had distinct class dimensions. Democracy thereby became synonymous with the range of socialist parties, while those of the bourgeoisie (Kadets) and the old aristocracy (Octobrists and others) were anti-democratic.<sup>9</sup> Lenin played no small part in that process of redefinition, which brings me to the second point concerning concealment:

2) Bourgeois claims to foster “pure democracy” or “freedom in general” conceal their class interest. By contrast, one must not conceal the partisan nature of proletarian freedom, for it is “*openly* linked to the proletariat.”<sup>10</sup>

7 As he observes already in 1916: “The socialist revolution is not one single act, not one single battle on a single front; but a whole epoch of intensified class conflicts, a long series of battles on all fronts, i.e., battles around all the problems of economics and politics, which can culminate only in the expropriation of the bourgeoisie.” Lenin 1916 [1964], p. 144.

8 Lenin 1905 [1963], p. 502.

9 Kolonitskii 2004.

10 Lenin 1905 [1966], p. 48. As Lenin writes in his exploratory notes for the Extraordinary Seventh

3) Bourgeois freedom is predicated on the individual, while proletarian freedom is collective. The catch here is that this supposed individuality of bourgeois freedom is in fact a collective position that is, once again, systematically concealed and denied. However, if one begins explicitly with the collective, then freedom begins to mean a very different type of freedom.

4) This apparently individual, bourgeois freedom operates within a society that holds as sacrosanct private property, a society “based on the power of money, in a society in which the masses of working people live in poverty and the handful of rich live like parasites.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, bourgeois freedom serves the cause of capitalism in which the vast majority are systematically denied freedom. The only viable form of freedom, a “freedom without inverted commas,” is that which emancipates labour from the yoke of capitalism and replaces it with a communist system.<sup>12</sup>

5) It is possible to use the terminology of universals: bourgeois freedom constitutes a false universal, based upon a particular which is concealed, namely the power of capital, while proletarian freedom is a genuine universal, based not upon greed or careerism but upon the interests of the vast majority that unites the best of the past's revolutionary traditions and the best of the present struggle for a new life.

6) Even this terminology becomes inadequate and falls away in light of the final point, which aligns with Lenin's argument in *The State and Revolution*.<sup>13</sup> Here he argues that since all freedoms are partisan and since proletarian freedom constitutes the only true freedom, freedom

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Congress of the Russian Communist Party in March, 1918: “‘Liberties’ and democracy *not* for all, but *for* the working and exploited masses, to emancipate them from exploitation; ruthless suppression of exploiters.” And in explanation, “NB: chief stress is shifted *from* formal *recognition* of liberties (such as existed under bourgeois parliamentarism) *to* actually ensuring the *enjoyment* of liberties by the working people who are overthrowing the exploiters, e.g., from *recognition* of freedom of assembly to the *handing over* of all the best halls and premises to the workers, from recognition of freedom of speech to the handing over of all the best printing presses to the workers, and so forth.” Lenin 1918 [1965]-a, p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> Lenin 1905 [1966], p. 48, 1919 [1965]-c, p. 354.

<sup>12</sup> Lenin 1906 [1962], p. 264, 1919 [1965]-c, p. 352.

<sup>13</sup> This argument may be formulated in five steps: 1) the state is the result of the irreconcilability of class conflict; 2) the state is a weapon, a special coercive force in the hands of bourgeoisie to oppress the workers; 3) given this nature of the state, the working class must smash the state apparatus; 4) in order to do so, it uses that apparatus to destroy the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie through the dictatorship of the proletariat; 5) only when that process is complete does the state begin to wither away. See Lenin 1917 [1964]-b, 1917 [1966], p. 102, 1919 [1965]-f, 1919 [1965]-a. See also his close integration of the argument from *The State and Revolution* and the argument concerning freedom and democracy: Lenin 1919 [1965]-d, pp. 457-67, 1919 [1965]-b, pp. 107-9, 1920 [1966]-b, pp. 392-96.

and democracy will themselves disappear with the construction of communism. In a (significantly parenthetical) observation, Lenin writes: “(Let us say in parenthesis that ‘pure democracy’ is not only an *ignorant* phrase, revealing a lack of understanding both of the class struggle and of the nature of the state, but also a thrice-empty phrase, since in communist society democracy will *wither away* in the process of changing and becoming a habit, but will never be ‘pure’ democracy).”<sup>14</sup> This comment follows his point that while classes exist there can only ever be class democracy rather than “pure” democracy. But why are the parentheses significant? They give voice to an as yet unrealised situation, after the bourgeois state, after bourgeois freedom and democracy have been destroyed. In that situation, not only does class conflict disappear and not only does the state wither away, but so also do freedom and democracy in the sense that they become not a goal to which one must strive but *an everyday habit*.

We may describe this argument as an effort to redefine freedom in a sense that is not bourgeois. The problem is that such a task had never been undertaken after a successful overthrow of bourgeois power, so Lenin and the communists found themselves in uncharted waters (and subject to intense criticism not only from the international bourgeoisie but many fellow socialists<sup>15</sup>). As he reiterated over and over, the actual seizure of power is the easy part, but the task of constructing communism is far more complex than anything that has gone before. Yermakov puts it well: “They were part of a search for a correct road to the unknown.”<sup>16</sup> And Lenin repeatedly reminds his fellow Bolsheviks of the many mistakes made, of the evils and “many sins” they have committed, of the need to try anew each time. As he writes in a New Year greeting in 1919: “Greetings and New Year salutations to the Communist group. With all my heart I wish that in the new year we shall all commit fewer stupidities than in the old.”<sup>17</sup>

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14 Lenin 1918 [1965]-c, p. 242.

15 Lenin 1919 [1965]-c, pp. 340, 350-53. Throughout 1917-23 (see the *Collected Works*, volume 26-33), Lenin returns again and again to this burning issue, especially in response to widespread international criticism of the apparent lack of freedom.

16 Yermakov 1975, p. 107. Lenin moves between the lapidary and the metaphoric: “It is no easy matter to create a socialist system” (Lenin 1918 [1965]-d, p. 77); “Our society is one which has left the rails of capitalism, but has not yet got on to new rails” (Lenin 1922 [1966], p. 278).

17 Lenin 1919 [1970], a p. 180.

## Mao and Democracy

These initial elaborations by Lenin set the theoretical context for Mao's own thoughts. I would like to focus on three dialectical (or at least near dialectical) features of Mao's writings on democracy: the redefinition of "new democracy"; democratic centralism; democratic dictatorship. These will then provide the heuristic framework for my reflections on socialist democracy in China today.

### *New Democracy*

New democracy marks Mao's effort to reshape, within the Marxist tradition, the understanding of the bourgeois revolutions and their resulting forms of bourgeois democracy. This issue had vexed the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in Russia, especially after the revolutions of 1905 when the tsar had conceded some ground and granted limited parliaments (Dumas). Should one now foster the fragile plant of bourgeois democracy, even allowing the bourgeoisie to take the lead, since it is the first stage that eventually leads to the socialist revolution? Most of the Mensheviks and a good number of Bolsheviks thought so, tied as they were to a fixed stages theory of revolution. Or should communists take the lead in the bourgeois revolution, pushing its contradictions and seizing the opportunity for a socialist revolution? Lenin certainly thought so, especially after his reengagement with Hegel in 1914.<sup>18</sup> The difference may be cast in terms of objective and subjective positions, with the former tending to objective historical unfolding and the latter to subjective intervention to recreate the very conditions under which such stages may be understood.

Mao takes this argument a step further, distinguishing between old bourgeois democracy and socialist democracy. In between appears new democracy, which begins as a mediation only to become a full dialectical argument. Old bourgeois democracy is that of the "mature" revolutions, those to be found in Western Europe and North America, while socialist democracy is in a process of becoming, not yet suitable for China. Mao wrote his two keynote pieces on new democracy in early 1940,<sup>19</sup> when the burning issue was a united front against the Japanese. In this context, new democracy was a clever political tactic to force the Guomintang to

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<sup>18</sup>The clearest statements are to be found in his *Letters from Afar* and *The April Theses*: Lenin 1917 [1964]-a, 1917 [1964]-c. The best studies on this matter are by Anderson 1995, pp. 123-70; Kouvelakis 2007; Bensaïd 2007. Note, however, my qualifications of those arguments through a careful study of all Lenin's texts on Hegel, in Boer 2013, pp. 103-33.

<sup>19</sup> Mao 1940 [2005]-c, 1940 [2005]-b.

alter its political shape in response to moves by the communist party to join all political groups in that united front. The result would be the first step on the path to a communist revolution and the overcoming of the Guomintang itself.

Now we come to Mao's dialectical point, astutely aware as it is of the conditions under which it is made. He begins with what appears an objective stages theory of revolution, in which a mature bourgeois revolution leads to a socialist one. But then he overturns it by means of the rhetorical strategy I noted earlier, distinguishing between old bourgeois and socialist democracy. New democracy cuts a new path: it is not the older style that leads to the dead-end of bourgeois democracy. That is the outcome of any policy that gives the treacherous bourgeoisie space to consolidate their revolution, a consolidation that involves supporting workers and peasants when it suits them, but then betraying them at the moment power is attained.<sup>20</sup> Instead, new democracy seizes the bourgeois revolution and turns it into the first step to socialism, precisely because the communist party leads this initial revolution. The initial idea may be Lenin's, but the clarity and strengthening of this argument comes from Mao. He goes yet a step further: "Without communism to guide it, China's democratic revolution cannot possibly succeed, let alone move on to the next stage."<sup>21</sup> That is, the democratic revolution has no hope of getting off the ground without communist leadership.

Instead of an opposition between bourgeois democracy and socialist democracy, with the latter trumping the former, Mao encircles the former and claims it for communism. He may identify the moment of that turning with communist leadership after the May Fourth Movement, he may even urge new democracy as multiparty governance aimed at confronting the Japanese, but he has turned the bourgeois democratic revolution into part of the communist agenda. This is not through an objective stages theory, but through a subjective reshaping of the conditions by which we understand bourgeois democracy.

### *Democratic Centralism*

Initially, Mao's reflections on democratic centralism may seem less dialectical, even though they have more far-reaching implications. Democratic centralism seeks to bring together "in a certain form" the

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20 Marx 1850 [1978]; Mao 1940 [2005]-c, pp. 348-49.

21 Mao 1940 [2005]-c, p. 350. See also Mao 1937 [1999]-b, pp. 645-46, 1937 [1999]-a, pp. 654-55.

two seeming opposites of democracy and centralization.<sup>22</sup> How so?

There is no impassable gulf between democracy and centralism, both of which are essential for China. On the one hand, the government we are asking for must be able truly to represent the popular will; it must be supported and embraced by the broad masses throughout the country, and the people certainly must be free to support it and have every opportunity to influence the government's policies. This is the meaning of democracy. On the other hand, the centralization of administrative power is also necessary, and once the policies demanded by the people are handed over to their own elected government through their representative body, the government will carry them out and will certainly be able to do so smoothly, so long as it does not go against the general policy line adopted in accordance with the people's will. This is the meaning of centralism.<sup>23</sup>

This lapidary description makes sense only with a couple of crucial assumptions. Mao does not mean here bourgeois democracy, with its pseudo political parties that are actually factions of the same party. Rather, he means a government based on the vast masses of peasants and workers, precisely those who are excluded from bourgeois democracy. However, there is a crucial exclusion: the former rulers and reactionaries who have been ousted from power. They are certainly not to be included, unless of course they undergo a slow process of reform and become part of the new system. It should be clear by now that this is a development from Lenin's argument concerning democracy, which I outlined above. The bourgeois and aristocratic rulers who had become so accustomed to power are not to be part of the new democracy, simply because they are not the majority. Here too we see the justification for government by the communist party, as the party that represents the majority of the people.<sup>24</sup> All the same, Mao has a warning: "so long as it does not go against the general policy line adopted in accordance with the people's will." Any communist government that goes against the people's will risks its own future. Yet, note how he phrases his observation: it is a policy line adopted in line with the people's will. It is not ultra-democracy, operating purely from the bottom up, but democratic centralism, in which decisions made by the government express the

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<sup>22</sup> Mao 1937 [2004], p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> Mao 1937 [2004], p. 122

<sup>24</sup> He also applies it to "new democracy," insofar as the government represents the will of all revolutionary classes. Mao 1940 [2005]-c, p. 342, 1940 [2005]-a, p. 443.

people's will, seek out the people's opinions and responses, but also seek to educate the people.<sup>25</sup>

I mentioned earlier that this does not seem at first like a dialectical argument, for it appears to be a mean between democracy and centralism. However, two moments in his writings suggest otherwise. At one point, Mao writes: "the system of democratic centralism in which the minority is subordinate to the majority, the lower level to the higher level, the part to the whole and the entire membership to the Central Committee."<sup>26</sup> Each formulation is rhetorically balanced, moving from part to whole and back again. In order to express the will of the people, the minority (higher level, part, Central Committee) must be subordinate to the majority (lower level, entire membership), and vice versa. Except that to put it this way is not quite to capture the dialectic: the leadership is subject to all in the same way that the all is subject to the leadership.<sup>27</sup> Mao is of course simplifying matters here a little, for the various interwoven layers included the bureaus of the Central Committee, the area Party committees, the regional committees, and so on. Now the dialectic's complexity increases exponentially, becoming what Tian Chenshan calls "focus-field," the incredibly subtle overlays and interactions between the various parts of government and people.<sup>28</sup> And this applies only to the party! Mao's text that I quoted above refers to inner-party workings,<sup>29</sup> so

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25 A good example is the need to educate people in the workings of democracy when they have been too used to centralism under former rulers. In his "Role of the Chinese Communist Party" from 1938, he points out that the history of patriarchalism and small-scale production means that the party itself is not yet familiar enough with democratic processes, with full engagement with the peasants and workers, with voting and representation in the party leadership: Mao 1938 [2004], pp. 533-34. On "ultra-democracy," see Mao 1929 [1995], pp. 198-99.

26 Mao 1942 [1965], p. 44. More prosaically and practically: "We should never pretend to know what we don't know, we should 'not feel ashamed to ask and learn from people below' and we should listen carefully to the views of the cadres at the lower levels. Be a pupil before you become a teacher; learn from the cadres at the lower levels before you issue orders ... Since our decisions incorporate the correct views of the cadres at the lower levels, the latter will naturally support them. What the cadres at the lower levels say may or may not be correct; we must analyse it. We must heed the correct views and act upon them. The reason why the leadership of the Central Committee is correct is chiefly that it synthesizes the material, reports and correct views coming from different localities. It would be difficult for the Central Committee to issue correct orders if the localities did not provide material and put forward opinions. Listen also to the mistaken views from below; it is wrong not to listen to them at all. Such views, however, are not to be acted upon but to be criticized." Mao 1949 [1961]-a, pp. 378-79.

27 For a discussion of a wonderful example of such a process, see Ransome's description of the decision making process in response to a proposal from the Central Committee in the Jaroslavl Soviet of the USSR: Ransome 2011 [1921], pp. 28-34; Boer 2013, p. 171.

28 Personal communication; Tian Chenshan is professor at Beijing Foreign Languages University.

29 See also Mao 1949 [1961]-a.



one may imagine what this means for the country as a whole.

The second moment is a clear deployment of the dialectic:

Democracy and freedom are both relative, not absolute; both come into existence and develop in the course of history. Within the ranks of the people, democracy is relative to centralization and freedom is relative to discipline. All these are contradictory facets of a unity; they are contradictory and at the same time united. We should not place one-sided emphasis on one aspect while negating the other. Within the ranks of the people, freedom is indispensable, and so is discipline; democracy is indispensable, and so is centralization. Such a unity of democracy and centralization, or freedom and discipline, constitutes our system of democratic centralism.<sup>30</sup>

Without following Mao all the way into his famous discussions of contradictions, the point here is that the contradictions are constitutive of unity. The people can develop their rule only through the constant interaction between democracy and centralism. Is this condition to become perpetual, an end in itself? Ultimately, no, for democratic centralism is not an end but a means, not abstract ideals but concrete realities. In that situation, democratic centralism becomes a means to what lies beyond.

### *Democratic Dictatorship*

The third feature of Mao's treatment concerns democratic dictatorship, which he defines as "democracy for the people and dictatorship over the reactionaries."<sup>31</sup> It flows on from my earlier discussion of democratic centralism, especially since democratic dictatorship becomes a constant theme in Mao's later writings. The difference is that while democratic centralism concerns the relations between the various layers of leadership and the people, democratic dictatorship focuses on the relations between the people and their enemies. This is clearly a class distinction, with the reactionaries and their accomplices the class enemy of peasants, workers, and petty-bourgeoisie.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, democratic dictatorship becomes the overarching category within which the others fit. New democracy (with its

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30 Mao 1957 [1992], p. 314

31 Mao 1949 [1961]-b, p. 418. See also Mao 1957 [1992], pp. 316-17

32 The national bourgeoisie form an in-between group, for they can be included within the category of the people, yet they require education to become a full part of the road to communism: Mao 1949 [1961]-b, p. 421. After the revolution, they may form the new class enemy that then needs to be overcome, albeit in terms of a new contradiction within the people: Mao 1957 [1992], p. 312.



alliance of revolutionary groups) and democratic centralism concern the working of democracy itself, among the people. By contrast, those outside democracy are not subject to the same approach. Given that Mao has discussed both elements of democracy in other places, his focus in pieces that discuss democratic dictatorship is on the latter term.

How should one treat the reactionaries and their useless hangers-on? He is quite explicit that the state machinery, once in the hands of the people, should become an “instrument for the oppression of antagonistic classes,” whether inside China or outside.<sup>33</sup> After all, they have learned precisely this lesson from the reactionaries, who used to exercise reactionary dictatorship over the people. They will now suffer their own medicine. The state apparatus, which includes the army, police and courts, are to be used for precisely this purpose. Of course, these very same instruments, now in the hands of the people, function to protect the people, to maintain state power, and to assist in the development of communism. If this requires violence, then so be it – but only as a last resort, only if reactionaries seek to restore their rule. In fact, if they avoid rebellion and sabotage, and if they are willing to work under the new arrangement, then they will even have land to do so. Alongside propaganda and education, the new hegemony may require force in order to get them to do what they have never done – work.

The key statement from which I have drawn these points, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” was written on the eve of communist victory in June, 1949.<sup>34</sup> It looks ahead to the process of consolidating power, of establishing the new government, of economic and social reconstruction. In this situation, the question that arises is how these principles may be deployed. I think especially of a situation after the former rulers, the reactionaries, have been truly vanquished and have fled the country. To be sure, plenty remain behind and the process of overcoming them continues for a long time, especially as new contradictions arise. But can these principles also become a tool for struggles among the people themselves, or perhaps within the party, in which one accuses one’s opponents of being reactionaries, bourgeois, bent on destroying the revolution? The danger is always there, as Mao candidly admits in 1955.<sup>35</sup> It is a danger particularly after the struggle with

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33 Mao 1949 [1961]-b, p. 418. For his discussion of external reactionaries, see Mao 1957 [1992], p. 313.

34 Mao 1949 [1961]-b.

35 Mao 1957 [1992], p. 317.

the old enemy has abated, after that contradiction – manifested in the dictatorship of democracy – has been resolved somewhat. The mistake is then to see the contradictions among the people in the same light, as happens at times during rectification campaigns and the purging out of counter-revolutionaries. Such contradictions have a tendency to arise when the external enemies have turned tail, but Mao insists that the only way to resolve contradictions among the people is through democratic centralism, not dictatorship.

At first sight, democratic dictatorship seems like a minor variation on Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat. The latter makes use of the state machinery to crush its class enemies, the bourgeoisie and old aristocracy that had for so long deployed the state to crush the proletariat. Democracy is thereby partisan, becoming a universal by abolishing those who oppose it. For Mao, this is how contradictions between the enemy and the people may be resolved, while contradictions among the people should be resolved by means of democratic centralism. A dialectic this may be, enacted by means of Mao's legendary pragmatism. Yet, he also introduces a crucial difference. I mean not the fact that he includes the petty-bourgeoisie or even – with some qualifications – the national bourgeoisie, but that he replaces "proletariat" with "people." Democracy concerns the people, those who have for so long not had a voice. "People" means not merely the vast numbers of peasants and lesser number of workers, who comprise 80-90 per cent of China's population, but even more the very idea of a people. Those who are the people are the heart and soul of China, the recently voiceless majority, and their enemies are not people. Reactionaries and their perpetual dinner guests do not even count as people. Democracy is not for them. This is a rather breathtaking dialectical reinvention of the term "people" itself. "People" is partisan, focused on the majority who simultaneously comprise the whole. It calls the bluff on old bourgeois democracy's claim to "democracy" as representation of the whole people, for "whole" excludes precisely the people it claims to represent.

### **Chinese Democracy**

I would like to close by asking what bearing these reflections by Mao (and Lenin to some extent) have on the current situation in China. Is it new democracy or democratic centralism, understanding them as subsets of democratic dictatorship? The answer is both straightforward and not. Simply put, democratic centralism remains the key term in the constitution of the CPC: "The Party is an integral body organized

under its program and Constitution and on the basis of democratic centralism.”<sup>36</sup> It would seem that the operation of government largely follows the lines I discussed earlier under that category. As Yang and Li put it, “the CCP as the state-founder holding absolute state power is at the same time a representative and electoral apparatus reflecting public opinion.”<sup>37</sup> In this light, myriad patterns may be discerned, of which I select but a few: village elections with multiple candidates, urban district councils, indirect elections to county-level people’s congresses, comprehensive consultation with regional committees, rotation of power, toleration and listening to criticism (with some limitations), room for labour strikes, significant experimentation, the testing of public opinion with new measures, multiple political parties,<sup>38</sup> private entrepreneurs in government roles, interest groups, and so on.<sup>39</sup> Not only do these provide many avenues for suggestions and proposals to government bodies, but they also provide ample opportunity for floating new proposals in order to gain feedback. Of course, the various features have changed over time, so much that the state-society model characteristic of Western analysis fails to capture what happens in China. Instead, a state-party-society triangulation may better capture this complex interweaving of the government with the state and society.<sup>40</sup> Inevitably, the government’s top councils and committees are some remove from everyday opinions and sentiments, so these mechanisms are intended to provide many lines of communication. It is not difficult to see that any party like the CPC that fails to maintain such a diverse system would not be able to maintain its

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<sup>36</sup> Zhao 2011. The official description closely follows Mao’s definition of democratic centralism: “It is a combination of centralism on the basis of democracy and democracy under centralized leadership and represents a high degree of centralization based on a high degree of democracy.” Zhao 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Yang and Li 2013, p. 81

<sup>38</sup> These have been part of China’s political scene since 1925 and continue to provide valuable feedback to the government. Apart from the CPC, China has eight other officially recognised political parties that work alongside the CPC: Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang (RCCK); China Democratic League (CDL); China National Democratic Construction Association (CNDCA); China Association for Promoting Democracy (CAPD); Chinese Peasants and Workers Democratic Party (CPWDP); China Zhi Gong Dang (CZGD); Jiu San Society; Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League (TSL). Finally, there are those known as Personages Without Party Affiliation. See “China’s Political Party System” 2007. See also Mu 2008.

<sup>39</sup> For specific examples, from the internet to village elections, see Jing 2002; Lin 2007; Yang and Li 2013, pp. 62-63, 76-79; Ogden 2007; Li and Zhong 2007. In my significant experience in China, I have found that political debate is open and wide ranging indeed, far wider than in bourgeois democracies. Typically, criticism of the “political authorities” is widespread, but it coincides with a sense that the government has made China much better today than it was. Ogden 2007, pp. 62-66.

<sup>40</sup> Lin 2001; Yang and Li 2013, pp. 75-76.

legitimacy as the government.

Even with all the variations and developments, this approach seems to be in line with Mao's reflections on democratic centralism, except for one crucial point. He argued that such a political structure was a means to an end, not an end in itself. One of the best expressions of this position is as follows:

Our present task is to strengthen the people's state apparatus – mainly the people's army, the people's police and the people's courts – in order to consolidate national defence and protect the people's interests. Given this condition, China can develop steadily, under the leadership of the working class and the Communist Party, from an agricultural into an industrial country and from a new-democratic into a socialist and communist society, can abolish classes and realize the Great Harmony (*datong*).<sup>41</sup>

Eventually the contradictions must be overcome, especially those between democracy and centralisation, freedom and discipline. Does not the dialectic, as Mao frames it, move from unity through contradiction to unity once again? If that is the case, the current situation may be seen in three ways: a) China is still on the path to the Great Harmony, and is thereby in the phase of democratic centralism; b) Mao was wrong in the sense that one cannot do without contradictions even within emerging communism; c) democratic centralism is one form that socialist democracy may take, for there are multiple forms rather than one ideal. Let me say a little more concerning each possibility.

The first opts for a periodization, a set of stages on the long road to communism. In this light, Mao's observation from 1940 seems pertinent to China today:

This is another solemn declaration in the manifesto of the Guomindang's First National Congress and it is the correct policy for the economic structure of the new-democratic republic. In the new-democratic republic under the leadership of the proletariat, the state enterprises will have a socialist character and will constitute the leading force in the whole national economy. But *at the same time* the republic will neither confiscate capitalist private property in general nor forbid the development of such capitalist production as it does not "dominate the

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<sup>41</sup> Mao 1949 [1961]-b, p. 418. *Datong*, the Great Harmony or Unity, is the idea in traditional Chinese thought of the period after all strife is over and everyone lives in peace and harmony. Mao repeatedly invokes this idea and melds it with communism. Related is the more recent slogan of *xiaokang*, a society that is communitarian, healthy, and without polarisation. See Ogden 2007, pp. 56-58.

livelihood of the people,” for China’s economy is still very backward.<sup>42</sup>

Economically, most enterprises are operated by the state with socialist structures, yet capitalist production plays a significant role. The balancing act is to maintain control over those developments so that they do not dominate. Some would argue that the government and people have been swamped by capitalism since the opening up by Deng Xiaoping, but others observe that the situation is far from full-blooded capitalism.<sup>43</sup> Politically, the situation is less new democracy and clearly democratic centralism. This sense of being on the long path to communism was reiterated recently by President Xi Jinping at the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party in 2012. China, he urged, has developed “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” but it is still in the primary stage of socialism.<sup>44</sup> One may note here a nod to both Deng Xiaoping and Mao, although Xi Jinping has been invoking the latter far more in his efforts to revamp the party.

The second option – that Mao was mistaken – is obviously less amenable to the government position, although the official line is that the Cultural Revolution was a mistake. Mao’s effort to advance beyond the primary stage and draw near to communism is regarded as a disaster. Perhaps a mistake of old age, it was a premature burst for which China was simply not ready. Nonetheless, one may find justification for this option within Mao’s own writings, particularly the argument that contradictions are bound to arise out of unity. The dialectic – unity-contradiction-unity – does not cease, for new divisions of the unity happen after former contradictions are overcome. If we entertain this position, then Mao’s effort at a unity beyond the contradictions of democracy and centralism has generated a new form of that contradiction, which is the reality of China in its current form.

Both of these options may be combined in a position that Lukács

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42 Mao 1940 [2005]-c, p. 343. The second sentence was added under Mao’s direction as the authoritative edition of the *Selected Works* was being edited. It does not appear in the original publication of this text.

43 Arrighi 2007. Note also Liu Xiaoming: “Some people regard what China is doing is practicing capitalism. In fact, what we are doing now is socialism with Chinese characteristics. I think Deng Xiaoping has a very good line about this. He said, market economy or planned economy is just means of economy, not a benchmark to determine whether this country is a capitalist or socialist country. Since capitalist societies have both market and planned economy. Why should socialist country not have a planned economy and market economy?” Liu and Salah 2002.

44 Yang 2012.

first proposed: communism is a state of becoming rather than being.<sup>45</sup> The sheer complexity of building communism (as both Lenin and Mao emphasised), the continued opposition of capitalism, the long struggle for global communism, the trial and error as one seeks the correct road to the unknown – these and more insist on becoming rather than being. While much may recommend such a position, not least the need for a goal and for a political myth than embodies that goal, it has the danger of falling into the trap of a romanticised and idealised view of communism and the revolution.<sup>46</sup> As a counter-weight to that danger, I would like to close by entertaining the possibility that democratic centralism is indeed one form that socialist democracy may take.<sup>47</sup> This argument removes the romanticism surrounding an as yet unattained communism, in which a full socialist democracy can be realised, indeed, in which the various forms of democracy pass as categories. Instead, it enables us to consider the various examples of revolutions and constructions of socialism that have and continue to take place. Some lasted longer than others, and some continue to seek out new paths. Yet they offer various instances of socialist democracy, constantly reshaped due to changing conditions and outside pressures. Let me use Mao's three categories to group these variations. Under democratic dictatorship may be located the authoritarian communism of Stalin's era in the USSR, in parts of Eastern Europe, and in North Korea in our own day. By contrast, the forms of socialism in South America, especially in Venezuela, Bolivia and formerly in Nicaragua, may be seen as new democracy, drawing together various more or less radical classes together in a united front. What then of democratic centralism? Here I would include the former Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Laos, and of course China. Obviously, I am not interested in assessing how much or how little they meet the ideal criteria of socialist democracy, but whether and how and in what form they manifest different types of socialist democracy. The implication is that each of the key forms Mao outlined is in fact a form of socialist democracy. It is not so much the near or distant future, but has been and continues to be practised in various ways. This is not, of course, to preclude yet other forms that may arise.

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45 Lukács 1970 [1924], pp. 72-73.

46 This is a position particularly germane to Western Marxists, enabling them to dismiss any successful communist revolution that has taken place. See further, Boer 2011.

47 After I wrote this sentence, I found that the first white paper on China's political party system argues for the same position "China's Political Party System" 2007. See also Liu and Salah 2002.

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# **The Indignant of the Earth**

**Frank Ruda**

“Poverty is in its in its abasement the indignation at that abasement, an *indignation* to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human *nature* and its condition of life, which is outright, resolute and comprehensive of that nature.” (K. Marx)

„Vielleicht tut es doch weh; und dann kommt auch die Angst.“  
(Turbostaat)

### Introduction: A European Spring?

When in recent times the riots in the streets of London became a widely discussed topic throughout Europe, many left intellectuals read them as a sign as an indication of an imminent process of change, as commencement of a politicization, which – maybe due to the lack of organizational means to bundle the different involved groups, maybe due to the fact that in the contemporary situation there is no other way out – ended in straightforward violent actions, but where nonetheless first steps on a way to emancipation. In this sense the London riots presented a peculiar European version of the Arab spring before an actual European spring; an Arab spring in the midst of Europe that if only its agents had known what they really wanted – namely political emancipation – could have denounced injustices and would have adequately struggled for a new way of conceiving social equality.<sup>1</sup> This reading is – as also the immediate aftermath of the riots has shown – wrong, even if one might say it is wrong for the right reasons. It is wrong because it misconstrued crucial features of these riots. Those who took to the streets in the outskirts of London did precisely *not* have the goal to generate a fundamental socio-political transformation. What one was able to witness was rather that the young or younger people involved in the turmoil were not insurgent because they were unsatisfied with contemporary society as such or because they were furious about certain symptoms of its social and political paralysis. That this was not the case can already and quite easily be derived from an empirical fact: no bank was robbed, but diverse Carhartt-stores and several electronic shops. What hence motivated these riots and the people that were referred to (by the police) as looters<sup>2</sup> was to finally be able to comply with the most crucial imperative of present social relations, which might be rendered as: Enjoy and consume! This means that one was less dealing with newly emerging revolutionary tendencies that tried to carve out a

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of these riots in a broader conceptual context, cf. Žižek 2012a.

<sup>2</sup> The London riots hence fall under what Alain Badiou calls “immediate riots”. On this term and on the English “situation”, cf. Badiou 2012, pp. 17ff.

space of their own, but rather with the fact that the rioters finally wanted to consume and enjoy precisely those commodities that are advertised (everywhere) as being absolutely worth of being enjoyed and consumed (from the newest X-Box, flat screen televisions up to new trendy sneakers or pants). The situation was therefore rather delineated by the fact that the rioters had no monetary means to comply with the imperative to enjoy and consume but nonetheless wanted to comply with it: “they were a manifestation of a consumerist desire violently enacted when unable to realise itself in the ‘proper’ way – by shopping.”<sup>3</sup> This incapacity and impotence of means to comply with a maxim supposed to be valid for the whole of society led to a violent manner of expression. This very structure of willingness to follow a social imperative that coincides with a simultaneous impossibility to do so, is one that already Hegel depicted as a crucial problem; a problematic structure, which is at the same time inscribed into any civil society, into any (bourgeois) order of the world. His name for the embodiment of this contradiction is “rabble”. Subsequently I will reconstruct the most crucial elements of Hegel’s notion of the rabble<sup>4</sup>, only to conceptualize something immanently linked to it, namely the category, the peculiar attitude that he referred to as “indignation.”

### Hegel’s Bomb

At one point between his 33<sup>rd</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> year of age, Hegel wrote in his so called *Wastebok*: “Original completely wonderful works of education [*Bildung*] resemble a bomb, which falls into a lazy city in which everyone sits in front of his beer-mug and is extremely wise and does not sense that it is their flat well-being that caused the very crash of thunder.”<sup>5</sup> It is quite justified to state, even against a still widespread opinion, that Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*<sup>6</sup> resembled a similar bomb in its time in Prussia. This is not only justified, as for example Domenico Losurdo has demonstrated<sup>7</sup>, because in it he developed a theory of the corporation, that provides an organizational model and a conception of a political instrument for the working class in the moment of its formation. This is to say it

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3 Žižek 2011a.

4 I have developed this concept in great detail in: Ruda 2011. I will here only deal with the most important aspect of the rabble, such that it enables me to propose the concept of indignation.

5 Hegel 1970, p. 550.

6 Hegel 2008.

7 Cf. Losurdo 1993, pp. 157-234.

offers a sketch of something like a proto-trade-union that should enable the working class to distance itself from the ossified structures of mediaeval guild-system and should enable them to influence economic factors like working hours, wages and further general determinations linked to the errand of the workers' interests. This would already be enough – we are in Prussia of the 1830's – to legitimately read the *Philosophy of Right* as a metaphorical bomb. Since Hegel formulates with his conception of the corporation how a sphere of civil society could organize itself in a manner by which it could counter the instability of the economic dynamic, by which it is otherwise determined. In the corporation for example a sort of collective property is established, which would be able to provide for the members of the corporation who fall into poverty.

However, it is precisely this very book, which brought Hegel quite some critics. The explosive character of this book hence can already be derived from the reactions it provoked. And these could not have been worse; people could not have been more outraged and indignant. One can for example find in the highly influential – yet unsustainable – book that Rudolf Haym published in 1857 under the title “Hegel and his time”<sup>8</sup> the famous attack on the *Philosophy of Right* that it is nothing but an apology of the Prussian state. This is a criticism, which up till today (and maybe unsurprisingly today<sup>9</sup>) adheres to the *Philosophy of Right* and to Hegel and has been reformulated in the last century by Ernst Tugendhat in a similarly unconvincing manner.<sup>10</sup> Haym and Tugendhat, one might even add convinced and convicted Hegelians like Michael Theunissen<sup>11</sup> or Theodor Adorno<sup>12</sup>, who also openly dismissed the *Philosophy of Right*. Such unusual and maybe surprising alliances are made possible by the indignant criticisms the *Philosophy of Right* provoked.

To return to Haym: As Losurdo has shown that it is not at all astonishing that he articulated his critique of Hegel's allegedly reactionary

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8 Cf. Haym 1973.

9 One might just recall the opinion that all political camps today share, namely that one cannot regulate the economic dynamic by artificial means and (external) state intervention, since such measures would limit and restrict free market development (and hence arrest capital circulation). The left as much as the right agree – and not only in Germany – that the economy has a will of its own and to not follow it – this is common to all market optimists and palliates – is what generates the very crises that one constantly lives through.

10 Tugendhat 1989.

11 Cf. Theunissen 1982.

12 Think of Adorno's contention that the *Philosophy of Right* is “awkwardly ideological”. Cf. Adorno 1993, p. 131.

position by claiming Hegel wrote an apology for the state. Haym was a political proponent of the liberal-bourgeois position, of a position for which any demonstration of a necessary limitation of individual freedom and even of individual freedom on the market always sounded terrifying. An interpretation of freedom, which fully emphasizes individual realization on the market and whose domain is economic competition; an interpretation of freedom that defined the liberal bourgeoisie back in Hegel's days and still defines contemporary liberal parties is precisely what Hegel book depicts in its contradictory and self-destructive effects (precisely when it is realized in and as the world of bourgeois market dynamics). Hegel recapitulates the contradictory nature of this conception of freedom in one thesis: in modern societies, which have been brought about by the concatenation of free inner self-determination (a thought embodied by the Reformation<sup>13</sup>) and general legal equality, which provides the universal condition granting the very realization of self-determination (a thought whose historical origin lies in the French Revolution<sup>14</sup>), *there is poverty*. Poverty is, as Hegel outlines, a phenomenon that gains, as much as the societies confronted with it, a specific modern quality. It is specifically related to what is modern about modernity, namely the possibility that is legally warranted to everyone to realize his own freedom in a self-determining manner – say at least in the minimal form of earning one's own subsistence, and at least in the domain of civil society, in the "system of complete interdependence"<sup>15</sup> that is the market.

As Hegel claimed in one of his lectures on the philosophy of right, before Luther is "poverty was [still] considered to stand higher than living from one's own hands labour; but now [after the Reformation but also in modernity tout court] it is known that poverty is an aim not more ethical. Rather it is more ethical to live from labour and to be happy about what one brings before oneself."<sup>16</sup> And this is why he can state that: "The important question of how poverty is to be abolished is one that agitates and torments modern society in particular."<sup>17</sup> Poverty agitates and torments modernity, the moderns and it outrages all those who do not want to hear and accept it. It also makes those indignant who think, as Hegel

.....  
13 Cf. Ritter 2003.

14 Cf. the by far best book on Hegel and the French Revolution: Comay 2010.

15 Hegel 2008, p. 181.

16 Hegel 1974, p. 49.

17 Hegel 2008, p. 221.

once smugly remarks, it is the “most direct measure against poverty” is “to leave the poor to their fate and instruct them to beg from public.”<sup>18</sup> It is not overly difficult to assign this position precisely to the forming liberal bourgeoisie. Hegel’s thesis – and this is what also motivates the enumerated critics of his philosophy of right – presents a very concise and very fundamental critique precisely of those effects and presuppositions, which are generated in modern societies through the hypostatization of the conception of individual freedom into the only true form of freedom. Hegel does not shy away from the contradictory nature of modernity. He rather seeks to demonstrate that one has to deal with it, make attempts to at least tame it, however for doing so one needs a decidedly non-liberal approach.

### Method: Experiment

It is a nowadays widespread and influential reconstruction of Hegel that claims his systematic arguments always show in what sense precisely the implicit premises on which a certain position relies lead this very position to explicitly – in the process of its realization – state something that refutes and disproves the position. Thereby the initial state of the position is overcome and some sort of progression is generated.<sup>19</sup> With regard to the contradictory nature that results from the hypostasis of the idea of free individual self-realization legally granted to everyone, one might state that this is how Hegel operates: he accounts for how in the historical process of realization of the claim of individual realization of freedom certain contradictions cannot be avoided, but they rather become apparent. If one, just for fun, would like to mimic Robert Brandom<sup>20</sup>, one could say: it is precisely the process of *making it explicit*, i.e. the historical realization of such a determination of freedom, which gives the primacy to individual self-determination, implies the *becoming-explicit* of an immanent and this is to say previously only implicit contradictory nature of such an understanding of freedom.

However, Hegel would indeed be Brandom and not be Hegel, if this were where he would stop. But Hegel’s position is – and this makes it

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> This reconstruction falls short to acknowledge one absolutely crucial dimension of Hegel’s whole project, namely that even though one might run into contradiction in realizing certain assumptions implicit in one’s position, these contradictions do not at all prevent these assumptions from persisting nonetheless.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Brandom 1998.

structurally resemble psychoanalysis<sup>21</sup> – in its approach first and foremost a theory of resistance against itself, a theory of resistances against theory (and the different guises such resistances might take). Hegel thereby anticipates in advance in his exposition the symbolic place of all his indignant critics, the place of all those Hayms, to which I referred above. More precisely one can state that he demonstrates why the critique of the critique of pure individual realizations of freedom<sup>22</sup>, why the outrage that emerges when one seeks to limit these freedoms is a necessary defense mechanism, which is – in fact constitutively – linked to such a comprehension of how to conceptualize and realize freedom. Hegel thereby substantiates the diagnosis that the resistance towards his critique essentially belongs to the position, which he criticizes (and is therefore by no means independent from its internal contradictory nature). He criticizes in advance – a sort of critique of the future and in the mode of the future anterior – his liberal critics for being constantly driven to deny that which cannot be denied: for acting as if the de facto existence of poverty does not affect their comprehension of freedom (and this becomes the most apparent in their criticisms of Hegel's critique of their positions). The outrage and indignation of his critics is thus itself a symptom of the contradictory nature of their positions – some sort of “I do not know who the woman in my dream is, it is certainly not my mother!”<sup>23</sup>

This is why Hegel talks about the fact of poverty as something that not only agitates but also torments modern societies. For what torments society is, as Hegel is able to show, that all defense mechanism (inter alia the critique of Hegel's own position) blocking the insight into the necessity of limiting individual freedoms are a constitutive component, a part of the problem that is inevitably produced in modern societies (i.e. societies after the Reformation and the French Revolution). Yet, Hegel's thesis is not only that poverty is unavoidably present and hence necessary in modern societies, but moreover that all means which society imagines to have at its disposal cannot resolve this persistently recurring problem. A specter haunts modernity.... it seems to be poverty. Hegel thus attests that even the critics of his position move on the level of civil society and its proposed solutions. This is due to the fact that it is precisely the structural functioning of civil society that generates with its understanding of

21 Freud stated for example that “the overcoming of resistance is the part of our work that requires the most time and the greatest trouble. It is worth while...” Freud 1989, p. 58.

22 Here Hegel anticipates what Marx and Engels call „critical criticism“ in their: Marx / Engels 1975.

23 For this cf. the inspiring lecture of Zupancic 2013.



freedom the problem of poverty. *Freedom is the problem not the solution.* I will hence subsequently not follow the paths of the mentioned critics<sup>24</sup>, but rather in a rather experimental manner. With this I am not trying to unfolding a merely idiosyncratic position, but I rather take recourse to Adorno, who in one of his great texts on Hegel stated that one cannot but read Hegel in an experimental manner.<sup>25</sup>

Not only due to the mentioned points Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* resembles a metaphorical bomb in Prussia. Moreover in it something becomes explicit – without being over-explicitly articulated – that has overly explosive and at the same time overly contemporary value: in it Hegel presents a theory of indignation, of social outrage. Today from Stephane Hessel's imperative to the Spanish *indignados*, indignation seems to be overly present and indignant people is what can be seen and heard nearly everywhere. At the same time – especially amongst readers of Spinoza<sup>26</sup> – it is today to claim that there is something like political affects, political emotions and it seems fashionable or at least possible today to identify one of these affects as the affect of indignation.<sup>27</sup> For indignation seems to have become one of the political master words, if not the political word of the present moment. To give a more adequate account of what one is talking about when referring to indignation, I take it to be highly instructive to reconstruct Hegel's – implicit – theory of universal indignation that can be derived from his *Philosophy of Right*. This can also lead to the insight that this very book has far more contemporary relevance than usually admitted. Its actuality results from the fact that Hegel therein does not only give a theoretical account of an affect that seems to stand in a peculiar relationship to political action, he furthermore demonstrates that this very affect is linked with a universal claim. My claim will be a simple one: already due to Hegel's reflections on indignation, his *Philosophy of Right* is of an invaluable contemporary political relevance. So what

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24 Hegel – as afterwards repeatedly psychoanalysis – has been precisely for this reason over and over criticized as totalitarian and self-immunizing thinker. Paradigmatically cf. Popper 1940.

25 „[R]eading Hegel is an experimental procedure....“ Adorno 1993, p. 144.

26 Cf. for example: Negri 2013.

27 An account of Spinoza theory of indignation can be found in. I refrain here from a detailed discussion of 1. The relation between Hegel and Spinoza on the issue of indignation and of 2. Stolze's criticism of Badiou's and Žižek's criticism of Spinoza, since I first and foremost want to account for Hegel's assessment of indignation and the debate between Stolze's (and Macherey's) reading of Spinoza and Badiou's and Žižek's criticism of it, does not center on the concept of indignation (although it may be one crucial entry point into the debate).

is Hegel's theory of this universal – as I want to claim “pre-political”<sup>28</sup> – affect, of indignation?

### Indignation and Anxiety

Before I want to answer this, what needs to be answered first is why the following remarks can nonetheless be considered to be experimental? The answer is that I will unfold the following experimental set up: Jacques Lacan once claimed that the only affect that he thought has a universal aspect to it – taking up a something of Heidegger – is the affect of anxiety.<sup>29</sup> This affect is characterized via at least six criteria: 1. One does not experience anxiety with regard to a concrete object (an object appearing in the world) – this is what makes anxiety differ from fear; a point also made by Heidegger<sup>30</sup> and Freud.<sup>31</sup> Say: you encounter a tiger in a train or a guy with a machete and an ice-hockey mask on a dark road, one can experience fear, but not anxiety. Anxiety is nothing I have “of” something that I could encounter in the world. Anxiety is rather related to the fundamental coordinates of the world, to those coordinates that determine what can appear to me as an object at all, what can appear to me as reality. Anxiety hence affects me in a manner that is more fundamental than the way fear affects me. Freud articulated this in the following way: I can flee out of fear, yet anxiety makes it impossible for me to flee at all, because I do not know where to flee to.<sup>32</sup> This is why for Lacan 2. Anxiety is related to an insight into the non-necessity of the world as it is. Anxiety makes me experience ‘something’, which shakes the consistency of my relation to the world and to reality as such. *Fear* one experiences *in relation* to something, i.e. it occurs in already established relations, whereas anxiety concerns the relationality and wordliness as such. It indicates that no relation is necessarily, immutably as it is, that is to say: that it does not need to be how it is. 3. This is precisely why anxiety lacking any objective, i.e. object-related dimension, is an affect that never deceives. It never deceives because it cannot be objectively falsified or verified.

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28 I take this term from Alain Badiou who introduced it in: Badiou 1985. I am referring to indignation as pre-political and not as political to already emphasize my skepticism with regard to the concept of political affects.

29 Cf. Lacan 2004.

30 Cf. Heidegger 2008, pp. 228-234.

31 Cf. Freud 1990, pp. 101ff.

32 Ibid.

Therefore it is always true, or more precisely: always certain that one is in a state of anxiety when one is in a state of anxiety.<sup>33</sup> Anxiety leads directly into the – peculiar – kernel of the subject (or the peculiar certainty of its existence). This is also why one can say that fear can be communicated, for example I can say that people with machetes and ice-hockey masks scare me, however irrational it might be, but anxiety cannot be communicated. 4. Although anxiety has no direct relation to an object of and in the world, anxiety is, as Lacan pointed out<sup>34</sup>, never without an object.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the object of anxiety is not an object of the world, but rather appears within the very relation to the world, which implies that the place of the strange object of anxiety is within the subject of anxiety itself: I am afraid not “of” me, but “for” me; something within me is in a state of anxiety. And this means that anxiety by affecting relation as such puts me into the position of the object. 5. Freud defined anxiety as an affect and hence as composed of at least two things<sup>36</sup>: namely of a movement, which the subject of the movement did not inaugurate itself and the perception of this movement. This very concatenation produces anxiety. For, anxiety concerns the perception of a kind of heteronomously generated movement of a subject (that is moved). 6. Anxiety by generating the perception that I am determined heteronomously puts me in the position of subjective destitution, in a position in which I cannot act any longer, because I lose the status of being a subject. Anxiety does not, although it comes with an insight into the non-necessity of the world, make me active; it rather makes me more passive.

I enlist these determinations of anxiety here because in the following I will try to demonstrate that what Hegel calls indignation comes very close to the determination of anxiety as depicted by Lacan (and Freud or Heidegger). Hegel characterizes indignation in such a way that it cannot be an indignation directed at something, say directed at a particular in-

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33 This seeming tautology is none. For it confirms the nearly Cartesian insight into the absolute certainty of anxiety in the affective state of anxiety.

34 This is the point where Lacan clearly goes a step further than Heidegger or Freud. With regard to the former it is clear that he stops precisely after claiming that anxiety does not have an object. Cf. again: Lacan 2004, p. 155f.

35 In French this can be worded as follows: “l’angoisse n’est pas sans objet” or in oral language “l’angoisse est pas sans objet.” It does not only entail a reference to the French word for “step” (pas), but also and even more importantly generates a phonetic similarity between the “pas sans objet” (not without object) of anxiety and the peculiar status of this very (not-without-)object. For it resembles a passing object, a “passant object” (which is why Lacan’s examples are inter alia the voice and the gaze). For this see the magnificent book: Dolar 2006.

36 Cf. Freud 1952.

justice or an objective momentum of the world, but indignation is directed against the general manner in which the world is set up and erected. More precisely: *indignation for Hegel is always indignation against a world in which there is indignation*. Moreover, he defines indignation such that it marks the non-necessity of the world as it is. For, if the world were necessarily as it is, in it there would not be any indignation. Indignation thereby becomes an affect that never deceives, because as soon as there is indignation, indignation is outraged about its own existence – which makes indignation into a reflexive affect. Therefore indignation is outraged about the position of those who are feeling indignant. And: indignation is forced to be indignation at indignation because the world is as it is.

### **The Subject of Indignation**

Hegel demonstrates in his *Philosophy of Right* that modern civil society from a certain historical moment of its own economic development onwards is not able to uphold its own principle without contradiction. If for any member of civil society holds that it has to gain its own subsistence through the investment of its own labor force, Hegel's diagnosis can be read in the following manner: civil society generates the contradiction that in it all have to subsist via the investment of labor power, yet at the same time it makes it impossible that all can subsist via investment of their own labor force.<sup>37</sup> In short: civil society produces poverty. Poverty is defined by Hegel as state in which all advantages of civil society are lost, yet all desires generated by it continue to exist. Although Hegel discusses a series of solutions how to deal with the poverty problem, he clearly sees that all of them do not principally overcome this problem, but rather produce even bigger problems, problems related to what Hegel calls the “rabble”.

If for example Hegel discusses to leave the poor to their destiny and refer them to public begging, he immediately noticed that any man, who once begged, will soon lose the habit to work and believe he is entitled to live without labor. In this manner the poor would be turned into the rabble. The rabble is, in a first definition, the poor man who lost more than just his property, namely also the insight into the necessity of labor and the honor to earn his own subsistence through investing his own activity. Poverty as necessary product of the economic dynamic of civil society is hence the constantly given condition of possibility for the emergence of

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37 Another manner of putting this in very profane terms: civil society necessarily produces unemployment – whatever the current historical rates of it are; it is a systemic effect.

the rabble, of a lazy existence without honor. Although Hegel characterizes the rabble by a series of additional losses, which add up to poverty – say it is shy of work, without shame, lazy and without honor – the rabble is at the same time not a necessarily derivable consequence of the state of poverty. Here one needs to take one determination Hegel assigns to the rabble absolutely seriously. For the rabble “makes itself”<sup>38</sup>, this makes him different from the poor. Poverty is a necessary product of the historically self-specifying and self-differentiating movement of civil society – and hence not based on individual mistakes or misdoings, although this may be the case with regard to a particular individual. There is poverty, this is Hegel far reaching claim, because modern societies function like they do. Fredric Jameson has recently elaborated that Marx already demonstrated that *the* problem of capitalism is unemployment<sup>39</sup>, that is to say there is a problem which arises from the fact that capitalism cannot ensure the subsistence of all its members through labor although it explicitly claims to do so. This is already Hegel’s insight. But what is crucial here is that if poverty is a product of society and the rabble is self-generative, the poor and the rabble are distinct – something which repeats in the distinction of worker class and proletariat in Marx. Because the rabble at first emerges when a contingent attitude supplements the necessary condition, i.e. if a subjective attitude, which is determinant for the rabble, supplements the state of poverty. This attitude Hegel designates with the name “indignation”. But how does it emerge?

If for Hegel poverty is a necessary product of civil society and hence not dependent on individual misdoings, in civil society any of its members is latently poor. This is to say: if anyone can become poor without individual fault, in civil society anyone is latently poor. If now the rabble emerges from the poor through the contingent supplement of an attitude, one can infer that any poor can make itself into the rabble. Anyone in civil society is latently poor and hence latently rabble. Or more precisely: Anyone will have been latently rabble. Why this peculiar temporality? One here needs the future anterior, because the logical insight into the fact that there is this latency, the first latency that anyone will have been poor and the second latency that anyone will have been rabble, only results if one starts from the emergence of the rabble. It is a retroactive and not only retrospective insight and hence this specific temporality – the emergence

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38 I here altered the misleading – wrong – translation that the rabble “is fixed automatically” Hegel 2008, p. 221.

39 Jameson 2010.

of the rabble changes the past of civil society. I will refer to this insight in an abbreviated manner as *logic of double latency*. It is linked to the emergence of the rabble and this emergence is again linked to what Hegel calls indignation.

### Forms and Contents of Indignation

Hegel qualifies the content of the indignation of the rabble as follows: the rabble deprives the state and all its institutions of their legitimacy. The rabble disqualifies the existing state of things in their rationality and deprives them of the right to exist. For Hegel this can be done in two different manners and hence he needs to introduce the distinction between two modalities of the rabble. Civil society is for Hegel organized by estates and the participation in one of them is necessary for everyone, other than this one's subsistence cannot be attained (this simply means that anyone needs to have a proper job). In this way anyone outside of the estates is for Hegel what he calls a "mere private person".<sup>40</sup> Private person are then again distinguished into two categories: there are the poor and there are the gamblers. Anyone can *involuntarily* become poor, whereas one can only become a gambler if one *voluntarily and arbitrarily* decides to not satisfy one's self-seeking interest through one's own labor force and bet on the contingent movement of bourgeois economy. This decision relies on the hope that one will also contingently – say through winnings at the stock market – secure one's subsistence. If such winning is obtained, the gambler immediately and necessarily becomes what I call *luxury rabble*. Luxury is the category Hegel deploys for the following thesis: any wealth outside the estates (and the corporation) is property of the rich rabble. The luxury rabble also deprives all existing institutions of their right and their legitimacy, yet it spares one, namely that institution on which its own existence relies: the arbitrary dynamic of the market dynamic, which made the rich rabble into what it is. That the rich rabble dislikes Hegel's thesis is in the nature of things. The luxury-rabble is therefore fundamentally determined by what I refer to as *logic of double arbitrariness*, which applies to anyone who 1. Arbitrarily places himself outside the estates and hence relies on the game of luck of economy and to who 2. Arbitrarily gains some profit in this game. If the logic of double latency, which applies to the poor rabble, is latently valid for anyone, the logic of double arbitrariness is only valid for those who are by their arbitrary attitude driven into the game of contingency and who arbitrarily gains some winning in it.

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40 Hegel 2008, p. 197.

It hence only applies to those who arbitrarily decided to opt for the arbitrary game, arbitrarily gain something and it only applies as long as they have won and did not again lose their winnings.<sup>41</sup>

Hegel wants to criticize the position of the rabble in general as a position of an irrational particularity, which claims its mere particular interests against the existing and rationally organized universal and is thereby led into contradiction. Yet, it can be demonstrated that it is only the rich rabble that Hegel justifiably criticizes as being nothing but a particularity. Whereas the poor rabble entails against Hegel's assessment as particularity a latent universal dimension, which is not at all inferior to the universality of Hegel's concept of ethical life – a concept that he precisely invokes to overcome the contradictions of mere particularities. Although it seems as if Hegel nonetheless has to assign an indignant attitude also to the rich rabble, he – in a very consistent manner – reserves for it the concept of depravity and corruption [*Verdorbenheit*].<sup>42</sup> Rich private persons are and will always be conceptually corrupt and depraved; already Hegel could not be more explicit about this. And this also means: only the poor rabble is indignant, which is why I from here on leave the rich rabble aside. The poor rabble is indignant about its own conditions of possibility, that is to say it is outraged because of poverty and infers from this that an ethico-political community, which does not prevent it from being brought about, is itself nothing but an illegitimate accumulation of self-seeking interests without any rational and actual universality. The further and deepening loss, which the rabble suffers with regard to poverty leads to the fact that it is full of “inner indignation against the rich, against society, against the government, etc.” – it is the “etc.” at the end which is decisive, since it marks for Hegel the (bad) infinite continual of indignation. The rabble is indignant because it considers itself to be in a “state that lacks rights [*Rechtlosigkeit*]”<sup>43</sup>, which is nonetheless displayed as being a state of right; hence the rabble sees this as a gigantic masquerade. Hegel's clearly marks on one side that civil society is driven into the contradictory production of poverty but still he cannot – and here one should be more Hegelian than Hegel – read this contradiction as in his depiction the rabble reads it: namely as a wrong, as an injustice. Hegel

41 For a longer elaboration of this distinction, cf. Ruda 2011, pp. 49-74.

42 As Hegel states: „One can call this depravity [*Verdorbenheit*] that the rich assumes himself to be at liberty to do anything.” Hegel 2005, p 223. Also relevant in this context is the statement: “everything in the world that has become corrupt has a good reason for its corruption.” Hegel 1982, p. 229

43 Hegel 2005, p. 222.



clearly observes that poverty is a state of lack of possibilities to realize one's own freedom; he also notes that this lack, this *impossibility* (of realizing one's own freedom<sup>44</sup>) is indispensable, i.e. *necessary* as well as it is artificially produced. This ought to turn this lack into an injustice. Yet, it is this consequence that Hegel does not draw, since otherwise he would assert that civil society, "the *world of appearance* of the ethical"<sup>45</sup> is in its totality nothing but a gigantic concatenation of injustices; a concatenation, which incessantly produces the impossibility to universally validate (i.e. for all) the very principle on which it relies.<sup>46</sup> The rabble does not hesitate to draw this consequence and it infers from the indignation against the existing state of things the claim of a right to subsist without labor, since, de facto, it cannot subsist by laboring. To claim such a right can only appear irrational to Hegel, since he links the very concept of right to the notion of the free will, which can only be what it is, i.e. free when it objectifies and hence realizes itself through laborious activity (which is precisely what the rabble does not do).

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44 Already early Hegel defined poverty as „impossibility to bring something in front of oneself." Hegel 1969, p.232.

45 Hegel 2008, p. 180.

46 Let me be more precise here: Hegel is fully aware that civil society is contradictory. Of course, this is precisely how he comes to depict the existence first of the police and the corporation and second of the state. The former two try to cope with the contradictory nature of civil society by means of limiting the outburst of all its potential catastrophes happening in miniature (the police) or by trying to generate a different mode of organization on its very terrain (the corporation). Both are just transitory institutions leading into the state. The difficult thing to understand with regard to the overall conception of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is the following: what happens to all the contradictions that Hegel clearly sees on the level of civil society after the conceptual insight into the necessity of the state, if they cannot be overcome in any way? There are a variety of possible answers, some very unconvincing ones (all members become ethically aware of the destructive tendencies of the market and hence behave in a more morally responsible manner when partaking in ethical life – which is precisely what today consumer responsibility theories / advertisements rely on), some rather unsatisfying (Hegel acknowledges the unsublatability of these contradictions and simply develops that state for those not at all confronted with them), etc. Yet, there is one possibility, which I consider to be the most consistent with regard to Hegel's overall depiction of the idea of right in the *Philosophy of Right*, but which I at the same time cannot adequately unfold here: Hegel shows that even the state cannot properly stabilize civil society, which is also one of the reasons why there never will be an eternal state – states have a history, i.e. they emerge and disappear in history. That is to say, Hegel's crucial claim is: any state – conceptually necessitated by the contradictions of civil society – will always have been a failed state – as it will have proven inapt to deal with these very contradictions. And the very moment its failure becomes manifest is when it conceptually starts to disappear. I here read Hegel as depicting another path: the rabble and the state co-emerge at the same logical locus and hence in Hegel there is either the option of the always-already-will-have-failed-state or the option of the rabble.



## Indignant Form, Indignant Content

To demand a right to subsistence without activity and at the same time to assume this right only for oneself signifies for Hegel that one assumes right, which neither has nor is able to have the universality nor the objective validity of a right. The right, that the rabble claims, is for Hegel a right without right – that is to say for him it has neither the characteristic of universality nor of rationality – and he defines consequentially the rabble as that particularity, which even unbinds itself from all relations of rights and duties. Yet, due to the mentioned *logic of double latency*, it becomes clear what Hegel does not want to assert with regard to the rabble: the right without right it claims entails a latent universal dimension and hence is more than just a merely particular demand. It rather breaks with the very idea of demand. It is as a right articulated from a particular position a right that latently concerns anyone and it hence offers the insight that there can be a claim for equality beyond the existing, objective state relations. But what does all this mean for the question that I set off to answer? What does all this signify for the affect of indignation proper and its (pre-) political status? It shall be clear that indignation thereby does not merely articulate and embody frustration. It is also not simply a sign of the loss of self-respect, hence not an expression of melancholia.<sup>47</sup> Rather what indignation does entails is some sort of positive self-assertion, it thereby can be read as an expression of self-respect, although as it seems an impossible one. As it is precisely the society to which it is supposed to belong that denies him the right to exist, the rabble asserts a right against the world as it is and hence it claims a right, as Žižek depicted it, “a universal right to have rights, to be in a position to act as free autonomous subject. The demand to be provided for life without working is thus a (possible superficial) form of appearance of the more basic and in no way ‘irrational’ demand to be given a chance to act as an autonomous free subject, to be included in the universe of freedoms and obligations.”<sup>48</sup> The rabble measures civil society by the claim that arises from its own nature but which it at the same time cannot uphold due to the lack inscribed into it. If the production of poor masses is an inevitable part of the movement of civil society, its very existence is accompanied

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47 As Freud claims: The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.” There is not lack of self-regard involved in the rabble’s indignation. Cf. Freud 2005, pp. 205.

48 Žižek 2011b, p. xvi.

by an indignation about this existence. The rabble is in indignation about the excessive, unnatural and perverse effects of the economic movement of society, because in and through them it becomes clear that the legal claim with regard to the subsistence of all individuals can only be uphold under the retroactively visible condition of constantly depriving large masses of poor individuals of their rights. The possibility to uphold the right to subsistence of all implies within society at the same time the impossibility to warrant the right to subsistence for all. This contingent insight into the perverted unnatural essence of society is what generates the rabble and its indignation.

Indignation is as Hegel states in one of his lectures on the philosophy of right an “attitude without right.”<sup>49</sup> In civil society only that does truly exist, what is mediated by activity and labor. Yet, at the same time its own dynamic creates something that impossibly can be mediated by activity and labor. The indignation, which can emerge about this structural lack and which hence is an indignation about society’s own unnatural nature, can only appear as an unnatural excess to it. In the indicting indignation of the rabble civil society listens to nothing but to an unnatural voice it itself brought about. But this indignation which is directed against the very nature of civil society is coupled with a universal dimension (as anyone is latently poor and any poor can become rabble and he becomes part of the – poor – rabble for Hegel when he starts to be indignant). This dimension emerges with the rabble-indignation, since it is a (latently) universal indignation and in this very universal dimension it is bound to the claim of a right without right which is expressed in this indignation. The right without right is the content and the peculiar form of indignation. The right without right consists of an indignant form and an indignant content. This is why it appears to be “without right [rechtlos]”. Yet, it is important to note that indignation is directed against its own conditions of possibility. *Indignation is indignation against indignation*<sup>50</sup>, against the condition of possibility of being indignant at all. It is hence not directed against an object of the world but rather against the world as it is. That is

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49 Hegel 1974, p. 703.

50 If the talk about political affects is supposed to have any meaning whatsoever, then it seems to me, it can only do so if any political affect has such a reflexive structure as its prerequisite (and at the same time I do not think that this is a sufficient conditions to qualify an affect as being political; indignation as such is *not* political). If this prerequisite is not achieved, one cannot speak of (political) affects but rather of feelings and Hegel once rightly stated that: “If man on any topic appeals... but to his feeling, the only thing to do is to let him alone, because he thereby spurns the community of rationality....” Hegel 2009, p. 178.

to say, indignation is directed against a world in which there is indignation. Indignation thereby can be read as a form of (latent) subjectivization of an injustice, which is not conceded to be one by the existing objective categories of right, since it concerns the very constitution of the world as such.

It is important to keep in mind that the rabble makes itself, that is to say that its emergence is contingent. If poor masses are necessarily generated through the general dynamic of civil society, indignation about this manifestation of poverty, which provides the ground for the poor rabble, is generated contingently. Indignation due to its contingent origin might hence be read in terms of what Adorno once called the *addendum* [*das Hinzutretende*].<sup>51</sup> This category describes something that contingently supplements a situation, in which a subject encounters a concrete impossibility (in the rabble's case the impossibility to bring something in front of itself, i.e. an impossibility of realizing one's own freedom under given conditions). As Adorno rightly states: "The subject's decisions do not roll off in a causal chain; what occurs is a jolt, rather."<sup>52</sup> Hence the subject's decision relies on an addendum, the additional indignation. Indignation also results from a jolt and it is thus the necessary content and the necessary form of a contingent attitude, which is directed against its own condition of possibility. And it is precisely this interplay of necessary possibility of indignation, i.e. of poverty and of the contingent genesis of this attitude, which assures its universality. Indignation is, at least latent-

51 Cf. Adorno 1973.

52 Ibid., p. 226f. In a different context, Adorno gives a good example of this „jolt“ [Ruck], which generates the type of action he has in mind and that I here see as structurally equivalent with the emergence of indignation. He reports the following: "Perhaps I can illustrate this with something I experienced... in the first few months after I returned to Germany - it is now almost fourteen years ago - from emigration. I had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of one of the few crucial actors of the 20 July and was able to talk to him. I said to him, 'Well, you knew very well that the conspiracy's chances of success were minimal, and you must have known that if you were caught you had to expect a fate far more terrible than death - unimaginably terrible consequences. What made it possible for you to take action notwithstanding this?' - Whereupon he said to me - you will all know his name, but I do not wish to name him here - 'But there are situations that are so intolerable that one just cannot continue to put up with them, no matter what may happen and no matter what may happen to oneself in the course of the attempt to change them.' He said this without any pathos - and I should like to add, without any appeal to theory. He was simply explaining to me what motivated him in that seemingly absurd enterprise on 20 July. I believe that this act of resistance - the fact that things may be so intolerable that you feel compelled to make the attempt to change them, regardless of the consequences for yourself, and in circumstances in which you may also predict the possible consequences for other people - is the precise point at which the irrationality, or better, the irrational aspect of moral action is to be sought, the point at which it may be located." Cf. Adorno 2001, p. 8. In another language one might also read this as a good example of a "logical revolt", since what Adorno depicts is neither determined by some type of social necessity nor by any pure moral catechism relying on an imperative that could guide all actions within concrete situations.

ly, indignation of anyone. He who is indignant in the rabble-sense of the term is aiming to be a representative of the whole of humanity. Therefore indignation never deceives and it can thereby become a possible category of political action. But – and this but is crucial – it can only do so if 1. One does not only depicts its determinations in a merely negative way as also Hegel seems to do (although he also offers the means to conceptualize it otherwise) and 2. By not only determining it as an affective expression of a particularity as particularity. There can be merely particular indignation, obviously – when sitting in front of the TV and watching the news for example, even watching a sport match in a sport stadium. To overcome the purely particular and purely negative characteristics of indignation what needs to be happen is precisely what Hegel sees happening with the rabble's indignation. In it there is 1. A positive kernel, namely the formulation of a right (without right) to subsist without working and 2. This is a latently universal dimension that although articulated from a particular position includes anyone in its address and 3. It has a reflexive structure in the sense that its negative dimension is directed against its own condition of possibility (i.e. against the world which allows for indignation to exist).

### **Indignation – Anxiety and....**

It is important to note that Hegel employs the word “indignation” in a two-fold manner. He uses it as affective determination of the attitude of the rabble but also – and here the reference to the Lacanian concept of anxiety is interesting – in the (etymologically wrong) sense of rebellion, revolt, turmoil, insurrection. This is why he can write that a “rebellion in a province conquered in war is a different thing from a rising [Empörung] in a well-organized state.”<sup>53</sup> The latter, he thinks, is a veritable “crime against the state”<sup>54</sup>; a crime against the consistency of social bonds – duties and rights – which make the state into the state; an attack on the world as it is. This demonstrates that indignation is not simply a characteristic of an inner attitude and therefore without any external effects. The rabble is in a state of affective indignation about the state and outraged at the existing order. This leads the rabble to claim a right without a right, which marks a moment of absolute unbinding from the concepts and spheres of right, from the social bond, etc. This leads to the fact that one can state that one here moves from “indignation about” (the condition of possibility of

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53 Hegel 2008, p. 275.

54 Ibid.

indignation) to “indignation against” (the reproduction and perpetuation of it). *The indignation about the world rises itself up – akin to baron Münchhausen’s famous self-liberation from the marsh – to the indignation against the world, which puts the latter in a state of turmoil.*

The indignation-against is directed against the state, the order, the world, as it is. Indignation is hence in Hegel an *anti-state*, literally an *a-social* and therefore a *pre-political* affect. It is an affect of possible political subjectivization; it is not an affect indicating political subjectivity in actu – hence the sole dimension, as I demonstrated, that is present in it is a latently universal one. But it indicates the place of politics. Why? Because political actions always starts with breaking the social bond; diminishing the evidence of the state (of things). Yet, latent politicality, pre-politics should never be confused with actual politics. Indicating the politics is possible is not doing politics. With regard to the rabble one may say: the true revolt of the rabble is the indignant unbinding of the alleged necessity of the world as it is. The rabble asserts, emphasizes and indignantly demonstrates the (impossible) possibility of politics. Indignation comes, in this respect again comparable to Lacan’s but also to Heidegger’s depiction of anxiety, with an effect of de-naturalization of the existing order, which opens up the dimension of true political action. This is because indignation expresses the contradiction between concept and reality, say between the concept of right and the reality of right and the implied depravation of rights of the poor; between the concept of the free will and the reality of its realizations. Already in his early *Realphilosophie* Hegel had characterized inner indignation as “highest inner turmoil of the will”, which is brought about by “the inequality of wealth and poverty.”<sup>55</sup> Here indignation does not only designate the subjective thinking of the rabble-like poor vis-à-vis the rich, rather it is directed against the very possibility of this splitting, of the split of poverty and wealth as such. Indignation is hence not the hatred of the poor directed towards the rich, but rather what is generated when this splitting in poor and rich becomes a principle structuring the world. Indignation in its latent universal dimension names the affect that indicates the breaking of the social bond. Why? Because it is directed towards those separations that, if they exist, indicate that the social bond is already broken. This is why Hegel describes indignation as highest turmoil [*höchste Zerrissenheit*] – as rupture of the social, which at the same time come with an insight into a fundamental and universal dimension that is not any longer founded in the social, but

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55 Hegel 1969, p. 232f.

rather in its impossibility (this is what marks the place of possible political action).

Lacan describes anxiety as affective manifestation of the necessary condition for any real transformation (the abyssal and ground-shaking insight into the non-necessity of the world). However, to actually transform one needs hence to work with (certain doses of) anxiety, for one cannot simply remain within anxiety, otherwise one would remain within subjective destitution. Rather one needs to raise the impotency to act in face of the non-necessity of the world to a real point of impossibility. This is one definition of the analytic cure, recently brought up again by Badiou (and of course first elaborated by Lacan).<sup>56</sup> One might also render this transition from subjective destitution (i.e. impotence) to point of impossibility as transition from anxiety to courage. A transition from the moment of non-necessity to the affirmation of a point, whose affirmation contains, perpetuates, in short: sublates the non-necessity. Hegel's theory of indignation seems to entail both dimensions, both as elements of the proper universal dimension of indignation. But one might nonetheless ask: if indignation as depicted by Hegel has a latent universal dimension – and hence not an actual one – what does it mean to think the transition from latency to actuality? It has to be a transition, a path, a pass which does not simply realize a given possibility – for indignation is immanently linked to an impossibility. To put this in other terms, if courage is what need to logically follows anxiety to generate proper subjective action, to not remain within a subjective inability to act (indicated by indignation), what affect could logically succeed indignation? How to get from the riots in London's suburbs to true political action?

If one needs to pass from indignation to an affect, let's call it "E" to account for proper politicization and if "E" names the affective dimension of political subjectivization, there is one affect, which seems to be a promising candidate. Of course one can here think of is enthusiasm.<sup>57</sup> If this could be substantiated, then to think in Hegelian terms a politiciza-

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56 Cf. Badiou 2008, p. 35.

57 Besides Kant, I am thinking of Žižek's recent attempt to correct Badiou's early foursome distinction of anxiety, courage, superego and justice by anxiety, courage, terror and enthusiasm. Cf. Žižek 2012b, p. 834-835. Žižek here does not account for the fact that Badiou – himself without offering any proper theoretical elaboration – explicitly stated that the affect of politics is enthusiasm. Badiou does not develop this, neither does he thus far offer an account of how affects work in his system. He simply enlists four affects, each of them matching one of the "conditions" of philosophy: enthusiasm in politics, pleasure in art, happiness in love and joy in science. As odd, and as Kantian as at least half of them may sound, to my mind it is important that Badiou indicates that in politics proper we are always also dealing with an enthusiastic subject. Cf. Badiou 2009, p. 76-77.

tion of the latently universal subject, to think a transition from a pre-political situation to politics proper and hence to think a true transformation of the world would also imply to conceive of the transition from indignation to enthusiasm. This transition – this passage – would then not only be an indicator of transformation, but also and at the same time it would be linked with the appearance of a new subject, that courageously and full of enthusiasm would be ready to traverse anxiety and leave indignation behind. From indignation to enthusiasm could then also be a formula for depicting what it could mean – with and for Hegel – to frighten those who set up the world as it is just now.



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# **Democracy and revolution on the Internet**

**Katarina  
Peović Vuković**

## **The Internet Revolutions on the Facebook – the rebirth of history?**

In recent political history, social networks were frequently used as organizing tools of protests, marches and uprisings. There are numerous examples of this. Moldova's Twitter revolution (2009), Iranian Twitter election protests (2009-2010), Tunisian revolution (2010-2011), Egyptian revolution (2011), Facebook anti-government protests in Croatia (2008), etc. It is a well known fact that Egyptian people thanked Facebook for its role in the revolution: pictures published all over the world showed protesters with banners reading "Thank you Facebook". The most bizarre example of displaying gratitude to this social network was the naming of newborn children after it. Some claim that Twitter and Facebook themselves played important role in political events. Clay Shirky stated that "under the death of vertical media system we are today facing the changes not only in production of media content, but also in nature of politics"<sup>1</sup>. Not only that the Internet was seen as a tool, used by revolutionaries and protesters, but that those revolutionaries and protesters were Internet corporations managers. A central figure of Egyptian protests Wael Ghonim, the Google manager mobilized protesters through the Facebook group "We are all Khaled Saeed". The group was an homage to young man beaten to death by a police. In one occasion Ghonim stated: "If you want to liberate society just give them the Internet".

If we take into account Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of cultural industries, the critique of standardization and commodification of culture, it is paradoxical to question "media hegemony", since standardization is obvious a matter of the past.<sup>2</sup> But what if the nature of contemporary mass-culture is still hegemonic? Is it not a fact that commodification today exists without mass-media standardization? Mark Zuckerberg, in an interview in the *Wired* magazine, stated that the thing he really cares about is "the mission, making the world open"<sup>3</sup>. On his Facebook profile, Zuckerberg writes: "I'm trying to make the world a more open place by helping people connect and share." But, isn't this an empty statement, a symbolic exchange in which we have "free choice" but at the same time we know which choice is the right one? Connecting

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<sup>1</sup> Shirky 2009

<sup>2</sup> Adorno/Horkheimer 1944 (2002), p. 94-136

<sup>3</sup> Singel, 2010

and sharing on social networks is limited to proper codes and implied definitions. If nothing else, the freedom is limited by Facebook's "terms of service" which prohibits pornography and anonymity, while allows targeted advertising. As a result of this particular definition of "open communication", personal data became a common. Facebook's marketing system can target users according to several data: age, place, interests, similar to Google AdWords. We are witnessing the constant battle between company and its users on the matter of private data. There were several law suites against Facebook because of jeopardizing privacy of users. Among them there was Beacon scandal from 2007 when company implemented new model of commercialization of private information. The system collected information from partner web sites in order to more precisely personalize marketing on users's News Feeds. Private law suits forced Facebook to modify the Beacon system, so now it can be shut down.

Paradoxes of "open media" became obvious during the Arab revolution in 2010 and 2011. On the seventh day of protests in Egypt, Facebook published the statement stating that "the turmoil in Egypt is a matter for the Egyptian people and their government to resolve"<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, during the revolution, the Facebook corporation suspended one protest group because its administrators were using pseudonyms. Censorship was not provoke by the decision of Facebook to enter into the political arena, nor because corporation had any political preference in local matters, or specific point of view, but it was the logical outcome of Facebook's terms of service and the aim of this network to commodify private information. There is no use of the data if the company cannot relate the data to its user.

Corporation policy and the definition of public space clashed on the matter of identification. Many even today claim that anonymous communication over social networks is dangerous for the sake of the users. But it seems that it is more dangerous and unfruitful for states and companies. The value of the information about users can easily be verified. Study on the cost of marketing on Facebook showed that investing in Facebook pays off. The cost of obtaining fun is exactly 1,07\$<sup>5</sup>. Such precise calculation is the vital for existence of this network.

Mark Poster, even in the early days of the Internet, concluded that

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4 Melber, 2011

5 Flowtown 2011

corporations and the states represent the greater danger for the privacy of the users, nevertheless, limiting of the networks is legitimated with the fear of cyber-terrorism<sup>6</sup>. It is not symmetric relation with private users on the one side and corporations and states on the other. The benefits of sustaining the possibilities of anonymous communications are to easily overthrown for the false sake of the user. Many users themselves advocate the limitation of the open communication. But the agents who gain the most benefits from such limitations are corporations and states. As Poster visionary announced limitation of the Internet as a public sphere will happened in the form of the fear of private users. Benefits of anonymous communication are easily forgotten since anonymous communication is mostly seen as conformist practice.

Using social networks as public space for organizing protests revealed that anonymous communication is not only a conformist practice (practice of sharing pornographic content, for example). Protesters in Egypt extensively used Facebook as tool for organizing marches and protests precisely because it was the only way not to get prosecuted. Apart from the political issues in recent revolutions, anonymous communication was one of the fundamental characteristics of the Internet communication as such. In the early days of the Internet, Donna Harraway and other cyber-feminists considered the Net to be an ideal political sphere for deconstruction of gender and the tool for new emancipatory politics, since disembodiment creates a possibilities for overcoming of the logocentrism and patriarchal order<sup>7</sup>. However, the Arab Spring showed that the most valuable political aspect of Internet communication - disembodiment that allows anonymous communication is no longer possible, at least not on commercialized social networks. It is now clear that Facebook's definition of openness is fundamentally different from openness defined by early implementers of the Internet. It is also different from anarchical, illegal p2p file sharing groups. Facebook's openness presents a specific new media backlash. It is a process that aims at centralization of originally decentralized communication. Confrontation between users and the company is, nevertheless, part of larger problem of privacy on the Internet.

The question that is imposing in era of open media, is *what exactly is open?* Instead of open platform for sharing and connecting

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6 Poster 2001, p. 171

7 Harraway 1991, p. 149-181

(anonymously), corporations are offering form of centralized and commercialized services with ownership over the users data. Facebook is proposing what company defined as a concept of “radical transparency”. The term refers to supposedly voluntarily act of users to share their information without restraint. One of many Mark Zuckerberg’s statements that provoked public reaction, revealed the brutality of the system: “You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly.” He doesn’t hesitate to add: “Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity”<sup>8</sup>. Fundamentally, what Zuckerberg declares as “will to transparency”, is a distortion of original idea of openness. The success of Facebook is based on connecting people and promoting *transparent* communication – unimaginable until then. Anonymous usage of the Facebook is not its best use. Facebook’s success is an outcome of nevertheless bold idea about the users need for transparency.

Critics argued that Zuckerberg’s statement showed a lack of social intelligence, that distrustful approach on privateness is typical for young man, and that such pose would terrify any mature person. The problem is that Facebook executives still don’t understand that there are some things people would rather keep for themselves<sup>9</sup>. This remark on Zuckerberg is typical, because it supports the myth about socially unintelligent, but in any other way brilliant, young man. But while Zuckerberg’s other skills, such as programing, are questionable, his social intelligence is no less than visionary. Transparency is the most important element Facebook’s success. People really wants to present a picture of themselves with their real names and photographs. The problem is not a false premise on sociality of Facebook’s users. The problem is not that users of Facebook do not want to be transparent, instead, the problem is that the corporation is working under the system that could be defended as radically non-transparent. While radical openness should be radical transparency of the system, corporative logic defines transparency as the characteristic of users. Willingness to communicate openly with one’s real name and surname should not imply willingness to submit to exploitative corporative Panopticon. Such openness in the early day of virtual networks was guarantied; it was a radical openness of the networks.

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8 Kirpatrick 2010, p. 199

9 Kirpatrick 2010, p. 199

The Internet offered users the ability to communicate anonymously. The system structured around the commercialization and exploitation of users' data came in a conflict with the original structure of the Internet.

### Transparency of the Internet

Public debates include the more retrograde question: Why should network platforms be defined as a public sphere at all? Why should private corporate networks be the democratic spaces? The question is very similar to a common remark in the days of television: "You can always switch the program". Both statements are ignoring the perspective of the power - if nothing else the power of media to represent certain definition of reality - in which one who shuts down a program does not participate. The idea of the Internet as a public sphere originates from early days of the Internet and it is embodied in the structure of the Internet. The Internet radically decentralizes production and distribution of information, as it is the only media that directly interlinks two users without hierarchical mediator. Structural concepts behind the Internet, primary TCP/IP protocols, allow direct peer-to-peer communication between two computers. In his study, Protocol Alexander R. Galloway elaborates this shift in depth<sup>10</sup>. The rhisomatic structure is reconstituting a social structures, and not institutional structures. Media in the traditional sense are communication media (telephone, telegraph), or mass-media (radio, television, newspaper). The Internet is the first media that is at the same time a communication media and a mas-media. For that matter Manuel Castells writes on the Internet as the first *mass-self communication*<sup>11</sup> media.

Such structure empowered an optimistic notion of the Internet as the site of (cyber)democracy. Early virtual communities described by their pioneer and theoretician Howard Rheingold, were public spaces for communication. Rheingold coined the term *virtual agora* in order to accent the political aspect, and potential of democratization of society. Howard Rheingold described the cyberspace as "a social petri dish", the open virtual communities open toward experiment and opportunity for establishing new forms of democratic society<sup>12</sup>. In his essay "Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere" Mark Poster

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<sup>10</sup> Galloway 2006

<sup>11</sup> Castells 2009, p. 58-71

<sup>12</sup> Rheingold 1993

elaborated the importance to use Jürgen Habermas' idea of public sphere, but to redefine it so as to include virtual spaces of network communication<sup>13</sup>.

Even in the early days skeptical voices raised the question of the real political character of the Internet. Bennett Voyles, in his essay about popular the website e-thepeople.com (the site promoted democracy and provoked political debates), describes the network as a kind of "political karaoke bar". Although the Net offers free public space for political debate, it is obvious, claims Voyles, that country does not want to be saved<sup>14</sup>. The debates are usually too emotional and focused on wrong things. In Web 2.0 era the phenomenon of slactivism emerged. Slactivism only straightened the view of the disinterested community. Slactivism is pejorative term for activism that is exhausting with the declarative support to the cause. Such declarative support was unquestionably present in the case of hoax campaign for saving Stork fountain in Copenhagen, which was not actually endangered. In his study *The Net Delusion* Evgeny Morozov claims that this is a classic example of social networks political activism that does not require any effort, and therefore serves only to impress friends<sup>15</sup>. Media activist Geert Lovink agrees with skeptical view on social networks, but he sees it as a result of the negative processes on the Internet. What the Internet lost after 2000 was the "illusion of change"<sup>16</sup>. Lovink see blogs as part of an unfolding process of "massification" that is degrading the medium. Such negative tendencies are accompanied with simplification of digital tools, transition of early virtual communities into Web 2.0 social networks, and at the same time commodification of the network communication.

Such trends are a part of a broader phenomenon of depolitization of the public sphere, a process that started way before the Internet itself. It is a part of the process Jürgen Habermas diagnosed as dangerous "scientization of politics and public opinion". In such depoliticized society "functions of the expert from those of the politician" are separating<sup>17</sup>. The final form of this political model would be absolute independence of the professionals. In the final form of that *technocratic*

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13 Poster 1996

14 Voyles 2003, p. 16

15 Morozov 2011, p. 186–187

16 Loving, 2007

17 Habermas 1980, p. 63



society, politicians would become “the mere agent of scientific intelligentsia, which, in concrete circumstances, elaborates the objective implications and requirements of available techniques and resources as well as of optimal strategies and rules of control”<sup>18</sup>. The process of scientization that can be tracked, even from Max Weber who himself followed the tradition of Thomas Hobbes, is present in the most radical way in the political definition of social networks.

Media is not standardized (uniformed as mass-media cultural-symbolic production), but, paradoxically, the political aspect of the media is fading. Standardization of the technical structure of social networking (that allows easy communication for technically non-skillful user) is a form of scientization and de-politisation of the Internet. Social networking sites played an important political role in imposing democracy in the Arab world<sup>19</sup>, but such a role was more an outcome of the Internet structure, than characteristic of media tools. Networks acted as impartial observers whose role is not political but economically-pragmatical. It is not a direct, but an indirect relation of installation of new market economies in the Arab world, in a form of depoliticized media tools.

### **Ideology today**

What is ideology in this post-ideological world? Post-ideological societies are already defined as a type of social network, depoliticized and quasi-universal clusters, specific for post-industrial capitalism. In his study *The End of Ideology*, Daniel Bell introduced the idea that ideology had to come to its end because of a triumph of Western democratic politics and capitalism<sup>20</sup>. Alain Touraine offered a reply to Bell's speculative endism, the dangerous belief that post-World War II societies are societies without political conflicts. Touraine sees that there is a need to re-define the theory of ideology, to offer the description of the new era of society in which new forms of hegemony occurred<sup>21</sup>. He mostly agrees with Bell's findings that conflicts shifted from industrial production to production of knowledge, culture and consumption. Nevertheless, alienated work is still the foundation of extrapolation of profit. The

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18 Habermas 1980, p. 63-64

19 Homogenization of citizens in the Egypt during the Arab spring through social networks is similar to the homogenization in nineteen century, when newspapers played important role in forming the nations.

20 Bell 1960

21 Touraine 1974

problem with this post-ideological critique is also that Marx's formula of ideology cannot describe flexibility and dynamism of the relations between base and superstructure. (Raymond Williams offered plausible analysis of the problem present in Marx's spacial formula of base and superstructure<sup>22</sup>. The most important theories, such as Gramsci's and Althusser's, emerged from Marx, while insisting on relative autonomy of superstructure.)

Is ideology today a kind of cynical thought, as Peter Sloterdijk elaborated in his formula, while paraphrasing Marx? Sloterdijk stated that today, political subjects "know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it". Ideology would be cynical if an ideology would have been a matter of believing (knowledge). Since an ideology is a matter of acting according to certain ideas, it is somewhat different, reformulates Slavoj Žižek. So the final definition of ideology today is a form of inverted Marx formula of ideology as false consciousness. Contemporary subjects know "that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it" <sup>23</sup>.

Post-ideological societies are not societies in which ideology become insolvent, but societies in which ideology offers the most dangerous ideological gesture. In such societies, ideology or ideological "fantasy", in order to be effective firstly has to declare that it is non-ideological, even universal <sup>24</sup>. Declared universalism of the late capitalism is also inscribed in politics of social networks as a new type of public spheres. Although open, Facebook "terms of uses" describe the profitable oriented "public" space. As the Egypt revolution shows, such ideology is working beside the formal interface level. Capitalism, and social networks as its symptom, is a name of truly "neutral economic-symbolic machine"<sup>25</sup>. The only thing that is un-questionable is the fundament of capitalo-parliamentarianism, the matter of the capitalist way of production, and the accompanied democratic system that is providing the ideological framework. In Badiou's usage of the term<sup>26</sup> capitalo-parliamentarianism, this democratic framework, often excluded from the ideological arena, is crucial in the maintenance of the established

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<sup>22</sup> Williams 1980

<sup>23</sup> Žižek 1989, p. 31

<sup>24</sup> Žižek 1989, p. 30

<sup>25</sup> Žižek 2008, p. 156

<sup>26</sup> Badiou 2010, p. 31

order, since it is serving a conservative function. It can often be heard that capitalism is problematic, while democracy is not. But the Egyptian post-revolutionary state shows exactly that democracy served as an ideological framework for implementing capitalism.

Egyptian people lived long enough in a totalitarian system that the depoliticization of public sphere and the scientization of politics seemed like proper solutions for uniting and resolving conflicts and local antagonisms. The commodification of the public sphere today seems a minor problem. Social networks indifferent to political and religious perspectives of protesters, and at the same time operational tools for organizing protests, were the ideal type of media. Networks provided space for communication, tools for organizing events, aggregating of various contents from other web sites, etc. It was an ideal tool not only because of its efficiency, but, paradoxically, also because of its depoliticized nature. Egyptian people used Facebook as the public sphere. At the same time, what was missing was actually an authentic public sphere. Although Facebook is a corporative place, people used it as a public space, until the difference of their concept of openness resulted in conflict. In this case, the conflict was forgotten, represented as a minor casualty of the conflicted character of the political situation. But there were cases in which differences between the corporative logic of depoliticized market economy and the logic of revolution conflicted in a more violent way.

After Mubarak's regime in Egypt fell in June 2011, Vodafone's pilot-advert arrived on the Internet. The advert implied that the company, with its technological solutions, had inspired the Egyptian revolution. The advert stated: "We did not send people to the streets... We did not start the revolution... We only reminded Egyptians how powerful they are...". The advert was pure falsification since Vodafone was one of three mobile operators that decided to shoot down the communication network at the order of Mubarak's regime. Mobile phones and the Internet were shot down for a week, resulting in chaos, not only in the communication system, but also in the logistics and transport of the wounded to hospitals. But the advert is more than a pure falsification, it is a symptom of post-ideological systems that are truly universal, open for different views and opinions, with a clear mission. The fundament of capitalist economy cannot be questioned. Instead of a political amalgam and openness, the politics of the Internet (if it can emerge from certain political gestures that are present on the Internet) should insist exactly on those topics that are conflictual. In the era of post-ideological

canalization of every conflict, the most important thing should be to insist on the conflict. Egypt's revolution was a historical moment in which the Egyptian transition toward post-ideological society began. The post-totalitarian system of Western democracy seemed like the ideal form open to different political and religious view points. But different voices and conflictual situations vanished, while the commodified reality took the lead.

### **Hegemony and the Internet**

There is a serious problem present in oppositional cultures, as well as in critical theory, sociology and other discourses that legitimated the counter-power of networks, the problem of repeating the post-ideological matrix, the same one that is responsible for contemporary ideological fantasy. Critical theory and sociology sometimes define network as a universal place, a non-conflict space that promotes an idea of openness, communication and plurality of identities. Pierre Lévy and Manuel Castells offered the basic formula. Castells described the Net as an abstract, universal instrumental place that transforms the Self that is both particular and historically rooted<sup>27</sup>. Pierre Lévy accented liberation of a subject through the universal character of virtual networks. For Lévy, the Net as “universal without totality”, is a place in which totality could not survive because the Net includes “all people with their differences, and even with differences within themselves”<sup>28</sup>.

Although Castells and Lévy emphasized the importance of the social context, they are still conceptualizing the media and communication practices within the dominant neoliberal post-political matrix. In such societies, as Chantal Mouffe concludes, “the aspect of detotalization and decentring prevails” while “dispersion of subject positions is transformed into an effective separation”<sup>29</sup>. Instead of dispersion and separation, there is a need to elaborate the Net and the society in a whole as a place of struggle. The counter-power of the Net can be described in different terms. It is not a power of universal instrumental place, but a power of “a radical democratic citizenship” in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of the term<sup>30</sup>. It is a democratic

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<sup>27</sup> Castells 2000, p. 3

<sup>28</sup> Lévy 2001, p. 91

<sup>29</sup> Mouffe 1993, 77

<sup>30</sup> Laclau/Mouffe 1985

citizenship of a common political identity that does not form a unity, but a new hegemony articulated through new egalitarian social relations, practices and institutions. Such an antagonistic character of identity is more plausible for the (possible) Internet politics than it is the theory of “openness”, since openness is already inscribed in the corporative canons.

The Internet is truly universal, but it functions as a symptom of what is missing in the contemporary definition of universal democracy. Complementarity and possibilities to overcome our particularities (which was the main agenda in the Arab Spring) is a typical political shift in the depoliticized society where subjects are becoming aware that their cultural background is something contingent. Instead of insisting on relations between the universal and the particular, they should change places. The series of universal interpretative matrices are all “answers to the ‘absolute particularity’ of the traumatic Real, of the imbalance of *antagonisms* which throws out of joint, and thereby ‘particularises’ the neutral-universal frame”<sup>31</sup>.

To describe democracy through its antagonistic character, means to recognize an ideology as a form of distortion. In *The German ideology*, Marx writes: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”<sup>32</sup>. But the paradox of the Net, is that “it emerges from openness, inclusion, universalism, and flexibility”<sup>33</sup>. It is an order described by all post-Marxist theoreticians of hegemony that insisted that hegemony is a matter of social consent. A political model of distributive media is in no way different from other spheres that articulate personal needs in neoliberal society. Those fields act as fields of struggle for cultural meaning. The neo-Gramscian perspective offers useful tools for understanding the paradox of media. In understanding cultural meanings, the one valuable concept is that of hegemony. In Western society, claims Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is not established by violent acts, but through a process of negotiations about meanings<sup>34</sup>.

The fundamental force behind Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, followed by Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses, is an accentuation of “the ‘spontaneous’ consent” of the

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<sup>31</sup> Žižek 1996, p. 217 (my cursive)

<sup>32</sup> Marx|Engels 1979, p. 321

<sup>33</sup> Galloway 2006, p. 142

<sup>34</sup> Gramsci 1971

masses. Gramscian theory of ideology is approached in the elaboration of the co-optation, or appropriation of authentic/alternative cultures (R. Williams, S. Hall, R. Johnson). Hegemony in an era of post-ideology is the “form of appearance, the formal distortion/ displacement, of non-ideology”<sup>35</sup>. In order to be effective, every hegemonic universality has to incorporate *at least two* particular contents: “the ‘authentic’ popular content and its ‘distortion’ by the relations of domination and exploitation”<sup>36</sup>.

Raymond Williams in his essay “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” (1980) described what can be defined as a *distortion* of authentic culture. Ideology is not simply a reflection of a ruling class idea, but, as matter of negotiations. Williams proposes, a formula for social dynamism between the dominant and subordinated groups. According to Williams, all groups in Western democracies are related to each other. Williams distinguishes between the “residual and emergent forms, both of an alternative and of an oppositional culture”<sup>37</sup>. The residual cultures are “lived and practiced on the basis of the residue — cultural as well as social — of some previous social formation”<sup>38</sup>. Where traditional Marxism would have seen only two types of cultures - the dominant and the subordinate - Williams proposes a duplication of subordinate cultures, which he defines as the “emergent cultures”. The difference between two types of emergent cultures is crucial. While the oppositional emergent cultures constantly create “new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences” for the sake of changing the social order and gaining power, an alternative culture creates “a different way of life” in order to “be left alone”. While the oppositional culture aims at overthrowing the ruling culture, the alternative offers completely different forms of culture. Regardless of the degree of internal conflict between the oppositional and the dominant cultures, the oppositional culture will never “go beyond the limits of the central effective and dominant definitions”<sup>39</sup>.

The Gramscian theory of ideology positioned the alternative and the oppositional cultures at the center of social dynamism. The theory of

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35 Žižek 1999, p. 185

36 Žižek 1999, p. 194

37 Williams 1980, p. 40

38 Williams 1980, p. 40

39 Williams 1980, p. 31–49

ideology defined culture in capitalism as a dynamic field. The process of co-optation and appropriation of emergent forms of life is fundamental for capitalism. William's model can be applied on new forms of media production, in order to illustrate a twofold clash. The first is a clash between dominant but traditional cultural industries and emergent economic models, which introduce new forms of immaterial production and distribution. The second is a more complex form of a cultural battle, with logic that seems immanent to the so-called post-ideological era. It is a struggle between emergent oppositional media models of immaterial production and distribution, present in serial and heterogeneous forms (from social networks, digital e-readers, to mobile phones applications) and emergent alternative cultural p2p practices that are jeopardizing the foundations of cultural industries – copyright laws. While mainstream media offer an illusion of openness, and those are as such oppositional models, the alternative peer-to-peer economies are proposing radical opposition to neoliberal models of production, consumption and distribution.

Facebook is classical example of, what Williams defines as, oppositional emergent culture. The oppositional emergent culture appropriates some elements of an authentic (even of an alternative) culture, but in a form that is more or less adoptable and harmless to the system. Such culture acts as a parasite of the original authentic idea, but its only aim is to take over the dominant role. It is exactly a description of a culture of subordinated citizens who use Facebook as an open platform, and Facebook's business model as a form of emergent oppositional culture that distorts authentic practices so it can serve the economic needs of the ruling class. Distorted ideas, nevertheless, no longer have an authentic substance. Although today, emergent media cultures present horizontal media structure, and turn consumers into participants, the foundation of corporative market industry is modifying not only the open communication of its users, but also the original idea of the Internet openness. Company aims at modeling Facebook as a central place to browse, write e-mails, exchange data, etc. Such modeling threatens to become the model of using the Internet through the Facebook platform. Facebook's specific definition of freedom and free sharing is not imposing a radically different model, it is only installing new models of market economy, and innovation in businesses. Facebook, as emergent market model, presents a specific distortion of the original free culture of sharing and connecting.

Zygmunt Bauman illustrated liquid modernity by describing the

difference between Bill Gates and Henry Ford<sup>40</sup>. The model of progressive industrialist (Ford) is overshadowed by the playful industrialist (Gates): Long-term work (in Ford's factories) is overthrown by the liquid character of new types of job (in Microsoft corporation). Today, Mark Zuckerberg overshadows both icons, since he is a representative of an emergent capitalism, a new type of capitalist logic, at least on the matter of the exploitation of the work force. Zuckerberg's model of extrapolation of profit does not include production of material commodity that is copyrighted (as in Bill Gates case), but it is a widely implemented and relatively new model of profiting from users' data. New capitalism is not only liquid in the matter of physical working force (factories), or type of working conditions (work contracts), but it is also liquid on the matter of products and profit.

### **Conflictual character of the Internet**

Dominant cultures aim at the pacification of the economic conflict. What we are witnessing on the Internet today is establishing a new form of hegemony. Conflict between dominant and emergent cultures is more complex than the conflict of a traditional (dominant) and oppositional culture. In order to recognize one of the fundamental conflicts in the era of late capitalism, it is important to describe specific distortion of original network culture. The structure of the Internet is defined by standardization, agreements, organized implementation – all processes invisible to an average user. Although the structure of the Net seems unchangeable, its political character is subject to social consensus. The most important shift that takes place with the coming of the Web 2.0 is centralization on the ground of new economic models. Emergent models do not perpetuate existing cultural industries model, but propagate, in their historical essence, authentic ideas of openness and inclusion. Instead of a radical democratic vision, they are offering regeneration of neoliberal economies.

What could be the milestone in the contemporary conflict? The important difference that separates oppositional models from other political struggles is the question of access, proposed through the concept of free software. Johan Söderberg wrote that free software is a “political project for social change”<sup>41</sup>. Peer to peer services and

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40 Bauman 2011

41 Söderberg 2002



practices, as a result of the original structure of the Internet, as well as the idea and movement of free software, are among the most conflictual cultures, since there are opposing existing capitalist modes of production. In doing so, p2p culture represents authentic alternative culture in Williams's understanding of the term. The structure of the Internet itself is in conflict. The Internet is empowering users, but the technological means and structural relations are destructive for neo-liberal capitalist mode of production. When a user distributes any data (visual, audio, textual materials) another user becomes an owner of that data.

The p2p practices were initialized technologically, but at the level of discursive representations they emerged with the free software movement. Free software was, before anything else, a pragmatic solution for the scientific and technological development. Richard Stallman, a founder of the Free Software Foundation, was working at MIT in the early 1980s. Stallman simply reacted to the companies' quasi-natural right to own software. Stallman decided to develop the non-proprietary software program named GNU (acronym for GNU's Not Unix), a version of licensed Unix. The GNU project promoted free using and modifying of software, as long as it was distributed under the same conditions. Open software norms later applied to various cultural artifacts, including: music, design, literature, etc. Stallman insisted on the pragmatism of sharing that allows maximization of progress. Open software subversion in its beginning was, if anything else, the subversion within a system. Early implementers did not elaborate on the political and economic consequences of their ideas. However, it turns out that those ideas are among the most conflicted ideas in capitalist societies.

Johan Söderberg precisely diagnosed the problem by stating that to oppose copyright means to oppose capitalism<sup>42</sup>. The history of capitalism and copyright are connected, since the copyright reproduces the relations in production. The need for copyright was created through the emergence of a bourgeoisie class. The economy and politics of copyright is founded as the imperative to define every object, experience and person in the manner of its many equivalents, its exchange values. In order to reproduce relations of production, property regime developed the system of manufacturing authentic originals with copyright limitations. The Internet threatens such relations in production, as a new form of forces of production. The question of copyright is much broader, since the history of capitalism and accompanied democracy that legitimate the system is a

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42 Söderberg, 2002

history of the fight for autonomy over skills and knowledge, a trend whose origins can be traced to industrialism. As Söderberg noted, the fight for open information is only a contemporary variant of the historical fight in earlier types of societies. The Internet's conflictual character on the matter of intellectual property opened the site of revolution.

There are many examples that show that the Internet created the problem of intellectual property that became one of the central conflict in capitalism today. In order to illustrate this thesis, I will list only three examples: the first case is the law battles (SOPA, PIPA, and ACTA cases) against free sharing of data. These law battles showed that there is still an unsolved conflict between users and companies on the matter of open structure of the Internet. In the legal battle against piracy the postponed SOPA and PIPA acts and signed Anti-counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) were proposed as statutory instruments to give courts the power to grant orders to other entities suspected of infringing copyright. The aim of these laws was to re-define the fundamental decentralized structure of the Internet and to reaffirm capitalist logic of centralized production and distribution. The fact that the laws were not implemented in full shows that there is still a long way to go until public consensus forms on these matters.

The second case is that of copyright infringement of books. Two platforms, Ifile and Gigapedia (not operational from 2012) together created an open library with more than 400,000 e-books available for free, but as illegal downloads<sup>43</sup>. In 2012, academic publishers, including Cambridge University Press, Elsevier and Pearson Education, lead by Booksellers Association (Börsenvereine) and the International Publishers Association (IPA) organized an action against copyright infringement as a criminal business, and brought down the sites. If we focus only on the output of legal action, leaving aside the legal aspect, academic publishers truly acted as "the enemies of science"<sup>44</sup>. Shooting down piracy sites was nothing but the shooting down of the horizontal networks for distribution of knowledge. The p2p networks operate under the "plenitude economy", taking advantages of digital flexibility and the network decentralization.

It is obvious that in such radical democratization of the distribution of information, the p2p networks clashes with the foundation of capitalist production, with the surplus value imperative. In the process of

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43 Taylor 2012

44 Taylor, 2012

restructuring capitalism that started in 1980s, informational capitalism radicalized the closure of the commons and the commodification of the public sphere. The period after Second World War was a period of economic stabilization, the Keynesian model of optimal capitalist growth established unprecedented economic prosperity and social stability<sup>45</sup>. On the other hand, informational capitalism entered the world stage during economic crisis. During the early 1970s, with the growth of oil prices (in 1994 and in 1997), Western societies were facing the privatization of public goods and the breaking of the social contract between capital and work. After the contemporary crises starting in 2008, all the main goals of that capitalist restructuring again intensified. In such restructuring, as a result of the clash of the welfare state, academic publishers became owners of knowledge. Instead of discussing alternative models of defining knowledge and information in the context of the Internet as decentralized media, publishers aimed at limiting the decentralized distribution and production of knowledge.

Motivated only by the logic of profit, publishers not only distribute books under the copyright rules, but also frame the scientific process of “consuming” knowledge. One cannot discuss proprietary infringement outside the problem of profit. So, in order to propose fundamental questions on knowledge, aside from the realm of profit, it is necessary to leave aside that paradigm, even if that gesture is only for the purpose of imagination.

The third case shows how public debate often hides the intrinsic altruistic character of sharing. Such motives were present in several cases, the most dramatic of which is the one of Aaron Swartz, activist who made JSTOR academic journal articles publicly available. For this, Swartz was prosecuted with two counts of wire fraud and 11 violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, charges carrying a cumulative maximum penalty of \$1 million in fines and 35 years in prison. This sentence led Aron Swartz to commit suicide in January of 2013. Several other cases, among which the most prominent was Wikileaks case, and more recent Edward Snowden’s case, are pointing at the same legal fight against practices of open sharing. The legal battle against piracy is a clear evidence of the conflictual character of the free software movement, and the evidence of the fundamental force behind such ideas that is devastating for the cultural industries and states.

The examples show, at minimum, two problems with the existing

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45 Castells 2000, p. 18

capitalist modes of production and the state battle against free sharing. Firstly, the institutional fight against piracy is legitimated as a fight for authors and their rights. In that legitimation, public debate disavows the profit that industries make on authors, and the fact that the role of industries in the new mode of production is only to parasite between authors and users. On a more fundamental level, the actions against open culture demonstrate that the problem is not only with copyright as such, but with the mode of production and reproduction of relations in production. On the matter of the role of the states in such battle it is obvious that states legitimate limitation of the Internet communication and assist corporations with legal needs.

### **Marxism as theoretical apparatuses of the Internet revolution**

The collapse of revolutionary Marxism, and of all the forms of progressive engagement that it inspired, is one of the reasons for ethical nihilism and lack of any positive idea. It is easier to establish consensus regarding what is evil rather than what is good<sup>46</sup>. The nonexistence of any emancipatory idea is reassured through the outcasting of Marxism, after its political implementations in communist states has failed around the world. Communism (and consequentially Marxism) has been labeled as the “criminal utopia”<sup>47</sup>. One reason for taking historical materialism as a theoretical frame for the matter of intellectual property is simply a need to engage with different perspectives. The common approach towards the matter of intellectual property is grounded in the question of profit. Such approach is a priori negative – it aims at the limiting, prohibiting, blocking of the free information. However, from the point of view of revolutionary thought, the conflict that emerged with new technology that questions intellectual property is an important event. The Internet (and more specifically free software) became the site of revolution. If we define free software through Marx’s notion of the productive forces and relations of production, such ideas seems challenging for intellectual rights’ regime. In a more narrow sense, free software falls into the Marx concept of “general intellect”.

The important reason for approaching the concept of free software from the perspective of historical materialism is the fact that classical

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<sup>46</sup> Badiou 2001, p. 10

<sup>47</sup> Badiou 2010, p. 2

Marxism offers a lot on the “fettering of the general intellect”<sup>48</sup>. The most promising feature of free software is that it has mushroomed spontaneously and entirely outside of previous capital structures of production. On the other hand, as Söderberg noticed, the intellectual property regime has become a fetter to the development of the emerging forces of production. As Marx explained, capital fetters emerging forces of production, and such fettering is the main flywheel of the Capitalism. This can be taken as an indication of how the productive forces are undermining established relations of production<sup>49</sup>.

Marx described the term “general intellect”, as a form of new technology that comes into a conflict with existing relation of production. “At certain stage of their development, the material productive forces come into conflict with the existing relations of production”<sup>50</sup>. In *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx introduces concept of “general intellect”, which stress the intrinsic connection “between relative surplus value and the systematic tendency for the scientific-technical knowledge to play an increasingly important role in the production process”<sup>51</sup>. As capital continuously aims at maximization of productivity, it invests in “general intellect”, which is responsible for progress in scientific knowledge. Capital allows for an increase in the free time necessary for the growth of the general intellect. But capital allows it only in order to maximize profit.

In *Grundrisse* Marx explained the paradox of capital, and presented a solution:

“Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition “question of life or death “ for the necessary...”<sup>52</sup>

“The more this contradiction develops, the more does it become evident that the growth of the forces of production can no longer be bound up with the appropriation of alien labour, but that the mass of workers

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48 Söderberg, 2002

49 Söderberg, 2002

50 Žižek 1998, p. 33-34, cited in R. Barbrook 2000

51 Smith 2013

52 Marx 1973, p. 706

must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour.”<sup>53</sup>

“If the entire labour of a country were sufficient only to raise the support of the whole population, there would be no surplus labour, consequently nothing that could be allowed to accumulate as capital.”<sup>54</sup>

The crucial moment is the moment when capital is forced to create disposable time: non-labour time, free time. As it depends on appropriation of surplus labour time, it must reduce labour time for personal development. Marx offers a solution that is in the realm of utopian ideas, since he imagines a society in which progress is not driven by the profit. This paradox that Marx located in the term “general intellect” is the paradox that inevitably leads capitalism to its end, since this contradiction of creativity of general intellect and capital profit orientation intensifies through time. In such context “even though production is now calculated for the wealth of all, disposable time will grow for all”.<sup>55</sup>

The Marx’s anticipation of a transition from capitalism to communism was highly criticized. This unfulfilled prophecy was heavily under attack by sociologists, such as Anthony Giddens<sup>56</sup>. On the other hand, Marxists Paolo Virno and Carlo Vercellone claimed that Marx only made a mistake on the duration of this transitional historical period and that “‘collective appropriation of knowledges’ has in fact occurred”,<sup>57</sup> mostly in the form of digital democratization of media and the Internet.

Why there is no major relating of the Marxist theory and free software movement? The free software movement is revolutionary only *in potentia*. There are several forms of modeling that idea, from truly authentic oppositions to models co-opted by emerged neo-liberal economic models. Conflict occurred in the free software movement itself, between Stallman’s free software idea and Linus Torvalds’s Linux program. Stallman insists that “GNU is not Linux”, because his initial project was uncompromising on the fact that it has to be open and free for everyone. On the other hand, Linux is an open-source project that can be commercialized and co-opted by cultural industries in the form of

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53 Marx 1973, p. 708

54 Marx 1973, p. 709

55 Marx 1973, p. 708

56 Giddens 1995

57 Smith 2013

open-source programs that are more-or-less harmful for market economy. (Such is the example of Red Hat commercial version of GNU/Linux operating system).

On a global platform there is contra-reformist moment in the Internet history, and major differences between authentic early technological radical media solutions and commercialization of Web 2.0 in a form of social networks. Following early enthusiasm, reformist modes acted in efforts to expand market economy on the Internet. The Facebook revolutions indicated the gap between initial definition of the Internet: between using the Internet as public space and limitation of the Internet as a form of implementing commercial platforms. How, then, to relate the free software movement to Marxist theory? The rear leftist commentators relate new conflicts in capitalist economy outbursts by the alternative modes of reproduction of forces of production with Marxist concepts.

There are several reasons why the free software movement and Marxist theory failed to merge. It is partly a reflection of the conflict between Marxists that detected the era of cognitive-capitalism, and more traditional demand for re-affirmation of classical Marx's elaboration of capitalism. Alain Badiou, in his study *The rebirth of History* from 2012, criticized Negri's optimistic position on capitalism on the eve of its metamorphosis into communism<sup>58</sup>. Badiou thinks that we are witnessing a retrograde consummation of the essence of capitalism, of a return to the spirit of the 1850s – the primacy of things and commodities over life and machines of workers<sup>59</sup>. He writes that new wakening of the history could happen not from capitalism itself, but rather from “popular initiative in which the power of an Idea will take root”<sup>60</sup>. In a study, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, Badiou dismisses a few forms within which we also find what he called an alter-globalists movement that presents itself in “a multiform [of] movement inspired by the intelligence of the multitude (elaborated by Negri and the other alter-globalists)”<sup>61</sup>. It cannot be disputed that a lack of systematic political-economic theory behind the movement is one of the major problems of free software and its successors.

But is it not partially a problem of Marxism today, since the Marxist view on what could be elaborated as revolutionary does not

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<sup>58</sup> Badiou 2012, p. 10

<sup>59</sup> Badiou 2012, p. 11-14

<sup>60</sup> Badiou 2012, p. 15

<sup>61</sup> Badiou 2008, p. 114

include informational progress? Marx himself insisted on the relation between production forces and class struggle. In the chapter of Capital “Machinery and Large Scale Industry”, Marx discusses the class conflict as determined by the progress of machinery. It would be possible” Marx observes, “to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working class revolt”<sup>62</sup>. As Dyer-Witheford presented, there are numerous passages in Marx where he stresses the relationship between scientific work (discoveries and inventions) and capitalism. In *Grundrisse* Marx wrote about the progress of machinery in the hand of capitalists who aim to instrumentalise machinery in order to “depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed” than on “the general state of science and on the progress of technology”<sup>63</sup>.

The reluctance to identify with hackers ideas is partially understandable from the point of view of Marxist analysis, which cannot start from the prediction that the Internet and digital forms of production and reproduction are imposing completely new means and forms. But the Marxist’s perspective on hacking, technology and copyright (present in the works of Richard Barbrook, Nick Dyer-Witheford, Johan Söderberg and others) starts from definitions that relate the Internet to long standing fights. Such perspective demonstrates that technology is in the center of class fight. What Barbrook and others saw is initial conflict in the technology, in ‘economy of gifts’ as opposed to profitable exchange and “market competition at the cutting-edge of modernity”<sup>64</sup>.

Movements and individuals that are promoting free software as leftist ideas are rare. Mostly there are reluctant to identify with communism. Such animosity is a result of the collapse of revolutionary Marxism, and of all the forms of progressive engagement it inspired (a process described in details in Badiou’s work). But if a different perspective can emerge, it could detect a communist hypothesis within movements that are opposing the fundamental notions of capitalism, with or without theoretical elaboration of such fight. If open software wants to be a political project for social change, it has to approach the problem of class fight.

Decisions about the limitations of the politics of plurality, and

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<sup>62</sup> Marx 1977, p. 563

<sup>63</sup> Dyer-Witheford 1999, p. 5

<sup>64</sup> Barbrook 1999



possibilities for debate, create the ground for common sense and “doctrine of consensus” that Badiou proclaimed as “dominant ideology of contemporary parliamentary States”<sup>65</sup>. What every emancipatory project must do, what every emergence of hitherto unknown possibilities must do, is to put an end to such consensus<sup>66</sup>.

The case of free sharing is one of the rear moments in neoliberal-parliamentarism that is still without consensus. It is still a matter of a battle between citizens and corporations. The corporations are using all means available to win that battle. However, this battle is not only over the current legislation, but also over the public opinion. The means of this battle are not secret, as it is a battle over the public consensus. Google, Microsoft, and other companies have a classified job positions named Google/Microsoft “evangelist”, whose job is to preach or advocate certain technological solutions. Examples of breaking of doctrine of consensus, such as postponed SOPA and PIPA acts, show that any important cause (including that of free sharing) is not only a question of economy. The hegemony is created and redistributed through discursive economy, process of negotiations – the results of that battle are still uncertain. Criminalizing free software principles (free sharing of software, music, films, books, etc.) is a matter of public consensus. If such consensus fail, the project of limiting the p2p sharing will fail. For this reason, it is important to ask whether recent democratic processes have to do with free societies, and how commodification influences such processes.

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65 Badiou 2005, p. 18

66 Badiou 2001, p. 32

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# **Alain Badiou and the aporia of democracy within generic communism**

**Panagiotis  
Sotiris**

## Badiou's critique of democracy

Alain Badiou in *Rebirth of History*<sup>1</sup> offers his thoughts on the latest wave of mass movements and riots that shook the world, especially in 2011, from the Arab Spring to the Indignados and Occupy! Badiou welcomes this social and political dynamic. However, he is critical of one crucial aspect of the discourse of some of these movements, namely the demand for real or direct democracy. Badiou insists that '[t]o demand 'real democracy', as opposed to bad democracy, does not create any enduring dynamic', because 'it remains much too internal to the established democratic ideology'.<sup>2</sup> He is, also, particularly critical of the tendency of people who take part in such movements to think that the democratic practices within the movement can also be a model for a new organization of the State.

These people think that the popular democratic practices of the movement (of any historical riot, no matter when and where it occurs) form a kind of paradigm for the state to come. Egalitarian assemblies are held; everyone has the right to speak; social, religious, racial, national, sexual and intellectual differences are no longer of any significance. Decisions are always collective. In appearance at least: seasoned militants know how to prepare for an assembly by a prior, closed meeting that will in fact remain secret. But no matter, it is indeed true that decisions will invariably be unanimous, because the strongest, most appropriate proposal emerges from the discussion. And it can then be said that 'legislative' power, which formulates the new directive, not only coincides with 'executive power', which organizes its practical consequences, but also with the whole active people symbolized by the assembly.<sup>3</sup>

Badiou bases his opposition to this demand for mass democratic practices as a way to administer the state on the assumption that such forms of democratic politics could only be possible at the end of a process of withering away of the State. He invokes the authority of Marx himself

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1 Badiou 2012.

2 Badiou 2012, p. 97.

3 Badiou 2012, pp. 44-45

to support this claim, returning to Marx's insistence that some form of transitional dictatorship is necessary in order to initiate the process that could lead to some form of social organization without the state.

Why not extend these features of mass democracy, which are so powerful and inspiring, to the state in its entirety? Quite simply because between the democracy of the riot and the routine, repressive, blind system of state decisions - even, and especially, when they claim to be 'democratic' - there is such a wide gulf that Marx could only imagine overcoming it at the end of a process of the state's withering away. And, to be brought to a successful conclusion, that process required not mass democracy everywhere, but its dialectical opposite: a transitional dictatorship which was compacted and implacable.<sup>4</sup>

From these passages it becomes obvious that although Badiou is not directly critical of democratic practices within movements, especially during as 'historical riots' that ground 'in the occupied space the promise of a new, long-term temporality',<sup>5</sup> but he does not think that this can be turned into a permanent political solution. His reference to the classical Marxist theme of the dictatorship of the proletariat, is not limited to the necessary class oppressive character of any form of proletarian political power (in the sense that any form of power is always, in the last instance, *class* power, and that, also in the last instance, any class state power is a class dictatorship), but also to the form of its functioning.

How does Badiou attempt to describe this notion of the *popular dictatorship*? For Badiou a popular dictatorship represents exactly that particular moment in the evolution of an insurrectionary sequence, when a mass movement, that represents the truth in a particular situation, namely the possibility of an emancipatory and egalitarian sequence, manages to impose its will, without any other form of legitimization, either quantitative (i.e. claiming to be the majority) or procedural (referring to formal democratic procedures) other than its decision to impose its *will*.

By 'popular dictatorship' we mean an authority that is legitimate precisely because its truth derives from the fact

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<sup>4</sup> Badiou 2012, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Badiou 2012, p. 35.

that it legitimizes itself. No one is the delegate of anybody else (as in a representative authority); for what they say to become what everyone says, nobody needs propaganda or police (as in a dictatorial state), for what they say is what is true in the situation; there are only the people who are there; and those who are there, and who are obviously a minority, possess an accepted authority to proclaim that the historical destiny of the country (including the overwhelming majority comprising the people who are not there) is them. 'Mass democracy' imposes on everything outside it the dictatorship of its decisions as if they were those of a general will.<sup>6</sup>

Although Badiou explicitly refers to Rousseau, he criticizes him for his 'concession [...] to electoral procedures'<sup>7</sup> and he insists that what Rousseau described as the general will could any emerge within the 'minoritarian but localized'<sup>8</sup> dynamic of an historical riot. However, his emphasis is not on the dynamic of an historical riot per se; rather, he stresses the relation of a historical truth to a *political truth*. And such a truth can only be imposed by this kind of 'dictatorial', authoritarian means, based upon the 'authority of truth, the authority of reason',<sup>9</sup> this particular popular 'authoritarianism' being the main reason for the appeal of such mass insurrectionary movements.

Authoritarian in the strict sense, because, at the start at any rate, the fact that there is an absolute justice in the historical riot is what no one is entitled publicly to ignore. And it is precisely this dictatorial element that enthuses everyone, just like the finally discovered proof of a theorem, a dazzling work of art or a finally declared amorous passion - all of them things whose absolute law cannot be defeated by any opinion.<sup>10</sup>

For Badiou what motivates people in such mass movements and insurrectionary sequences is this encounter with a Truth and a demand for

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6 Badiou 2012, p. 59-60.

7 Badiou 2012, p. 60.

8 Badiou 2012, p. 60.

9 Badiou 2012, p. 61.

10 Badiou 2012, p. 61.

unconditional justice. Therefore, what he has described as the reopening of History by such movements, is not “real democracy’, but [...] the authority of the True, or of an unconditional Idea of justice’.<sup>11</sup>

This criticism of democracy has been a constant feature of Alain Badiou’s latest writings. One of the texts collected in *Metapolitics*<sup>12</sup> is dedicated to this criticism of democracy. Badiou begins by revisiting Lenin’s criticism of democracy. He makes a distinction between two forms of criticism of democracy by Lenin. The first one is based upon the opposition of proletarian to bourgeois democracy. The second one, which Badiou prefers, is based upon the assumption that ‘*democracy* should in truth always be understood as a *form of state*’.<sup>13</sup> If democracy is a form of State, then it cannot be by itself a political aim for communist politics, whose aim should be ‘generic communism [...] an egalitarian society of free association between polymorphous labourers [...] [where] the State as an authority separate from public coercion is dissolved’.<sup>14</sup> For Badiou the emphasis on democracy leads not to generic communism, but to a politics aiming at determining ‘the good State’.<sup>15</sup> In a politics of generic communism ‘democracy’ is relevant only ‘*as long as ‘democracy’ is grasped in sense other than a form of the State*’.<sup>16</sup> However, Badiou thinks that this treatment of democracy as a not a form of the State should not lead us to embracing some form of mass or direct democracy.

The first attempt would be to conjoin ‘democracy’ directly to mass political activity; not to the statist configuration, but to that which is most immediately antagonistic to it. For mass political activity or the spontaneous mobilization of the masses, generally comes about through an anti-statist drive. This has provided the syntagm, romantic in my view, of mass democracy, and an opposition between mass democracy and formal democracy, or democracy as a figure of the State.<sup>17</sup>

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11 Badiou 2012, p. 97.

12 Badiou 2005.

13 Badiou 2005, p. 79.

14 Badiou 2005, p. 79-80.

15 Badiou 2005, p. 84.

16 Badiou 2005, p. 85.

17 Badiou 2005, p. 88.



For Badiou mass democracy, in phenomena such mass gatherings, assemblies, riots etc, can be easily reversible to mass dictatorship. This is based on the fact that 'the essence of mass democracy actually yields a mass sovereignty, and mass sovereignty is a sovereignty of immediacy, thus of the gathering itself'.<sup>18</sup> Badiou explicitly turns to Sartre and the dialectical modalities of the 'group – in – fusion' and particularly the revolutionary group. In the same manner that Sartre insisted that "[t]he only contradiction between the characteristics which are so often opposed to one another by reactionary writers – Hope and Terror, sovereign Freedom in everyone and Violence against the Other, both outside and inside the group – is a dialectical one'.<sup>19</sup> The same point is practically repeated by Badiou: 'There is an organic correlation between the practice of mass democracy as an internal principle of the group-in-fusion and a point of reversibility with the immediately authoritarian or dictatorial element at work in terroristic-fraternity'.<sup>20</sup> For Badiou the only way out of this 'democracy/dictatorship dyad that resists elementary designation',<sup>21</sup> is to think in terms of the radical anti-statism of generic communism. Marxists could accept the notion of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', because there were 'points of reversibility between democracy and dictatorship which assumed the historical figure of mass democracy, or revolutionary democracy, or romantic democracy'.<sup>22</sup> However, Badiou leaves a space open for a reconceptualization of democracy. De-linked from the State and any politics associated with the State, democracy 'would be organically bound to the universality of the political prescription, or to its universal capacity'.<sup>23</sup> This could establish a different relation between democracy and politics, it 'would allow for an intrinsically democratic characterization of politics to the extent that, quite obviously, politics would be self-determined as a space of emancipation subtracted from the consensual figures of the State'.<sup>24</sup> Through a re-reading of Rousseau's particular conception of the relation

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<sup>18</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Sartre 2004, pp, 406-407.

<sup>20</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 89.

<sup>21</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 90.

<sup>23</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 90.

between sovereignty and democracy in the establishment of government, Badiou insists on this conception of democracy as universality of political prescription, in an attempt to free politics from its subordination to the State. 'Democracy could thus be defined as that which authorizes a placement of the particular under the law of the universality of the political will'.<sup>25</sup> And this for Badiou is linked to equality: 'democracy as a philosophical category is that which *presents equality*'.<sup>26</sup>

From all these it becomes obvious that for Badiou does not designate some form of political procedure or process of taking decisions. It refers to an egalitarian form of collective politics, erupting as an expression of an insurrectionary general will of the oppressed and to a political demand for equality and emancipation. That is why for Badiou the mass riot or the mass gathering is put on the same level with the mass assembly. One might say that in contrast to a procedural conception of democratic decision making, here we are dealing with a *performative* practice of emancipation. What is also important is that this kind of democratic politics as a politics of the universality of political prescription is also linked to the Truth of a particular situation and eventual site. A democratic politics is a politics that inscribes itself to this Truth. However, this inscription to this Truth is not determined by a democratic process of discussion, deliberation or decision.

## 2. A platonic critique of democracy

At the same time, Badiou repeatedly criticizes the current use of notion of democracy, and particularly the direct association of 'democracy' to the contemporary version of a liberal-parliamentary regime for advanced capitalist economies, what Badiou terms 'capitalo-parliamentarism'. In light of this definition of democracy, Badiou goes back to Plato's criticism of democracy and the platonic theme that 'crucial traits of the democratic type are egoism and desire for petty enjoyment'.<sup>27</sup> Although Badiou admits that Plato was politically conservative and nostalgic of a potential return to a more aristocratic form of politics, however he insists on the validity of the Platonic position that 'the only thing that constitutes the democratic subject is pleasure or, more precisely, pleasure-seeking

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<sup>25</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 92.

<sup>26</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Badiou 2011, p. 8.

behavior'.<sup>28</sup> Badiou links Plato's criticism of democracy as imposition of an artificial equality upon things unequal, which Badiou defines as a 'world of universal substitutability',<sup>29</sup> to the pseudo-equality of generalized commodity and money exchanges in contemporary capitalist societies, along with consumerism and hedonism associated with neoliberal capitalism

What defines the homo democraticus trained into this anarchy is that he or she as subject reflects the substitutability of everything for everything else. So we have the overt circulation of desires, of the objects on which these desires fix, and of the cheap thrills they deliver, and it's within this circulation that the subject is constituted. And as I said, in senescence our subject, blasé by now, comes to accept a certain interexchangeability of those objects, as a boost to circulation (or 'modernization'). All he or she can really make out any more are the numbers, the quantities of money in circulation.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore for Badiou, in contemporary capitalist societies 'democracy' as a battle-cry of the dominant social forces, equals the demand for what we could describe as a generalization of capitalist market practices plus the generalized prescription of a compulsive 'youthful' pleasure seeking. Therefore the opposite of 'democracy' is

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28 Badiou 2011, p. 9.

29 Badiou 2011, p. 11.

30 Badiou 2011, p. 11. Badiou's dialogue with the Platonic criticism of democracy is most obvious in his rewriting, or adapting in contemporary terms of a passage from Plato's *Republic* (book 8, 561d): "Democratic man lives only for the pure present, transient desire is his only law Today he regales himself with a fourcourse dinner and vintage wine, tomorrow he is all about Buddha, ascetic fasting, streams of crystal-clear water, and sustainable development. Monday he tries to get back in shape by pedalling for hours on a stationary bicycle; Tuesday he sleeps all day, then smokes and gorges again in the evening. Wednesday he declares that he is going to read some philosophy, but prefers doing nothing in the end. At Thursdays dinner party he crackles with zeal for politics, fumes indignantly at the next persons opinion, and heatedly denounces the society of consumption and spectacle. That evening he goes to see a Ridley Scott blockbuster about medieval warriors. Back home, he falls to sleep and dreams of liberating oppressed peoples by force of arms. Next morning he goes to work, feeling distinctly seedy, and tries without success to seduce the secretary from the office next door. He's been turning things over and has made up his mind to get into real estate and go for the big money But now the weekend has arrived, and this economic crisis isn't going away, so next week will be soon enough for all that. There you have a life, or lifestyle, or lifeworld, or whatever you want to call it: no order, no ideas, but nothing too disagreeable or distressing either. It is as free as it is unsignifying, and insignificance isn't too high a price to pay for freedom." (Badiou 2011, p. 13).

a form of collective politics that goes beyond both the State and the dominance of the global capitalist market, a politics that aims at the extinction of the State.

[I]f democracy equals monetary abstraction equals an organized death wish, then its opposite is hardly despotism or “totalitarianism.” Real opposition is the desire to set collective existence free of the grip of this organization. Negatively, that means the order of circulation must no longer be that of money, nor the order of accumulation that of capital. [...]Politics will not be subordinated to power, to the State. It is, it will be, the force in the breast of the assembled and active people driving the State and its laws to extinction.<sup>31</sup>

That is why Badiou concludes this Platonic criticism of democracy as a capitalist liberal emblem with a lineage between democracy and communism. This means going back ‘to the literal meaning of democracy’,<sup>32</sup> as a politics of collective self-emancipation, a communist politics. ‘From that perspective, we will only ever be true democrats, integral to the historic life of peoples, when we become communists again’.<sup>33</sup>

However, this acceptance of some reference to democracy does not mean that Badiou has abandoned his critique of most forms of democracy. He still has a very negative view towards any form of electoral democracy and he discards the principle of universal suffrage

I must tell you that I absolutely do not respect universal suffrage in itself; it depends upon what it does. Is universal suffrage the only thing we should respect, regardless of what it produces? And why is that? [...] Universal suffrage has produced a number of abominations. In history competent majorities have legitimized Hitler and Pétain, the Algerian War, the invasion of Iraq.<sup>34</sup>

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31 Badiou 2011, p. 14.

32 Badiou 2011, p. 15.

33 Badiou 2011, p. 15.

34 Badiou 2008, p. 32.

Badiou is not alone in this critique of the limits of universal suffrage. Luciano Canfora in his *Democracy in Europe. A History of an Ideology*<sup>35</sup> has offered a wide ranging history of the democratic form and has placed particular emphasis on all the particular moments that universal suffrage did not avert reactionary developments. In a similar line Badiou draws a sharp line of demarcation between any form of parliamentary or in general representative democracy and the communist hypothesis: 'from the beginning the communist hypothesis in no way coincided with the 'democratic' hypothesis that would lead to present-day parliamentarism'.<sup>36</sup>

If these references offer a support of a criticism of parliamentary democracy and of the particular form of representation in liberal democracies, is there some other form of democracy, compatible with the 'communist hypothesis'? As Daniel Bensaïd noted,<sup>37</sup> Badiou does not provide an actual answer to what should follow the destruction of the bourgeois State, what form of democratic politics are appropriate to the 'communist hypothesis'. This is particularly evident in Badiou's 2003 text on the Paris Commune Badiou praises the Commune's steps towards the 'destruction of State bureaucracy'.<sup>38</sup> He also stresses the ambiguity of the classical Marxist and Leninist reference to the Commune through the subsequent formulation of the centrality of the party-state: 'retroactively thought through the party-state, the Commune is reducible to two parameters: first, to its *social* determination (workers); and second, to a heroic but defective exercise of *power*'.<sup>39</sup> However, when it comes to actually discuss its political content, its particular form of doing politics, of establishing different forms and norms of democratic politics, Badiou remains relatively silent, despite criticizing Marx for deploring incapacities 'that are actually statist incapacities'.<sup>40</sup>

### 3. The critique of democracy in the Marxist tradition

After this partial rereading of some aspects of Badiou's critique of

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35 Canfora 2006.

36 Badiou 2008, p. 100-1.

37 Bensaïd 2011, p. 24.

38 Badiou 2006, p. 263.

39 Badiou 2006, pp. 264-65.

40 Badiou 2006, p. 262.

democracy, we can now attempt to offer a critique of his positions. First of all, we must stress that this ambiguity towards democracy as a political form has been an essential aspect of the Marxist tradition, especially since Marx, from the beginning also attempted a critique of politics. Marx in his criticism of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* insists on democratic elections as an advance even in the sense of bringing forward the contradictions of bourgeois societies: 'The representative constitution is a great advance, since it is the *frank, undistorted, consistent* expression of the *modern condition of the state*. It is an *unconcealed contradiction*'.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Marx thinks of a radical democratic politics that leads to a new socialization of politics and politicization of society.

Civil society is *actual* political society. In this case, it is nonsense to raise a demand which has risen only from the notion of the political state as a phenomenon separated from civil society, which has arisen only from the *theological notion* of the political state. In this situation the significance of *legislative* power as a *representative* power completely disappears. The legislative power is representation here in the sense in which *every* function is representative – in the sense in which, e.g., the shoemaker, insofar as he satisfies a social need, is my representative, in which every particular social activity as a species-activity merely represents the species, i.e., an attribute of my own nature, and in which every person is the representative of any other. He is here representative not because of something else which he represents but because of what he *is* and *does*.<sup>42</sup>

However, soon afterwards, in 1844, Marx formulates in the *Jewish Question* a strong critique of any version of political emancipation that does not also include social transformation and emancipation. For Marx the political revolutions of the bourgeois era also led to a full development of capitalist social practice. 'Throwing off the political yoke meant at the same time throwing off the bonds which restrained the egoistic spirit of civil society. Political emancipation was at the same time the emancipation of civil society from politics, from having even

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41 Marx-Engels 1975, p. 75.

42 Marx-Engels 1975, p. 119.

the *semblance* of a universal content'.<sup>43</sup> From this point onwards this critique of political forms became a major aspect of Marx's theoretical and political endeavor. Political rights and democratic political forms without radical social change and transformation of capitalist social relations of property and exploitation can have little relative value and can also function as means for mystification and legitimization of capitalist exploitation. This is particularly evident in the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where Marx confronts the fact that democratic electoral procedures can also be used as means to legitimize the strengthening of domination and exploitation. At the same time, when Marx is confronted with the experience of the Paris Commune, an experience that actually helped him reformulate the very concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the emphasis is both on the destruction of the oppressive State apparatus and also and on the emergence of novel *democratic* forms, based on universal suffrage, full eligibility and full revocability, open and equal deliberation and procedure, absence of any privilege for elected officials:

The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time. [...] The vested interests and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of state disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves. Public functions ceased to be the private property of the tools of the Central Government. Not only municipal administration, but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the state was laid into the hands of the Commune. [...] The rural communities of every district were to administer their common affairs by an assembly of delegates in the central town, and these district assemblies were again to send deputies to the National Delegation in Paris, each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Marx – Engels 1975, p. 166.

<sup>44</sup> Marx 1871.

In the *Critique of the Gotha Program* Marx defends the need for a *revolutionary dictatorship*, explicitly distinguishing it from the *democratic republic* as a set of demands for the capitalist societies of his time and opposing to the confusing demand for a *free state* that was included in the Gotha program of the German Social-democracy. However, this does not mean the Marx denied the crucial democratic aspects of the experience of the Commune; he stressed the need to think of a democracy beyond parliamentarism. Lenin rereading Marx's writings on the Paris Commune, in *State and Revolution*, grasps this need to rethink the politics of *proletarian democracy*.

The Commune substitutes for the venal and rotten parliamentarism of bourgeois society institutions in which freedom of opinion and discussion does not degenerate into deception, for the parliamentarians themselves have to work, have to execute their own laws, have themselves to test the results achieved in reality, and to account directly to their constituents. Representative institutions remain, but there is no parliamentarism here as a special system, as the division of labor between the legislative and the executive, as a privileged position for the deputies. We cannot imagine democracy, even proletarian democracy, without representative institutions, but we can and must imagine democracy without parliamentarism, if criticism of bourgeois society is not mere words for us.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, Lenin stresses that as part of a process of revolutionary transformation, this withering away of the State means an expansion of democratic principles outside the political sphere. Revocable representation, deliberation and collective decision, must also be the fundamental aspects of a different organization of social production and only in this way can the need for a 'specialized' state apparatus be diminished.

*We*, the workers, shall organize large-scale production on the basis of what capitalism has already created, relying on our own experience as workers, establishing strict, iron discipline backed up by the state power of the armed workers.

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<sup>45</sup> Lenin 1918.



We shall reduce the role of state officials to that of simply carrying out our instructions as responsible, revocable, modestly paid “foremen and accountants” (of course, with the aid of technicians of all sorts, types and degrees). [...] Such a beginning, on the basis of large-scale production, will of itself lead to the gradual “withering away” of all bureaucracy, to the gradual creation of an order--an order without inverted commas, an order bearing no similarity to wage slavery--an order under which the functions of control and accounting, becoming more and more simple, will be performed by each in turn, will then become a habit and will finally die out as the special functions of a special section of the population.<sup>46</sup>

Although Lenin could not easily offer a answer to how this could be accomplished, and despite his oscillation between an emphasis on the abolition of the social division of labour and socialization of knowledge and an emphasis on a certain collective efficiency of well organized and simplified procedures (exemplified in the famous exemplified in the remarks to the postal service as a model), it is obvious that he was thinking of the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat in terms of an expansion of democratic forms and in particularly in terms of thinking of democratic forms not only regarding the ‘political sphere’ but also the ‘economic sphere’. This expansion of revolutionary democratic politics into the realm of production, this radical politicization of the supposedly neutral or ‘technical’ realm of production, is a crucial aspect of this initial conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Of course such a return to textual sources cannot function as a solution; especially since these references were followed by more than seven decades during which ‘socialism’ was associated, at least for long periods with the suppression of mass democratic practices. However, I used these references to the classics as a means to highlight that in the tradition of Marxism there has always been such an emphasis on democracy as an integral aspect of the revolutionary process.

#### **4. The distrust of democracy**

At the same time, Badiou's distrust of democracy is not limited – at least in my reading – to the ideological and political role of liberal parliamentary democracy. It is also – and this is the reason for his

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<sup>46</sup> Lenin 1918.

recurring Platonic references – a distrust of democracy *per se*. This distrust is not a priori unfounded. From the beginning of political philosophy, in Ancient Athens, the crucial question was: how can we entrust government and important decisions to people that are ignorant, lack knowledge, are guided by ideological opinion and can be manipulated by demagogues. Both Plato's and Aristotle's unease towards democracy and democratic opinion was based upon such assumptions. One can think of the projection of such a position to the contradictions of contemporary mass democracies and the forms of ideological misrecognition associated with the reproduction of bourgeois rule. And this can easily lead in the end to a mistrust of the masses themselves and –through a pattern that marked the evolution of 'historical communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – consequently to a politics of the Party as the vanguard that "knows best".

This is coupled with a certain tension between this conception of the masses inevitable ideological manipulation with the exaltation of the masses and especially the proletarian masses as the ontological ground of communist politics. This is a tension that runs through the history of Marxism – the few writers that have attempted to go beyond it, such as Jacques Rancière,<sup>47</sup> usually also dispense with the notion of the Party and any form of organized vanguard – and is more than evident in the work of Badiou, who at the same time celebrates the mass riot and laments the mass manipulation by capitalo-parliamentarism. Badiou's solution to this tendency, namely the temporal and ontological difference in intensity between insurrectionary sequences and periods of normality, in my opinion falls short of offering an answer, mainly because it fails to put the crucial question: how can we think of the masses in their insurrectionary potential and in their ability to be manipulated, at the same time insisting that a politics of emancipation is based upon the projection of their resistances, and not some normative ideal imposed upon social reality.

### **5. Democracy, liberalism and bourgeois hegemony**

And this must also be put in historical perspective. One of the problems of Badiou's linking of democracy to parliamentarism is that it forgets the very historicity of modern political forms. Domenico Losurdo's *Liberalism. A Counter-History*<sup>48</sup> offers ample evidence of the inherently

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47 Rancière 1991; Rancière 2010.

48 Losurdo 2011.

undemocratic character of liberalism and of the support given by the theorists of classical liberalism to oppressive an undemocratic political configuration. Moreover, it is always necessary to remember that democratic institutions would not have been introduced without the political pressure of the subaltern classes and above all the working class, in a long history of political struggles.

The fact that in the end the institutions of universal suffrage and parliamentary representation ‘functioned’ in favour of the bourgeoisie was itself the result of a history of social and political antagonisms and how the apparatuses of bourgeois hegemony changed and adapted to the development of the labor movement. This led to the establishment of a political mechanism structurally disjoined from actual social practices and intrinsically linked to electing parties of the State, turning as Althusser stressed, the whole political ‘system’ into an Ideological State Apparatus:

What permits [...] to talk about the “political system” as a “State *ideological* apparatus”, is the *fiction* that corresponds to “a certain reality”, namely that the pieces of this system and its principle of functioning are based upon *the ideology of “freedom”* and “equality” of the individual voter, on the “free choice” of those that will represent the people by the individuals in relation to the *idea* that every individual has about the policy that the State must follow.<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, it was exactly a long history of social and political struggles that led to the emergence of modern parliamentarism, with the emphasis on individuation (the voter as individual not as representative of his class position), distance between elected officials and voters and above all the subsumption of politics within the strict limits of dominant capitalist strategies and their inscription in the materiality of the modern state. It is this history that can explain how the democratic impetus of the subaltern classes was incorporated into the functioning of bourgeois hegemonic apparatuses, especially in the period of the bourgeois passive revolution.<sup>50</sup> And this can indeed to the possibility that ‘*politics itself can*

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49 Althusser 1995, p. 259.

50 Gramsci 1971.

*become the 'mask' of politics*'.<sup>51</sup> Part of this historical process, has been the many ways the 'dominant ideology' was based not so much upon the projection of the "bourgeois worldview" and more on the incorporation / transformation of ideological aspirations of the subaltern classes. As Balibar has noted it is exactly this 'universalistic' aspect of ideological domination that characterizes the functioning of hegemony:

The necessary condition for an ideology to become dominant is that it should elaborate the values and claims of the 'social majority' become the discourse of the *dominated* [...] 'Society' or the dominant forces in society, can speak to the masses in the language of universalistic values (rights, justice, equality, welfare, progress...), because in this language a kernel remains which came from the masses themselves, and is returned to them.<sup>52</sup>

## 6. Democracy as a communist project

Explaining the transformation of 'democratic institutions' into integral aspects of bourgeois class domination and in parts of the bourgeois hegemonic apparatus, is not enough. We must always stress the constant effectivity of the practices, discourses and aspirations of the subaltern classes, not in the sense of the proletariat as a 'messianic' social force entering the historical scene, but more in the sense of the results and traces, the cracks and ruptures caused by the multiple singular resistances of the subaltern classes, exactly that kind of social effectivity that Badiou's ontology of the event fails to register because of the focus mainly on the insurrectionary sequence. As Mario Tronti stressed in 1964, with an optimism that might sound paradoxical today, 'at the points where capital's power appears most dominant, there it is more deeply penetrated by this threat of the working class'.<sup>53</sup>

In such a perspective, what is at stake is exactly a different practice of politics, *democratic* politics associated with the communist project. As Balibar in his reading of Marx's and Engels' confrontation with the Paris

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<sup>51</sup> Balibar 1994, p. 165.

<sup>52</sup> Balibar 2002, p. 164.

<sup>53</sup> Tronti 2006, p. 87.

Commune, as *rectification* of the *Communist Manifesto*,<sup>54</sup> the challenge is exactly to think not just of politics and the State, but of a different *practice of proletarian politics*. And as again Balibar again noted this means an

original practice of politics that is *not less but more* 'democratic', than that incarnated by the pluralism of the representative institutions of the bourgeois State itself; to make the revolutionary party at the same time the means to take power and to exercise it in an new fashion; therefore to surpass progressively within its ranks the 'division of manual and intellectual labour', the opposition between 'those who govern and those that are governed'.<sup>55</sup>

Therefore instead of Badiou's oscillation between an exaltation of the insurrectionary potential expressed in times of historic riots and the Platonic lamentation of mass hypnotization by the dominant capitalist *doxa*, that forms the theoretical foundation for his mistrust of democracy, we must try and rethink of *democratic practices*, within movements and everyday struggles, as exactly the means both to bring forward the political potential of popular initiatives and also to materialize a possible subaltern (counter)hegemony. And this means, contrary to Platonic fears of mass ideological manipulation, that the masses have always something important to say, however contradictorily they articulate it; that communist politics must begin by paying attention to the imagination, inventiveness, collective ingenuity of the masses. And as Althusser stressed, this means '*restoring their voice to the masses* who make history. Not just putting oneself 'at the service of the masses' (a slogan which may be pretty reactionary), but *opening one's ears to them*, studying and understanding their aspirations and their contradictions, their aspirations in their contradictions, learning how to be attentive to the masses' imagination and inventiveness'.<sup>56</sup> This is also based on the possibility of communism emerging not as a normative political ideal, but as an actual tendency within current social relations and antagonism, tendency materialized exactly in the collective *democratic* practices of the masses, namely their forms of autonomous organization

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54 Balibar 1974.

55 Balibar (1982) 1999, p. 1139.

56 Althusser 1977, p. 11.

Marx thinks of communism as a *tendency* of capitalist society. This tendency is not an abstract result. It already exists, in a concrete form in the “interstices of capitalist society” (a little bit like commodity relations existing “in the interstices” of slave or feudal society), virtual forms of communism, in the associations that manage [...] to avoid commodity relations.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, we need to rethink the importance of mass democratic practices in contemporary movements and the current sequence of struggles. The call for ‘real democracy’ is not just a misguided demand for radical political change. It also encapsulates one of the crucial prerequisites for communist politics today. The mass assembly as the main form of organization, the open discussion, the emphasis on decisions being made democratically, the emphasis on collective representation and revocability, the distrust of ‘leadership’, the emphasis on horizontal coordination and building democratic networks instead of top-down traditional hierarchical fronts, all these concrete experimentations with new forms of democracy-in-struggle are indispensable aspects of communist politics. Instead of a Platonic mistrust of such democratic practices, we need a more optimist Spinozist insistence that in the end it is ‘practically impossible for the majority of a single assembly, if it is of some size, to agree on the same piece of folly’.<sup>58</sup>

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57 Althusser 1998, p. 285.

58 Spinoza 2002, p. 530.

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# **Climate Crisis, Ideology, and Collective Action**

**Ted Stolze**



“Nightmare, nightmare, struggle, despair and dream...”  
—Thomas McGrath, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*

According to new scientific research, there exist nine *planetary boundaries*, which are interlinked Earth-system processes and biophysical constraints: climate change, rate of biodiversity loss, interference with the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, stratospheric ozone depletion, ocean acidification, global freshwater use, change in land use, chemical pollution, and atmospheric aerosol loading. Crossing even one of these boundaries would risk triggering abrupt or irreversible environmental changes that would be very damaging or even catastrophic for society. Furthermore, if any of these boundaries were crossed, then there would be a serious risk of crossing the others. However, as long as these boundaries are not crossed, “humanity has the freedom to pursue long-term social and economic development.”<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the following three boundaries have already been crossed: climate change, rate of biodiversity loss, and interference with the nitrogen cycle. The threat that humanity has posed to the conditions of life for our own and other species has never been greater.<sup>2</sup>

In response to this emergency, let us consider the following moral argument. Call it the *Urgency Argument*:

1. One should urgently act to halt any grave threat posing serious harm to others.
2. Crossing any of the nine planetary boundaries would be a grave threat posing serious harm to human development.
3. Therefore, humanity should urgently act to avoid crossing these boundaries, or, if already crossed, to reverse course and resume social and economic development within them.
4. Dangerous climate change will result from crossing one of the nine planetary boundaries.
5. But dangerous climate change is caused by releasing excessive greenhouse gas emissions into the earth’s atmosphere (>350 ppm CO<sub>2</sub>).
6. Therefore, humanity should urgently act to reduce greenhouse gas

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<sup>1</sup> Rockström et al. 2009.

<sup>2</sup>The planetary boundaries associated with stratospheric ozone depletion, ocean acidification, global freshwater use, and change in land use have not yet been crossed; and those boundaries associated with chemical pollution, and atmospheric aerosol loading have yet to be quantified scientifically.

emissions into the earth's atmosphere to a safe target (<350 ppm CO<sub>2</sub>).<sup>3</sup>

But given the imminent prospect of severe climate disruption, why as yet has there occurred relatively little collective action in response? Psychologist Daniel Gilbert thought he had the answer. In an opinion piece provocatively titled "If Only Gay Sex Caused Global Warming"<sup>4</sup> Gilbert argued<sup>5</sup> that the real psychological obstacle to effective action on climate change is that human brains have evolved to deal most effectively with threats that:

- are intentional and personal;
- violate our moral sensibilities;
- are a clear and present danger; and
- involve quick changes rather than gradual changes
- 

Unfortunately, as Greg Craven has noted, climate change has none of these properties; "[i]t is impersonal, morally neutral, in the future, and gradual, and we're just not wired to watch out for stuff like that."<sup>6</sup>

Lisa Bennett has offered additional neurological evidence: not only do humans initially assess risks not by means of rational analysis but through emotion, but we also depend heavily on our background worldview for interpreting information. For example, individuals with "hierarchical" worldviews are likely to discount the need for political action on climate change, whereas individuals with "egalitarian" worldviews are likely to be motivated to participate in a movement for climate justice.<sup>7</sup>

What should we make of Gilbert's and Bennett's explanations? Let us be blunt. They are striking examples of what we could call ideological evasion by recourse to neuroscience. Essentially, they are claiming that the fault lies not in external social conditions but within us.

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3 Premise one is a moral presupposition that relies on broad intuitive appeal, whether from consequentialist, deontological, or virtue-based approaches. For evidence in support of premise two, see Wijkman and Rockström 2012, pp. 36-48; in support of premise four, see Anderson 2012; and in support of premise five, see Hansen and Sato 2012. Berners-Lee and Clark 2013 provides an up-to-date, but non-technical, overview of climate science research and projections. From a frustratingly contrarian perspective, Mark Lynas well explains the concept of planetary boundaries but then chides Green activists for their "pessimism" and insists—with scant argument—that there is no need for "ditching capitalism, the profit principle, or the market" (Lynas 2011, p. 9).

4 Gilbert 2006.

5 See Greg Craven's (2009, 72-3) careful reconstruction of Gilbert's argument.

6 Craven 2009, p. 73.

7 Bennett 2008.

Each of our individual brains has failed us; and this is why we haven't set about to do together what we must in order to mitigate climate change.

Yet, as neuroscientist Steven Rose has insisted, "the mind is wider than the brain."<sup>8</sup> Likewise is the reach of ideology.

Consider that denial about climate change is hardly new but only the latest in a long series of corporate and pseudo-scientific efforts to discredit evidence for, and undermine action, on such problems as acid rain, dangers of secondhand smoke, and ozone depletion.<sup>9</sup> Such efforts rely not on how the human brain is hardwired to distinguish between immediate and long-term risk but on what Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway call a deliberate strategy of "doubt-mongering." In short, urgent action on climate change requires not a rewiring of our brains but a fundamental critique of, and struggle against, global capitalism. Activists must take up the difficult issues of how best to challenge the dominant ideological structure of climate change denial and how most effectively to mobilize collective action in favor of radical social transformation.

No doubt such a perspective goes against the contemporary grain of organizing efforts by otherwise admirable reform-oriented environmental organizations like 350.org.<sup>10</sup> Yet even a greener capitalism is scarcely plausible apart from the sustained pressure exerted by a deeper systemic challenge to the capitalist mode of production itself. Climate justice activists simply must confront capitalism as a whole—above all with respect to its "mental conception of the world."<sup>11</sup> This is why Annie Leonard's challenge to mainstream environmentalists is refreshingly candid: "Can we put capitalism on the table and talk about it with the same intellectual rigor that we welcome for other topics?"<sup>12</sup>

## **I. Ecological rift: a new climate case against capitalism**

Consider now a second moral argument, which we may call the *Unsustainability Argument*:

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<sup>8</sup> Rose 2005, p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> Oreskes and Conway 2010.

<sup>10</sup> In his impressive recent book *Eaarth* (McKibben 2010), the co-founder of 350.org, Bill McKibben still fails to identify capitalism as the chief cause of the climate crisis.

<sup>11</sup> See Marx's footnote on technology (1990, pp. 493–4n.4) and Harvey's commentary (2010a, pp. 189–201).

<sup>12</sup> Leonard 2010, p. xxii.

1. The capitalist mode of production has already crossed, and will unavoidably continue to cross, one or more of the nine planetary boundaries.

2. A mode of production that unavoidably crosses even one of the nine planetary boundaries is ecologically unsustainable.

3. Therefore, the capitalist mode of production is ecologically unsustainable.

4. An ecologically unsustainable mode of production is a grave threat posing serious harm to human development.

5. Therefore, the capitalist mode of production is a grave threat posing serious harm to human development.

The first, and most important, premise of this argument can readily be justified. Without external constraints imposed by the state or by organized social forces, capitalism will have a strong tendency to exceed the nine planetary boundaries. There are three basic features of capitalism that account for this problem.<sup>13</sup> First of all, a relentless profit imperative underlies capitalist accumulation. Since capitalist firms face competitive pressure from other firms, there exists a strong motivation for them to externalize costs onto the natural world.

Secondly, the profit imperative inherent in capitalism results in an ever-expanding search for new markets or, as Marx strikingly put it in the *Grundrisse*, to regard natural “boundaries as mere “barriers” to be overcome or simply shifted elsewhere<sup>14</sup>—with no less deleterious effects.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, capitalism emphasizes short-term economic calculation to the detriment of long-term planning that is essential for sustainable human development. Even worse, “capitalist time” invariably collides with, and disrupts, such natural rhythms, cycles, and temporalities as weather patterns,<sup>16</sup> the migration of species,<sup>17</sup> and seasonal adaptation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Williams 2010, pp. 191-214; Derber 2010, pp. 105-15; and Baer 2012, pp. 57-116.

<sup>14</sup> On this dialectical interplay between ecological “rifts” and economic “shifts,” see Foster, Clark, and York 2010, pp. 73-87.

<sup>15</sup> Marx 1973, pp. 334-5. See the implicit disagreement between Harvey (2010b, pp. 70-84) and Foster, Clark, and York (2010, pp. 13-49, 275-87) on whether or not contemporary capitalism can in fact continue to turn the nine planetary boundaries into barriers.

<sup>16</sup> See Cullen 2010.

<sup>17</sup> See Wilcove 2007.

<sup>18</sup> See Foster and Kreitzman 2009.

In sum, capitalism has tended “to undermine the very process of interaction with nature on which it, like every other form of human society, depended.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York have powerfully argued, capitalism has introduced a profound “ecological rift” into the relationship between humanity and the natural world, which has arisen from “the conflicts and contradictions of the modern capitalist society” and has severely disrupted the essential metabolic interchange between human beings and nature. As they write, “the planet is now dominated by a technologically potent but alienated humanity—alienated both from nature and itself; and hence ultimately destructive of everything around it. At issue is not just the sustainability of human society, but the diversity of life on Earth.”<sup>20</sup> And so, they continue, “for a sustainable relation between humanity and the earth to be possible under modern conditions, the metabolic relation between human beings and nature needs to be rationally regulated by the associated producers in line with their needs *and* those of future generations. This means that the vital conditions of life and the energy involved in such processes need to be conserved.”<sup>21</sup> But capitalism is incapable of reigning in its relentless drive to expansion beyond what planetary boundaries can withstand. As a result, Foster, Clark, and York conclude, an “ecological revolution” against global capitalism is not only desirable but is imperative.<sup>22</sup>

## II. Some difficulties for collective action

Building on the Unsustainability Argument, consider now the *Obstruction Argument*:

1. Humanity should urgently act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions into the earth's atmosphere to a safe target (<350 ppm CO<sub>2</sub>).
2. But capitalism structurally obstructs individual actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to a safe target.
3. Therefore, collective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to a safe target is necessary.
4. But capitalism also obstructs collective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to a safe target.

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<sup>19</sup> Harman 2010, p. 307.

<sup>20</sup> Foster, Clark, and York 2010, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Foster, Clark, and York 2010, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> See especially Foster, Clark, and York 2010, pp. 423-42.

5. If both individual and collective means of action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to a safe target are obstructed, then the obstruction itself must be removed.

6. But capitalism cannot be removed through individual actions.

7. Therefore, capitalism must be removed through collective action.

How might we justify the second and sixth premises of the Obstruction Argument? How exactly does capitalism obstruct individual actions to tackle the problem of climate change? In no small part this occurs by means of ideological practices and strategies.

If we consider what Raymond Geuss has called ideology in the “pejorative sense,”<sup>23</sup> we can see that the onset of climate change has generated an especially pernicious ideology, or rather an “assemblage”<sup>24</sup> of ideological strategies and practices. In particular, ideology operates on, and distorts, people’s historically contingent beliefs, desires, and intentions; and by so doing presents the latter as if they were universal, natural, and inevitable.<sup>25</sup>

The upshot is that ideology “interpellates individuals as subjects”<sup>26</sup> not just with respect to such mental states as beliefs but also with respect to desires, intentions, and resolutions.<sup>27</sup> Following Terry Eagleton, let us note that ideology has a twofold nature: it operates at both cognitive and conative levels.<sup>28</sup> In the first instance, ideology channels or obscures what is known to people; in the second instance, ideology weakens or misdirects people’s desires, intentions to act as they determine best and resolutions to resist countervailing temptations. With some notable exceptions,<sup>29</sup> Marxists have devoted more attention to the cognitive than to the conative side of ideology. Without denying the importance of that extensive, and impressively variegated, tradition, literature, and debate, in what follows let us aim to reset a theoretical imbalance.

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23 Geuss 1981, pp. 4-22.

24 David Harvey (2010b, p. 128) has incorporated Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of assemblage (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, *passim*) into a new critical Marxist lexicon.

25 See Geuss’s (2008, pp. 52-3) recent formulation.

26 To use Louis Althusser’s expression. See Althusser 2008, pp. 44-51.

27 On the irreducibility of intentions and resolutions to beliefs and desires, see Holton 2009.

28 Eagleton 2007, p. 19. Eagleton himself distinguishes “cognitive” from “affective” aspects of ideology.

29 See especially Eagleton 2007, pp. 33-61 on “ideological strategies.” See also Meyerson 1991.

There undoubtedly never exists a condition of perfect ideological dominance by one group over others, whether at the level of belief, desire, intention, or resolution. In the introduction to his trenchant critique of “American ideology” Howard Zinn offered an especially lucid account of such ideological unevenness. In Zinn’s view,

the dominance of [an ideology] is not the product of a conspiratorial group that has devilishly plotted to implant on society a particular point of view. Nor is it an accident, an innocent result of people thinking freely. There is a process of natural (or, rather, *unnatural*) selection, in which certain orthodox ideas are encouraged, financed, and pushed forward by the most powerful mechanisms of our culture. These ideas are preferred because they are safe; they don’t threaten established wealth or power.<sup>30</sup>

Since ideology cannot be restricted to ideas or beliefs alone, we should add to Zinn’s account that person’s basic desires, intentions, and resolutions equally become distorted, channeled, weakened, or misdirected as a result of ideological strategies serving powerful socio-economic interests.

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Consider now the fourth premise of the Obstruction Argument: “capitalism also obstructs collective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to a safe target.” By “collective action” let us understand, following Alex Callinicos, “any attempt by persons to co-ordinate their actions so as to achieve some goal or goals.”<sup>31</sup> Yet collective action is easier to envision and encourage than it is to carry out successfully. A number of difficulties arise along the way. Let us consider seven of these difficulties. Too many individuals

- may not know basic facts about the problem; or
- may not want to know basic facts about the problem; or
- may not know what to do about the problem; or
- may not want to know what to do about the problem; or
- may not intend to do anything about the problem; or
- may not resolve to act with others to solve the problem; or
- may fail to act with resolve with others to solve the problem.

At each step along the way to collective action, specific ideological strategies arise to delay, distort, obstruct, or misdirect individuals. The

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<sup>30</sup> Zinn 1990, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Callinicos 2004, p. 153.

task for activists in general—and for anti-capitalists specifically—is to intervene at each link in this sequence of practical reasoning about the desirability of collective action. How best can we help to educate, agitate, and organize an anti-capitalist movement for climate justice? Consider each step in order as it pertains to the problem of climate change.

If *individuals do not know the basic facts about climate change*, then the appropriate response is to demand better science education and to disseminate such information effectively through corporate or alternative media.<sup>32</sup>

However, if *individuals do not want to know basic facts about climate change*, we encounter not *ignorance* about a problem that can be relatively easily corrected but instead *stupidity* proper. In this case, what is required is a detailed account of the “genesis of stupidity” along the lines of what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno once attempted, namely, to examine stupidity as a “scar”—a symptom of a damaged psychic life.<sup>33</sup>

But stupidity is only part of the problem. As James Rachels once observed, “accepting a moral argument often means that we must change our behavior. People may not want to do that. So, not surprisingly, they will sometimes turn a deaf ear.”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, anxiety about an uncertain future is a key factor that inhibits willingness to accept risks involved in social transformation. Chris Hedges writes that “our passivity is due, in part, to our inability to confront the awful fact of extinction, either our own inevitable mortality or that of the human species. The emotional cost of confronting death is painful. We prefer illusion.”<sup>35</sup>

How should activists respond to such flight from the painful truth of climate change? By instilling courage in others that radical change is necessary, that future delay will only make matters worse.

Simply acknowledging, and knowing in the abstract about, a collective problem takes us only so far along the way to collective action. The next three steps are crucial. Firstly, *individuals may not know what to do about climate change*. The appropriate response to such practical

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the thoughtful proposals by Mooney and Kirshenbaum 2009 and Olson 2009 for improving basic scientific literacy in the United States.

<sup>33</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 213-4. Also see Pierce 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Rachels and Rachels 2009, p. 160.

<sup>35</sup> Hedges 2010, pp. 198-9.



uncertainty would be to offer concrete tactics and strategies that are appealing. An exceptionally fine, detailed program is the demand by the U.K.-based Campaign against Climate Change's for the establishment of a National Climate Service and creation of the "one million, green climate jobs."<sup>36</sup>

However, there is another aspect of this first obstacle: any serious solution to climate change must break with the "productivist" and "consumerist" logics of capitalism.<sup>37</sup> Yet, as Ozzie Zehner has argued, there exist widespread "green illusions" that pursuing alternative technologies alone can provide a sure path to a sustainable future.<sup>38</sup> Even the vaunted pursuit of greater economic efficiency turns out, under scrutiny, to be a pernicious trap that will result in greater consumption, faster depletion of natural resources, more waste, and continued surpassing of planetary boundaries.<sup>39</sup> What is required, by contrast, is a rapid shift from production for profit to production for meeting human needs; and a profound transformation in individual and collective patterns of consumption, regardless of the technologies deployed.<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, *individuals may not want to know what to do about climate change*. Here the problem is not ignorance, stupidity, or practical uncertainty, but a range of "rogue desires,"<sup>41</sup> ranging from disillusionment and despair to cynicism. Consider cynicism. Even if we allow for a distinction<sup>42</sup> between official cynicism from above and populist *kynicism* from below, not all ideology is an exercise of "cynical reason." For example, as Chris Mooney and Sheril Kirshenbaum have argued, one of the main reasons in the United States for the lack of public demand for climate change policy has been the failure of basic science education in schools and in corporate media to provide accurate information about the gravity of the problem.<sup>43</sup>

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36 See the campaign's excellent pamphlet: Neale et al. 2010.

37 See especially Baer 2012 and Tanuro 2013.

38 Zehner 2012.

39 On the perils of the "efficiency trap," see Hallett 2013.

40 For a set of concrete proposals on how this might occur, see especially Berners-Lee and Clark 2013.

41 On the concept of "rogue desires" see Meyerson 1991, pp. 130-45.

42 See Žižek 2009, pp. 24-7.

43 Mooney and Kirshenbaum 2009.

Thirdly, *individuals may not intend to do anything about the problem*. Such paralysis above all afflicts academics whose fetish of deliberation reins in every decision about what to do for fear that it may be premature or ill considered. In this case, a good Sartrean response would be to insist that failure, or refusal, to act, is by default still a form of action—but in bad faith.<sup>44</sup> The only way out of bad faith is to undergo what Simone de Beauvoir once called a radical “conversion.”<sup>45</sup> As a result of such conversion, an individual would recognize that his or her concrete freedom is not separate from, but is interdependent with, the concrete freedoms of everyone else. However, de Beauvoir clearly rejected all “utopian reveries” of voluntary conversion by oppressors to the cause of freedom; they must be forced to change through revolt by the oppressed themselves acting in concert.<sup>46</sup>

The final two links in the theoretical-practical chain bring us at last to the threshold of collective action. Consider, though, the following difficulty: *individuals may not resolve to act with others to solve the problem of climate change*. Here we encounter above all an ideological strategy that Andrew Szasz has brilliantly identified and critiqued: what he calls the “inverted quarantine.”<sup>47</sup> Through illuminating case studies—from the 1961 U.S. “fallout shelter panic” to the current reliance on bottled drinking water—Szasz examines how individuals have often responded to perceived social and environmental threats “by *isolating themselves*...by erecting some sort of barrier or enclosure and withdrawing behind it or inside it.” Instead of acting jointly with others to bring about structural change by “making history,” individuals opt to deal with collective problems on their own. This inverted quarantine strategy as a “mass phenomenon” invariably leads to the displacement of politics through consumption as individuals seek to “shop their way to safety.”<sup>48</sup>

The appropriate response to the perverse logic of “inverted quarantine” is to construct means by which individuals can break out from such an “I-mode” and adopt instead a “we-mode” that embodies

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44 On the connection between ideology and bad faith in Sartre, see Coombes 2008, especially 89-116.

45 Beauvoir 1976, pp. 13-4, 66-7. On the concept of “conversion” in Beauvoir’s (and Sartre’s) writings, see Deutscher 2008.

46 Beauvoir 1976, pp. 96-7.

47 Szasz 2007.

48 Szasz 2007, p. 5.

genuinely shared intentions, resolutions, and commitments.<sup>49</sup> Without such a transformation, collective action regarding climate change is not possible.

Finally, *individuals may fail to act with resolve with others to solve the problem*. This is a political manifestation of what philosophers have traditionally called “weakness of the will,” but more simply could be termed *ethical weakness* (or *backsliding*<sup>50</sup>).

In the Marxist tradition, scant attention has been paid to the problem not of the ideological obscuring of what is in one’s class interest but why *even if one does know, and resolve to act upon this interest, one may still fail to do so*.<sup>51</sup> It is true enough that class interests often conflict with those based, for example, on race, gender, and nationality; but a deeper analysis of human moral psychology suggests that there is an affective undercurrent to political decision making and acting. And this undercurrent is difficult to navigate successfully.

The solution to the problem of ethical weakness cannot be found in simply consciously vowing to maintain sound judgment now and in the future. What is needed is more akin to cultivating what Spinoza called “fortitude,” or, more simply, ethical strength.<sup>52</sup> How is this possible? In part 5 of the *Ethics* Spinoza recommended certain imaginative practices that inspired what the Marxist sociologist and Spinoza scholar Georges Friedmann called “spiritual exercises.”<sup>53</sup> As Friedmann proposed in a journal entry dating from the French Resistance to German occupation, “this effort upon oneself is necessary; this ambition—just. Many are those who are completely absorbed in militant politics, preparation for the social Revolution. Rare, very rare, are those who, to prepare for the Revolution, want to make themselves worthy of it.”<sup>54</sup>

Yet spiritual exercises are not the exclusive preserve of individuals. Ethical strength cannot be based on one’s internal resources alone. On the contrary, the enduring Spinozist question is, “How can we

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49 I borrow the distinction between “I-perspective” and a “we-perspective” from Tuomela 2007.

50 See Mele 2012.

51 A notable exception is Meyerson 1991, pp. 165-8.

52 Spinoza classifies “fortitude” (*fortitudo*) as a key “active affect” in the *Ethics*; see the note to proposition 59, part three, and the note to proposition 73, part four (Spinoza 1996, pp. 102-3, pp. 154-5). Holton 2009, pp. 112-36 uses the term “strength of will,” but he thereby presumes the existence of a “will,” which is an unnecessary postulate.

53 Friedmann 1970, p. 359.

54 Friedmann 1970, pp. 359-60.

increase our individual powers to act by joining together with others?”<sup>55</sup> What we need above all to envision and put into practice is the common exercise of ethical strength made possible through collective action. In the face of threatened or actual state violence, the pressing question then becomes how to give each other courage.

**III. From weakness to strength: building an anti-capitalist movement for climate justice**

Let us take stock. Thus far we have considered an Urgency Argument, an Unsustainability Argument, and an Obstruction Argument. Add finally a fourth argument, which links the results of the previous three. Call it the *Removal Argument*:

1. The capitalist mode of production is a grave threat posing serious harm to human development.
2. Any mode of production that is a grave threat posing serious harm to human development should be removed.
3. But capitalism *must* be removed through collective action.
4. Therefore, capitalism *should* be removed through collective action.

Of course building a successful anti-capitalist movement for climate justice won't be easy. It will require no less than “a world uprising transcending all geographical boundaries.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, parents who gaze at their children in the early morning hours while the latter are fast asleep may worry that the prospects for success are not great. Yet honest despair or even rage is preferable to what Roger Hodge has aptly termed the “mendacity of hope.”<sup>57</sup> As Thomas McGrath once put it so eloquently, “[A]nger sustains me—it is better than hope—it is *not* better than/Love.../ But it *will* keep warm in the cold of the wrong world.”<sup>58</sup>

There are anger and despair aplenty in Chris Hedges’ recent work. Hedges has stared into the capitalist abyss and decried liberal complicity with a descent into barbarism. Hedges warns that corporate interests have seized all mechanisms of power, from government to mass propaganda. They will not be defeated through elections or influenced through popular movements. The working class has been wiped out. The economy is in ruins. The imperial expansion is teetering on collapse. The ecosystem is undergoing terrifying changes unseen in recorded human

55 See Spinoza’s note to proposition 18 in part four of the *Ethics* (Spinoza 1996, pp. 125-26).

56 Foster, Clark, and York 2010, p. 440.

57 Hodge 2010.

58 McGrath 1997, p. 317.

history. The death spiral, which will wipe out whole sections of the human race, demands a return to a radical militancy that asks the uncomfortable question of whether it is time to break laws that, if followed, ensure our annihilation.”<sup>59</sup>

Yet in spite of the dismal state of the world Hedges discerns a glimmer of hope arising from such renewed militancy:

The best opportunities for radical social change exist among the poor, the homeless, the working class, and the destitute. As the numbers of disenfranchised dramatically increase, our only hope is to connect ourselves with the daily injustices visited upon the weak and the outcast. Out of this contact we can resurrect, from the ground up, a social ethic, a new movement.”<sup>60</sup>

Hedges acknowledges that “it is too late to prevent profound climate change.” But, he quickly adds, “why allow our ruling elite, driven by the lust for profits, to accelerate the death spiral? Why continue to obey the laws and dictates of our executioners?”<sup>61</sup>

Although Hedges rightly stresses the imperative to resist the global capitalist order, he fails to provide a nuanced assessment of what is required for successful collective action against capitalism. Here David Harvey offers an invaluable strategic corrective to Hedges’ tendency to lapse into moralistic denunciations and desperate appeals to rebellion.

Harvey has identified “seven distinctive ‘activity spheres’ within the evolutionary trajectory of capitalism” and within which that any anti-capitalist movement must intervene if it is to increase its strength and effectiveness: “technologies and organizational forms; social relations; institutional and administrative arrangements; production and labour processes; relations to nature; the reproduction of daily life and of the species; and ‘mental conceptions of the world’.”<sup>62</sup> For Harvey, a movement can begin in any of these activity spheres, but “the trick is to keep the political movement moving from one sphere of activity to another in mutually reinforcing ways.”<sup>63</sup> Such a “co-revolutionary politics”<sup>64</sup> has the following implication:

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59 Hedges 2010, pp. 194-5.

60 Hedges 2010, p. 156.

61 Hedges 2010, p. 202.

62 Harvey 2010b, p. 123.

63 Harvey 2010b, p. 228.

64 Harvey 2010b, p. 241.

[W]e can start anywhere and everywhere as long as we do not stay where we start from! The revolution has to be a *movement* in every sense of the word. If it cannot move within, across and through the different spheres then it will ultimately go nowhere at all. Recognising this, it becomes imperative to envision alliances between a whole range of social forces configured around the different spheres. Those with deep knowledge of how the relation to nature works need to ally with those deeply familiar with how institutional and administrative arrangements function, how science and technology can be mobilised, how daily life and social relations can most easily be re-organised, how mental conceptions can be changed, and how production and the labour process can be reconfigured.”<sup>65</sup>

It is striking that for Harvey a militant workers’ movement will not necessarily be at the forefront of this “broad alliance of the discontented, the alienated, the deprived and the dispossessed.”<sup>66</sup> On the contrary, he fully expects that a “youthful, student-led revolutionary movement” will lead the way.<sup>67</sup> Whether Harvey is correct in his forecast, or whether Charles Derber is right to stress that “the labor movement is at the intersection of the economic and environmental crises that make a green revolution possible”<sup>68</sup> cannot be decided *a priori* and apart from efforts actually to build a global alliance that would formulate structural reforms leading beyond capitalism and toward democratic eco-socialism.<sup>69</sup> At any rate, as I have argued above, the ultimate goal of such an alliance should be nothing less than the creation of a new world<sup>70</sup>: an ecologically sustainable planet, a planet whose boundaries still allow for the flourishing of human beings and other species, a planet fit for our children and theirs.<sup>71</sup>

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65 Harvey 2010b, pp. 138-9.

66 Harvey 2010b, p. 240.

67 Harvey 2010b, p. 239.

68 Derber 2010, p. 209.

69 An excellent initial formulation of a “transitional program” for eco-socialists to rally around may be found in Baer 2012, pp. 213-44.

70 On the impracticality, even the undesirability, of restoring the nature to a pristine “original baseline,” see MacKinnon 2013.

71 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Crisis and Critique*, especially for noticing, and suggesting how to correct, a serious flaw in an earlier version of the Obstruction Argument.

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# **Lacan and Rational Choice**

**Yuan Yao**

“The importance of social phenomena, the wealth and multiplicity of their manifestations, and the complexity of their structure, are at least equal to those in physics. It is therefore to be expected – or feared – that mathematical discoveries of a stature comparable to that of calculus will be needed in order to produce decisive success in this field. (Incidentally, it is in this spirit that our present efforts must be discounted). *A fortiori* it is unlikely that a mere repetition of the tricks which served us so well in physics will do for the social phenomena too. The probability is very slim indeed, since it will be shown that we encounter in our discussions some mathematical problems which are quite different from those which occur in physical science.”<sup>1</sup>

In the following pages we examine the possibility of reconciling two fields which are both exceptional to the scientific discourse today: modern economic theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Though it appears that these two are deadly enemies in every respect, we argue that this is due more to their theoretical proximity than any substantial conceptual differences. To begin the transition from psychoanalytic theory to economics appears as a daunting task, but it requires only that we consider their shared place among the sciences – from the standpoint of traditional mathematized science, psychoanalysis and economics are both fraudulent. That is, they are both marked by the difficulty of finding empirical validity for their theories.

Our example of this in economics is the failure of “rational choice theory” (RCT) to properly model the activities of individuals on the market<sup>2</sup>. Economists have long attempted to import the fundamental insights of game theory to the real world, but this requires several reductions concerning what “rationality” entails. One class of problems concern that of collective action<sup>3</sup>, which can be summarized by the following question: why would an individual participate in a group when he would be able to reap the benefits of that group’s action anyway? If each individual reasons that they can “freely ride” on the work of others, why would a group ever form? Mancur Olson, in his well known *Logic of*

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1 Von Neumann and Morgenstern 1953, p. 6

2 For a thorough history of RCT, see Oppenheimer 2010 and for a discussion on its problems, see Scott 2000.

3 See Olson 1966.

*Collective Action*, proposes that groups must incentivize membership in order to counteract this effect. Yet, how does this work when the utility to each individual is infinite, for example, when we are dealing with potential ecological catastrophes? Perhaps the situation today is one in which the notion of utility itself is in crisis. Our only chance is to re-conceptualize political economy, since the history of political movements shows that collective action does occur even when participants do not obtain much individual utility from it.

Psychoanalysis shares with economics a similar difficulty - though there exists empirical evidence<sup>4</sup> of its therapeutic effectiveness, it is still seems unable to make the jump into the realm of a valid science, a fact its detractors enjoy pointing out<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps Lacan was ahead of the curve then, when he claimed that the primary function of psychoanalysis is not therapy, but a confrontation with desire<sup>6</sup>. Such a confrontation cannot occur without a fundamental change in the patient, one which is literally more than he or she bargained for. Yet, one cannot aim directly at such a change - psychoanalysis works by the principle that the *customer is always wrong*, but also that this mistake by the patient is necessary. In any case, psychoanalysis seems to be in the same boat as economics, always on the threshold of credibility, always mired in (economic or clinical) disasters.

We are not suggesting that these two fields are the same in terms of conceptual development – psychoanalysis is far more ready to accept (and make use of) its inadequacy with regard to the other empirical sciences. Lacan's claim, for example, that "there is no human science" is not only to be read as an external attack on "inferior" fields (psychology, social sciences, anthropology, etc.), but one also directed at those who believe in the full scientific legitimacy of psychoanalysis as well. Lacan is not denying that humans exist, but rather that "human individuals" are not adequate epistemic objects - their physical and biological forms do not account for their immersion in language. As long as we rely on this object, we will not be able to grasp Freud's basic lesson - that normality is itself a kind of deviation. There is an incentive, then, to make a theoretical reference to the "human animal", our natural state prior to subjectivization - it grants the existence of an object which can

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4 For a recent study on the effectiveness of psychoanalysis, see Schedler 2010.

5 It is not hard to find anti-Freud literature, the most notable and recent example is Rillaer, Pleux, Cottraux, Borch-Jacobsen 2005.

6 For more on this, see Dunker 2011.

be treated. Our reliance on this figure of the human to ground certain branches of science is directly proportional to the ground which science is quickly taking away from the individual today.

Lacan's point, in short, is that the "human being" is an ideological term which serves to cover up the impasses of the subject of science. The effect of this ideology has far reaching consequences. It is still a common belief that the financial destruction of recent times is due to the actions of particular individuals. We are all familiar with the discourse which says human greed and egotism are obstacles to the development of society as a whole. As long as economic and political power is available, individuals will misuse it - why would the markets be any different? The fallacy of this argument is that it assumes the naturalization of the markets themselves, when in fact, a market is the outcome of politics. For this discourse, the immanent development of the markets is sacred, and its gatekeeper is the human ego which is only rational enough for Capital's ends. To function, Capital must constantly convince us that it is an extension of nature, that the human individual's "life-world" is the market - brutal but fair - and those who are crushed by it are ultimately selected out by its evolutionary processes.

The proper way to remain faithful to Freud's original discovery is not to put all of our eggs into the scientific basket, so to speak, but rather to affirm that psychoanalysis gains its legitimacy precisely where certain eggs fall out – the idea of humanity being among them. What strategy does this affirmation take? We outline in the following text a re-appropriation of the notion of *utility* in economics, one which will consider the Freudian discovery of the unconscious. While it seems relatively easy to criticize the idea of a quantifiable use of a commodity, as well as to link this to all sorts of social ills, it is much more difficult to devise a replacement theory. The main strategy today is to explain the issues of RCT as a symptom of an incomplete understanding of human psychology<sup>7</sup>. Generally speaking, its proponents advocate a renewed investigation into the effects of groups on an individual's decision-making, a position which is surely to yield promising results. However, we think this strategy still relies too heavily on a notion of intersubjectivity, while psychoanalysis is uniquely equipped to explain certain group phenomena even without recourse to relations between people.

By changing our theory of utility, we are also implicitly changing our conception of private ownership. For example, it may not be difficult to

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7 Perhaps the most popular example in recent times is Ariely 2008.

think of something with potentially infinite use-value that is amenable to the form of the commodity – clean drinking water, for example – but it is another to think of how one makes use of language. Water may satisfy a need, but speech allows us to formulate a desire – and if desire is material, can we not also include it among the forms of use which we are capable of? But a desire is not something we can own, therefore it cannot appear on the market, and it cannot be exchanged. Yet, to render the paradox more fully, we can say that the existence of psychoanalysis stands as proof that we can pay for our desire.

Even with a conception of the death drive on the side of psychoanalysis, and the capitalist drive for surplus value on the side of Marxist economic theory, we have yet to adequately critique the figure of the individual who attempts to maximize utility for himself. What is the form of rationality which is supposed by this figure, and what sort of utility must be required to maintain it? We know since Marx that the exchange process dominates over the process of consumption – commodities are produced because they can be exchanged, not simply for their usefulness. Since exchange is divided from use, it introduces an abstraction to the very form of the commodity. One no longer requires reference to particular commodities, but rather to their abstract form. In 1991, the hedge fund Goldman Sachs created the first Commodity Index, an assemblage of commodities from 18 different sectors. This new financial product allowed investors to speculate while ensuring that prices would not deviate too far from what was dictated by actual supply and demand. In principle, the actual price of the underlying commodities should not be affected by speculation on its future price, but this is precisely what occurred in the price of grain in 2008. This “contango” market led to millions starving while the US silos were stocked with a surplus, what Frederick Kaufman called a “demand shock”<sup>8</sup>.

The lesson here is that the value of a commodity can exist purely in the future, with material effects on the present. Capitalism thus introduces to utility a kind of temporal plasticity, to the point where the commodity does not need to actually be consumed. From this standpoint, utility is always potential utility, a usefulness which outlives the material form that encases it. To put it in Marx’s terms, utility is one of the “metaphysical niceties” of the commodity form – it has no need for actual commodities themselves. The paradox for our reading of Marx today is how surplus value can be created from the “thin air” of market

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8 Kaufman 2010

transactions. No labor is consumed during exchange, but it exists as a labor that will be consumed – a contract to buy a future commodity also implies that future labor will occur, and that the price for this labor will be below the price of the commodity it produces. This latter fact is guaranteed by Marx's idea of the "reserve army of labor" – in developed capitalist countries, the supply of labor in general will always be greater than its demand. Therefore, it is possible to not only exploit existing workers now, but also future laborers, since the asymmetry between labor and product is assumed to always exist.

Marx separated the study of use from the study of political economy because he thought use-values are inherently private and only realized in the consumption of the commodity<sup>9</sup>. Yet, the profound dependence between *market* and *marketing* seem to contradict these premises – use-value does not need to be tied to the physical properties of a commodity, since commodities can be made to "appear useful" in ways which are hardly tangible today. This "metaphysics of use" is more apparent than ever in the conjunction of advertisement and labor. Today, in order to compete as a laborer on the market, one must adorn oneself with a list of traits which evoke a surplus utility. Even outside the workplace, there is a pressure to enjoy which is accompanied by an even worse pressure to prove that one is enjoying. Education which does not improve our marketable skills is undergoing devaluation because it is "not useful". Are these not signs that the rationality ascribed to the human is quickly converging with the rationality of the Capital? If so, the proper way to return to Marx will involve a reconsideration of the relation between use and exchange.

Perhaps the most metaphysical dimension of use today is that of private knowledge. What separates a CEO from an average worker if not a privileged insight into market trends and strategy, a clairvoyance of the market? The acquisition of these individuals amounts to the acquisition of the utility of their knowledge, which can then be used to out-smart the competition. Here, we find a surprising connection to psychoanalysis – it is in the form of competition that Lacan originally conceived the subject to emerge. His early text on "logical time" focused on the implications of game theory for the formation of the subject, a theme which he repeated throughout his later teachings. Jean-Pierre Dupuy extends these insights in his text *Common Knowledge, Common Sense*:

.....  
9 Marx 1859

“How are the Lacanian categories of the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘imaginary’ related to formal game theory? First of all, it may be noted that in game theory the very rationality of the players implies that they must put themselves in each other’s shoes so as to examine the situation from the adversary’s viewpoint. In so doing, each player perceives that the other has done the same in regard to him. The result is a play of mirrors, a specularity that is potentially infinite.”<sup>10</sup>

Dupuy introduces in this text a series of games in which the solution requires not only the knowledge of the individual participants, but the knowledge of what the Other knows, i.e. “common knowledge”<sup>11</sup>. His argument is that Lacan’s category of the “symbolic” is not simply a transcendental structuring the situation, but can be shown logically to arise from the play of specularity among competitors. The symbolic has the form of “I know that you know that I know...” raised to infinity. Since one cannot actually reach infinity through counting, the enumeration of these levels of knowledge does not suffice to generate common knowledge. Rather, one must posit a knowledge which is not “owned” by any of the players, but generated inductively by the very structure of the game. Once posited, one finds that this knowledge was always there – in Kantian terms, it is *synthetic a priori* knowledge.

This conception of the Other as arising through the specular play of competition adds a new twist to the distinction between public and private (a distinction emphasized by Kant). At what point do actions stop being for our own personal utility and begin to take on the dimension of the public? For Dupuy, it is precisely those actions which alter the already public knowledge at work in a given structure. We propose that the notion of a “common use” corresponds to the “common knowledge”, a utility which cannot be claimed by the individual. We all know that in the market, knowing what others do not is a powerful thing - however, when this is universalized, what we get is an Other who is ignorant. In this sense, when a speculator makes profit from his investments, he is making profit from the privatization of knowledge, an operation dependent on the Other’s ignorance. Taking this logic further, one can understand the problem of “free riding” in collective action problems as one where we benefit from the actions of others while the Other does not know that we are not participating. This can perhaps render more clearly why, in Zizek’s

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10 Dupuy 1989, p. 38

11 This term was first coined in Lewis 1969.



terms, “the situation is catastrophic but not serious”. We ourselves know that a catastrophe will happen, but no one acts because we have yet to convince the Other.

To produce changes in the knowledge of the Other implies a change in the status of private knowledge itself. To take a political example, the secrets released by Wikileaks were not exactly surprising to anyone in particular – we knew that there were assassination plots, terror, and corruption going on – but to inform the Other that these things were going on had real effects. We can no longer pretend that we do not know, the taboo is now broken. Psychoanalysis allows us to examine these effects in their pure form, as effects on discourse.

Lacan’s definition of discourse as a “social link” has always been a point of much confusion. Our first impression is that it describes a metaphysics in which an invisible thread connects bodies together, creating a field called “the social”. We propose to clarify this notion through an excursion through economics – specifically Friedrich Hayek’s famous text *The Use of Knowledge in Society*. For Hayek, the dynamism of the market resides in its ability to coordinate prices across time and space. He says, for example:

“The peculiar character of the problem of a rational economic order is determined precisely by the fact that the knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess. The economic problem of society is thus not merely a problem of how to allocate ‘given’ resources—if ‘given’ is taken to mean given to a single mind which deliberately solves the problem set by these ‘data.’ It is rather a problem of how to secure the best use of resources known to any of the members of society, for ends whose relative importance only these individuals know. Or, to put it briefly, it is a problem of the utilization of knowledge which is not given to anyone in its totality.”<sup>12</sup>

Hayek articulates the problem of social organization as the relation between planning and knowledge. How do we properly distribute resources given the fact that no individual can comprehend all economic situations at once? What is interesting here is the type of knowledge which Hayek makes reference to:

Today it is almost heresy to suggest that scientific knowledge is not the sum of all knowledge. But a little reflection will show that there is

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<sup>12</sup> Hayek 1945.

beyond question a body of very important but unorganized knowledge which cannot possibly be called scientific in the sense of knowledge of general rules: the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place. It is with respect to this that practically every individual has some advantage over all others because he possesses unique information of which beneficial use might be made, but of which use can be made only if the decisions depending on it are left to him or are made with his active coöperation.

The knowledge of the *hic et nunc* resonates surprisingly with Lacan's early remarks on the clinic - one loses sight of this particular knowledge precisely when one is able to see everything at once. Just as a hasty categorization of a patient's condition in a clinical setting can obscure what he or she is trying to tell us, one forgets that, ultimately, it is the worker's know-how which is the source of the dynamism of the market. To make decisions based on the aggregation of data is therefore a faulty method, an argument Hayek uses against central planning. What is required is the "man in the spot", the individual who knows the concrete circumstances and can act on them with haste. This text is usually taken to be emblematic of free market thought, but we argue that it is more suitably a communist text. We can agree with Hayek in praising the knowledge of the worker in concrete circumstances, but is he justified in claiming that the market adequately expresses this knowledge?

Is Hayek's theory truly adequate to cover the phenomena of speculation, for example, where investors are manipulating large quantities of goods far away from the "particular concrete practices" of a given job? The financial crisis of recent years has shown that the market does not respond to the knowledge of the worker. Rather, it is proof that investors are acting on what they think the others are doing. The fact that the most profitable decisions one can make today come from a clairvoyance of the market shows the inverted nature of Capital - one begins with a decentralized system of price signals, but one ends with an aggregated form of gambling. Investors are not central planners, but they use statistical tools to predict the market as a whole - their ideal is the Other's knowledge, a view of everything at once. This appears as the direct result of the fact that the commodity form can be stretched and divided indefinitely, that its substance is not physical but metaphysical - in other words, that its utility is infinite.

To see everything at once, and before everyone else, that is the ideal of the market speculator. This contradicts the very spirit of Capitalism, as Hayek's text defines it, yet we observe that this is a consequence of the

commodity form. Returning to Lacan, we can say the “social link” appears when we are able to let go of the fantasy that one can possess the knowledge of the Other. We can then replace this fantasy with our activity of changing what the Other knows. This corresponds to a change in the mode of organization, allowing us to do what was previously conceived as impossible. It is this act of producing changes in common knowledge that is necessary today.

To summarize the points which link our two domains:

1. There is a knowledge of the Other generated from the speculative play of competition.
2. This knowledge is inherently public and cannot be appropriated by any individual.
3. One can add to this knowledge (and perhaps subtract from it as well), producing a change also in the way we organize (without necessarily changing what we as individuals actually know).
4. This process of changing what the Other knows is the result of a proper critique of political economy.

Psychoanalysis has always struggled to ground itself empirically, since its effects by definition require the admission of a singular experience. To remain faithful to this aspect of its teaching seemingly requires that one take a critical distance from the sciences, a requirement which today has come into question by many Lacanian scholars<sup>13</sup>. Interestingly, this distance cannot be found in Lacan and Freud themselves, who incessantly used (and perhaps misused) several concepts from the hard sciences in an attempt to lay the foundation for their field.

Freud in particular used the term “economic” many times to describe the energetic model of the unconscious. Its primary unit was the “cathexis”, the quanta of psychic energy which could attach to and dislodge itself from various parts of the body. Freud’s early theory for why the talking cure worked resolved itself as a theory of the release of cathectic energy from traumatic memories, allowing this psychic “currency” to flow without obstructions. Freud offers an intriguing glimpse into his own inspiration for this model in the following passage from his *Interpretation of Dreams*:

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<sup>13</sup> Most notably Johnston 2013.

“A daytime thought may very well play the part of entrepreneur for a dream; but the entrepreneur, who, as people say, has the idea and the initiative to carry it out, can do nothing without capital; he needs a capitalist who can afford the outlay, and the capitalist who provides the psychical outlay for the dream is invariably and indisputably, whatever may be the thoughts of the previous day, a wish from the unconscious.”<sup>14</sup>

In other words, a dream proceeds like an investment – it begins with a wish that funds it, and attempts to turn a profit of some kind. Freud leaves this analogy open until *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he not only posits the existence of a “pleasure-profit” which is added to the psychic system, but more importantly, he abandons the economic model altogether as an adequate description of psychic phenomena. Given the notion of a death drive, an impulse to repeat beyond life and death, it is untenable to assume that homeostasis is the end goal of the psyche. As Lacan already pointed out, this maneuver on Freud’s part marks the homology between himself and Marx.

We can now glean something new from this cryptic statement - what ties Freud and Marx together is not a common concept, but a failure for their respective objects to become epistemically grounded. The unconscious stands for that thing which is lost as soon as an individual “grasps” it as knowledge (or as the ignorance of others). Thus, it inherently resists the movement of privatizing knowledge. This failure to know what our collective desires are, seen from the stance of engaged politics, is an impetus to action. After all, Lacan says that there is only a cause in that which fails. What resists appropriation is precisely the utility of collective action, a form of use which is inherently public.

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<sup>14</sup> Freud 1899.

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# **Redemptive Revolutions: The Political Hermeneutics of Walter Benjamin**

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An often quoted and highly plausible phrase points out a contemporary challenge for political philosophy: “Today, it is easier to imagine the end of all life on earth, than the breakdown of capitalism.” This quote is sometimes attributed to Žižek, sometimes to Jameson. Its uncertain origin serves to prove its common appeal: that we live in a time of economic, social and political crises is no controversial claim. Here, we strike a problem much more profound: the crisis does not merely concern our political system or our economic behavior, but also *thinking itself*. The aforementioned phrase says: It is impossible to *imagine* anything outside of the status quo.

If this is true, political philosophy faces a hermeneutical challenge—and this, I believe, is where a turn to the thought of Walter Benjamin can prove itself useful. Instead of postulating utopian dreams that late capitalism can easily integrate and consumerize, Benjamin offers a political hermeneutics seeking to develop thought that can transcend the status quo without underestimating the totalizing function of capitalism.

As an *homme de lettres*, he locates this potential in reading and writing. In this sense, Benjamin’s work is a hermeneutical quest for justice that revolves around the citation that he believes to entail a twofold responsibility: the citation must do justice to the one quoted, and it must be well-placed, well-timed and thus also do justice to its present surroundings. For Benjamin, the citation (and are not all texts citations?) is a philological engagement with a specific piece of the past, and simultaneously, as an actualization or recollection of this past, it is an engagement with the present that has the interventional potential to change the present. The citations are both philological and political.

In his essay on Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin discusses the slogan of the German Social Democracy before World War I, “Knowledge is power,” by suggesting that the party failed to perceive its double meaning. It thought the same knowledge that secured the rule of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat would enable the proletariat to free itself from that rule. In reality, knowledge with no outlet in praxis, knowledge that could teach the proletariat nothing about its situation as a class, was no danger to its oppressors.<sup>1</sup>

The intellectual producing political knowledge—the outcome of a political hermeneutics—must meet two criteria: (a) teach the proletariat about its situation as a class, i.e., take upon himself an organizational

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin 1979, p. 356. When relevant a reference to the German text in *Gesammelte Schriften* will follow the English reference in square brackets: [GS, volume/part, page].

function and (b) give this knowledge an “outlet in praxis,” i.e., offer the constructed collective subjectivity motivations for political action.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the question imposing itself on the political hermeneutics here concerns the relation between theory and praxis. As I will show (in section I), this relation in Benjamin’s early materialism (culminating with the often neglected Brecht-period) becomes a dialectic between the image of an emancipatory potential and a collective subject capable of revolutionary action. Following this insight, the central concept of Benjamin’s late philosophy, *redemption* (described in section II), must be politically repositioned through an inquiry into the *relation between collectivity and the weak Messianic force* (which I follow in section III).

### I. Images and Organization

Richard Wolin calls Benjamin’s Brecht-period “vulgar materialist” and believes Benjamin to have “uncritically identified” the methods of mechanical reproduction and the revolutionary potential of art.<sup>3</sup> This is a typical way to dismiss this period in Benjamin’s thinking, where he is most explicitly developing a political philosophy. This account of the engagement with Brecht, however, fails to acknowledge how the organizational function of art, media and technology is, in fact, addressing a central problem present in Benjamin’s earlier (and widely celebrated) collection of aphorisms from 1928, *One-Way Street*, and in his work on Surrealism from 1929, which mark his initial turn towards materialism.

In the aphorism ‘Imperial Panorama’ from *One-Way Street*, Benjamin formulates a historiographical theme that will occupy him for the rest of his life, when he discusses the piece of phraseology “things can’t go on like this.” This is seen as an expression of the “average [German] citizen,” who notices the increasingly unpleasant conditions of life in capitalist society, but expects this decay to come to an automatic halt.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, however, objects: “To decline is no less stable, no more surprising, than to rise.”<sup>5</sup> Rather than assume that decline is inherently unstable and bound to stop, he suggests that under capitalism we must conceive “decline as stability itself.”<sup>6</sup> The present situation is so dire that we must

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2 Cf. Buck-Morss 1981, p. 53

3 Wolin 1994, p. 156, 158

4 Benjamin 1979, p. 54

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.



view everything in the light of the impending catastrophe rather than expect progress. In a certain sense, he seems to suggest that progress *is* a catastrophe: “Nothing, therefore, remains but to direct the gaze, in the perpetual expectation of the final onslaught, on nothing except the extraordinary event in which alone salvation now lies.”<sup>7</sup>

This (famous) pessimism or melancholia reveals the method of *One-Way Street* with which Benjamin hopes to open the possibility of the “extraordinary event in which alone salvation now lies.” The maxim *to see events in the light of the catastrophe* is (a personal inclination and) a strategic, literary method that Benjamin uses in an attempt to inspire people to break out of the habits that hold us on a collision course with disaster. By allegorically juxtaposing the objects of everyday life with the horror of present-age capitalism, Benjamin hopes to strip them off their immediacy and familiarity and create a distance for critical reflection and action.

The image of the catastrophe reappears in another aphorism, ‘Fire Alarm,’ that can serve as a further indicator of his conception of criticism: if the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed by an almost calculable moment in economic and technical development (a moment signaled by inflation and poison-gas warfare), all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut. The interventions, danger, and tempi of politicians are technical—not chivalrous.<sup>8</sup>

Society is in decay and if nothing is done, disaster is certain. What is needed, however, is not an imaginative consideration of alternative worlds or utopias but the courage to stare at the “final onslaught” in order to find its weak spot. Benjamin emphasizes the technicality of this task when using surgery as a metaphor of the literary-critical process: “With the cautious lineaments of handwriting the operator makes incisions, displaces internal accents, cauterizes proliferations of words, inserts a foreign term as a silver rib.”<sup>9</sup>

The forces that the critic must counter are great, and thus he cannot do it alone. To be countered is thus the individualizing effect of modernity. In ‘Imperial Panorama’ Benjamin underlines that this is the fuse that must be cut:

[J]ust as a man can endure much in isolation, but feels justifiable shame when his wife sees him bear it or suffers it herself, so he may tol-

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7 Ibid., p. 55

8 Ibid., p. 84

9 Ibid., p. 85

erate much as long as he is alone, and everything as long as he conceals it. But no one may ever make peace with poverty when it falls like a gigantic shadow upon his countrymen and his house. Then he must be alert to every humiliation done to him and so discipline himself that his suffering becomes no longer the downhill road of grief, but the rising path of revolt.<sup>10</sup>

The critic must uncover the impoverishment and the humiliation caused by bourgeois society by countering isolation and (re)placing man in a social context. Only in a collective body can we face the terror and follow “the rising path of revolt.” Man in isolation accepts grief, but the collective revolts. And yet, the formation of the present isolates man: “people have only the narrowest private interest in mind.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Benjamin’s revolutionary materialism encounters the problem of organization: how can the literary-philosophical author constitute a collective body capable of political action? That this problem is absolutely central to Benjamin’s early materialism is evident, when we consider the position described in his essay on Surrealism. that Benjamin felt akin to.

The Surrealist emphasis on intoxication presents another attempt to counter the described individualism. “In the world’s structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth.”<sup>12</sup> In intoxication—a form of *ekstasis*, a being outside of oneself—the Surrealists found a method of breaking the confining isolation of capitalism. In their writing, the Surrealists document or demonstrate the experience of intoxication that breaks the self—that is, its revolutionary potential.

This potential, however, is not *necessarily* connected with intoxication. The important aspect that Benjamin finds fruitful, however, is not the intoxication itself, but rather the experience of a possible negation of the status quo. A concrete material triggers this experience and as such it is a profane instead of religious dogmatism. “[T]he true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson.”<sup>13</sup> Benjamin calls the experience a *profane illumination*. Through its art, Surrealism makes the audience realize the mysteries of everyday life as the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 56

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 55

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin 2007a, p. 179

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 179

objects of our everyday lives are transformed into something mysterious and alien. By merging reality and dream, the Surrealists seek to distance us from our habitual course of life and make us, in the material closest to us, see the possibility of something entirely different. Thus, the profane illumination is an immanent negation that through a concrete object reveals the possibility of change. The Surrealist fusion of reality and dream makes us realize the *possible in the actual*.

Despite this obvious revolutionary potential, Benjamin doubts that the Surrealists strategy can actualize itself into revolutionary action. As in *One-Way Street*, there seems to be a missing link between the interruption as an alienation of everyday life and collective action. “[A]re they successful in welding this experience of freedom to the other revolutionary experience that we have to acknowledge because it has been ours, the constructive, dictatorial side of revolution? In short, have they bound revolt to revolution?”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, we arrive at the central problem with the Surrealist position: they retain a romantic distance to the masses when they consider art to be autonomous and thus cannot rid themselves of a certain form of individualism or isolation. This is the problem with the avant-garde or the intelligentsia. The same essentially individualistic tendency problematizes the use of narcotics: the Surrealists isolate themselves in private dream worlds and thus reveal themselves to be anarchic rather than properly revolutionary. Nonetheless, there is a revolutionary potential in the profane illumination that expresses a central pessimistic attitude in the Surrealist “cult of evil” not unlike the pessimism employed in *One-Way Street*’s image of the catastrophe.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the critical attitude expressed in both these works lacks the socializing element required to transcend the individualism of the present age and enter the rising path of revolt. Benjamin addresses this problem, when he calls for an “organization of pessimism”:<sup>16</sup>

Surrealism has come ever closer to the Communist answer. And that means pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes,

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14 Ibid., p. 189

15 Ibid., p. 187

16 Ibid., p.190

between nations, between individuals.<sup>17</sup>

Even though the profane illumination gives us a radical concept of freedom, it is unable to constitute a collective body capable of revolutionary action. The Communist answer “is pessimism all along the line.” This means that pessimism must acquire an organizing function.

The allegory of *One-Way Street* and the profane illumination of Surrealism are examples of what Benjamin calls *images*. The notion of the image marks one of the difficulties of approaching Benjamin’s philosophy as he uses images instead of systematically defined concepts. Obviously, images in this sense are not synonymous with pictures or photographs as Benjamin was an *homme de lettres*— they are discursive but non-conceptual.<sup>18</sup> Or, rather, they mark the *limit of concepts*. The images are made in language but they resist a total conceptualization and thus are dissolved into the established totality of meaning. As he writes in ‘Surrealism’:

Life only seemed worth living where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as by the steps of multitudinous images flooding back and forth, language only seemed itself where where sound and image, image and sound interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called “meaning.” Image and language takes precedence (...) Not only before meaning. Also before the self.<sup>19</sup>

The image takes precedence over meaning, i.e., in the revolutionary attempt image gains priority over meaning, which, on the other hand, is identified as essentially belonging to the capitalist order: meaning is commoditized as a “penny-in-the-slot.” The image is an immanent negation in the sense that it is articulated in a present totality of meaning but points beyond this sphere and thus contains and localizes a potential for revolutionary action. The image is expressed, but never adequately.

In order to become truly revolutionary the image function of art must be supplemented by organizing subjectivity into a collective body: “to organize pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images.”<sup>20</sup> This means that the Left-wing intellectuals must overthrow the intellectuals of the bourgeoisie and unite their con-

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 191

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Benjamin 1999: N3,1. References to The Arcades Project will follow Benjamin’s own indexation.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin 2007a: p. 178f

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

templative revolutionary experiments with the masses by making a multiplicity of images accessible.

In the image-sphere, the artist or the intellectual must address his proper audience: the revolutionary subject. Or, rather, he must participate in the organization of this subject. This happens *through technology*, as this is the medium that can finally make body and image interpenetrate. In other words, Benjamin calls for a dialectical transformation that unites the image with the collective body and forms a revolutionary subject.

So far Benjamin has been concerned with only one side of the dialectics: the development of the image. The organizational side of the dialectics is largely lacking, and this is what turns him towards the Brechtian materialism and specifically his *Umfunktionalisierung*. This also means that an internal dialectics is present in Benjamin's thought, striving towards the establishment of a revolutionary subject. This dialectical connection between Benjamin's first materialist writings and his Brecht-period seems to be what Wolin fails to see when he dismisses the latter as "undialectical."<sup>21</sup>

In 'The Author as Producer' (1934) Benjamin seeks to dialectically transcend the unfruitful antinomy between literary quality and political tendency that dominates the literary theory and criticism at his time. Instead, he proposes that such a dichotomy loses its importance once we reflect on the *technique* of the author, or his position within and effect on the current relations of production. Already in this framing of the argument, it is evident that Benjamin picks up where he left Surrealism. We must rethink the artistic technique so that it can be socially and politically progressive. When urging us to think not of the *attitude* towards the relations of production in the work but of the *position in* the relations of productions, he has, from the very outset, dealt with the question concerning the autonomy of art.

At this point in the argument, in order to avoid a gross misunderstanding of 'The Author as Producer' as expressing a naïve or vulgar faith in technological progress, it is important to stress that technique and technology, however closely related they might be, are *not* identical. Further explaining his misreading of the Brecht-period, Wolin makes exactly this mistake: The work of art will be progressive if it follows the most advanced *techniques*—epic theater, film, Soviet journalism—and regressive

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21 Wolin 1994, p. 158. A similar mistake is made by Michael Löwy, when he, avoiding the temptation to categorize the Brecht-period as blunder, calls it a "brief intellectual experiment" (Löwy 1985, p. 54) or an "exception" (*ibid.*, p. 53) to the overarching criticism of progress. Like Wolin, Löwy severs the dialectical connection between image and organization.

if it follows traditional, outmoded artistic practices—regressive, that is, in terms of both its political tendency and quality. (...) As in the 1936 “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin’s analysis is vitiated by the vulgar materialist presupposition that the use of *technologically* advanced means will have unilaterally positive results for art.<sup>22</sup>

As my italics show, Wolin slips from the *technical* advanced to the *technological* advanced. An evocation of the analogy of the surgeon that Benjamin used in *One-Way Street* to describe the role of the writer emphasizes this difference. A surgeon uses *technology* and preferably the newest and most advanced technology, but his *technique*, the skill with which he operates, is not solely determined by the technology available to him. To believe that technique and technology are identical amounts to claiming that a painter would become a surgeon if his brushes and paint were suddenly replaced by scalpels, clamps and suction tubes, and that the surgeon should use the newest equipment for brain surgery in order to remove an appendix. The most advanced technique is the one that performs the operation in the best possible way. The best possible way, in turn, reflects the technology available as well as the nature of the patient and the operation (or, in the case of the revolutionary, the nature of the collective subject and its capability to change the relations of production).

Benjamin himself implies this difference, when saying that Brecht, whom he admired deeply, “fell back on the most primitive elements of the theater. He contended himself, by and large, with a podium.”<sup>23</sup> Contrary to Wolin’s suggestion, a technological simplicity founds the technical advancement of Epic Theater. Benjamin’s fascination of Brecht is due to the delicacy with which Brecht conceived of his role as a producer, specializing in the field of theater. Instead of upholding the distinction between artist and spectator, as such a specialization seems to imply, Brecht sought to undermine it, and the technique of the Epic Theater is exactly such an attempt to engage the audience, rather than to pacify it.

In the Epic Theater, Benjamin locates a double function: the interruptive and the organizing. In his plays, Brecht takes up familiar situations but defamiliarizes them through interruption. Benjamin exemplifies this point by referencing how Brecht allows a complete stranger to enter the scene, so that when the audience looks at things from the stranger’s per-

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22 Ibid., p. 156, my italics

23 Benjamin 2008, p. 90

spective they are suddenly alienated from a situation that minutes ago they were completely absorbed in. Where the traditional theater seeks absorption, *catharsis*, Brecht seeks its interruption. Benjamin formulates the revolutionary potential in this alienation by saying that “What emerges is this: events are alterable not at their climaxes, not by virtue and resolution, but only in their strictly habitual course [*gewöhnheitsmäßigen Verlaufe*], by reason and practice [*durch Vernunft und Übung*].”<sup>24</sup> The function of this interruption resembles the function of the profane illumination: it alienates us from our everyday, and in so doing it provides a distance from which we can critically reflect.

This leads to the *Umfunktionierung*, which seems to be the Brechtian parallel of the image-sphere, where the engagement of the audience dialectically unifies interruption and a collective body. By equipping the spectator with a critical distance, Brecht socializes “the intellectual means of production.”<sup>25</sup> This means that the interruption “has the character not of a stimulant but of an organizing function.”<sup>26</sup> With interruption, Brecht alienates the spectator. Inherent in this alienation is a distance that allows the spectator *critically to reflect* on the world in which he usually operates with utmost familiarity. Only through interruption and reflection can habits be changed, and thus, the interruption plays a revolutionary role. Furthermore, as the audience is not a single but a collective subject, the *Umfunktionierung* is social. The technique Brecht employs thus manages to consider and affect its own position in the relations of production. Benjamin summarizes this when he writes: “*An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one.* (...) [The] apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.”<sup>27</sup>

Brecht’s advantage is the way he induces the audience to be collaborators in his play, rather than passive and thoughtless spectators. Nonetheless, even for the most optimistic revolutionary, a collective subject the size of a theater audience is incapable of overthrowing the capitalist means of production. Brecht did, however, find a technique, the *Umfunktionierung*, that generates a critical, collective subject. But as the technique, or the apparatus as Benjamin says, is “better, it is able to turn

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 91 [GS, II/2, p. 699]

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 93

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 91

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 89, his italics

more consumers into producers," Benjamin must face the limitations of the Epic Theater and move beyond the domain of art. He must instead turn his attention to the mass production of popular culture.

For Benjamin, the political importance of film consists not only in the larger audience that it addresses but also in the way that it changes "the *relation* of the masses to art."<sup>28</sup> Whereas mass consumption might be a sufficient aim for a capitalist producer, Benjamin locates three different ways that change the *relation* to the masses in order to socialize the revolutionary impulse. The first two of these have already been encountered in premature forms and will thus be briefly summarized. The first corresponds to the defamiliarization of everyday life as an interruption, where the camera distorts objects and the editing distorts contexts.<sup>29</sup> The second entails the possibility of collectivizing the ecstatic aspect of Surrealism as dreams and psychotic experiences that "can be appropriated by collective perception."<sup>30</sup>

The third function is what Benjamin calls *distraction*. Here, he finds a technique that differs from the others in the way that it seeks to constitute a collective body not by establishing a critical distance to the everyday life but by assuming the closest proximity to it. "[T]he greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation."<sup>31</sup> Traditionally, "the masses are criticized for seeking distraction in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration."<sup>32</sup> This distinction between distraction and concentration, however, must not be conceived as one between social classes, but as one between modes of reception. The concentrated person "enters into the work," whereas "the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves."<sup>33</sup> In distraction we find a habitual training: "Even the distracted person can form habits."<sup>34</sup>

Technique is thus the dialectics between emancipatory potential as images on the one hand and a collective body on the other. *One-Way*

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 36, my italics

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 37

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 38

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 40

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



*Street* and Surrealism offer shock-like interruptions of everyday life and thus destabilize the status quo. They do, however, lack a collective body. Brechtian Epic Theater and movies, on the contrary, are able to constitute a collective subject through socializing the revolutionary experience of alienation, dreams and certain types of distraction. In section III, the insight that aesthetics and media are forms of reception and organization and thus ultimately a counter-hegemonic movement will be unfolded, but first I will trace the impulse already seen in *One-Way Street* where events were seen in the light of catastrophe to its radicalization in Benjamin's groundbreaking theses on history.

## II. Historical Materialism: Ideology and History

The last text Benjamin wrote before he died was the famous 'On the Concept of History', often referred to simply as the theses. Commentators often recognize the political potential of the theses with its radical critique of progress and historical continuity and hint that Benjamin's philosophy of history is a critique of ideology,<sup>35</sup> but they fail to place this critique of ideology in the larger political framework of Benjamin's thought. I will in this section provide a reading of the theses that focuses on its potential as a critique of ideology, before in the next section considering the relation between the dialectics of image and collective body outlined above and the weak Messianic force. Following the development of Benjamin's text, I will outline (i) the ontological ground for the juxtaposition of history and theology, (ii) how the weak Messianic force is a relation to the past, and (iii) the political function of this account of history and its relation to the dialectical image.

The famous image from the first thesis sets the scene: historical materialism is a chess-playing puppet. In order for it "to win all the time" it must enlist "the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight."<sup>36</sup> What does it mean that historical materialism must enlist theology in its service? How is this possible? What people tend to overlook is that we are not merely presented with the elements—history and theology—that must be related, we are also given a hint towards the nature of this relationship: its aim is to "win all the time." The game played, I believe, is politics, and thus to be figured out is

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35 Löwy calls it "the most important attempt at a Marxist critique of the ideology of progress" (Löwy 2000, p. 41) and Buck-Morss says that "Benjamin's 'Copernican revolution' completely strips 'history' of its legitimating, ideological function" (Buck-Morss 1993, p. x).

36 Benjamin 2007b, p. 253

in what sense the relation between history and theology is political.

This question motivates a turn to ontology in order to clarify the type of objects that must be common to history and theology in order for them to become a functional unit. This is, implicitly, what happens in the second thesis, which Benjamin introduces by quoting Lotze:

One of the most remarkable characteristics of human nature is, alongside so much selfishness in specific instances, the freedom from envy which the present displays toward the future.<sup>37</sup>

According to Benjamin, the bracketing of the future experienced in envy runs parallel to the experience of happiness, which is “colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us.”<sup>38</sup> He emphasizes a certain modality central to both these phenomena: the possibility of envy means that our happiness exists “among people we *could* have talked to, women who *could* have given themselves to us.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, humans have an ability to put themselves in a relation to something absent. In envy and happiness, this ability is confined to a certain modality and temporality: we are not envious of the future, only the present and the past. Furthermore, we are envious of what could have happened, but did not. This is, in a certain sense, an ability to transcend the present and put oneself in relation to something other than what is immediately given. That something could have happened but did not means that the present has brushed aside these other possibilities. For Benjamin, the present has been actualized at the expense of these alternative possibilities that have consequently been oppressed. Thus, happiness and envy imply a structure that puts man in a relation to the past. They imply a modal-temporal ability to transcend the present. This motivates Benjamin to make the apparently abrupt conclusion that “our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption [*Erlösung*]. The same applies to our view of the past [*der Verstellung des Glücks*], which is the concern [*Sache*] of history.”<sup>40</sup>

Behind this inference is the assumption that the logic of redemption implies the same modality and temporality as that of happiness and of history. Thus, the object, *die Sache* of history and of redemption (i.e., theology) is the *past*. Benjamin’s word is *die Vergangenheit*, literally ‘that

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37 Ibid., p. 253

38 Ibid., p. 254

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid. [GS, I/2, p. 693]

which has gone by or which is no longer actual.' What is characteristic of the past is that it carries with it "a secret index [*heimlichen Index*] by which it is referred to redemption."<sup>41</sup> Benjamin exemplifies (in a passage omitted in *Illuminations*) this secret index by expanding on the modality of our happiness: "Are we not touched by the same air as our predecessors? Are there not in the voices that we lend our ears an echo of those now silenced? Do the women that we court not have sisters they do not know?."<sup>42</sup> The secret index is inscribed in this modality, where everything present exists at the expense of something else. Thus, the existent carries for Benjamin's sensible ear an echo of what has been silenced. He sees in the existent particular not an entirely hypothetical or abstract multiplicity of possibilities, but one that has been historically silenced or oppressed. What is no longer actual must be heard in every word. The present being bears witness to beings no longer actual. In every particular being there is *a trace of a historically concrete multiplicity*. Pushed to its furthest ontological consequence: the possibilities of the past are *real* but *un-actual*.<sup>43</sup>

Whereas history traditionally *uncovers* the past, theology, or at least messianism, *redeems* this past. This common ontology justifies the juxtaposition of history and theology, but why one necessarily calls for the other is in no way self-evident.

The nature of the reference "by which [the secret index] is referred to redemption" might explain this entanglement of theology and history. The rest of the theses goes:

If this is so, then there is a secret agreement [*geheime Verabredung*] between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim [*Anspruch*]. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that.<sup>44</sup>

The reality of the past implies for Benjamin a call or a demand [*ein Anspruch*]. The secret index is what I have called the real but un-actual

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41 Ibid., translation corrected

42 GS, I/2, p. 693f, my translation

43 I use this inelegant negation in order to avoid the associations of the usual antonyms of actual: it is not fictitious or imaginary but objectively real, nor is it hypothetical, a mere logical possibility to be proven. My dictionary even suggest past as an antonym to actual, but even past seems (if we ignore the obvious tautological nature of such an expression) a bit too crude to describe the ontological delicacy of Benjamin's *Vergangenheit*: the adjective past connotes that something is lost for good, and this is, exactly, what must be countered if we are to follow Benjamin.

44 Ibid., p. 254 [GS, I/2, p. 695], translation corrected

historical multiplicity and the reference to redemption is the call or demand directed towards the historical materialist. The modal-temporal ability to relate to something outside of the present is a condition of the weak Messianic force: only with this ability can the historical materialist hear the call from the past. But the ability to hear is not enough: the weak Messianic force is a type of responsiveness, where a past demands something of me and I must prove myself responsible to the past. This responsibility is the weak Messianic force. It is the redemptive power that puts me in a relation to the real but un-actualized past, i.e., the power by which the historical materialist rejects that anything should be *irredeemably* lost.

A turn to the epistemology of this account of history shows how the demanded response as redemption is possible. Benjamin writes in his third thesis:

To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day.<sup>45</sup>

For mankind to receive the fullness of its past is equivalent to the past becoming citable in all its moments. This means that the function of the weak Messianic force is to actualize the un-actualized or forgotten. For Benjamin this is the function of the citation: to quote is to take something out of its context and bring it into the present, to put something on the agenda, *the order of the day*. The citation is a way of answering the demand of the past—it is a textual responsibility where one takes responsibility for and actualizes the past. The quotation is thus a relation with the past; an instance of the weak Messianic force.

Due to the finitude of man, hermeneutically situated in the ideological structures of his own time, only certain elements of the past are understandable and quotable: “only for a [fully] redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.” Benjamin puts the same thought differently in the *Arcades Project* when commenting on a letter from Horkheimer concerning his essay on Fuchs. Here, Benjamin unfolds the theologico-historical hermeneutics that relates one to the past by saying that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. What science has ‘determined,’ [*festgestellt*, fixated or held fast] remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete [*das Unabgeschlossene*] (happiness) into something

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45 Ibid.

complete, and the complete [*das Abgeschlossene*] (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.<sup>46</sup>

Eiland and McLaughlin translate *Abgeschlossene* and *Unabgeschlossene* are complete and incomplete, but as these words derive from *schließen*, which means to end or conclude but first and foremost to close or shut down, I prefer to translate them with *closed* and *open*, since the word *complete* associates a form of perfection or totality and such an association will prove itself incompatible with Benjamin's project. What the science of history has determined or fixated, what has finally been *closed*, can be opened by remembrance. The closed nature of history is what I called the un-actual—that which is no longer actual, relevant or citable. This movement can be countered by the theological approach to the past: remembrance. The medium of this remembrance is citation, where what was forgotten and thus closed is taken up again, reopened, and is, perhaps, given the opportunity to unfold its potential.

In thesis five, Benjamin describes how the “true picture of the past flits by” and can only be recognized by the historical materialist in a “flash.”<sup>47</sup> These epistemological claims are perhaps best explained with a contrast to historicism. Buck-Morss suggests that the differentiation between Benjamin's method and that of historicism is that the latter, even though it, like Benjamin interprets the “past in the light of the present,” and is concerned with “the given present rather than a revolutionary one.”<sup>48</sup> Benjamin's emphasis on redemption is central to his historical method and implies that a radical break with historicism as redemption holds as its object that which has been oppressed and thus forgotten by the present and not the past as it is immediately handed over by the tradition. The theological impulse implies that the concern with the past is not one of preservation, but an attempt to change the present.<sup>49</sup> This means,

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46 Benjamin 1999, N8,1 [GS, V/1, p. 589]

47 Benjamin 2007b, p. 255

48 Buck-Morss 1981, p. 60

49 In her major work, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Buck-Morss associates this insight with Benjamin's interest in the hermeneutical method of Kabbala: “As is true of most theology, it is first and foremost a hermeneutic method of reading the sacred texts. But as mysticism, it reads them for hidden meanings that could not have been known at the time of their writing, rejecting the historicist approach of interpreting texts in terms of authorial intent (...) Their concern for tradition is in the interest of its transformation rather than preservation. They interpret the texts in order to illuminate

however, that the recognition of the historical materialist is not merely determined by the past as it was objectively given. The recognition unfolds between the past and the present, as the current conditions of the present (co)determine (i) which aspects of the past are revealed and (ii) which of these are capable of changing the status quo. Or, as Benjamin puts it in the Arcades Project, truth is “bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike. This is so true that the eternal, in any case, is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea.”<sup>50</sup> Consequently, as the present changes, the “true picture of the past flits by.”

A danger is inherent in the present as it constantly threatens to drown the call from the past. As it is shown in the sixth thesis, this is first and foremost a political danger.

Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject [dem historischen Subjekt] singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.<sup>51</sup>

The political danger is that of being exploited by the ruling class, and this threatens the past as well as its receivers in the present. This reveals traditional historiography as essentially ideological. At play is the dual responsibility I mentioned in the beginning of this paper: the historical materialist must counter the danger of the ruling classes, which means that he must save the past *and* the present. In other words, he must be a philologist and a politician. In order to prevent this danger, the historian must realize that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy” because historiography plays a legitimizing role for the ruling class that must be countered. An appropriation of history (which we call tradition and which gives a single historical document or event priority over everything else) legitimizes the status quo.

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their own era, in order to discover within it clues of the coming Messianic Age” (Buck-Morss 1993, p. 233).

50 Benjamin 1999: N3,2

51 Benjamin 2007b, p. 255

“It is the task of the historical materialist to dispel the phantasmagoria, to wrest tradition from the ruling class,” writes Rolf Tiedemann before commenting on Benjamin’s usage of the explicitly theological images of the Antichrist and the Messiah in this thesis, “The Antichrist is an image for the ‘ruling classes,’ their ‘conformism.’ But the Messiah, who overcomes him, is their opponent in the class struggle: the proletariat and its science, historical materialism.”<sup>52</sup> This interpretation is supported by the fact that Benjamin in an earlier draft of the theses wrote that “[i]n the idea of a classless society, Marx had secularized the idea of messianic time. And that’s as it should be.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, the science of historical materialism must awaken the historical subject, the proletariat, in order to “subdue” the ruling classes and “redeem” the past. Firstly, this supports the hypothesis that the game played by the materialist puppet and the theological hunchback is politics. Secondly, this double function of the proletarian Messiah as a redeemer and a subduer helps to establish that the weak Messianic force, due to its subversiveness, is at least partly a critique of ideology. To redeem the past is, simultaneously, to awaken the proletariat from its traditional slumber.

This critique of ideology is way of turning the legitimizing function of history upside down. The cultural treasures

owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.<sup>54</sup>

Every cultural document that is taken as a witness of richness and legitimation of the status quo must be seen as an expression of oppression and barbarism. In this way, history is brushed “against the grain.”<sup>55</sup> The historical materialist’s recognition springs forth from a constellation of the past and the present that forestalls any notion of historiographical continuity. As this is a mere construction serving to legitimize the status quo, to brush history against the grains is to do justice to what has been historically oppressed and thus left out of the traditional narrative. *Discontinuity is the leading concept of historical materialism.*

The most famous image of the theses is the interpretation of

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52 Tiedemann 1989, p. 187

53 GS, I/3, p. 1231, my translation

54 Benjamin 2007b, p. 256

55 Ibid., p. 257



Klee's *Angelus Novus*, "the angel of history," who is said to stare at the past with eyes wide open. The vision of the angel reveals the theme of discontinuity in a new form: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."<sup>56</sup> As I have shown, the method of the historical materialist is to brush history against the grains and see the oppressed historical multiplicity where traditional historians see tradition and causality. Hence, the angel of history is in fact the ideal image of the historical materialist himself. What is the ground for this theological substitution of the (pseudo-)scientific historical materialist for the angel of history? Unsurprisingly, it is the theological impulse known as the weak Messianic force.

Like the historical materialist, the angel seeks to redeem the past, to "awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed," but this is prevented by a storm "blowing from Paradise,"<sup>57</sup> which the angel is unable to stop. "This storm is what we call progress."<sup>58</sup>

In the image of the angel, the notion of progress is revealed to be just as ideological as the notion of continuity. Since progress prevents any justice to the past by continuing to oppress whatever does not fit its categories, it continues to pile "wreckage upon wreckage." Put in political terms, any belief in progress implies a causality in which the horrifying oppression and injustice of the status quo is continued rather than redeemed. The historical materialist must, like the angel, obstruct the gaze seeking the future. The revolutionary must seek the past.

In the *Arcades* it is said:

It may be considered one of the theological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization.<sup>59</sup>

This means that the object of the historical materialist is not the future or the future promise of happiness but the past, always in need of rescuing. The fundamental insight of this pessimism ("all along the line", one might add) is that the political promises of progress, of future happi-

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 257

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 258

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin 1999: N2,2



ness, are all lies.

Firstly, however, it is important to insist that this pessimism, in spite of appearances, does not entail a political resignation. The radical historiographic critique of continuity and progress called the weak Messianic force is, in fact, an *ability* leading to an emancipatory *technique*. This is what Benjamin elsewhere calls the *dialectical image*.

The historical materialist must not see the present as a transition to the future, but in witnessing the “flash of recognition”, he must regard time as standing still. This flash of recognition, where the present is experienced in a tension with the past, is what Benjamin calls *Jetztzeit*.<sup>60</sup> In the *Jetztzeit*, the present reveals itself as charged with the past, i.e., with unactualized possibilities, to such an extent that it is about to burst and thus explode the continuum of history. What the historical materialist produces in the moment of recognition, the *Jetztzeit*, is dialectical images, i.e., the constellation of the present and the past finally made legible and thus citable.<sup>61</sup> The profane illumination reveals the possible in the actual, and even though the Surrealists fall into an empty or unreal abstraction, they were on the right path when they dialecticized everyday life. Benjamin attempts the same thing, but instead of putting everyday life in a dialectical relation with a dream-like, fictitious or euphoric utopia, it is a dialectical relation with the oppressed past.

That the dialectical image is, in fact, a revolutionary technique is evident when we consider Benjamin’s history of philosophy as a critique of ideology countering the traditional historiography—“the strongest narcotic of the century.”<sup>62</sup> Like any critique of ideology its aim is to free man from his pacifying, ideological chains and to prepare him for revolutionary action. Benjamin’s metaphor is one of *awakening*. This is the intended effect of the dialectical image:

In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, ‘what has been from time immemorial.’ As such, however, it is manifest, on each occasion, only to a specific epoch—namely, the one in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such. It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation.<sup>63</sup>

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60 cf. GS, I/2, p. 701

61 Benjamin 1999, N3,1

62 Ibid., N3,4

63 Ibid., N4,1

In the dialectical image, the promise of a particular epoch is revealed as something that has immemorially been a mere promise, i.e., that the promised progress is a lie. Thus, the dream image, the longing for something better (in Marxist terms, the longing for a classless society), is revealed as nothing but a dream that will not be granted. The dream image is a messianic impulse, a whiff of paradise, but it must be understood in a very specific way: as something the status quo always promises but never provides. The dialectical image reveals this promise as such and awakens humanity, breaks it free of the illusory promises that have chained it, and thus render it capable of revolutionary action. Like the image reveals the limit of concepts, the dialectical image reveals the present as the border to a radically different course of history.

But if we are to take Benjamin seriously, two questions remain: why should anyone revolutionize without any hope for progress? And is this notion of the dialectical image not merely a new kind of intellectualism remaining as distant to the masses as the avant-garde revolution of Surrealism?

### III. Dialectical Materialism: Mythic Violence and Its Other

My hypothesis is that an answer to these questions requires a consideration of the relation between the two different kinds of materialism I have described above: on the one hand the dialectic between image and collective body aiming for a revolutionary subject capable of changing the status quo, and on the other hand, the historical materialism turning the ideological function of history upside down by redeeming the oppressed past. The key to understanding this relation, I believe, is Benjamin's famous essay 'The Critique of Violence' from 1921.

Already at this point in Benjamin's thinking, his political engagement is shot through with theology, and Benjamin contrasts the essentially violent nature of law with what he calls *divine violence*. Later this will provide us with an interesting parallel to the theses, but first Benjamin's account of the internal dialectics of violence and law, that is, the dialectics of politics, must be outlined.

Benjamin tries to come up with a tenable differentiation between justified and unjustified violence, taking positive law as his point of departure. Positive law, Benjamin states, "undertakes a fundamental distinction between kinds of violence independently of cases of their application. This distinction is between historically acknowledged so-called

sanctioned and unsanctioned violence.”<sup>64</sup> Importantly, the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence comes to depend on “its historical origin.”<sup>65</sup> Positive law reveals the legitimizing function of history that justifies the distinction between violence [*Gewalt*] and law [*Recht*], or, rather, it justifies how some types of violence are legal and others are not.

This view, however, is complicated by military and paramilitary violence. Both examples show that unsanctioned violence can become sanctioned violence: paramilitary violence through the public admiration of e.g. the mafia that threatens to constitute a new law, and military violence through the formal requirement of a peace treaty. This possibility of establishing new law from illegal violence means that even in “violence used for natural ends, there is inherent in all such violence a lawmaking character.”<sup>66</sup>

This does not render the criteria of historical acknowledgement arbitrary. Rather, the transition from (unsanctioned) violence to law (i.e., sanctioned violence) is done through a historical justification. When establishing a new regime, one historical document, e.g. the peace treaty or the new law, is continually cited as the basis of the new law-preserving violence. Thus, unsanctioned violence has a lawmaking character. The sanctioned law is called law-preserving, and thus the internal dynamics of the social order are revealed as dialectics of violence with the two dialectical poles being the law-preserving [*rechtserhaltende*] and the law-making [*rechtsetzende*].<sup>67</sup>

This dialectical insight sheds new light on Benjamin’s attempts to identify the revolutionary potential of art and mass communication. Evidently, all revolutionary attempts are counter-hegemonic and thus directed against the law-preserving function of the status quo. According to this definition, art that questions the legitimacy of the status quo is counter-violence, however insignificant this threat might be. What happens in the Brecht-period and especially in the work on mass media is that Benjamin identifies in distraction a superstructure that enlarges the possibilities of establishing a new law through naturalization. The dialectics between image and collective body is a law-making force.

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64 Benjamin 2007a, p. 279

65 Ibid., p. 280

66 Ibid., p. 284

67 Ibid., p. 287

The dialectics of violence are, according to Benjamin, *mythical* since it in their relation to law, they *appropriate the past*. “[V]iolence crowned by fate [*schicksalhaft gekrönte Gewalt*]” is “the origin of law” (ibid., 286 [GS, II/1, 188]). Myth seeks legitimation by inscribing itself in history, by making one historical document legible at the expense of all others.

This is the point in the essay where Benjamin introduces the category of *divine violence*. Simultaneously, as my emphasis on the legitimizing function of history and its relation to law hopes to show, this move opens the text (and thus the Brecht-period) to an interpretation relying on insight into Benjamin's philosophy of history. Even though divine violence is mainly defined in negative terms, as a mere opposition to mythical violence, this can indeed be taken as a justification of the juxtaposition between the divine violence and the weak Messianic force:

Far from inaugurating a purer sphere, the mythical manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence, and turns suspicion concerning the latter into certainty of the perniciousness of its *historical function, the destruction of which thus becomes obligatory*. (...) Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. (...) If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, *divine power only expiates...*<sup>68</sup>

Legal violence posits a pernicious historical function that must be destroyed. This is identical to the ideological function of traditional historiography that must be countered by the historical materialist. Like the weak Messianic force redeems, the divine power expiates.

To be spelled out here, however, is the relation between divine violence and the political action of the collective subject. The dialectical image seeks to establish a connection between the weak Messianic force and the revolutionary, lawmaking subject, but how can this be done if mythical and divine violence are antithetical?

My suggestion is that if we consider historiography a domain of ideology, historical continuity or acknowledgement is what must be criticized. This (1) undermines the legitimacy of the status quo and (2) opens up for a revolutionary potential, where the relation to the unredeemed, un-actualized and oppressed past can motivate, in a moment of *Jetztzeit*, revolutionary action in order to settle accounts with the present tyrants. The critique of the ideological historiography is thus a revolutionary technique,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 297, my italics

which is remarkable in so far as it *opens the dialectics of violence*. Where the traditional dialectics of violence oscillates between contemporary agents (i.e., the revolutionaries and the counterrevolutionaries), the theses short-circuit this dialectic by assigning the past an active role to play in the class struggle rather than the passivity assigned to it in 'The Critique of Violence.' Historical acknowledgement is no longer merely in a relation to mythical violence, but central to the theological force. Instead of letting the ruling classes possess and utilize history in law-preservation, this almost infinite repertoire of motifs and tendencies must be regained by the revolution in order not to abandon this hermeneutical treasure.

How is this account of revolutionary action reconcilable with the abolition of any notion of progress and the insistence that law is ultimately mythic and violent? Here, the epistemological flashing of the *Jetztzeit* is crucial. The past can be used for revolutionary action, since revolutionary action is "nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren,"<sup>69</sup> but there can be no state or society entirely based on the weak Messianic force. The relation between redemption and revolutionary action *flashes*, i.e., it absolves itself in the moment it has been instituted. In fact, redemption is essentially incompatible with institution, but redemption can nonetheless spark institution. This means that the dialectical image is a revolutionary technique that can redeem the past, but once the revolutionary movement posits law it is no longer redemptive or divine, and the dialectical image has evaporated, as institution relies on a violently unjust appropriation of the past. The revolutionary potential is neutralized, as it is transformed into a new normality. Put historiographically, a moment of historical change reveals injustice, and an oppressed and over-looked event is made citable. But this happens in a new political constellation, where the citability of this event founds new instants of injustice in a new logic of domination. Hence, divine violence can be revolutionary only in a flash.

Cryptical as this might seem, Benjamin's 'Theologico-Political Fragment' supports this reading. Here, we are told that "the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic."<sup>70</sup> The Kingdom of God, which any redemptive power must seek, is *external* to the dialectics of violence. Not in a dialectical way in which it might later be appropriated, but completely in opposition. The Kingdom of Heaven is the Other of the dialectics of

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69 Benjamin 2007b, p. 260

70 Benjamin 2007a, p. 312

violence: external and inappropriable. In a flash, however, it can influence these political dialectics by giving motivation for revolutionary action. In the fragment, Benjamin gets at this relation by saying:

If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom.<sup>71</sup>

The profane and the theological are directed in opposite directions, but they can still assist one another, and profane justice can prepare the coming of the Messiah when the revolutionary technique is put in a relation to the unredeemed past. Whenever this relation is institutionalized and used as a legitimation for a law, a new instant of mythical violence does injustice to the past. What can be done is that through the revolutionary techniques of e.g. mass media the weak Messianic force of historical materialism can be magnified in order to strengthen its redemptive powers.

This explains the relation between the revolutionary collectivity and Benjamin's theology. And further, it explains how a concept of revolution is indeed compatible with the abolition of progress without reverting to a romantic anarchism: progress is impossible, since law is by nature violent, but in revolution this violence can, temporarily, be redeemed. The Kingdom of Heaven (or secularized: the classless society) is, by nature, out of reach for mankind, but the revolutionary, retrospective justice aims for it, nonetheless.

#### IV. Conclusion

Recently, global economic, social, ecological and political crises have failed to inspire the Left to formulate radical alternatives able to gain wide support and thus to counter present-age capitalism. Despite popular uprisings, symptomatic of a *de facto* existing discontent with the status quo, these have resulted in neoliberal policies rather than in real solidarity. According to a Benjaminian analysis, this is explained by the fact that the critique of the ideology of progress has been entirely absent as a Leftist strategy, and for good reasons, one might add: are we really to counter our political lack of imagination by abolishing any notion of hope?

Perhaps not, but I do believe that the political thought of Walter Ben-

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71 Ibid.

jamin provides us with a figure of inspiration: Benjamin took the most politically pessimistic stance possible—the belief that *progress is impossible*—and, yet, he sought and located a concrete method for releasing a revolutionary rage capable of overthrowing the most dire conditions.

What, then, is to be done? The production of dialectical images, when collectivized through media, establishes the connection between the weak Messianic force (which will allow us to think something outside of the status quo) and the collective body necessary for revolutionary action. Dream images, isolated from the ideological belief in progress, are revealed as Messianic impulses that cannot be fulfilled by the status quo, which continuously promise to do so. The realization of this is, according to Benjamin, the only means to an anger that will motivate a revolutionary break with the present conditions. This is what happens in the dialectical image that destroys the historical function of the current regime.

According to the dialectics of violence, however, revolutionary action that overthrows the ruling class and establishes a new society merely establishes a new reign of mythical violence, where one historical document is given priority above everything else. Thus, the revolutionary action leads inevitably to a new violent appropriation of the past. *Even the dead will not be safe*. This, however, is not a political resignation. This merely means that the collectivity of the proletarian revolution must be sought in a more complex relation to the weak Messianic force—a relation that motivates revolutionary action *while* abolishing the concept of progress.

The past is full of injustices that we can counter through actualization. According to Benjamin, this ability is both the weak Messianic force and the motivation for revolutionary action. The past *demand*s this justice, and thus it is *urgently* necessary to revolutionize and cite what has been forgotten. In a flash, we can redeem the historical violence, but new laws can immediately establish a new paradigm of historical oppression. Thus, it is urgently necessary to revolutionize, even if it will inevitably lead to new violence.

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# **The Necessity of Philosophy**

**Srdjan  
Cvjetičanin**

## Introduction

All around us we hear the screams of discontent, and a moment later the march of protest. And yet, all of this clamor, all of these protests and cries, are followed in almost every case by a silence – a silence that is as deafening as it is heavy to bear. What is the cause of this failure? Why is it that all of this anger, all of this will, all of this rallying of discontent amounts to nothing? Here in the West, we cannot say that this silence is solely the work of some heavy hand. Certainly there is repression, there is brutality, and there is a sophisticated structure of censorship – but could we in all honesty, maintain that anything other than this silence would follow from all of our screams and shouts, our anger and our discontent, if that which we oppose were to get out of the way? Can we really blame the weakness and impotence on that which it opposes? It is not without a bit of irony that while we so often recite some lines pointing at the world, we too seem to be passing from one day to the next without an Idea.<sup>1</sup>

I affirm that the question ‘how to account for the weakness of the left in a time when capitalism is going through a crisis?’ is a question that very much *exists* in our world. Its existence cannot be in doubt, it is a fact. The left is weak, the left is impotent, the left, in spite of its frantic activity, is, on the whole, paralyzed. It is on these grounds that we must understand Slavoj Žižek’s call for reversing Marx’s infamous 11<sup>th</sup> thesis – philosophers have only contemplated the world, the point is to change it:

“the first task today is precisely NOT to succumb to the temptation to act, to directly intervene and change things (which then inevitably ends in a *cul de sac* of debilitating impossibility: “what can one do against the global capital?”), but to question the hegemonic ideological coordinates.”<sup>2</sup>

In short, the philosopher’s point is that what is necessary today is precisely to return to the philosophical task of thinking the world. And if this is a philosophical task, then philosophy is not concerned so much with the provision of answers as with the reformulation of questions, the reformulation of problems. Žižek, in fact, suggests that the philosophical task is to expose how the very way we conceive of a problem may itself be part of the problem. This implication of our conceptualization of the problem leads us to a minimal definition of ideology: it is these ‘wrong

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<sup>1</sup> We can define an Idea as the knotting of a truth, a world and a subject, or, as Badiou himself has translated it, a real (truth), a symbolic (world) and an imaginary (subject). See *The Idea of Communism*, in *The Communist Hypothesis*, Badiou 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Žižek 2011, p. 170.

questions which we can call ideology'. In consequence we must be careful with the very assignment of the cause of this weakness of the left – there is nothing innocent, nothing objective in the way we understand the problem. Indeed, it carries radical consequences. The first question, therefore, is how to conceptualize the problem without opening the way to the temptation of despair, of cynicism or skepticism, of a resignation to a fate, which would be constituted by the act of the resignation itself. In a peculiar logical twist, just because there is no History, no Fate, no predetermined End, does not mean that one cannot become necessary. Perhaps the only way to evade this road to Fate is to reverse *the reversal*, that is, conceive of the cause as strictly logical and not ontological. In which case, the first task for thought is to turn the mirror, so to speak, on ourselves and ask what is it that we are doing, or not doing, what it is that we are thinking, or not thinking, that is the support of the very cause of our discontent, its permanence, and its seeming inescapability. Psychoanalysis, we know, was brought into the thought of emancipatory politics precisely to respond to this seemingly paradoxical problem – to unravel the mystery of our attachment to our enslavement, and to our discontent. This text is not on psychoanalysis, but on philosophy, on what philosophy can do, on what role philosophy in its very weakness can play in revitalizing the left. My wager is that to cast off this impotence, and to cast off this temptation, what we need today is something that itself was castoff long ago, thrown away as irrelevant, misguided, guilty even, and certainly un-useful. My thought is that what the left needs today is philosophy.

The existing question, then, takes on a little more specificity for us here: it is no longer 'how can we assume this problem' – for there are may be many ways to do so – but: *how can philosophy, as philosophy, assume it? What is it that philosophy can do to help nudge the present off its current track, and give it a chance at some other direction?*

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The first step, naturally, would be to affirm that capitalism is, in fact, in such a crisis. We cannot, however, do that here. Nonetheless – for it is a useful supposition – let us consent that there is such a crisis, and so, an opportunity. From the above question we can subtract two points:

- 1) There is something is missing (for the left)
- 2) There is the question of radical change (how it would be possible, and by the same pivot, why is it not taking place)

The two, can then be formed into one:

3) That which is missing is the pivot that turns the continuation of the present into the production of a new future.

Nietzsche once said that no man can see around his own corner—something that was already obvious from the very outline of *ubermensch*. And Marx, for his part, could never fully (and was never fully concerned to) describe the future society that would be the overcoming of the contradictions of the present. That there is always a wager and a risk with the new is the only inevitability. This problem of change, of its possibility, its destination, its place, has often been said – and it has certainly been implicitly proved – to be the most difficult of philosophy's problems.<sup>3</sup> But, as fate would have it, it is also its most essential problem. Though philosophy may be in the present, its problem, its cross to bear is how to think of the possibility of the new, how to think the possibility of the passage from the present to a new future – a passage we would call historical, a passage that would not be just a development, an extension of the present. And so, perhaps the idea of putting philosophy to work on this problem is not so strange, and is not only a possibility but something of a duty, a duty of philosophy..

Louis Althusser once proposed that the duty of philosophers was to conceive of how philosophy could be put at the service of sciences and that this, as opposed to making the sciences subservient to philosophy, would be the properly emancipatory use of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> If we assume all that which is denoted by Althusser by 'sciences' we could well say that the thesis here is Althusserian. But the thesis is also – I believe – fully Badiouian, in that we must maintain a specific definition of philosophy, a definition which restricts its ability to produce any truths. And it is truths, and truths alone, that make history, that can move the present off of its path - in our case, a path that is certainly moving towards catastrophe.

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3 *Some Ambiguities in Discussions Concerning Time* 1963, p.107. Nietzsche, for instance, writes: "these reflections are also untimely, because I attempt to understand as a defect, infirmity and shortcoming of the age something of which our age is justifiably proud, its historical education. I even believe that all of us suffer from a consuming historical fever and should at least realize that we suffer from it. If Goethe has said with good reason that with our virtues we also cultivate our faults, and if, as everyone knows, a hypertrophic virtue – which the historical sense of our age seems to me to be – may bring about the decay of a people as much as a hypertrophic vice, one may as well allow me my say. ... , [to be untimely is] to act against the age and so to have an effect on the age to the advantage, it is to be hoped, of a coming age". See Nietzsche 1995, p.87.

4 Althusser 2011, p. 69 – 165.

We confront, therefore, a very specific problem: *what can philosophy, despite its limitations, contribute to the creation of a new possibility, maybe a new future?*

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Let us begin with a question that is so often addressed to philosophers: what is it that you do? And let us admit that it is a fair question, not least because we ourselves are largely unable to provide a response any more than a consensus. What is it that we do, after all? Some of us, of course, study Kant, others Nietzsche, others still turn to Hegel and the Ancient Greeks – this is all well and good, and, maybe, important. After all, philosophy – and perhaps art, as well – is one of the few forms of thought for which an understanding of its past is essential, to the extent that it could even be maintained that the very subject of philosophy – its definition, its essence – is revealed by its history.<sup>5</sup> And yet, if philosophy is reduced only to the study of its history, then it is, in fact, something other than philosophy – it is scholasticism. If philosophy is reduced merely to the recollection of its past, it is but a museum of itself.<sup>6</sup> What then is it that philosophy does? Of course, there exist, common answers to this question: philosophy is the love of knowledge, the love of wisdom, maybe the love of truth, or even, philosophy is that which relentlessly asks questions. That we are unsure of what philosophy is, of what it does, is made obvious by the sheer vacuity of these responses, as much as by the fact that they are too often assumed as synonymous, as interchangeable, when, in fact, they all imply something quite distinct, and even in opposition to each other.. What is it, then? Is it the thought of truth? And if it is, is it a construction, or a discovery? Or is it some higher knowledge? Does it judge, or construct? Does it appropriate its other, or does it determine the same? Or, finally, is it just the passive serenity of wisdom?

Let us assume a definition, in fact, let us assume the most famous of philosophy's definitions, Hegel's: *philosophy is its time in thought*.<sup>7</sup> But to simply state this definition does not resolve our problem, for we can ask:

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5 Hegel 1997, p. 207-218. Badiou, on the other hand proposes that the ethics of philosophy is the history of philosophy, an idea which – given what this ethics is, and what history is, is not all that different for it would reveal and force the central element of philosophy's decision for Badiou, its emptiness, the emptiness of Truth. See Badiou 2008, p. 25.

6 Badiou 2008, p. 3-5.

7 Hegel 2002, p. 9.

to what end, or, what is the consequence, the purpose of this thought? Is it the pinnacle of an age? The genius of its time? Its self-consciousness? Is it the key to its time? Maybe. But again: what of it? What do we do with this thought? Or, what does this thought do? If there is nothing more to philosophy, if there is no consequence to this thought, no end to it, then philosophy is nothing more than a very complex, and very beautiful, history of ideas. If such a thought merely consummates the genius of its time, and its use is exhausted by retroactive comprehension of some near or distant age, then philosophy is of use only to historians – or, at best, any other use can be revealed through historians. But even such a circuit does not itself resolve our question, it merely displaces it from the confused hands of philosophers to the fumbling ones of historians. If philosophy's existence is to be justified – and by extension, the thesis of this short text – then it is we who must answer the question of what *it* does. So we can ask: *what is the function of this thought of its time, of this thought of thought?*

We can begin with something of a concrete situation. In 2010, amidst the continuation of austerity measures, the British government cut funding to higher education. These cuts, of course, were not equally distributed across the faculties: the faculties of science, medicine, engineering and business would see a reduction in funding, but would largely remain unaffected, while what is often called the Faculty of Philosophy, the faculty wherein the liberal arts and humanities are studied, would see its funding reduced to zero, or next to zero.. These cuts were defended on the grounds that these fields make no contribution to the state, and so there is no justification for their continued funding and subsidizing by the state. And we must admit that this is in fact correct: philosophy does not contribute anything to the state. As we are all so fond of history, let us give a historical argument: the first contradiction encountered by philosophy was that between itself and the state.<sup>8</sup> This is not, of course, to say that philosophy has no role in the state as such – in fact, we could even maintain the Platonic thesis that philosophy (and the philosopher) is simultaneously impossible outside of the state and within the state, that philosophy is as necessary to a rational state as it is dangerous, or at least, useless to the particular state within which Plato and Socrates found themselves.<sup>9</sup> This impossibility, and the paradoxical

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8 Koyre, 1945: p. 53–106.

9 Ibid.

relationship underlying it, can be read in many ways. For example, we could take this to mean that philosophy is always political, that is to say, a true philosophy is not at liberty to choose whether it is or is not political any more than it can choose to be concerned with art, science, and so on. Another possibility would be to understand this statement to mean that although philosophy 'corrupts', its wager is that corruption is not enough, put differently, philosophy involves a further step then nihilism, skepticism or sophism.<sup>10</sup> Philosophy, in the case of the latter possibility, maintains a thesis homologous to that of Saint Just when he announced the necessity of institutions to prevent the French Revolution from ending in the pure event of its uprising.<sup>11</sup> In its own terms, we could say that philosophy maintains that desire alone is insufficient, that desire must be institutionalized, that it must become love.<sup>12</sup> The infamous – and in fact not at all ridiculous, but rather very rational – solution of Plato was the philosopher king – a thesis which, although I cannot defend it here, is not at all a suture for Plato but precisely what we could call a structural necessity for a rational state, a rational totality.

This somewhat paradoxical relationship between philosophy and the state does not resolve our question, but it does point us in the right direction – at least insofar as we assume that 'state' is another name for structure, or better, the structuring of a situation.<sup>13</sup> In which case, philosophy as the thought of its time, as the thought of thought, maintains a homologous relationship to the structure of a world as did the Greek philosophers to Athens. Philosophy, then, is both useless to the state, unrecognizable to it – a 'fools blabbering', a corruption, and a blasphemy<sup>14</sup> – and a subversion of the same state.

To begin to defend our thesis that philosophy has some use in our common predicament, we must first be more precise on the nature of philosophy. It is, however, impossible to provide a full articulation of its very complex definition, and so let us be content with positing

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10 We can consider, for example not only Plato's (and then later Badiou's, in his re-writing of *The Republic*) move from the question of what is justice, in the subjective sense to the question of what is a just state, but also the very endeavor of writing *The Republic*, of thinking the republic, as a way to structure the philosophy of Socrates – the book, in some sense, is Socrates's attempts to construct a state fitting to his thought.

11 Badiou 2008, p. 26-32.

12 Badiou 2012, p. 66.

13 Badiou 2005: p. 93-103.

14 Plato 1997, p. 503; p. 17-36.



the following: philosophy does not create truths, but constructs the Truth, which is a compossibility of the various operations of the truth-procedures. This conditioning and immanence of philosophy demands that we conceive of it as strictly empty before the appropriation of forms, operations and concepts which are created by the truth-procedures. In this respect, philosophy is an operational space that is simultaneously within and in exception to its conditions. Moreover, from this it follows that philosophy is distinct both from sophistry (in that it affirms truths and constructs the Truth) and religion (in that it constructs the Truth out of historically generated truths) – in this respect, philosophy is something like the thought of truth without God. In consequence, philosophy must resign any substantial superiority over the conditions, in the sense that it would assume some access to a higher truth or knowledge by which it could determine the conditions, be it in the present or the future, and yet it is what affirms truths. To this we can add that a philosophy is the same as its Truth, that is, as the compossibility of truths. Finally, we can say that the function of philosophy (thinking the totality of its time) and the conditioning and space of philosophy (it is immanent and exceptional) carries the consequence that the addition of philosophy to the world, its inclusion in it, makes the world evental and properly infinite. As should be obvious, our definition of philosophy is Badiou's.<sup>15</sup>

Given this definition, it is obvious what philosophy does in a situation where truths exist – it reflexively constructs a Truth, the Truth of its time, and, in a loop, affirms the truths out of which it composed itself. The question that is far more difficult, far more obscure, and, in fact, far more important, is: what philosophy does, or what can it do, when the truth-procedures are not active, when we live in a world without truth(s)? Philosophy itself cannot produce truths, and so in their absence it seems to be in a position of absolute impotence: it is both impotent, for it cannot itself produce the pivot of the shift, and impossible, for there are no active truth-procedures out of which it can compose itself. In short: it is impotent and inexistent. After all, if philosophy is its time in thought, and so the thought of thought, then the thought of which it is the thought must pre-exist it. Such a situation, *our situation*, therefore, only further complicates our initial problem, and, by extension, our thesis. Finally, we can recognize here that we have again arrived at Hegel, who further

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<sup>15</sup> It is possible, in fact, to say that the definition of philosophy is *Being and Event*, which is also the Truth of it time, or, our time.

defined philosophy as the Owl of Minerva, taking flight at dusk.<sup>16</sup>

This fuller definition of philosophy, when made concrete in our world, has, therefore, not only failed to resolve our initial problem, but has only further complicated it. The very thing that I proposed can operate the passage that would resolve our problem is impossible precisely at the moment of its necessity. Our question, consequently, can be reformulated, and it is again two-fold: *what can philosophy do in a world where truths do not exist, which is also a world that determines it as impossible?* And, second: *what is missing?*

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We can begin with the latter question. That we live in a world where truths do not exist, at least not with sufficient intensity, is a thesis that – like the state of capitalism today – we cannot defend or prove here. As such, we will merely assume it. The argument is that in the place of truth-procedures, today we find only their perversions: in the place of art there is culture, in the place of science, technology, in the place of love there is but sex, and, finally, in the place of politics we have management.<sup>17</sup> Two things follow from this set of distortions: First, that the conditions are truth-procedures is no more a necessity than that an event follows from a site – that truths are produced is merely a possibility. Consequently, the fields can be divided: there can be conditions without active truth-processes and conditions with active truth-processes. To the former we can give the name ‘knowledge’ and to the latter ‘thought’. And second, we can suppose that there is something the presence or absence of which is the operator of this distinction, further adding that it is this something which is ‘what is missing’ from the left today.

It would be impossible, in a text of this size, to consider in detail the singular distortions of each of the generic-procedures. It is also

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<sup>16</sup> Hegel 2002, p. 10. This thesis is in no way restricted to Hegel – even the anti-Hegelian Althusser, for instance in *Lenin and Philosophy*, confirmed it when we spoke about the necessary lag of philosophy behind the sciences, and we too must affirm this limitation of philosophy by way of its conditioning, and by way of restricting the production of truth to the generic-procedures.

<sup>17</sup> Badiou 2003, p. 12. Specifically, Badiou writes: “The contemporary world is thus doubly hostile to truth procedures. This hostility betrays itself through nominal occlusions: where the name of a truth procedure should obtain, another, which represses it, holds sway. The name “culture” comes to obliterate that of “art.” The word “technology” obliterates the word “science.” The word “management” obliterates the word “politics.” The word “sexuality” obliterates love. The “culture-technology-management-sexuality” system, which has the immense merit of being homogeneous to the market, and all of whose terms designate a category of commercial presentation, constitutes the modern nominal occlusion of the “art-science-politics-love” system, which identifies truth procedures typologically.”

unnecessary to do so, since the cause of the distortion is in some sense the same in each case. Badiou, in fact, suggests as much when he states that the contemporary 'culture-technology-management-sexuality system' occludes the 'art-science-politics-love system'. In place of a singular analysis, let us wager that the distortion is on account of what we can call perversion, which can be minimally defined as the disavowal of castration. Put another way, it is the disavowal of a certain impossibility, and the consequent activity on top of this negation. Specifically, in psychoanalysis, it is the objectification of oneself into the supposed object of the other's desire. There are, here, three implications: the supposition of a knowable object in the place of a lack; a certainty of the knowable object and more fundamentally, that there is an object; and, third, the constitution of the other as whole. Such a structure, consequently, conceals the very possibility of what psychoanalysis calls truth, which is what 'pokes holes in knowledge', or the fact that the other does not exist (as whole). We can translate this as follows: perversion is the consistency of knowledge made possible by the negation of some impossibility, some inconsistency. Such a move supposes that there are objects of knowledge and nothing in exception to them, and, thereby, allows the situation to appear as consistent and whole – the only un-known is that which can become known, without disrupting the consistency of the situation. The perversion of the conditions, therefore, is the very condition of what we call 'the end of history'. In consequence to this definition of knowledge, we can define thought as that which forces or carries with the same inconsistency.

We arrive here, at a first response to our initial problem: what is missing – such that there is no structural change despite the existence of a crisis – is truth(s). The construction of a new concept of truth is one of the fundamental tasks of *Being and Event*,<sup>18</sup> and we cannot here venture into a full description. Rather, let us again be satisfied with a minimal definition: the being of a truth is, naturally, determined by ontology, and so it is what Badiou calls a generic multiple, a subset of a situation which finding its origin in the eruption of the void within a situation, is constructed through a series of subtractions. It is, thereby, also infinite and eternal, despite arising out of a specific situation and a singular site. Truth, as a process sourced from such an eruption, exposes or forces into existence that on whose negation the situation attained consistency. Therefore, not only are truths strictly speaking immanent

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<sup>18</sup> Badiou 2005, p.3

and historical, despite being infinite and eternal, they are also the very vehicles of history. Their construction, their coming into existence, or their appearance in the world, is impossible without a radical change in the very structure of the world from which they arose. History, therefore, is always and only the history of eternal truths.<sup>19</sup>

This response, however, is rather obvious and tautological, and, moreover, does not allow us to resolve the problem with the aid of philosophy, since producing truth is precisely what it cannot do. And so, our task must be to consider: *why it is that within the logic of the contemporary world the conditions for truths do not exist?* The state of our situation, which is to say, our world, is structured by the logic of that Badiou calls constructivist. Thus, we must consider what of the conditions of a truth is obstructed within this logic.

Before we can see how this is an occlusion of the possibility of a truth, we must fix some terminology, namely: situation state of the situation, constructivism, and within these, the void. A situation is any consistent multiplicity, but a consistent multiplicity is not a presentation of being itself, for it is the result of an operation, the name of which is count-as-one. The being of being, in so far as a situation is the result of an operation, we can conclude is not one, and so is multiple. This multiplicity, however, in that it is without one, is a pure or inconsistent multiplicity. That is, a multiplicity of multiplicity, of multiplicity, and so on until we reach the only possible point of termination, the void. The void, therefore, like pure multiplicity is a deductive supposition, the grounds for which follow from a two-fold thesis: mathematics is ontology, set theory being the articulation of what we can know of being today, and to ontology can be known. The count-as-one, therefore, is the operation that both installs "the universal pertinence of the one/multiple couple for any situation", and forecloses being as such, which is to say, the inconsistent multiple. The count-as-one, finally, is the condition for the possibility of any experience – which is another way of saying: everything is a situation.

The concept of situation, is not, however, the end of structure. Structure is the sum of two levels or operations: presentation, i.e., the situation, the count-as-one, and representation, i.e., the state of the situation, the count-of-the-count or forming-into-one. The necessity of the second operation is immanent to the function of the first. It secures

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19 'History' is here used as distinct both from History and historicism, indeed 'history' here implies precisely that which is opposed and irreducible to both of the others, that is, to historicity.

the situation from confronting its void by counting that which is the sole indicator that the situation is not being itself, but the institution of a count-as-one. It is a representation, it counts the count. More specifically, since everything is a set – for instance, a kitchen is a set, but so is a table, and so is a cup, and so is the content on the cup, and so on – then the full definition of the count of the count, of the state of the situation, is that it counts all that which is an element of each set, of each count-as-one. The consequence of this is that representation reveals itself to be the doubling of presentation. The final result of this structuring is the one/multiple couple. For instance: a person is a one and a multiple, it is one but it is also a multiple of other ones (features, characteristics, papers, licenses, interests, etc., etc.), which are themselves multiples of other ones, and so on towards infinity. The function of the state – its forming into sub-sets those things which themselves are the groupings of sets – is to constitute the semblance that everything is some one thing. The consequence is the foreclosure of the void, of the pure multiplicity of the situation, precisely by giving the situation the semblance of being a set of counted ones, and not a set of *count-as-ones*. By this operation, the state is able to cover over, or conceal, the irreducibility of being and existence, by reducing the former to the latter. Put another way, the gap in existence the name of which is pure multiplicity, or the void, is concealed by the very operation of securing that every set is a one, a one multiple, which is to say, whole.<sup>20</sup> The essential point is that the second count is a necessity because the very fact of the first count, i.e., *the counting itself*, is the mark of the fact that there is an irreducibility between being as such and its presentation, i.e., of the fact that there is a void. *Representation, therefore, conceals this gap by concealing the structure of structure, by concealing the fact or form of structure.*

The structuring of the situation produces three types of terms: normal terms, which are presented and represented, excrescent terms, which are represented but not presented, and singular terms, which are presented but not represented. The second constitute the infinite surplus of representation over presentation, of included terms over ones which belong – the precise size of this excess is equal to two to the power of the number of terms in the situation, or two to the power of the cardinality

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<sup>20</sup> We can say that pure multiplicity, or the void is the gap in existence since it is that which is supposed to exist on the basis of a rationality that is always within a situation. We cannot directly experience pure multiplicity – as the count-as-one is the most elementary condition of experience – but with mathematics, i.e. set theory, we can nonetheless think it, write it, and in some sense, know it.

of the situation. The third, on the other hand, mark the *irreducibility concealed by the second count*. The presence of the third – specifically, in its radical form, a term none of whose elements are themselves presented<sup>21</sup> – makes a situation historical. Given that the singular is produced and concealed necessarily, we can confirm that *every situation is ontologically historical*, and so we can also confirm that the stake for us is a logical problem, and not an ontological one. Moreover, we can absolutely confirm Walter Benjamin's thesis that the end of history is always ideological.

It is this concealment of excrescence and the count, inherent to every structuring of a situation, that allows us to say that every established situation is, ultimately, constructivist.<sup>22</sup> The primary characteristic of which is that it maintains, as a solution to mastering this excess and concealment, the supposition that all represented one-multiples are always already presented.<sup>23</sup> This solution is made possible by the placement of the situation under complete jurisdiction by language, which admits as existing only that which is explicitly, and already, nameable.<sup>24</sup> The specific function of language is to demand that the representation of anything already be presented in the situation is that it contains a certain recognizable, i.e., already named, property or sub-multiple. In fact, that all of its elements are themselves presented, and, further, still represented. Language, therefore, is here posited as the bridge discernibility (presentation) and classification (representation). Hence, if to the constructivist question of 'what is that?' we cannot respond with properties already existing in the structured situation, the response will be 'it is nothing'. Constructivism is, ultimately, a radical nominalism: that which is not already named by language, or cannot be named by some construction of language, is simply denied existence. Further still, since the structuring of the situation already reduces being to existence, language determines, and can deny, being as such. That 'nothing', therefore, is simply 'not', it is 'non-being'. The co-ordinated movement of these three functions (discernment, classification and language) is

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21 This is the definition of an evental site, that is, it is a site where none of the terms grouped are themselves presented, it is, therefore, a radical singularity.

22 Badiou 2005, p. 281–294.

23 Badiou 2005, p. 286.

24 Badiou 2005, p. 504.

called *knowledge* - the objective knowledge of the state of the situation.<sup>25</sup> The price of this consistency of knowledge is the negation of the void of the situation, and the consequent claim that all that exists, and all that exist is, therefore, are knowable objects. *Constructivism, therefore, is the structural logic of the perversion of the truth-procedures.*

It is possible to condense this logic – with respect to our venture – into a set of propositions:

1. The knowledge of the world is constituted on a certain ignorance.
2. This ignorance is the ignorance of the very structure constitutive of knowledge.

Put another way:

3. There is some unknown-known, there is some knowledge<sup>26</sup> irreducible to the knowledge within a structured situation.

The logic of constructivism allows us to account for the fact that in our world possibilities are reduced to different variations of what already exists. In the case of politics, consequently, what we have are various possibilities of *managing the world*.<sup>27</sup> The possibilities admitted as possible are, however, only as different as they are the same. *This is the fate of the world*. And it is a fate since nothing new – wherein ‘new’ is distinct from new arrangements of the same – is possible. Indeed, all that is possible in such a world are different configurations and intensities of already known existences, and what is not possible, consequently, is some new existence. What is not possible is a radical change – a change that necessitates the construction of a *new structure* of the situation. In short: what is not possible in a constructivist world, what is not possible within its logic, is a truth. And why? Because the conditions for what

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<sup>25</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 328.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Knowledge’ here is not to be misunderstood as synonymous to the way we have proposed to use the term, i.e., as designating the understanding within and extending of a condition devoid of an active truth. Rather, by this ‘knowledge’ we intend something like form of knowledge, which, incidentally is not all that far from thought, or, at least, it is closer to it than the knowledge it makes possible.

<sup>27</sup> A world can, at its most elementary, be defined as the sum of knowable objects and their relation – relations (and hence the objects themselves) which are not only not restricted from modifications, but whose continuous modification constitutes the particular development of a world.

would be a truth are concealed. This is, again, a very complex structure, but for our intents it is sufficient to say that the conditions of possibility for a truth-process are: the existence of a singularity; a site, moreover an eventual one; the possibility of intervention;<sup>28</sup> and, following this, the processes of fidelity<sup>29</sup> and forcing.<sup>30</sup> The first pair are strictly impossible from the position of the objective knowledge of a constructivist situation. Since in constructivism only terms whose elements themselves are terms of the situation are granted existence, there can be, from the point of view of the knowledge of the situation, no recognizable site within the situation. Put another way, the knowledge of the situation does not recognize anything that could disrupt it. And second, since intervention requires not only the decision that an event has taken place but also the capacity to name something which is in-existent to the situation, intervention demands of language something that is strictly beyond its reach, according to the logic of constructivism. This reduces it to circulating between what is already discernable and the potentially infinite cross-classifications of these terms – namely, the capacity to stretch itself beyond objective existence. It is with this in mind, that we can understand why the reliance on poetry in *Being and Event* is not metaphorical, but strictly a condition of philosophy, that is, a condition of the construction of the process of a truth, i.e., of Truth.

Within such a world, it is not only that truths do not exist, but that their very conditions of possibility are negated or concealed. Meaning not only the void, which is concealed by every situation, and its marker, by every structuring of a situation, but also the possibility of a singularity, of a site and intervention are made impossible with a situation such as this. This is not, however, to say that an event is impossible, *but only that it is impossible from the point of view of the objective knowledge of such a world*. Hence the Žižekian thesis with which we began: what is necessary today is to return to a philosophical comprehension, or analysis of the world, of the structure of the situation.

Žižek again captures the predicament of the impotence of our wills and intentions, perfectly:

“In an old joke from the German Democratic Republic, a German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by censors,

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28 See Badiou 2005, p. 201-211.

29 See Badiou 2005, p. 232-254.

30 See Badiou 2005, p. 391-430.



he tells his friends: "Let's establish a code: if a letter from me is written in blue ink, it is true; if it is written in red ink, it is false." After a month, his friends get the first letter written in blue ink: "Everything is wonderful here: stores are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, movie theatres show films from the west, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair - the only thing unavailable is red ink..."<sup>31</sup>

What is missing, therefore, is precisely the immanent possibility of the very conditions of a truth, at least in so far as we continue to think within the ideological co-ordinates, that is within the objective knowledge of the situation. We have, then, another definition of ideology: "ideology exploits the minimal distance between a simple *collection* of elements and the different *sets* one can form out of this collection", such that it limits the possible to its own extension.<sup>32</sup> What is missing, therefore, is precisely the capacity to assume the conditions for that which would, or by which it would be possible to, articulate *the cause* of discontent – an articulation that would already be a first step towards some Idea.<sup>33</sup>

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The most elementary thesis of philosophy, Badiou has proposed, is that of the void, and so it is natural to propose that what philosophy can and could transmit is precisely this thesis. However, what would it mean to transmit the void? After all, the void is, first, the proper name of the inconsistent multiple, of being as such, and so, a retroactive supposition of what is anterior to presentation, and *not something visible from within a situation*.<sup>34</sup> It is, therefore, precisely that which must be nothing for the pertinence of the one-multiple pair to attain consistency, and so from the point of view of any presentation it is strictly speaking a nothing equivalent to a non-being. It is, of course, not equivalent to non-being, but precisely the marker of the irreducibility of being to existence. This, however, is only articulable by ontology, which is to say by the presentation of presentation, and meta-ontology, and not visible from within a presentation. Moreover, despite the fact that the void is necessarily within everything in a situation, that it haunts the entirety of the situation, the void is not itself directly graspable. And so, we

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<sup>31</sup> Žižek 2002, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek 2009, p. 105.

<sup>33</sup> Žižek 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 52.

must ask: what could transmission of the void, to whichever route or place, mean? Could it even be transmitted directly? And if it could be transmitted as a thesis, what could the consequences of this be on the conditions? Certainly, to transmit the void is, in some sense, a solution to the problem posed by a constructivist logic, but it appears as a something of an impossible one, or, at least, an ineffective one. If it is not directly graspable within a situation, and everything is a situation, then could the effect of its transmission be anything other disavowal? To be very naïve, we can ask what would be the effect of saying to the conditions ‘the void is’? Would the response not be something along the lines of: ‘I know very well, but...’? Finally, we can further ask: how does such a transmission square with the minimal definition of philosophy we assumed at the outset – that it is the reflexive thought of its time, the reflexive thought of thought.

To suggest that the most elementary operations of the discipleship of a philosophy is the transmission of its basic thesis is not, however, immediately reducible to the idea of this transmission being a transmission of the void of being. What the void involved in the philosophical operation is requires a rather complex theory of the definition of philosophy, but for our purpose here it is sufficient to say that aside from understanding the ‘thesis of the void’ as relating to the void of being, we can also understand it as an ‘operational void’, or as the ‘void of address’.<sup>35</sup> In the Introduction of *The Praxis of Alain Badiou*, the editors suggest the following:

“If philosophy itself institutes nothing but the void of an address, the transmission of a philosophy requires its disciples to invent new modes of thinking adequate to supporting the singularity of this empty address; these disciples work to transform the emergence of this void address into letters, into marks that subsist and can circulate along routes and through places that previously would have found these marks unthinkable and/or unacceptable. ...”<sup>36</sup>

It is interesting that with this idea of philosophy as evoking an operational void, which can also be called a void of address, there is a further return to Plato. For instance, consider *Euthyphro*, wherein Socrates’ central question is: do the gods love the pious because they are pious, or are they pious because they are loved by the gods? In other

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35 Badiou 2008, p. 3–32.

36 Ashton, Bartlett, Clemens 2006, p. 6.

words, where or what is the guarantee? With philosophy the guarantee of a proposition, of any proposition, is reason. In the case of Badiou it is a rationality that is strictly immanent to, or derived from, the conditions, while with religion, for instance, the guarantee is God. Put another way, there is a void of address of philosophy – philosophy has no sacred book, no sacred place of enunciation, and so on – and this questioning without guarantee can be read as an operational void. Put another way, these two voids ‘of address’ and ‘of operation’ demand that if something is true it is true if and only if it can be proved with reason, with argument, if it can withstand critique. Philosophy, then, as the transmission of this void is, naturally, very much the Platonic or Socratic procedure of questioning professed knowledge by an incessant and rather hysterical pursuit of its grounds, of its conditions.

But let us propose, instead, that philosophy, in order to make possible the shift from the continuation of the present to the construction of a new future – from knowledge to thought – must do something other than transmit the void. The idea is that all philosophy does, and all that it can do – given that it cannot itself produce truths – in such a situation such as ours is add itself to the world: *to make possible the movement from knowledge to thought, philosophy must add itself to the world. Philosophy adds to the world all that it is, and all that it has - it adds Truth.*

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What exactly is it that is added to the world by philosophy? There seem to exist two possibilities: one, philosophy adds a duplicate of the world to the world – it adds the thought of its time to its time; and two, philosophy in that it is something like the world’s unconscious, by adding itself adds the unknown-known of the world to the world. These two possibilities, however, are, in fact, but one.

First let us ask: what exactly is this thought of thought that is philosophy’s operation? What is it that philosophy appropriates from the conditions? What is it that it thinks? To use two rather naïve terms, we can ask: does philosophy think the content of the thoughts of the truth-procedures, or their form, that is, the operations themselves? The answer is clear: the category of Truth – which is the thought of philosophy – is the trajectory of truths,<sup>37</sup> it is, as Badiou states in the Introduction to *Being and Event* the system or ‘general order of thought’ that can be practiced “across the entirety of the contemporary system of reference. These

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37 Badiou 2010, p. 105-120; Badiou 2010b, p. 43-51.

categories are available for the service of scientific procedures just as they are for those of politics or art. They attempt to organize an abstract vision of the requirements of the epoch.”<sup>38</sup> We can, again, and somewhat rhetorically, ask a naïve question: if what philosophy thinks is anything other than *the compossibility of the operations of the truth-procedures*, how could it propose the unity of a time? Badiou again confirms as much when he writes all of the following:

“[Philosophy] roots out truths from the gangue of sense. It *separates* them from the law of the world”<sup>39</sup>

“The philosophical seizing of truths exposes them to eternity – we can say, along with Nietzsche, the eternity of their *return*.”<sup>40</sup>

“[philosophy] seizes truths, shows them, exposes them, announces that they exist. In so doing, it turns time towards eternity – since every truth, as a generic infinity, is eternal.”<sup>41</sup>

We have here two important points: first, what philosophy seizes of a truth-procedure is precisely that which can be subtracted from sense; and second, in this way it places truths into ‘the always of time’, a place from which they can forever be resurrected.<sup>42</sup> Philosophy’s thought, therefore, is not of the particular truths, but of what is timeless in them, that is: their forms and their operations. And philosophy, as we saw earlier, is this compossibility – a philosophy is its Truth, the Truth of its time. Philosophy, therefore, is something like an abstract duplicate of the world, but with a caveat: philosophy does not only think that which the world presents of itself, but also that which it constitutively negates.<sup>43</sup> This is evident in two ways: first, with ontology as the presentation of presentation, and the formalization of mathematics more generally, we can write being, and know that something must be negated from every

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<sup>38</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Badiou 1999, p. 142.

<sup>40</sup> Badiou 1999, p. 142.

<sup>41</sup> Badiou 2005b, p. 14

<sup>42</sup> See Badiou 2009, p. 65.

<sup>43</sup> Agamben 2011, p. 10-19. And Nietzsche 1995, p. 87-96.

structured situation for what we have called knowledge to be possible – we could add that ontology also allows us to *think* this something. Second, if Truth is the constructed trajectory of truth-procedures, out of the procedures themselves, then that Truth thinks the passage of that which in a world passes from inexistence into existence, and thus, the subversion of the semblance of exhaustive consistency of any knowledge precisely by that passage. In short, what philosophy is able to think – along with and through truths – is the very form of knowledge, i.e., the necessary structure for knowledge, which is in each established situation its unknown-known. This unknown-known, we must add is both constitutive of the space of knowledge, and operative only insofar as knowledge is ignorant of it. In short, philosophy thinks that which is constitutively foreclosed from knowledge – it thinks *the real of knowledge*. We can propose then that philosophy is something like the double of the world, *and its negative*. *Our thesis, therefore, is that the act of philosophy is the addition to the world of the thought of itself – a thought that necessarily includes its unknown-known, its real, its constitutive ignorance. Also, that it is in this manner that philosophy can intervene in the world such that it opens the possibility of converting knowledge into thought, without suture.*

The addition of philosophy to the world – that is, the addition of reflexive thought to the world, or the addition of the Truth of the world to the world – has two consequences:

- 1) To add philosophy to the world of which it is the thought makes the world evental.
- 2) To add philosophy to the world of which it is the thought makes the world infinite.

We will, however, here only consider the first of these consequences. Philosophy – the thought of a *philosophy*, the reflexive thought of thought – has two components. It is the duplicate of the world and it is the thought of the unknown-known of this same world. Consequently, its addition to the world brings about a somewhat paradoxical situation: there is something recognizable to objective knowledge, philosophy as the duplicate of the world, and something unrecognizable – philosophy as the unknown-known of the world. This odd addition of philosophy to its world, therefore, is possible only in the form of a singular site: the duplicate, recognizable to knowledge, is presented, but what is under this ‘thought of its time’ is precisely that which is necessarily unrecognizable to the world

as it is, and so is unrepresentable, and yet also completely immanent to its time. In fact, the structure of the site created by the addition of philosophy is totally singular – and so, eventual – in that nothing of this unknown-known is presentable. Philosophy, then, despite being recognizable is simultaneously unrecognizable, and so unknowable by the objective knowledge of the situation. Yet, its existence cannot be denied, since this knowledge sees itself in philosophy. That something is presented, and so exists, and not represented, and so does not exist, disrupts the consistency of constructivist knowledge by unsettling the reduction of being to existence on which constructivism hinges – since something exists but its elements do not. We can say, therefore, that for knowledge, philosophy has significance and not signification. To put it very naively, the addition of philosophy disrupts the consistency of knowledge, for it cannot deny the existence of something that is constitutively beyond it. That is, it cannot deny existence to something it cannot grant existence to, and so is forced to think.

By this transmission, or better, by this addition, philosophy introduces into the world precisely that which is concealed within a constructivist situation: the possibility of an eventual site. In short, philosophy introduces the fundamental condition for the possibility of what may one day be a truth. A condition that is, also, the very space of philosophy itself: the irreducibility of being and existence. Philosophy, therefore, constitutes its own conditions of existence in a double sense, when confronted with a constructivism world, a world where the truth-procedures are perverted. It does this first, by adding itself to the world – as its Truth – it forces the very space that is, and second, by introducing this distinction between being and existence, and therefore making the world eventual, or historical, it opens the possibility for the conditions to begin to think, that is, to produce truth. Therefore, philosophy constitutes the conditions of possibility for its own conditions of possibility. This, however, brings us to what is certainly the immediate objection to such a philosophical act: from where, and with what, does philosophy act in a world without truth – if it is absolutely conditioned, absolutely immanent to the world which it thinks? In some respect this is a fair criticism, since philosophy is absolutely immanent – constituting itself out of pre-existing conditions. However, philosophy does not only constitute itself by truths which it affirms, but to do so it subtracts them from history and places them into the 'always of time'. In fact, this is not only what Badiou's category of resurrection articulates, but is also what makes possible that truths can be resurrected, that is, it is a necessity if truths are eternal and infinite.

When philosophy acts in a world without truth, it acts by way of truths that have been subtracted from history and are now written in the history of philosophy. It acts, therefore, in some sense, by reminding the world of its past glory, of its moments of historicity. Maybe we can even say that in a world without truth, philosophy reminds the world of its past, it puts before is a mirror.

This is what philosophy can do: it can add to the world the thought of the world, the Truth of the world. It can add Truth to knowledge and thereby make the world historical. But this is the limit of philosophy – it can do no more without suture. Philosophy cannot tell us anything about what the future will look like, anymore than it can create the truths that will constitute it. It has been said that philosophy concerns itself with desire, that it concerns itself with the production of a new desire, a new desire for the world. This is true. But Badiou should not be misunderstood here as implying that philosophy directly produces desire, that it is the production of desire within the conditions, not least because in a text of this name<sup>44</sup>, the desire of philosophy is articulated again in the ‘abstract’<sup>45</sup> – involving the interplay of revolt, logic, universality, and risk. Philosophy itself is not the production of a desire for a more just state, a more complete form of art, and so on, as that would already be the first step towards suture. If philosophy is communist, it is – as Lenin would have said – communist because communism is true.

All philosophy can do is introduce some disruption into a stale world. It can corrupt it, by the act of adding to it its own Truth. Let us call this the cause – a cause induced by adding to the world its own real. By this addition the world becomes somehow paradoxical, it becomes infinite, it becomes paraconsistent, and it reveals itself to be historical. But after this humble act of returning to the world, the world itself in inverted form, philosophy can do no more then remind the procedures to give consistency to the cause. Which is, ultimately, nothing other than to say that is must live for an Idea.

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44 Badiou 2010, p. 29-42.

45 ‘Abstract’ is here used in the sense that the ‘general order of thought’ in *Being and Event* is abstract.

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**What is a  
Party a part of?**

**Gabriel  
Tupinambá**

“...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographer's Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography”

Borges, *On Rigor in Science*

### **What do we mean by presentation in politics?**

Jorge Luis Borges' *On Rigor in Science* tells of the creation of a map in which every point corresponded to a point in the world that it mapped. Because it had no reason of being - after all, it did not gather the regions of the world into more compact regions of the map, i.e. it did not *represent* the world - the map was finally cast out into the desert, to be inhabited “by animals and beggars”.

This story, however brief and fragmentary, nevertheless allows us to think a very important difference - one between two senses of the term *presentation*.

The first sense is the one of those “not so fond of the study of cartography as their forebears had been”. For them, the difference between presentation and representation is qualitative or intensional: presentation is what happens directly in the world, the direct taking place of something; while representation is always a redoubling – an image of the world – whose usefulness is proportional to its capacity to repeat, through restricted and more economic means, the geographical traits of the world as it is. A map that is the size of the world is, therefore, useless: first, it does not allow us to condense the whole into a smaller part and, second, if it is an *exact* replica of the world, then it still pales in comparison to it, for the simple fact that it lacks the quality of *being* the world.

The second sense of the term is one that might impose itself on us when we witness the “tattered ruins of that map”. Here, the accent falls on an extensive, rather than intensive, distinction between presentation and representation: after all, that vast map, devoid of representational use, has been *added to the world*. Meditating upon the wasteland that the ancient map has become, we can clearly see that the map is now a part of the world just like a mountain that is drawn on that very map, and would have to be itself marked in the new, functional map of the Empire as a new region, rather than as an image, of the world. Where representation fails - who would want to engage with a one-to-one replica of a mountain when the actual mountain is out there? - the map starts to count as a part of the world. Not only this, but it counts as a very singular part of it: a part of the whole that is in one-to-one correspondence with the whole it is a part of.

In 1889, this precise formulation was used by Richard Dedekind to define the mathematical infinite: “A system  $S$  is said to be infinite when it is similar to a proper part of itself”<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, the ruinous map of Borges, when considered as a part of the Empire and not as its failed representation - as the place of those without place, the stray animals and the homeless, rather than a guide to other places - becomes a localized proof of the infinitude of the world.

The pressing question of the contemporary relevance of the party-form could be perfectly framed by this preamble. The two functions of the map described above are, in fact, two different ways of thinking about the role of the Party. The classic conception of the party-form, of a political organization whose vocation would be to map and guide the different political struggles of its time, while not being reducible to any of these local demands, seems today to have exhausted itself<sup>2</sup>. Nothing resembles the useless map imagined by Borges so much as the ossified structure of the bureaucratic Party that large and inefficient political machine epitomized by the soviet model. Accordingly, as the political struggles of the last forty years challenged the capacity of this centralized agent to map the different demands of social movements and to represent them in a powerful and effective way, the party-form was perceived more and more as an old and monstrous idea, whose proper place would be

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<sup>1</sup> Dedekind, 1963, p.63 - where a “system  $S$ ” is a denumerable series, “similarity” is a function which maps each element of  $S$  to one element, and one alone, of a co-domain; and “proper part” of  $S$  is a sub-group of  $S$  which does not coincide with the whole series.

<sup>2</sup> Badiou, 1998, p.9; 2010, p.54

amongst other political relics, forgotten in a desert.

The question of what form of emancipatory collective would appear in the wake of this disaster became a central one, uniting, in a certain sense, both the Leftist and the more conservative sensibilities around the common diagnosis of the decadent status of large institutional machines today. A debate with such widespread acceptance, constituting a thread that binds together the whole political spectrum is, therefore, of no interest to us here. The question we pose is rather the following: once the party-form has been abandoned - cast aside as a historical failure in the mission of representing the people's demands - does the recognition of the ineptitude of this idea settle all accounts? Or does it open the space for us to think the party-form anew; considering it not from the standpoint of representation – a clumsy guide to the political scenario – but as another region of the political world? In other words, now that the Leftist Party has been deemed useless, what are we to make of the surprising structural resonance it suddenly acquires with those it first failed to represent - the beggars, the animals, those without a purpose? Could the party-form perhaps find its true vocation in the task of being the part of the world that serves as a home to those who are “a part of no part”<sup>3</sup>?

### **The resistance always is on the side of the Party**

Who would disagree with the claim that an important task for any emancipatory political project today is to adequate itself to the demands of the contemporary protester? It seems like any effective political organization must, if it is to engage the masses, abandon its concern with big hierarchical structures in favor of small vertical groups, substitute formal orientations by local directives born out of personal experience, and so on. We all more or less agree with the idea that we need more flexible institutions - if we need institutions at all - if we are to harvest the political potential of the spontaneous protests around the world today and direct them towards substantial change.

Jacques Lacan coined something of an axiom for psychoanalysis when he claimed that “there is no other resistance in analysis than that of the analyst”<sup>4</sup>. That is, the hindrances that stop the analytic process are not due to what the analysand does not say, but to what the analyst does not listen to. The hypothesis of the unconscious carries such a

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3 Rancière, 1999, p.9

4 Lacan, 2006, p.324

corollary. If the unconscious speaks and it does so with indifference to what the speaker wishes to say, then the task of marking this indelible division in speech falls on the analytic intervention. Thus, no excuse can be found in the claim that the analysand “didn’t want to face his fears” or any equivalent argument. A similar axiom could perhaps find its place in politics as well. The resistance that blocks the dispersion of ideological identifications is not on the side of the masses, but of those who have the ambition to intervene in it. The question of political direction is always: which form of intervention manages to distinguish between the transitive demands and identifications and the intransitive declarations that speak through them?

The consensus today seems to lead to the following situation: from the standpoint of political organizations, there is a growing tendency to identify with the explicit demands of the protesters, joining the chorus of those who ask for more horizontal organizations, less bureaucracy, and the general laxity of historical emblems of the Left. While, from the side of the protesters, there seems to be a general distrust of the very idea that there is anything else to listen to behind what is explicitly taking place in a protest and, therefore, a distrust of any political institution which maintains this wager. Our political moment seems to be marked by the rise of a new figure of militancy, one which appears in order to complement the consolidated figure of the corrupted socialist governor. For every penny the latter accepts, undoing in the name of power, our belief in the authenticity of his past political commitments, there is a partisan ideal that is rejected by the enlightened new militant on account of its dangerous alienating character.

Our current predicament seems therefore to be profoundly determined by our incapacity to find a conjunction between the two great axioms of 20th Century emancipatory politics: to direct the spontaneous force of masses, and to have confidence in the masses. Either we accept the former, and are automatically on the road to opportunistic manipulation of the people’s demands, or the latter, and we weaken or disperse our political institutions, because that is what the contemporary protester demands of the Left. To return once more to psychoanalysis, we find in Lacan’s teaching yet another expression in which could give a clue of how to think about the task that challenges any serious emancipatory political project today. The sentence serves as the title of one of Lacan’s most important and technical essays, written in 1958:

*The direction of Treatment and the Principle of its Power*<sup>5</sup>. If we were to summarize this difficult text in one sentence, it would be something like: the direction of the treatment is on the side of the analyst's position, but the principle of its power is on the side of the analysand's speech. If directing an analytical treatment requires the analyst to confront that in himself which resists the pulsation of the unconscious, the principle of power of an analysis resides in that dimension of the analysand's speech which speaks "despite" the speaker - that is, it resides in that point where we cease to recognize ourselves, but our speech goes on. Accordingly, we could say that the challenge we face today, when trying to think the conjunction of the two political maxims mentioned above, is framed by these two vectors: directing the masses requires us to confront that in us which resists marking the real openings for political intervention, while the confidence in the masses requires that we trust the true power and potential that shines through the very shortcomings of the spontaneous popular movements.

The task which lies ahead of us is thus the following: (1) to discern some of the invariant impasses proper to our current political conjuncture - which we will do by turning our attention to the recent protests in Brazil; (2) to locate therein the question of the party-form, in hope of extracting some useful speculative problems; and (3) to present a preliminary case study of the *Partia e Fortë*, a singular political invention which took place in Kosovo and which allows us to think the contours of what we have abstractly indicated in Borges' short story as an alternative vocation for the party-form.

### **Rio de Janeiro as a repetition**

We have recently gone through what became known in Brazil as the "June Journeys"<sup>6</sup>: a series of large protests which began in June 2013 and brought together hundred thousands of people in the streets of many Brazilian cities. These protests gained their strength and size in great part as a response to the brutality of the police's reaction to previous, more concise manifestations against the raising of bus fares throughout Brazil. This exponential growth was also followed by an increasing vagueness in the masses' demands - something which was

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5 Lacan, 2006, p.489

6 All the sources of information on which we base our analysis of the June Journeys have been gathered together and made available on this website: <http://marxismo21.org/junho-2013-2/>

to be expected, given that the great majority of the people involved were either reacting exclusively against the State's violence or at least joining in a mass movement for the first time. Nevertheless, such big commotion - and the confrontations with the police that followed - left a lasting mark in the political scenario, and paved the way for other protests and strikes, which have been taking place frequently throughout Brazil since June. The two impasses we have previously discerned as consequences of the decadence of the classic conception of party politics were both present here. Already in the first demonstrations, an outright and violent rejection of the participation of leftist parties could be seen, justified precisely through the argument that the political leaders, incapable of representing the interests of the people, only wanted to exploit the movements for the sake of their own agenda. On the other hand, most leftist partisans either joined the chorus against their own political organizations or merely stood by watching resentfully as they were excluded from the political process.

Finally, in the last couple of months, an alternative form of organization started to appear from within the protests: the so-called "Black Blocs" - organized protesters who distinguished themselves from the other participants by their masks and use of violence against both the police and public and private property such as banks, shops and the city hall. Rejecting any central organization, the Black Blocs do not claim any direction of political movement, nor do they claim any political ideal as their horizon.

One last point must be added to this panorama: not only did the June Journeys show the protestor's rejection of political parties, the incapacity of these parties to listen to the truth in this rejection, and the production within the protests of a violent and directionless substitute for organized political institutions, but - more importantly - the protests also showed *a staggering lack of participation of the poor*. Those whose lives would really be affected by the change in the bus fare - the initial demand of the protests - did not participate in the manifestations, which were led in their substantial majority by the recently expanded middle classes.

We have seen this sequence repeat itself: first, a large revolt against the State, led by the middle class, awoken from political slumber by the potential threat of losing the few privileges which distinguish it from the working class<sup>7</sup>, a first moment which is met with an incapacity of the Left

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7 On the structure of "the revolt of the salaried bourgeoisie", we refer the reader to the article of the same name by Slavoj Žižek, on London Review of Books, Vol.34, N.2, p.9-10, 2012. For a complete



to produce any consistent direction, a failure which, in turn, produces a more violent and aimless substitute, either tainting the political character of the protests or detaching itself from it altogether. The most notable cases thus far have been those of Paris in 2005 and London in 2011, both of which saw the appearance of aimless outburst of violence after mass movements, fighting for the rights of the middle class, dissolved back into the background<sup>8</sup>. But what is there to learn from this repetition?

### **Our emblematic lack of strength**

The key point in this sequence is clearly the passage from the first to the second moment: first we have spontaneous mass movements led by the demand to stabilize the small privileges which identify the salaried bourgeoisie, then we have violent protests, without any direct claim to power or change, led by the lower middle classes, destroying and looting precisely those institutions which have failed to maintain the traits which justified their “inclusion out” of the proletariat. In between these two moments, we find a failure of the Left and a failure of the mass movements. The failure of the protests revolves around the structural impasse of a movement organized around the demand not to be reduced to the working class and which suddenly, in order to gain solidity, would need to join forces with the very instance it is striving to get away from. The failure of the Left, on the other hand, is evidently that of not being able to produce a form of organization and an emblem capable of operating this impossible conjunction. Out of this double failure, we witness the proliferation of meaningless violence perpetrated by those who best embody the contradiction at the heart of the movement: the lower middle class - both in need of political organization, if it is to produce any change, and in need of identity and recognition, if it is to really belong to the class it is supposedly a part of.

It is not uncommon for these outbursts of impotent violence to give rise, in a third moment, to a new appreciation of fascism by the working class. And we can now understand why: through the operation which defines fascism - the choice of a particular enemy to stand in for

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presentation of the category of the “salaried bourgeoisie”, please refer to the work of Jean-Claude Milner: *Le salaire de l'idéal: La théorie des classes et de la culture au XXe siècle*.

<sup>8</sup> On the London and Paris riots, please refer to ‘Shoplifters of the World Unite’, available at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-Žižek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite>

the contradiction at the heart of capitalism<sup>9</sup> - the neo-fascist groups manage to intervene precisely where the Left has failed, organizing the unrecognized lower classes by offering them a way to supplement their lack of recognition through rivalry, thereby substituting the impotent outburst of violence for an insignia of potency and strength. Because the far-Right is not afraid to build up the image of the potent militant – the man who is valuable because he is disciplined in the task of effacing his enemy – it is also able to infuse in the masses those values previously presented as inherently oppressive and extraneous to it: organization, discipline, power - the only ideals capable of truly consolidating a mass movement.

This fascist compromise solution is not the only one to take place in the wake of the Left's failure. In Brazil, the parallel power exerted by the drug dealers in the slums operates a similar feat, proposing a figure of potency to the young men who have already seen that hard work does not produce any recognition of one's value and place in Brazilian society<sup>10</sup>. The drug factions offer a stage where, armed and organized, the invisible youth from the favelas are seen as powerful soldiers by their community, recognized as dangerous and useful men. But both the illegal and the fascist routes have one thing in common: they are able to produce an emblem which allows the lower classes to recognize themselves as potent actors precisely by staging this potency, acting it out, either through the fight against a foreign enemy who is supposed to prevent their full inscription into society, or through the praise and fear which organized crime installs in the communities which house them.

Such is, then, the failure - and the challenge - at stake today when trying to combine both direction and confidence in the masses: the difficulty of inventing a political emblem which would cut across the demands for identification which distinguish different sectors of the working class while, at the same time, having confidence that such an emblem is capable of evoking passionate discipline and organization in the masses without turning popular power into a totalitarian tendency. In other words, our task is to engage with that monstrous force which has given rise to the seductive figures of the fascist and the drug soldier without ever forgetting that these two types do not mark the success but

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<sup>9</sup> Žižek, 2008, p.141-143

<sup>10</sup> A first introduction to this situation can be found in the great work produced by Celso Athayde and MV Bill, in the documentary *Falcão, Meninos do Tráfico* [Falcon: the boys from traffic] and the book *Cabeça de Porco* [Pighead], co-authored by the sociologist Luis Eduardo Soares.

rather the failure to truly grasp this popular force.

The question posed to us by this repetitive sequence could finally be formulated as follows: what is an emblem that would capture *popular potency without its acting out* - without the requirement of a foreign enemy as a guarantee of its unity or of crime as a condition for its discipline. Unfashionable as this may seem, what is at stake here is the necessity to think a *theory of masculinity*, a theory of how to infuse the emblems of the Left with the traits necessary to win over the impoverished youth which today is offered only three false alternatives against our current cowardice: to have their power recognized through the power to consume more commodities (middle class), or through their power to fight the imaginary avatars of their impotence to consume (fascism) or to be recognized through the power to imaginarily circumvent the real cause of this impotence (crime).

The Strong Party, however, begins to sketch a true alternative, one that, being compatible with the party-form, might also start to spell out what a form of organization adequate to our current conjuncture would be.

In order to understand how the *Partia e Fortë* managed to cut across the current situation in an innovative way, we must consider an important trait of the political conjuncture in which it came to be. The Borgean tale of the map which contained the Empire but which, because of this very property, was cast out as a ruin, can itself be read as a tale about the status of Kosovo today: a country which is only member of financial institutions (World Bank, ERBD, IMF, etc) and still struggles to be recognized as a State, Kosovo is a map of the economic and political forces in Europe and the West, but it is a map inhabited by people - a singular part of the world that has no place in the current map of the State of that world. Within this uncanny site, our insistent repetition - which binds the moment of economic crisis, the opening of a place for a true Leftist intervention, and the ensuing rise of fascist tendencies after the failure of the Left to produce an alternative - appears in a slightly different, but crucial form<sup>11</sup>. There, the gap between the first and the second moments is widened, held in suspense, in a somewhat perplexing way - specially when we consider the myriad of fraud analyses that seek to present the situation in Kosovo for the West: the profoundly critical moment that the country is going through is not instantaneously

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<sup>11</sup> The best introduction to the actual situation of Kosovo is undoubtedly *From Myth to Symptom: the case of Kosovo* (KMD, 2013)

sutured into an imaginary substitute - the selection of an enemy who would give consistency to the critical region - because what is at stake in its crisis is precisely the notion of imaginary limits and borders. We can better understand, then, why it was in such a singular situation that a different relation to the contemporary task of the Left could be thought and experimented with: in Kosovo, a crisis cannot hide behind bourgeois or nationalist issues for the simple reason that these borders and distinctions are in an actual process of being established - to make recourse to these distinctive traits requires inventing them in the process.

### **The novelty of the Partia e Fortë**

We all know that classic situation so beautifully orchestrated by the hysteric: with a hint of debauchery, she tells her partner "I want you to act like a man!", only too aware of the metaphysical conundrum she has just staged for him. After all, if the guy tries to *actually* be a man, the very actualization of his masculine potency will become a proof of its opposite, his impotence, since in acting it out his explicit behavior has substituted his potency, rather than confirmed it - the guy has just followed someone else's orders - and if he does nothing, the potency does not reveal itself enough to be recognized as such. Since metaphysics always leads to laughter, this common situation is usually quite ridiculous, but it also tells us something about the difficulty at stake in our problem.

In the groundwork of militancy, there is in fact no other destiny for emancipatory politics: very little can be achieved by telling a poor person that one should beware of organization and power, that horizontal organizations are more authentic, or that a true militant does not fall into any ideological "box". These are either truisms, because poverty is a school of distrust, or useless remarks. This is in fact an important lesson of the *lumpenproletariat*: the demands of the poor are not actually political, they cannot be divided between a "relative" and an "absolute" struggle, partially seeking the fulfillment of present demands and partially striving to abolish the causes of their poverty. Misery is miserable precisely because there is no positive content marking the place of class struggle as such, no recognized distinction between survival and living. Unable to count either with a praise of fragility or with the reference to a particular positive content, the patient work of militancy in the slums and in the peripheries is confronted with an analogous problem to that of masculinity. If one is asked to act in accordance to a universal political

ideal, the actualization of this potency into a particular demand becomes its very opposite, the local fight for private interests (housing, food, health services, so on), proving the impotence of the Left to produce consistent and universal orientations which would not succumb to private interests, whereas if it remains only a looming background with no actuality, it is too bleak and ephemeral to inspire any confidence or organization. No wonder the Left is such a cause for laughter!

But it is only with this laughter in mind that we can fully appreciate the fundamental twist introduced in this scene by the *Partia e Fortë*. Our tired intuition tells us that this impotence to actualize our ideals can only be fixed by conjuring even more localized ideals, ones that would effectively survive their passage into actuality and therefore offer themselves as veritable emblems for popular organization. To return to our initial reference to Borges, our spontaneous tendency is to substitute a map that fails to represent a certain part of the world for a new, more precise map. The question we have posed, however, concerns the map which has become useless, which, incapable of representing anything, has become, simultaneously, a meaningless double of the world, for it reproduces it exactly as it is, and a new part of the world, for it occupies an actual site, it fights for space with the very world it contains. This uncanny mixture of pure appearance (meaningless redoubling) and pure actualization (the addition of something new to the world) is embodied by the political wager of the *Partia e Fortë*.

The Strong Party, in line with the strict Borgian standards of scientific rigor, upholds the paradoxical wager of a politics of *pure semblance*: rehabilitating the most precious lesson of Stalinism, the paradigmatic instance of a useless map, the Party has confidence in *feigning its own potency*.

Let us try to understand what is at stake in this wager, and why it is the only strong position today.

We have already seen that, in the repetitive cycle exemplified by the recent events in Rio de Janeiro, a certain insistent failure of the Left to produce emblems capable of capturing the political potential of mass movements leads to the impotent and violent acting out of this potency through non-political means - from fascist groups to organized crime. We have then discussed the way this failure is connected with the difficulty of producing an overarching political orientation when its very actualization turns into its opposite, into a proof of the purely local and self-interested demands of the poor, who are concerned solely with their survival, or of the politicians themselves, who are all too easily seduced by the games of

power. The question, then, becomes that of thinking an emblem that would resist the passage to actualization without corrupting itself, the thought of a potency whose realization is not impotence. The answer, the Strong Party declares, in the great tradition of our legendary philosopher Hegel, is in the power of appearance as appearance.

Instead of the corruption of great ideals, the Strong Party has the strength to construct a pure corruption, a corruption without a corrupted idea or object, instead of an over-investment in an authentic emblem leading to fascist discipline, it celebrates a fascism without enemies, and in the place of the substitution of legitimate popular democracy for organized crime, it turns political power itself into a parallel power, lawfulness itself is the crime. This step leads to a veritable “transubstantiation” of impotence into something else, into a strange potency that is confirmed, rather than disproved, by its actual inversion - that is, it leads us from impotence to *impossibility*. How else are we to call a political organization led not by the empty praise of democracy, honesty and equality - something all candidates, everywhere, in all parties, are all too eager to take up - but by a democratic, honest and egalitarian praise of the failure of these very ideals?

Consider, for example, the following extract from an interview conceded by the Strong Party’s Legendary President, Visar Arifaj. When asked about what could the Party promise to the people of Prishtina, the President answered:

“We will promise the citizens of Prishtina anything that they want to hear from a candidate. Since our main goal is the citizen’s vote, we will never hesitate to weave sweet sentences and promises for the eradication of all local problems, and even go as far as promises for development. To ensure that the promises are more believable we will explain them in short points on how they can become realized. It’s understood that the explanations will be formulated in a way which will make it look confusing for the common citizen, but at the same time it will look like we know exactly how it will be realized. The impression is everything.”<sup>12</sup>

What are we to make of this preposterous response? Is the Legendary

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12 ‘The Best Way To Counter Oppression is to Mock it’, an interview with Visar Arifaj - available at: <http://strongparty.wordpress.com/2013/10/18/the-best-way-to-counter-oppression-is-to-mock-it/>

President mocking us by declaring that his promises only count insofar as they get the elector to vote for the Party - that is, that promises only count as potential promises? Evidently not, since no one could really argue that any of our candidates intend to deliver what they promise or that these promises serve any other purpose than helping with the vote count. But, at the same time, it is clear that *this is not it*, that there is something else at stake, as if he is in fact playing an elusive prank on us, because making explicit the role of promises in the electoral game, *not in the form of an accusation, but of an identification*, somehow turns this mechanism into its opposite. As an appearance, a promise refers to a potential that is never really going to take place, but as the appearance of an appearance, as the redoubling of something which already takes place, taking the frustrating outcome of political promises for what these promises essentially are - a political promise is not something we make and later on do not keep, but something whose utterance is already its accomplishment, its failure to take place is nothing but what was said to take place. This is why a promise from the Legendary President Arifaj is always a kept promise: if he enunciates it, then it has already been fulfilled. And what could be a more definitive demonstration of strength and power than that?

This same strategy shines through all the proposals and commitments laid out by the Strong Party in its extensive program, *Lorem Ipsum*<sup>13</sup>: the transparent house that will be built once the President has been elected, where he will engage in recreational activities while the people join in as spectators (after all, he is enjoying the luxury for their sake), the letters written to Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan ("Your approach to green spaces throughout Turkey, especially Gezi Park, stands in full compliance with the Strong Party's program") and the soccer players Adnan Jonuzaj ("You, Adnan, need a stable representative. Of a stable country. You need the representation of Pristina city."), and the constant reaffirmation of Kosovo's essential political unity ("Because of the high levels of approval that we had for the other parties, it was only logical that the Strong Party would be created, as an umbrella party that would include the best parts of the other parties.")<sup>14</sup>. At all times, the Strong Party practices the unlikely operation of extracting force out of pure semblance ("the impression is everything"), as if harvesting from

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13 Available at: <http://www.partiaeforte.com/>

14 Quotes from: <http://strongparty.wordpress.com/>



every circulating fiction a certain indiscernible surface which, despite all cynicism which it harbors as its obverse, nevertheless exists and is universally shared. We all know that public figures praise universal values in appearance, but are, "in their essence", worried only with their own pockets, and, even worst, we all know that public figures who condition their proposals with an honest and felt admission of their petty little private concerns are, surprisingly enough, only worried about their petty little private concerns - but what are we to make of our Legendary President, who is selflessly concerned with *universalizing pettiness and private gain*? We cannot call him neither honest nor dishonest, neither ethical nor unethical: we are ultimately resigned to having to acknowledge him as a true politician.

The novelty of the Strong Party, even more than the surprising electoral success of its first campaign, is the novelty it inaugurates for political thinking. Through this precious experience in Prishtina, we have been exposed to an undeniable strength which until now we could only conceive as a weakness, appearing as the monstrous dimension of different forms of popular acting out. Crime, corruption and power can no longer serve as the universal names of our distrust in the masses and our unwillingness to organize, because it has become possible to extract political consistency out of the debasement that is proper to appearance as such. Through this impossible coincidence between a political idea and its supposedly inevitable perversion, the following paradox has risen to thought: by letting go of the reference to democracy as a future promise, as something yet to come, the Strong Party has invented an already democratic form of organization whose failure to actualize its promises, having no object, fails no one.

### **Obstacles to potency, objects of actuality**

Our initial reference to Borges' *On Rigor in Science* allowed us to formulate a key question which served as the backbone of our investigation: once the idea of the Party as a historical agent is abandoned, how is it transformed by this loss?

The classic conception of Party politics, from the standpoint of the radical Left at least, relied on two crucial claims: a claim to direction and a claim to power. First, the party-form is such that it calls upon itself the role of organizing different social and political movements into a unified front and, second, the party-form remains in excess to the unification of the localized struggles it gathers because it seeks not to make this collection of demands heard by the State, but rather to overthrow the



current State which produced the demands in the first place<sup>15</sup>. One claim ultimately supports the other: if the party-form is not based on the organization of real popular demands, it has no strength to fight for the abolition of the current situation, and if the party-form does not maintain the reference to a possible different future, it is reduced to the mere operator of connectivity between otherwise localized demands - whose final horizon is their recognition by the State. Borges' short story served as a useful preamble precisely because it allowed us to see that the classic theory of the party-form is in accordance with the criteria of good cartography: like a good map, the Party was supposed to provide a condensed and unified picture of disperse struggles and to help us navigate this terrain in search of a foreseeable destination.

Our guiding question - what is left of the party-form when its teleological vector is removed? - found its first model there as well, in the problem posed by the map that coincided with the world which it mapped. What is the status of this form once it can no longer orient anyone? We have already noted that a map such as the one conceived by Borges displays two very singular properties: first of all, because it is an exact double of the world, it coincides with the world's *appearance*, rather than function as its representation, secondly, because it is useless and ends up being cast out in the desert, it is no longer a mere mirror of reality, but a part of it. In short, the map becomes *the appearance of appearance*: it has no particular being - all that it is corresponds to something that already existed somewhere else - but, because of this, it is not the manifestation of any pre-conceived potency - like the mountain in a region of the Empire that is mapped onto it - but the appearance of a place that we have not been able to map yet. We have also suggested - in a proposition whose rigor is still to be demonstrated<sup>16</sup> - that to add this singular form to the world is to *reveal its infinitude*.

After having argued the hypothesis that the failure of Leftist Parties to intervene on the current political movements is connected with our incapacity to provide powerful emblems which would mobilize those without a place without succumbing to a fascist or criminal acting out, we turned to the case of the *Partia e Fortë*. Here, we believe, we have

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15 Duverger, 1967, p.262-266

16 It is enough to say that such a proposition would constitute an alternative, more Žižekian, logics of Worlds. Such work must be carried out in rigorous form, for it would allow us to distinguish between the three fundamental modes of conceiving the real in contemporary thought: presence, presentation and appearance. The distinction between the last two - until now only articulated in opposition to the first term - would allow us to properly distinguish Badiou and Žižek.

found the first elements for a theory of the party-form which displays these two traits of the Borgian map: the Strong Party organizes itself around the over-identification<sup>17</sup> with what already takes place - to the point of considering itself an “umbrella party” which houses *all the political tendencies* of Kosovo<sup>18</sup> - and, second, through the redoubling of the present situation, it offers to the people not the promise of a new future, a destination to which the Party would guide us, but the actuality of something new that was hidden in our current predicament. The Strong Party does not represent something still to come - a potentially new direction for the Left - rather, it *presents it as already here*. And this “already here” is, ultimately, the only mode of existence of popular power. Through this strange inversion of potency and semblance, the Party also turns those elements which currently function as the main obstacles to the political process - corruption, cynicism, fascism - into the very *objects* of political practice, into the site of an infinite force which the Left must desperately learn how to harvest<sup>19</sup>.

This is the lesson we have learned from the *Partia e Fortë*: turning obstacles to a potential change into the objects of an actual desire is precisely what a Party which does not resist the masses must do.

To conclude, let us propose four theses through which we might extract the first thinkable consequences of this new political experience<sup>20</sup>:

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17 Zimeri, Sead 2013 *The Subversive Potential of the Strong Party* - available at: <http://strongparty.wordpress.com/>

18 ‘The Best Way To Counter Oppression is to Mock it’, an interview with Visar Arifaj - available at: <http://strongparty.wordpress.com/2013/10/18/the-best-way-to-counter-oppression-is-to-mock-it/>

19 In this sense, the Strong Party gives us the first entry point to think the contemporary recuperation of the lost truth of the Haitian Revolution of 1804, which succeeded, even if briefly, in elevating the corrupted ideals of the French to their eternal dignity. See Žižek, 2009.

Still, we are faced here with new and interesting problems for the Left. After all, what does it mean to construct a political practice based not on an ideal, but on this strange relation to semblance? What does it mean, within this new orientation, to direct the masses, if the politics of semblance makes no claim to a special access to what the masses “really want deep down”? How can a Party trust the masses while at the same time not fearing to put back into circulation those ideas of discipline, power and organization which are associated, by the masses themselves, with totalitarianism and fascism? And, finally, how are we to move beyond the Stalinist distrust of semblance without leaving behind the critical concern with our own possible imposture? Much more important than finding quick solutions to these impasses is to recognize that being able to pose these questions is already the first sign that something truly new can be thought in politics today.

20 I would like to thank Agon Hamza and Stojan Pelko for highlighting the importance for this author to follow his own advice and not conclude this paper with anything less than the semblance of a solution.

(1) The current crisis of the Left is not a crisis of the party-form, it is a crisis of representative politics. Our task is to demonstrate that the party-form in fact *only reaches its notion* when a political organization is constructed in accordance to that which is always in excess to representation - pure appearance and pure presentation.

(2) Only a political orientation which organizes itself around the idea of appearance is capable of producing new emblems for the Left out of those ideas which we have conceded to purely ideological use: the passion for discipline, the ability to negotiate, etc. In order to dispute the direction of the masses - for example, in political campaigns - we must cease to fight over who is the best representative of the people and accept that the vocation of the party is to be, like Borges' map, a redoubling of the world.

(3) Only a political orientation which organizes itself around the idea of presentation is capable of attesting to the fact that the party-form, when subtracted from representative politics, becomes homogenous with those who are excluded from the political sphere. In order to cultivate the trust in the masses we must think the party as a part of the world - as a shelter in the desert rather than a useful map - by incorporating those without a place into this uncharted area of the Empire.

(4) Finally, the party-form must always keep in mind Hegel's famous final words from the preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* - in which he reminds us that the actual work of transformation takes place at the almost imperceptible surface of things, where the emancipatory Party alone can establish itself: "the share in the total work of Spirit which falls to the individual can only be very small"<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Hegel, 1997, p.45

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# **Communism is wrong**

**Jana  
Tsoneva**

Repetition demands the new. [...] Whatever, in repetition, is varied, modulated, is merely alienation of its meaning. The adult, and even the more advanced child, demands something new in his activities, in his games. But this 'sliding-away' (glissement) conceals what is the true secret of the ludic, namely, the most radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself.

J. Lacan<sup>1</sup>

The post-socialist predicament is a paranoid one: more than 20 years after 1989, we live in a political environment of extreme anti-communism with no tangible "communist threat" around that can be accused to have triggered it. Unless such a threat is imagined. As Derrida<sup>2</sup> has shown, Communism died in 1989 but it later returned as a specter haunting anti-communists. This article takes its cue from Derrida's observation and discusses some of the forms spectral communism has assumed in recent times.<sup>3</sup> It does so in respect to the latest waves of anti-governmental protests in Bulgaria.

I engage with the question of how can we extricate ourselves from our post-socialist ideological deadlock of living in perennial capitalist crises without the hope for a communist revolution. Paradoxically, the way out of our ideological predicament of vitriolic anti-communism without communists passes through and in anti-communism itself, yet in no way does this endanger our fidelity to the communist idea. However, the analysis is neither ideologiekritik nor the deconstructionist operation of immanent critique; as I will show, our task is not the deconstruction of the new anti-communism, but attentive cultivation of its central tropes.

In that respect, our method here resembles simple extraction: what kind of understanding of communism can we extrapolate from the current anti-communist ideological dynamics, and what role can anti-communists possibly play in the constitution of emancipatory politics? I will answer these questions in reverse order according to the level of complexity. Naturally, in the absence of a strong Left after 1989, the situation of "anti-communism without communists" is populated by anti-communists who therefore happen to be the only discursive source

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<sup>1</sup> Lacan, 2004, p. 61

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, 2012

<sup>3</sup>This essay is immensely indebted to my comrades Madlen Nikolova and Georgi Medarov. The essay's problematique is also tackled in Tsoneva, Nikolova and Medarov (forthcoming).

of any kind of understanding of communism whatsoever. Even though this is a negatively charged understanding, to put it mildly, it is crucial to remember the lesson of Freud that the unconscious knows no negation.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, the very fact that someone speaks about communism regardless of the type of valuation produces communism; or rather, we can say with Derrida, it invokes the specter of communism even if it is to exorcise it after.<sup>5</sup> The anti-communism of today, however, is not a static homogeneous whole but a complex body of ideas liable to subtle semantic shifts in its historical unfolding. Since the discursive production of communism is highly dependent on anti-communist intellectuals, I will show how some of these shifts attest to changes in the ideological environment which present the Left with vital opportunities to intervene and push the discourse in an ever more radical direction.

Our method is inspired to some extent by the Derridian notion of iterability.<sup>6</sup> However, the Derridian notion presupposes radical openness and context-independence, in the sense that repetition of the (self)same sign, free of any determination stemming from context and conditions, leads to endless proliferation of meaning(s). While I certainly endorse the idea of change through repetition of the same, in our case, thinking in terms of redoubling is more apposite. The 1990s anti-communist protest rhetoric was repeated verbatim in 2013, yet this precise redoubling or coiling of the discourse within itself led to a “mutation”, or the apparition of a really radical utopian dimension within the anti-communist narrative. We rely here on a weak teleology: iterability does not just alter in the abstract; redoubling enables the intrusion of the Real. Therefore, iterability obeys what I call the “appearance-apparition” nexus. It operates by quilting the analysis on the surface or “epidermal” level of the discourses under scrutiny, and forfeits the urge to look for “deep meaning” that allegedly informs them. The apparition is preceded by the moment of repetition and the bouncing back of the image from the reflecting surface. This is the condition that enables the apparition (of communism) to intrude. As Lacan says, repetition constitutes “the most radical diversity.”<sup>7</sup> My aim is to show how today’s revival and repetition of 1990s anti-communism changed its meaning and how we can profit from

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4 Freud, 2005

5 *ibid.*

6 Derrida, 2001

7 Lacan, 2004, p. 61



the new meaning.

Topographically speaking, our movement is neither as in ideologiekritik from the surface to the deeper cause, nor archaeological reconstruction, but upwardly moving eschatological reflection: from the surface up to the apparition itself. This means that our position vis-à-vis contemporary anti-communism is paradoxical: since the Left has occupied an apologetic position (“we are sorry for Stalinism...”) and busies itself with politics of recognition and consensus-building. We can suddenly rely on the Right which, in the very act of passionate negation of communism, articulates a much more radical idea thereof than the Left.

This essay is structured in the following way: I begin by familiarizing the reader with the wave of anti-governmental protests that erupted in Bulgaria in 2013. The discursive production of (anti)communism happens in times of extreme political turbulence and plays a crucial role in the ideological legitimization of the protests. Then I proceed with an historical outline of the terms of the debate after 1989 in order to compare the different ideas of communism which structure the narrativization of the post-socialist transition. To this end, I draw on examples from past, and on recent publications in the mass media. Finally, I will discuss the position of the left with regards these developments and assess its chances for seizing on the opportunities opened by the ideological shifts in contemporary anti-communism. (The implication is that we need to abandon the politics of recognition and fully assume the monstrosity of communism.)

The main vector of difference within the anti-communist narrative is temporality. In other words, the semantic difference is activated with respect to the temporal location of the “target” of the anti-communist rhetoric. For instance, the anti-communism directed at the empirical Socialist regime was the type of anti-communism that dominated in the 1990s and early 2000s. In short, this is an anti-communism directed at the past. The prevailing anti-communism of today, however, seems to be directed at the present. As such, it harbors a doubly subversive potential: when its links to the empirical, socialism get much looser, and the space for free fantasy looms larger. Further, this anti-communism delegitimizes the capitalist status quo while simultaneously relying on a fantasmatic (and fantastic!) notion of communism, which finally begins to autonomize itself from the catastrophic failures of actually existing socialism. Before I discuss this issue, a brief familiarization with the protests is in order.

## The ongoing Bulgarian Spring

The year of 2013 witnessed the longest anti-governmental mobilizations of recent history. Firstly, they happened in February over abnormally high electricity bills (sometimes exceeding people's disposable income!). The protesters blamed the privatized energy distribution companies for the price hikes and demanded their nationalization, among other things. Thousands of people marched in every Bulgarian city resulting (unsurprisingly) not in nationalization but in a surprising government resignation. The interim elections were won once again by the ex-ruling party, however, it could not form a government coalition so the president gave the mandate to the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP: socialist only in name, as they were responsible for the introduction of the flat tax, delegated budgets and other extreme anti-labour policies).

The BSP formed a government with the liberal Rights and Liberties Movement (DPS, informally known as the party representing Bulgaria's sizable Turkish minority) and their coalition was secured with the vote of the leader of the extreme-right ATAKA party. The new prime minister proposed an infamous media mogul called Delyan Peevski to be the chief of the national security agency (DANS), and this sparked an immense sense of moral indignation among the Bulgarians, expressed in daily protests that have recently entered their sixth month. The appointment was taken as the ultimate proof that in Bulgaria, mafia and politicians are indistinguishable and the latter serve only the interests of the former. People organized very quickly, and the government repealed the decision for the appointment within a few days. Nevertheless, the protests continued. This time around, however, it was emphatically reiterated that this protest, unlike the winter one, is not for bills and everyday trivialities but for morality in politics and Europeanization. Some of the language the protesters use to express their dissatisfaction with the government is anti-Turkish (because Peevski is a member of the Turkish-minority Rights and Liberties Movement - DPS) and virulently anti-communist, reviving the old anti-communist clichés from the 1990s.

Despite the fact the demand for the removal of Peevski as a security chief was met, the protesters say they will not stop until the government itself resigns because it has zero credibility after such an arrogant appointment. This central demand has been augmented with calls for "European normality," "authentic experts," "transparency and morality in politics" and similar slogans. EU and Bulgarian flags dot the "skyline" of the daily protests. The pro-EU sentiment is so strong that when the European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship

Viviane Reding visited Bulgaria apropos the political crisis, protesters flaunted a banner saying that they choose her as a Prime Minister, presenting themselves as voluntarily willing to submit to European colonization, as it were.

As if to amplify the urgency of the “moral crisis,” people organized various mock burials, church masses, enacted various impersonations of the government coalition and produced innumerable collages. Because of the surge of creativity surrounding the protest, some of the liberal media built an image of it as the protest of the moral, creative, pro-EU, tax- and bills-paying middle-class, which wants to finally get rid of the communist remainders and ensure “European normalcy”. Furthermore, liberal activists, explicitly supported by big business, asserted cynically that the poor protested in February, while now the “middle classes” march not for material trivialities, but for “values” against the shadow elite. In so doing, they revived the 1990s reactionary anti-communism in the compelling figure of the “unproductive parasitic communist oligarch”, pulling the strings of the Transition behind the backs of the hapless and hard-working Bulgarian middle class.

People shout “red scum”, but mix it with anti-Turkish images and slogans, while the extreme-right leader who supported the coalition is oftentimes portrayed as a traitor wearing a Turkish hat. “Communists” is a common word deployed to describe the government coalition. The image of the protests is one of productive bourgeoisie that has waged a struggle against the unholy alliance of parasitic politicians and the equally parasitic rabble, supplying the former with votes<sup>8</sup>.

The 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal imagination was also haunted by nightmarish representations of the working class power. Consider Pareto’s warning:

On the one side the trumpets are sounding and the troops moving to the assault; on the other, heads are bowed in submission . . . [T]he upper classes have become gutless and demoralized. They patiently endure every insult, threat and oppression; they are only too anxious to avoid irritating their enemies, kissing the hand that strikes them . . . Even when a strike is beaten they are too weakened to follow up their victory . . . ‘I will do the commons no wrong.’ The upper classes have followed this advice throughout the nineteenth century

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8 Ganev, 2013

and up to the present day. . . .In the past, the mass of the people was opposed, not so much to the principle of paying taxes as to the manner in which the principle was exercised. Today we find that it is the 'haves' who accept the principle of being squeezed . . . Never uniting to throw off the burden, each one of them strives to push it off on to the next man; by such internal discords they make themselves even weaker as a social group (Pareto 1966:320–22).<sup>9</sup>

Yes, no matter how exaggerated his fears and extravagant his rendition of “bourgeois meekness,” Pareto’s worries did have a base: in the run-up to the March on Rome, working class militancy had reached frightening proportions from the point of view of the “parties of Order.” No comparable threat to order is posed today by the toiling masses in Bulgaria. Yet the liberal imagination is contracting, wild with fear brought on by the communist specters that it sees.

### **Anti-communism and anti-capitalism**

As stated, the 6-months long (and ongoing) anti-governmental protest is explicitly justifying itself as an activity “against the communists”. What is usually meant by “communists” is the mafia-government entanglement, with some vague references to the socialist-era secret police agents who allegedly transformed their political power into the economic. The currently ruling coalition is led by an expert-technocrat (one of the architects of the 1997 currency board), who was appointed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party—the “heir” of the communist party. Therefore, it makes sense to many a protester to bracket off the transformation to the party that occurred with its explicit shedding of communist symbols, name, rhetoric and politics in 1990 and presuppose an immutable continuity between the two parties. However, even though the prime target of this discourse is the current government, it does not stop there. In fact, the entire transition to what Badiou has called “capitalo-parliamentarism” is often cast as illegitimate because the “communists have hijacked it”. One might object that this discourse serves to externalize the inherent faults of capitalism while the protesters actually support capitalist developments in the abstract. However, this observation misses the point that even though capitalism in the abstract is acceptable, every single concrete capitalist is considered an “oligarch,”

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<sup>9</sup> In Landa, 2012, p. 52.

a “mafioso,” a “communist,” and so on. This is how anti-communism directed at the present erodes the very legitimacy of the capitalist mode of production, while simultaneously reminding us about a chief feature of communism. Namely, when anti-communists blame the incomplete and inauthentic transition to market democracy on spectral communism, we are effectively reminded that communism subverts the self-valorization of Value. It matters little that throughout history communists succeeded in replacing feudalism in Central Europe with [state] capitalism “pure and simple”.<sup>1011</sup> By contrast, historically inaccurate anti-communism stays faithful to the idea of communism despite itself.

Slavoj Žižek<sup>12</sup> has argued that the post-1989 anti-communism provides a language with which to critique the problems capitalism generated. Thus, all the evils attributed to communism are actually the evils of capitalism: poverty, inequality, insecurity, corruption and so on. Žižek's observation is certainly correct, though in dismissing anti-communism as simply a misguided indirect critique of capitalism, he fails to see how the latter points beyond itself: to the truth not of capitalism but of an eventual (and eventual) communism.

How can we account for this dimension? The emergence of this potential obeys the logic of the redoubling enabling the emergence of the Real. As Zupancic demonstrates, the redoubling of fiction, exemplified in the “play-within-the-play” structure in Hamlet, far from avoiding the Real, serves as its very “trap”.<sup>13</sup> There is no opposition between fiction and the Real “truth is structured like fiction.” For example, in discussing the dream of the father, Zupancic<sup>14</sup> outlines the following sequence: the reality of the dead child, the old man keeping vigil (and failing) and the father redoubling in the dream of the latter, and precisely this redoubling enables the intrusion of the horrifying Real: the child reprimanding his father and thus forcing the father to confront the terrifying truth of a father failing as father.<sup>15</sup>

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10 Tamas, 2008

11 Postone, 2009

12 Žižek, 2009

13 Zupančič, 2003, p. 13

14 Zupančič, 2011

15 Zupančič. 2003

Going back to our discussion of anti-communism, in addition to serving as a vehicle for expressing discontent at capitalism as Žižek argues, the repetition of the 1990s anti-communism (directed at the past) for the needs of the protests to critique the present, triggered a repetition-redoubling sequence which opened up a space for a radical dimension previously not present. I will illustrate this point with a few examples.

### **Communism and democracy**

Almost the entire post-1989 transition passed under the rigid binary opposition between communism and democracy. For example, the main anti-communist opposition grouped under the coalition of the Union of Democratic Forces. Their newspaper (published from 1990 to 2002) was entitled “Demokratsia”, meaning “democracy”. It was one of the main vehicles for propagating the irreducible opposition between communism and (liberal) democracy. Despite the fact that this newspaper is associated with the liberal-democratic right, one can find in it articles according to which it is absurd to speak about fascism in Bulgaria during the interwar period<sup>16</sup><sup>17</sup>, articles which minimize the numbers of killed and tortured anti-communists in the same period<sup>18</sup>; articles espousing colonialist-nationalist aspirations towards the Republic of Macedonia<sup>19</sup>, articles which decry the negative demographic balance and propose to help some of the “three million Bulgarians abroad” (presumably Macedonians and others) to settle in the country, instead of “Turkish migrants”<sup>20</sup>, and suchlike. The newspaper is an endless source of anti-communist arguments, and as demonstrated above, even (proto)fascists ideas are acceptable in the “noble cause” of demolishing communist thinking and exposing “communist crimes.”

Paraphrasing Gary Madison<sup>21</sup>, in this vision democracy is everything communism was not. The Rightist universe is structured around simple binary oppositions which pit the various aspects of “communism” and

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16 Spasov, 1990

17 Kozarov, 1990a

18 Kozarov 1990b

19 Minkov, 1990

20 Dimitrov, 1991

21 Madison, 2012

“democracy” against each other: the state socialist bureaucratic and controlled society is opposed to freedom; uniformity and homogeneity to pluralism; control and administration to spontaneity; lies and inauthentic life to authenticity and truth; foreign imposition (from “Moscow”) to self-determination, etc.<sup>22</sup> More than anything, though, communist deprivation and the shortage economy are pitted against the (alleged) plenitude of capitalist democracy (as it is imagined existing in fantastic faraway lands). For example, one of the common tropes used to describe the “actually existing socialism” is that the nomenklatura enjoyed foreign imports and luxury goods whereas the Bulgarian people had to make do with low-quality foods and constant shortages of basic household goods. The situation becomes especially acute around the Chernobyl disaster: contemporary accounts of the period constantly stress that, whereas the ordinary people ate radioactive food, the nomenklatura enjoyed radiation-free foreign imports.<sup>23</sup> Thus, when opponents of communism speak about their experience of it, the image that emerges is of a two-tier regime which conforms to their binary universe: a well-fed and affluent elite, supported by their masters from Moscow, enjoying at the expense of the toiling people.

In a nutshell, in the 1990s “communism” overwhelmingly meant a top-down and an elitist project imposed over and against the will of the masses. This is especially so with regards to narrativization of the 1944 communist take over, where the role of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the guerillas is downplayed and the role of the Red Army magnified. This leads many to conclude that communism was a foreign imposition no different than any Western colonial project known in history (perhaps, even worse, as many historical accounts comparing the effects of the presence of the Red Army in Bulgaria and of the Wehrmacht seem to indicate, with Germans’ allegedly “civilized, clean and non-intrusive presence” always toppling the Russians).

In July 2013, an article appeared which caused a rupture in this line of thought. This article posited implicitly a long-lost connection between communism and democracy (lost even for communists)<sup>24</sup>. This article is part of a new trend of “class analysis” coming from a surprising

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22 Ibid.

23 Bakalov, 2012. (Inequality here runs not only around the axis “clean-contaminated” but also of what is the composition of the food in question: whereas the people eat simple vegetables, their rulers enjoy nutritious meat.)

24 Dainov, 2013

corner: the liberal opinion-makers. Its author, Evgenii Dainov, is a prolific public intellectual. The article in question aimed at giving a “scientific” justification of a popular 1990s and 2013 anti-communist protest slogan: “red scum/red garbage”. Dainov opens up dramatically with a scene from “Monty Python & the Holy Grail” movie: a bunch of hard-working peasants are confronted with the shining image of a man atop of a horse but they do not know who he is. The person’s impeccably clean white garment provides the only clue as to his identity. An exchange between the peasants follows, and one concludes that the clean stranger must be a king, since “he hasn’t got shit all over him.” This clear affirmation of the class optics from which the history of underwear is approached structures the entire article. For example, in discussing the medieval and early modern roots of the word “lingerie”, Dainov states that the entire set of white items that belongs to the group of lingerie was reserved for those “who did not have to immerse themselves in shit in order to get food”. The upshot is that before the advent of modernity, the aristocracy, by virtue of its privileged status position, had access to good quality underwear, something unthinkable for the poor masses. Dainov puts it bluntly: “the people who rule are those who can afford to wear white”. In Western modernity, everyone has access to underwear, but even so, it is a vehicle for reproducing class divisions. This logic obtains even in his discussion on the October Revolution: the dirty masses, rallying behind the red flag, versus the Whites<sup>25</sup>, or the upper echelon of pre-revolutionary Russia. However, unlike the gradual (according to Dainov) dethroning of the aristocracy from power, which proceeded by way of cooptation of the commoners who began ruling (i.e. their adoption of white underwear and all the rest of insignia belonging to the upper class, such as spats), those countries which underwent violent revolutions, such as Russia, had also declared war on upper class lingerie.

In the first 30-40 years of their rule, the Soviet Bolsheviks openly display their disdain for all forms of underwear. They wore green jackets, sailcloth boots and footcloth. Those types of white underwear that are still in use transform into “blackwear<sup>26</sup>” (to this day in Russia). The entire opulence of lingerie is reduced to the notorious tank-top whose

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<sup>25</sup> Dainov argues that the name “Whites” is also historically linked to white lingerie.

<sup>26</sup> This is a word game as in Bulgarian the word “underwear” is a derivative of the word for “white”.



function is merely bodily: namely, to soak up the sweat from the unwashed Bolshevik body so that the top coat can be washed as rarely as possible. It is only in the 1960s with the restoration of some rudimentary forms of civilized life, white shirts return to Soviet Russia as dress uniforms for weddings, celebrations, official visits and funerals.

In Bulgaria, with the demise of “newsboy cap” socialism, the communist nomenklatura which replaced the urban bourgeoisie as a ruling class, develops a taste for pink, light violet, gray, yellow and brick red [underwear]<sup>27</sup>.

Let us not be carried away by the depths of this spontaneous Bourdieuesque analysis of taste and (class) distinctions in fashion. In addition to learning about the rough typology of the kind of underwear appealing to communists, we should be alert to the implicit background message: communists are dirty. And they are dirty because they have carried over their previous dirty habits and distaste for lingerie from the-revolutionary class position. That happens to be the position of the toiling property-less and lingerie-less masses, or the vast majority of the population.

In other words, are we not facing a transition from the idea of communism as an elitist foreign colonization to communism as belonging to the mass democratic movement of workers and peasants, at the very heart of mainstream anti-communist discourse? Such a radical re-orientation is as of yet missing from the mainstream social-democratic left which still subscribes to the “elitist-colonial” theory of communism (not to mention the totalitarian paradigm) and is torn between the urge to denounce and apologize for “Russian colonization”, and the urge to affirm “our belonging to the European family.” Therefore, we should resist the temptation to denounce Dainov’s foul language and overly offensive depiction of the “tense” relations communists had with bodily hygiene and underwear, and embrace his brave move to dissociate communism from its 1990s colonial imagery and root it firmly with the “masses” (I will return to this point in the final section of this article)

Needless to say, the temporal division between anti-communism targeting the past vs. anti-communism targeting the present is a heuristic device and in reality, there are much more gradual transitions. Not to

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

mention that even the anti-communism directed at the socialist regime need not be constrained by empirical evidence or based on personal experience. For example, one of the chief grievances among nationalists with regards to the Socialist regime was related to the latter's alleged "national nihilism". This criticism operates with a monolithic understanding of socialism, which misses the important thresholds and transitions with which the regime unfolded. For example, the 1970s Bulgarian liberal economic reforms, and the concomitant nationalist-conservative turn which culminated in the ethnic cleansing of the Bulgarian Turks. Nevertheless, this critique is still useful in our analysis, which aims to show how anti-communists saw the regime as much more radical and subversive than it ever was. One version of this type of criticism emerged recently in an interview with the famous Bulgarian literary critic and theoretician, Miglena Nikolchina.

Nikolchina has recently published a book about the informal seminars occurring mostly in Sofia University in the 1980s<sup>28</sup>. She argues that the creation of those seminars was instrumental in the gradual erosion of the totalitarian state, which was historically bent on suppressing all forms of independent activity. In an interview dedicated to the publication, she argues that the seminar participants were driven by "an instinct, an unconscious impulse" to group together and attend even seminars few people could understand (i.e. in mathematical logic).<sup>29</sup> However, according to her, socialism was averse to large groups of people and sought to break them down whenever they appeared.<sup>30</sup> To speak of a regime so infamous for its mass mobilizations, unions, manifestations, mass gymnastics and collectivist ethos as a regime "which hates large groups. Its history can be narrated as the history of the breakdown of such groups – of artists, of people from any unified community"<sup>31</sup> can be done only at the cost of history itself.

And precisely because of the break with history, does this historically inaccurate assessment not point to an idea of communism which reclaims for itself individualism, transcending another great binary opposition structuring the post-1989 ideological space: that between the communitarian ideologies (i.e. of communism and nationalism) and

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28 Nikolchina, 2013a

29 Nikolchina in Okov, 2013

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

liberal-democratic individualism? Annihilation of the stereotypical image of the irreversible homogenizing force of communism, turning all diversity and individual particularities into a gray, uniform mass seems to be taking place. Thus, we are left with an inversion: now the liberal dissidents are those led by a herd instinct and community feeling to congregate in seminars they don't understand, whereas communism is the anti-communitarian force suspicious to uniform communities and groups.

If we can think of communism as the opposite of mindless groups whose behavior is premised on automatic and blind following of party injunctions (as most versions of the totalitarian paradigm presuppose), can we push this line of reasoning towards reclaiming individualism for the communist idea as an antidote to capitalist mass society where Value eradicates all diversity by turning in into equivalents?<sup>32</sup>

### Communism and the Event

In this section, I turn to an example of recent anti-communism from the conservative Christian Right in Bulgaria. In my opinion, it articulates one of the most radical possibilities for re-inventing communism, along the lines of the Badiouian event.

Before discussing it, I would like to open an important caveat. As stated above, the 2013 summer protests created an ideology of "protests for European normality." To this end, they drew on a common understanding of socialism which taxes it for "having derailed" Bulgaria from its "normal" development. Following our method of staying at the level of appearances and resisting the deconstructionist impulse to tear apart the word "normal," let us accept the charge: indeed, communism obeys the logic of the Benjaminian "caesura": the rupture which derails history (and capital), making it impossible for it go on as before.

Thus, one of the most influential spokespersons for the protests, Kalin Yanakiev, a philosopher, theologian and active public intellectual, wrote an article entitled "Again communists". Yanakiev begins with moralistic denunciations of the dangers of the communism his generation remembers. Despite the references to history, gradually communism is radically severed from history a way that "deliver[s] it from history in order to hand it over to the event"<sup>33</sup>

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32 See e.g. Berman, 2009 about the importance of radical individualism in early emancipatory politics.

33 Bensaid 2004, p. 99

The event, according to Badiou, is

a rupture in the normal order of bodies and languages as it exists for any particular situation [...]. What is important to note here is that an event is not the realization of a possibility that resides within the situation or that is dependent on the transcendental laws of the world. An event is the creation of new possibilities. It is located not merely at the level of objective possibilities but at the level of the possibility of possibilities. Another way of putting this is: with respect to a situation or a world, an event paves the way for the possibility of what from the limited perspective of the make-up of this situation or the legality of this world - is strictly impossible. If we keep in mind here that, for Lacan, the real = the impossible, the intrinsically real aspect of the event will be readily seen. We might also say that an event is the occurrence of the real as its own future possibility<sup>34</sup>

A truth, argues Hallward, is “innovation in acte, singular in its location and occasion, but universal in its address and import.”<sup>35</sup> It takes place in a situation but it is not of that situation<sup>36</sup>. This is precisely the contours of the anti-communist arguments of Yanakiev who marvels at the swift universalization of the hatred for communism that swept the protest. What for him was a lived historical order of experiences becomes a universal truth recognized as such even by people who have not lived communism, and for whom communism bears only abstract and not lived-empirical significance:

This means that even today, after exactly 24 years, the party of Stanishev [Bulgarian Socialist Party], was felt by people in possession of civil feeling [sic] to be “communist.” Here it matters absolutely nothing that in its proper political science meaning this party is not “communist” and its leaders are not “communists” in their basic practice since the entire political framework of the state would not allow them to become so.

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34 Badiou, 2010, p. 242-243

35 Badiou, 2001, p. ix

36 Ibid. x

People feel them this way and the entire “bouquet” of their age, value, mentality and even aesthetic diversity testifies to this.<sup>37</sup>

In short, far from being in need of complex theoretical and rhetorical rationalizations, communism emerges as something completely self-evident and clear to all. This is indeed a big change from the hitherto prevailing mode of reasoning which casts communism as an “unnatural” order which was imposed at the cost of great suffering, deaths, destruction of communities, violation of “human nature”, and so on<sup>38</sup>. In the anti-communist narratives, the “unnaturalness” of communism accounts for the regime’s need for “ideological propaganda” to paper over the unbridgeable gap between “human nature” and the Communist social order. This in turn makes it mandatory for anti-communist commentators to unmask, expose and denounce it incessantly.

That this is increasingly less the case can be gauged from Yanakiev’s article where, far from a perplexing and unnatural force in need of vigilant unmasking, communism is “felt” by all yet it is beyond the objective knowledge of political science and divorced from any necessity for experts to explain what is it. Thus, we are dealing with a gut feeling for abnormality, immorality and emergency, which cannot be properly symbolized by the languages and knowledges of the situation. Its address is absolutely universal, even if (because?) it defies symbolization, since all generations feel and understand it, regardless of whether they have lived it or not. In that respect, together with philosophy, the truth of communism belongs to the order of what Badiou has designated as “a wager endowed with a universal bearing’, at each step coming up against either ‘a specialized and fragmentary world’ in the catastrophic form of religious, communitarian or national passion – claims according to which only a woman can understand a woman, only a homosexual can understand a homosexual, only a Jew can understand a Jew, and so on.”<sup>39</sup> The abnormality, immorality and emergency of communism thus transcends all particularity, specialisation and fragmentation of the world: it is a universal non-language that defies symbolization, yet is immediately understandable by all.

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<sup>37</sup> Yanakiev 2013a, emphasis added

<sup>38</sup> Velev Bojidar (n.d.)

<sup>39</sup> Bensaid, *ibid.*

Drawing on Michel Foucault, Ina Dimitrova has developed a fascinating analysis of our curious post-socialist predicament of having constructed a monster out of communism.<sup>40</sup> As a monster, communism stands beyond the Law and thus prohibits standard/“normal” legal punishment. Since normal measures are rendered inapplicable apropos the radical monstrosity and exceptionality of communism, we end up “damned” to live with it for all eternity. In other words, the more communism is constructed as abnormal and monstrous, the more anti-communists rid themselves from what they desire most: a final cleansing (through so-called “lustration laws”) from the monster that keeps preventing us from achieving fullness. Dimitrova identifies two narrative strategies of handling the socialist legacy: the first emphasizes its radical abnormality which derailed us from the normal course of history, and the second (which she attributes to speakers for the regime) normalizes it by invoking historical necessities of late developing countries, etc.<sup>41</sup> It is obvious that the second approach to the socialist regime is more reasonable and sober, and this is precisely the reason why it is less useful for us. While the historicist-normalizing ethos of this approach lays communism at rest, together with other past facts of human history, it is precisely the irreducible element of paranoia in the anti-communist narrative that keeps communism alive by constantly conjuring it up. Moreover, the negative valuation of the anti-communist narrative need not dishearten us: as it speaks from the avowed perspective of an allegedly lost pre-1944 normality, communism in this framework cannot but assume the significance of an event, or caesura which disrupts the normal course of history and resists normalization/integration into the symbolic order of capital. Or: “the real movement which abolishes<sup>42</sup> the present state of things.”

In this respect, the left should resist the temptation to indulge in moral indignation at the rightists’ attempts at de-normalization, but work their way through them instead and radicalize their implications. The price is to supplement the self-referentiality of communist thinking about communism with a detour in the latest anti-communist conceptualizations of communism. Let us leave the sphere of circulation of selfsame ideas and enter the not-so-hidden, nightmarish-yet-

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40 Dimitrova, 2010

41 Ibid. 2010: 159

42 “abolishes” comes to replace “aufhebt” In the German version. I cannot imagine a more unfortunate translation.

promising abode of production of anti-communism. Nightmarish is not an accidental term: recall the terrifying dream of the father.

Is there any subject of the communist idea? The subject who proclaims the truth (of communism) is not the subject of the enunciated communism (here we must part ways with Badiou). The communist desire does not have a proper, communist subject as a source of its enunciation; rather, it lies precisely with those who invoke it by way of negating it and exists as an attribution on the part of the anti-communists onto an Other. In the final section I outline the (skewed) subject of communism as it emerges from the anti-communist interventions under scrutiny. Far from the secret services agent or old party apparatchik who enjoys at the expense of the masses, the new subject of communism resembles closely what Vighi has called “the excremental subject”.<sup>43</sup>

### **The ejects of communism**

Important events that rupture the monotony of the daily protests are the so-called “pro-governmental counter protests”. Several such protests have occurred since June 14: July 16, September 4<sup>th</sup>, and November 16<sup>th</sup> saw the largest mobilizations. These protests were organized by parties from the ruling coalition, with BSP and DPS bringing thousands of their supporters by bus and train from towns and villages outside Sofia. The anti-governmental protests’ usual response oscillates from a logic of extreme victimization of the people “bussed into” Sofia with no understanding of why they are there, to an outright conspiracy theory with racist overtones (i.e. “these are gypsies who have been paid some money to come here”). In both cases, the image of the counter-protester that emerges is one of a hapless and agency-less victim: a poor person without a clue. Anecdotal evidence as well as interviews with participants feeds the victimization discourse, especially whenever the journalists do happen to get honest responses from some of the people that their intention to come was not the protest but to visit Sofia.

The subject of communism is thus an eject: the non-integratable excess of the system whose appearance in public space wreaks havoc, strikes fear and even disgust. I deliberately opt for the word “eject” because it connotes systemic-automatic rather than interpersonal rejection: the ejected are those who have no place, the part of no part<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Vighi 2003, p. 102.

<sup>44</sup> Ranciere 2001

by virtue of the normal workings of the capitalist system wherein “[a]n accumulation of wealth at one pole of society indicates an accumulation of misery and overwork at the other.”<sup>45</sup>.

What is the effect of communism? As stated, some (but not all) of the participants in the counter protests did answer the journalists’ questioning as to what the purpose of their visit is with “I don’t care about the protests, I came to see Sofia and to have a coffee.” These responses were a minority, but were enough to spark an immense wave of moral indignation on part of the anti-governmental protesters, many of whom immediately declared that those people bear the entire truth of the pro-governmental protests: simple people, either violently bussed in to Sofia, or bribed to join the protest. In either way, they did not know what they were doing unlike the anti-governmental protests which were “authentic civil society” protests in that they were “spontaneous,” “self-organized” (despite the fact that opposition parties were involved in mobilizing their supporters), “creative” (the protest individual and hand-made banners bore witness to the creativity of the participants unlike the banners of the counter-protests which were often print outs disseminating the same messages), “middle-class” and even “beautiful.”<sup>46</sup> The numerous photo galleries with pretty faces from the protest were contrasted with the photo reportages of the counter-protests, where racist portraits of poor, ugly, downtrodden, wrecked people predominated, illustrating the incessant reiteration that these Gypsy and Turkish people do not belong to Sofia and its civil society<sup>47</sup>. In another famous article, Yanakiev declared that the protests and counter-protests can be best understood as the “quality” against the “quantity”.<sup>48</sup>

The blatantly racist representation of the counter-protest was indeed sickening to leftist activists, and many of us hurried to expose the racist logic guiding the liberal civil society in its violent contraction and exclusion of the counter-protest from itself. However, we should admit that once again anti-communists displayed a good intuition, namely, whereas the left detested the racist and exclusionary rhetoric which stripped the counter-protest of citizenship and membership in civil society, anti-communists were paradoxically closer to Marx in articulating

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45 Marx, Karl, *Das Kapital*, I, 671.

46 Gospodinov, 2013

47 Offnews, 2013

48 Yanakiev, 2013b



totally spontaneously what Marx had claimed about the position of the proletariat as part of no part of civil society.<sup>49</sup>

In the case of the protests, the marginalized ejects carried a doubly subversive potential. Firstly, as the imagined bearer of communism because of their associations with the ruling coalition, and secondly, as the other part of the double revolution that historically fascists have feared: namely, the revolution from below (proletariat) and the revolution from without (the racialized/colonized Others at the margins of the empire<sup>50</sup>). Finally, a fantastic communism that does not respect racial hierarchy is invoked due to the autonomization of the idea of communism from its historical precedent, over and against the evidence of some of the darkest aspects of the empirical Bulgarian socialist regime—such as the ethnic cleansing of Turks after the economic liberalization reforms were followed by a conservative cultural turn in the 1970s.

The anti-communist protesters<sup>51</sup> who built an unbridgeable gap between themselves and the counter-protest were more true to the core of the antagonistic deadlock structuring all capitalist societies than the left liberals who decried the “production of artificial antagonisms”, and who tried to be likeable and acceptable to all. In addition to falling back on unreflected-upon ideas about national unity, this impulse to secure acceptability and “social cohesion” forgets that communism must be necessarily wrong from point of view of bourgeois morality.

For example, in an article, Bakalov calls indignantly the anti-government riot of 23rd July an “anarchist-bolshevik” outburst of violence which has nothing to do with the moralistic image of the protest. Abstaining for a moment from the urge to demolish the claim that a pro-EU protest such as the Bulgarian one can be called either anarchist or bolshevik (let alone both simultaneously), we should admit that Bakalov’s argument does indeed lend itself to extrapolating the obvious conclusions: communism is immoral (from the point of view of bourgeois morality) and certain fault-lines cannot be overcome with mere reconciliation, no matter what amount of national ideology or liberal appeasement is produced to paper over the capitalist field’s constitutive

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49 Marx, 1977

50 See Landa, 201

51 It should be clear that because the protest was anti-communist this does not warrant hasty conclusions that the counter-protesters are communists. They were simply imagined to be so by anti-communists and since we operate on the level of their fantasy, let us accept their premises for the sake of the argument.

deadlock<sup>52</sup>.

Where the anti-governmental protesters saw no agency, but objectified victims of the exercise of arbitrary party power, I see a peculiar type of resistance embodied in people whose very presence sent shockwaves throughout civil society. Putting this in Althusserian terms, the counter-protesters did respond to the interpellating hail of the party, but did so on their own terms. Namely, when the party officials said “protest!”, the would-be subjects responded “OK, I don’t care what it is about if I get a free ride to Sofia,” in short: “Fuck you! Coffee.” If the Althusserian subject is the one who turns to the hail and assumes the symbolic identity conferred on him, the ejected one fails to do that. As Žižek argues, “The leftover which resists “subjectivation” embodies the impossibility which “is” the subject: in other words, the subject is strictly correlative to its own impossibility; its limit is its positive condition”.<sup>53</sup> So the eject is the opposite of the subject as theorized by Louis Althusser.

In short, the subject who refuses the symbolic mandates “far from emerging as the outcome of interpellation, the subject emerges only when and in so far as interpellation liminally fails. Not only does the subject never fully recognize itself in the interpellative call: its resistance to interpellation (to the symbolic identity provided by interpellation) is the subject.”<sup>54</sup> Taking our cue from that, the non-Althusserian eject should be the one who does not struggle for normality, but who prefers to explode the socio-symbolic order even at the cost of his own demise, rather than to assume its symbolic mandates and ideological fantasies that mediate between it and the Real.

We can think this problematic further with Ranciere: “Wrong is simply the mode of subjectification in which the assertion of equality takes its political shape... Wrong institutes a singular universal, a polemical universal, by tying the presentation of equality, as the part of those who have no part, to the conflict between parts of society.”<sup>55</sup>

Thus, when anti-communists want to prove that everything about communism is wrong, “wrong” should be taken in the double meaning which Ranciere’s perspective opens up: indeed, communism must be wrong, a terrible mistake even, from the point of view of bourgeois

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52 Bakalov in Volgin, 2013

53 Žižek, 2008, p. 236

54 Žižek, 2000: 115.

55 May, 2010, p. 75

normality, and “wrong” qua the radical assertion of equality on the part of those who have no part. Even if this assertion did not take place in the sense of people actually saying “we want equality”, the fact is that the shocking appearance of so many hitherto invisible and repelling people in the Bulgarian capital did present a formidable challenge to the “distribution of the sensible”.

## Conclusion

This paper dealt with the new and rejuvenated notion of communism anti-communists from the 2013 protests have minted. The protests revived the anti-communism from the 1990s, however, in the process of doing so, they radically altered its semantic coordinates, obeying the repetition-alterity nexus of Derrida. Anti-communism directed at the past of the “actually existing socialism” produces the narrative of the deprived victim caught up in the vagaries of, and complaining about the economy of shortage providing only partial enjoyments while the nomenklatura enjoys unrestrained.<sup>56</sup> Key to this narrative are the ways that the discrepancy between the elite and the populace unfolds: here, inequalities in the access to food, housing, jobs, culture, education and knowledge are paramount (and indeed absolutely worthy of critique from the Left). These were indeed recurring problems in state socialism that should be taken seriously. However, what is important to our discussion is opening up possibilities for thinking communism (and socialism) differently. Those come from a surprising corner: the anti-communist right, which has revived the anti-communism from the 1990s in an attempt to give political expression to the 2013 anti-governmental and anti-mafia protests. That is to say, it has re-directed its grievances against the socialist regime to the present political and economic conjuncture. Paradoxically, the same anti-communism directed at the present breaks radically with the 1990s cliché and frees communism for a radical renewal while simultaneously eroding the legitimacy of the capitalist mode of production.

Historical communism was not true to its concept: it generated and perpetuated a mass of inequalities and suffering. However, critique of historical communism does not lead too far. The spectral communism which resides within the anti-communist discourse is much more subversive. So, let the delusions and specters guide us. The critique of anti-communism which claims that the latter merely furnishes the

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<sup>56</sup> Koleva, 2012

disenchanted masses with a language with which to complain about capitalism's excesses (even in the case when the masses honestly believe they are critiquing communism), fails to see the pragmatic efficiency of this discourse in articulating oppositional discourses to the present, as well as their radical potential. By claiming that anti-communism misses the point because it does not assess reality adequately (= it is mistaking capitalism for communism), we miss its pointing to a reality beyond itself, much more real than reality itself; pointing, as it were, to its concept.

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# **The Jews and the Zionists; The Story of a Reversal**

**Sina Badiei**



My aim here would be to pose certain questions regarding the Jews. The way I will approach these questions will be purely philosophical, yet one that beyond its theoretical nuances does not feel obliged to justify its position for addressing such a delicate issue. After all, the Jews are part of the Middle East, no matter what.

The question of the Jews is today very much intertwined with that of the Middle East. Thus, in a way, if Hegel's idea of Islam being the universalized Judaism had no truth, it, nevertheless, very accurately anticipated the close association of the two in the figure of the contemporary Middle East. In a sense, the Jews are today a question of the Middle East, in the same way that they were the question of Europe during the preceding centuries. As such, any discourse bearing on the Jews today should be clear as to whether it deals with them from a European, Middle Eastern or a Jewish point of view. Yet, what interests us here is one that is beyond any such division; though one that beyond its mechanical universality carries the mark of a strange particularity, that of Benjamin Netanyahu. I speak of a leader who talks as if he is the ultimate victim of all nations; as if he is representing a country that is in enormous pain and suffering; as if Israel is not a very wealthy country,<sup>1</sup> with the most powerful military apparatus in the region<sup>2</sup> and one of the most powerful in the world. What can justify such a well-off country to have such an aggressive and Middle East bashing governor?

My argument will be thus as philosophical as it will be political; and so it should be as today, at the end of the day, the true symptom of the Jews are the Palestinians, and only they are capable to enunciate a considerable portion of what it means to be a Jew today.

We, nevertheless, give ourselves the right to treat the question of the Jews for two reasons, because we are beyond good and evil, and more importantly because we have genuinely sympathized with our Palestinian comrades. We have nothing adequate to say with regard to their grievances, and thus we do have a certain degree of reticence vis-à-vis what we will say in this text in spite of the right we reserve to ourselves to say it. In a way, we are before good and evil, and we sincerely hope that our Palestinian and Jewish anti-Zionist comrades forgive us for being so naïve.

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1 According to The Economist's recently published 'The World in 2014', the GDP per head of Israel is the staggering 38310\$. That of Iran, widely considered the biggest 'threat' to the prosperity of Israel, is the meager 4850\$!

2 Fareed Zakaria, 22/11/2012, 'Israel dominates the new Middle East', *The Washington Post*

Yet we are not stupid. We have followed wholeheartedly the Jews, we have followed their pains and their sorrows, their joys and their hopes, their hatreds and their apathies, their genuinely unique traits and their illusions of uniqueness and being chosen, their belief in victimhood, and their attempts in procuring themselves the right to do no matter what.

But, after this enigmatic overture - and every overture should be indeed very obscure - I will start the truly analytic part of this study; one which hopes to lay bare that beside rhetoric, I have, nonetheless, a certain kind of rationality which is very stringent, steadfast and uncompromising, even if it will probably upset very many. For, being partly Hegelian, I believe that reason ultimately divides instead of uniting, and so there is no reason that does not bite.

As such, I will begin from the end, by positing what I want to show in the course of my argument, and I hope to be able to justify the aptness of my claim; but first the claim itself:

The Jews were, until very recently, the *other* through whom the Christian identity forged itself. Due to the forced assumption of this status - the assumption of which was purely contingent, but which had very harsh and calamitous ramifications for the European Jews - they have developed a culture in which they often perceive themselves as being hated and despised by others, even if the historical situation that gave rise to this assumption has largely disappeared, and the Jews are today anything but victims. As such, the Jewish identity - and I am talking about its ethnic identity and not about Judaism as a religion - has no truth, and thus bears no politically progressive connotation, on a par with the majority of other identities, and to name a few: American, French, Chinese, Russian, Saudi Arabian and Iranian.

I have to begin by inquiring about the reasons due to which the Jews, and not other identities, assumed the role of 'the other' in the dominantly Christian regions of the world. Elucidating this necessitates that I first qualify what I have said, in the sense of adding to it that nowhere were the Jews the only hated people. In every part of Christendom, there were other communities that were detested as much, as or even more than, the Jews. Yet, what singled out the Jews is the fact that they were pretty much hated everywhere; though this does not mean in any sense that they were the only hated people. In fact, the first hypocritical part of the ZIBP emerges here: from the fact that they were hated everywhere in Christendom, they conclude that they were the only hated people; yet these two statements are not conveying by any means the same signification.

The reason why the Jews were forced to assume this position seems to have been purely contingent; a fact that would by no means diminish the sufferings which the Jews went through in the course of this dark, bloody part of the history of Christendom - a history for which 'official' Christianity should be very ashamed of itself. The contingent event was the selection of Christianity as the official religion of the same empire that had killed the God. On the walls of one of the major synagogues in Amsterdam, one reads that Jehovah condemned the Jews to take up as profession that which he had warned them against: usury. This was due to the fact that for the Christians dominating them, this was considered to be the greatest sin, and the Christian rulers often preventing the Jews from assuming any other profession, the Jews were left often with no choice except usury. Therefore, the ultimate irony of historical contingency forced the Jews also to assume that which they despised. Yet, another manifestation of pure contingency had Christianity becoming the religion of the very same empire that had committed the greatest crime ever conceivable.<sup>3</sup> Still, if the Romans were to be vindicated, who could then be incriminated in their stead? Who else could possibly be in that remote village where Jesus had allegedly lived?

A significant part of the Christian truth is the nothingness of Jesus, the fact that he was truly nobody. In addition, where the nobodies live we cannot find such a huge varieties of people. Apart from the Jews themselves, fortunately or unfortunately, pretty much no-one else was there. Consequently, Jesus's occasional scorns were poured against his own people, the Jews - they were often very bitter, though it is an attitude that every true revolutionary should absolutely share: to start from oneself and the people to whom one is supposed to belong. This genuine radicalism on behalf of Jesus, could, nevertheless, be applied to the majority of other people in his time, and was then used to rewrite history in such a way that the principal enemy of Jesus became the Jews, and thus they became those who had killed him. The ascension of Christianity to the status of the official religion was the result of a change of heart on behalf of the Roman Emperor and offered the least heroic narrative possible. In fact, there were two major reasons why Constantine chose Christianity. First, it was due to its insignificance within the higher ranks of the Roman ruling elites. Secondly, it was due to his presumption that

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<sup>3</sup>With regard to the historical claims related to the history of Christianity, I am relying for the most part on Diarmaid MacCulloch, 2010, *Christianity, The First Three Thousand Years*, New York: Viking Adult.

the insistence of Christianity on ONE God could be used to unify an otherwise utterly divided and overstretched empire.

So the Christians, given this non-heroic elevation of their religion to the highest statist rank, could not base it on a founding revolutionary act - something the Muslims, to their credit, would do, though more than three hundred years later. In the absence of such a choice, and in the light of such a craven seizure of power, it would not have been hard to anticipate that many pathetic things would emerge from this new 'official' Christianity. Among these, one of most devastating has been the blaming of the Jews for the death of Jesus. Moreover, if it is difficult to accept that one could manipulate history with such ease, it suffices to recall that a more horrendous aspect of this revision has been the ridding of Jesus of his Jewish identity, in the sense that in the common Christian consciousness, even today, very many have actually forgotten that Jesus was himself a Jew!

There is, therefore, this strange contingency located at the heart of the Jewish suffering in the course of their existence within the borders of Christendom. There are many possible conclusions to be drawn from this accentuation of the contingency. Yet, I prefer not to investigate them for the time being since they are not necessarily relevant to the general course of my argument. However, there is only one conclusion that seems to be maybe pertinent to what will be said later on. The fact that if there was anything 'particular' about the Jews in all this - and I mean the Jews in themselves and not what they represented for their Christian adversaries - it was the fact that they had bred among their ranks a true revolutionary. And as it had been the case before and it will be afterwards, one of the latest recurrences being Patrice Lumumba and the fate of Congo, whole communities can pay dearly for breeding revolutionaries. A good pretext to be used by imperialists to discourage those whom they have subjugated from letting anyone in their ranks to revolt, at least if they care about their short and mid term existence!

Now, back to the general line of my reasoning. I would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that this way of conceiving the Jewish-Christian history allows us to see, very manifestly, the fact that anti-Semitism is a very Christian phenomenon: the Jews have by no means occupied the same singular place in the history of other cultures. To cite some sporadic examples of Jew-bashing would not contradict the essence of this latter claim. For as I said before, even in Christendom, it was by no means true that the Jews were the only hated people: there were other peoples who were hated as much or more than the Jews here

or there, but that the Jews were singular in that they were the shared element of the set of hatred in Christendom. In other cultures, even if the Jews were sometimes hated, they represented much more the same position as those other hated peoples in Europe, and not by any means the role of the shared element. The signifier "Jew" means nothing in very many cultures. Many people have been as indifferent to the Jews as they have been to others. For a typical Bolivian, a Jew signifies as little as an Iranian.

The fact that the Jews were brutally despised by the Christians, does not justify the claim that they were hated by absolutely everybody. This inference from (the justified claim of) having been singularly hated by the Christians, to the claim that the Jews somewhat represent a kind of bizarre ontological victim, in the sense of having been the victim of all people in all times, represents one of the most hypocritical and most despicable elements of ZIBP. In this regard, the ZIBP truly resembles the Nietzschean slave morality, in that the creation of this identity hinges much less on the - needless to insist - praiseworthy and considerable positive traits of the Jewish people, than the pure resentment of their supposed having been hated by all.

Having this important point in mind, I will now move on to the second principal part of my argument that will deal with the Holocaust. This part of my argument would apparently convey a couple of contradictory undertones, which are nevertheless only contradictory in appearance and are not at least mutually exclusive. As such, I will begin by a skeptical assessment of the Jewish reaction to the Holocaust, but will then approach the same attitude from a much more sympathetic perspective. The starting point would be to question the reasons that seem to postulate the singularity of the Holocaust. One of the most stellar achievements of the ZIBP seems to be its success in having forced another question to occupy the skeptical stance; instead of the one that we are posing, this other question casts doubt on the historical authenticity of the Holocaust having taken place.

For us, this latter question should be disregarded: I have no doubt that the Holocaust has taken place, that a great many number (the question of the exact number has no importance; either one hundred thousand or hundreds of millions doesn't matter at all) of Jews have been horrifyingly and systematically purged by a vicious regime whose deeds only matched its disgusting, repugnant and obnoxious discourse.

No person worthy of sympathy would doubt for a moment the necessity of denouncing Nazism and its deeds. As such, I see no place

for being skeptical towards the Holocaust through posing this question. I think that in fact reprehensible groups from neo-Nazis, fascists and certain Islamists to Zionist identity builders share a common interest in elevating this question to the status of *the* skeptical question apropos the Holocaust.

The genuine skeptical question to ask with regard to the Holocaust is the following: what is it exactly that makes the Holocaust a singular historical nightmare, an iconic horrendous stain in recent history of the human animal?

A true skeptic would only find a skeptical response to this question. The fact of the matter seems to be that the Holocaust, even if one assumes that its scale was bigger than what is usually suggested, does not represent anything particular with regard to the history of genocides and mass killings in the course of history, including indeed very recent history. In terms of the viciousness of the actual physical eradication, the Holocaust does not differ at all from the other crimes committed with an equal degree of ferociousness against peoples in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. Especially, given the persistence of the sufferings that many of these latter peoples have been subjected to, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, the insistence on the Holocaust as having been the greatest crime in recent history seems to be very questionable to say the least. As such, to a true skeptic, the argument of the majority of those who insist on the uniqueness of the Holocaust seems to deal with the fact that, according to them, they were worthwhile European and civilized people who died in the course of the Holocaust. Where as, in most of the other recent genocides the victims were primitive and semi-barbaric peoples whose death would not bother us as much as the mass killing of humans, in the same way that every day we commit genocides in slaughter houses against animals but we barely bother. In this regard, the true horror of the Holocaust was that the bestiality of the European imperialist project turned inward and started to replicate in the very heart of Europe what it was doing prevalently in those spheres which were considered to be populated by lesser humans, and so did what it was doing already for centuries to non humans to (European) humans themselves. Unfortunately, this way of explicating the significance of the Holocaust is so prominent among many so called thinkers that assuming the skeptical stance which would cast doubt, not on the historical legitimacy of its utter savagery, but on the idea that it represented *the* crime committed in recent history, seems to be very just. To this skeptical eye, to paint the Holocaust as having been *the* crime of recent history is a racist claim

that entirely complies with the essence of that very discourse that in its eventual symphony of ruthlessness and horror also turned inward and committed the Holocaust. According to this view, the Holocaust would be a crime on a par with many other colonial crimes in recent history, and thus, instead of being singled out, ought to be considered as one among the many horrendous and stupefying moments of the contemporary history of colonialism

However, I do acknowledge that there are others who have tried to accentuate the singularity of the Holocaust from a different point of view, with regard to which the skeptical argument does not hold intact. According to this different view, the singularity of the Holocaust, even if physically on a par with other crimes in the recent colonial history, comes from the way that its perpetrators, i.e. the Nazis, justified it. According to this view, the crimes that the colonialists committed in Africa and Asia were conceived for the most part as horrendous yet necessary acts by their perpetrators themselves. The colonizers knew that what they were doing was dreadful. However, they tried to justify it by arguing that the sufferings they were inflicting on their slaves or colonized people were part of their ultimately benevolent will to force them into civilization; trying to wake them up from their primitive torpidity and forcing them into the light. The idea is that the colonialists themselves considered their acts to be brutal and abominable, but, in the last resort, beneficial to the common good of the vanquished peoples. This way of looking at what they were doing, even if in reality it did not discount by the smallest the intensity and brutality of the misdeeds they performed, seems to be completely absent from the way that the Nazis looked at their purging of the Jews. For them, the goal of the final solution was not to help the Jews, through sentencing them to pain and suffering, to enter the path of light and happiness, but their complete and thorough eradication. For a Nazi, there had never been and there could never be a just Jew: the Jews were conceived as essentially mean, and thus, the only solution could be to exterminate them for good, lest they threaten the march towards lumière characteristic of the Volksdeutsch. From this, the singularity of the Holocaust ensues as a singularity, let us not forget, that has more to do with the way that the crime was conceived than the real physical intensity of the crime.

Still, on a closer look, even this aspect of the singularity of the Holocaust seems to be debatable. It is true that the Nazi ideology, seen through the way that they saw the Jews, was at certain levels even more dreadful than the other colonialists' ideologies. That said, if we take into



account some other aspects of the colonial projects, we would see that this distinction does not hold at another level. Part of the colonial project was to pit one group of conquered peoples against another, so to ensure smoother rule and less expensive domination. The seeds of hatred that the colonialists sowed among these different groups of peoples often grew and reached such heinous animosities that could not but give rise to quarrels that aimed at the complete deracination of the adversary. It would not be an overestimation to say that the colonizers often played the principal role in provoking these hostilities. Not that they really wanted the hatred to reach a point where each of these groups would literally strive to wipe the other out, but in reality their politics of divide and rule, pursued often systematically and with remarkable precision could not but culminate in such disasters. Hence, the recent large-scale genocides in Africa or Asia, often committed by one indigenous group against another group, are by no means separable from the colonialist project. Thus conceived, the Holocaust would become, once again, merely one moment in the dark and horrifying history of recent imperial projects.

Beyond these, there is another element which constitutes the third moment of the hypocrisy of the ZIBP, the tendency to obfuscate the fact that the Holocaust was not just a crime against the Jews, but equally against other peoples who were not only expunged based on their political convictions, but who, as in the case of the mentally ill or handicapped Germans, were sentenced to death due to no different reason than that of the Jews. The implication of these other peoples in the Holocaust seems to be the principal reason why many radical Jews, including many of those who lived through the horrendous camps, wholeheartedly adhere themselves to the idea that the only genuine way to oppose the Holocaust, can be to make sure that it would never happen to anybody again, instead of using it as a pretext for other calamities committed against other people this time by the Jews.

Therefore, to close this second chapter of our argument, the one vis-à-vis the Holocaust, I want to put forward the forth aspect of the hypocrisy of the ZIBP, that which deals with the ways that the incarcerated Jews reacted to the their quandary in camps and ghettos. Contrary to the image very often depicted from these Jews as having accepted passively their gloomy fate, many of these Jews were strong and principled Subjects who by no means accepted passively the Nazis' savagery and did all



they could resist that which the Nazis had in stock for them.<sup>4</sup> Insisting on this heroic aspect of the resistance of the Jews would by no means belittle the monstrosity of the Nazis. Even so, in order to pave the way for the creation of that Jewish identity that sees the Jews as the ontological exclusion of all peoples at all times, it has been necessary to mask this other aspect of the Holocaust which is filled with stories of bravery and inspiration for all of us who aspire to the emergence of a more humane and tolerable world.

Having said this, I propose the thesis that the Holocaust has to be looked at as one chapter, albeit undoubtedly one of the darkest and meanest ones, of the atrocities committed in the course of the recent colonial and imperial projects. Besides, as with other colonial projects, and beyond the rhetorical aspects that are otherwise very important, part of the deeds committed against the Jews was to pillage and loot their belongings and their wealth. Seen from this more economical point of view, the anti-Semitic part of Nazism represents yet another chapter of the quest for primitive capitalist accumulation, characteristic of all the colonial projects, but performed within the borders of the central Europe itself this time around as a kind of internal process of primitive capitalist accumulation.

This helps us to perceive the Jews in the general context of the colonized people, but for doing so, it is necessary to put forward a more general survey of the ways that the colonized people are today and the different manners that they have reacted to their past plights. In order to do this, I would propose four categories:

1- The first category comprises of those formerly colonized peoples who have themselves, in the course of their later histories, become colonizers. Israel and China are the principal countries that should be considered in this category. The recent colonial undertakings of both of these countries are so brazen and brutal that any reference to their own histories of having suffered the horrors of colonization seems to us utterly hypocritical and out of place.

2- The second category comprises of those countries that have suffered considerably from colonialism and who have not become colonial but whose recent history justifies,

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<sup>4</sup> Marci Shore, 18/04/2013, 'The Jewish Hero History Forgot', *The NYTimes*.

nonetheless, an analysis that would have to be entirely immanent. India and Iran represent certain traits that fully justify putting them in this category. In this light, the incredible level of economic disparity and injustice in India or the remarkable maladroitness and clumsiness of the Iranian state, as well as the enormous political suffering that it has inflicted on the Iranian people, should be analyzed purely and simply based on the internal and domestic events of their recent histories. Having recourse to foreign intervention and meddling, as a pretext to justify these shortcomings and atrocities seems to us to be utterly hypocritical and shameful.

3- The third category consists of those countries whose current situation necessitates an analysis that would be a *mélange* of domestic variables and foreign interferences and tampering. Many of the North African countries, as well as a considerable number of Latin American countries, should be conceived in this way. Faced with such countries, neither a purely immanent analysis, that is to say one that would strive to explain the present situation by using the domestic variables only, nor a transcendent analysis, one that would explain everything through foreign meddling, would suffice. To understand these countries, the analysis should embrace elements of both kinds.

4- The fourth, and last, category deals with those countries where there is practically no possibility of any immanent analysis. The majority of Sub-Saharan African countries are included in this category. In such countries, the level of foreign influence and intervention has been so strong that practically no genuine domestic politics has taken shape. Therefore, in trying to analyze the plight that the people of these countries have been through, having recourse to any immanent sort of explication cannot but be artificial. The analysis should be, on the contrary, of a purely transcendent character: the brutality and the wickedness of the foreign meddling has never permitted these countries to enjoy even the slightest degree of autonomy. Congo represents the country that would manifest such traits *par excellence*.

What is useful about this categorization is that it helps us not be led astray by the similarity of the history that all these countries share. There is nothing in common today between Israel and China, on the one hand, and Congo, on the other. Besides, one other thing that this categorization lays bare is the absurdity and shamelessness of the ZIBP's continual zeal to depict the Jews as the ontologically excluded part of all peoples. If the Jews are that, then what are the Congolese?

Bearing in mind these categories, I think that with regard to the countries included in the first two, any reference to their historical sufferings cannot but be a brazen attempt to divert attention from their present. In the first category, to justify their own colonial undertakings which are sometimes no less cruel than what they have been through themselves in their pasts. In the second category, to justify their own domestic shortcomings and the economical and political injustices that prevail within their borders.

By taking into consideration the categorization that I have just sketched, we may also be in a better position to clarify for ourselves the different sorts of attitude that we should embrace towards national identities in the countries that belong to any of these categories.<sup>5</sup> I believe, in consequence, that it is only in the fourth category where we can still imagine the national identities to offer something of an emancipatory character. In these countries, the vehemence with which the colonial project has been pursued has left very little opportunity for a true national identity to take hold. This betrays the possibility of having recourse to the potentials of such identity making as bearing a progressive political agenda.

With regard to the countries in the third category, the fact that the internal political space has very often been overdetermined by one or another foreign meddler shows that the national identities can still play a minimal progressive role. Nevertheless, the fact that these countries have indeed had some level of domestic autonomy shows that their national identities have already been stained with all the problems associated with identity politics. Thus, even if one tries to use the national identity as a catalyzer for gaining greater autonomy, this forging of the national identity cannot be naive: it should embrace a very critical attitude towards those regressive and reactionary elements that the national identity has

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5 For a very interesting analysis of the different modalities of the concept of people, see Alain Badiou, 2013 'Vingt-Quatre notes sur les usages du mot peuple' in *Qu'est-ce qu'un peuple?*, Paris: La fabrique éditions.

already acquired.

In the second category, the national identity certainly is in full swing and as such has already pretty much incorporated all the regressive and backward elements associated with the national identities. In spite of this, the fact that the countries included in this category have not committed fully fledged colonial undertakings on their behalf shows that even if the national identity has nothing progressive to offer, the politics which would strive to create a genuine non-identitarian emancipatory politics in these countries does not need to have as negative an attitude towards the national identity as one should in the countries belonging to the first category. National identity in the countries of the second category plays a more neutral role, and attempts should be directed at ensuring that it would remain so.

Finally, the national identities of the countries belonging to the first category are today as regressive and blood stained as those of classical imperial countries. Their national identities not only have nothing progressive to offer, but that any radical politics dignified of its name should consist of an assiduous attempt in undermining these national identities; identities that represent today those signifiers in the names of which peoples of other regions are submitted to humiliating and demeaning, if not utterly barbarous, colonial rules.

As such, I am reluctant to accept that the ZIBP should be opposed based on an attempt in proclaiming the possibility of another, more just, Jewish identity. I do agree that the signifier 'Jew' is not reducible to the entirely sinister one of 'Zionist'. However, given the colonial character that the latter identity has assumed, a true radical politics should not simply propose another more humane identity as an alternative, but should, on the contrary, oppose the identity politics as such and aim at the creation of an emancipatory politics which would strive to go beyond existing identities. In doing so, it may also help those people who are subjugated, in this case the Palestinians, to skip past their claim - albeit rightful - to national determination and aim for a politics that would be beyond good and evil. In this, anti-identitarian Jewish and Palestinian activists may be our best hope for the creation of a politics that would legitimately go beyond the politics of colonized/colonizer. The only politics dignified of the best wishes of all the freedom fighters across the world would be such a politics of beyond identities.

This last point helps to finish this text with a final clarification. A major part of the Israeli government propaganda has been to portray the aversion that the Arabs show towards the Israelis as being on a

par with historical Christian anti-Semitism, and to paint it as a kind of continuation of the same attitude. I cannot but vehemently oppose this hypocritical idea. The hatred that the Arabs betray towards the Israelis, even if sometimes, and very unfortunately so, is directed against the Jews, is of an entirely different order than that of anti-Semitism. The fact that Israel has colonized millions of Arabs does justify the latter to hate the former. In addition, and unfortunately most of the time, the practical aspect of resistance obfuscates the necessity of clarity and precision in vocabulary. In the same manner that the majority of anti-Nazis were conceiving their enemies to be Germans and not the Nazis, and also the fact that during the American invasions of Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the majority of anti-war protesters across the world blamed the Americans for the war and not just Bush or the other Administrations, the Arabs consider the Jews, and not merely the government of Israel, to be responsible for the crimes of the Israeli government. I believe, however, that this attitude of the Arabs is utterly wrong. Nevertheless, at the heart of this oversimplification lies a false tendency whose existence we have already identified in the Jews themselves too. This is the tendency to think of one's plight as being of an ontologically exceptional character.

It remains to be investigated, separately, whether in terms of the realities of resistance, a movement can prevail without making this otherwise unwarranted short circuit. Yet, at least from a conceptual point of view, this is an altogether wrong position to assume. Akin to the fact that the Palestinians are not today's ontological exception, in the sense of being hated by all (a dangerous temptation that exists when sometimes, some factions of the Arabs portray the Zionists as ruling the whole world!), not all the Jews are also responsible for the plights of the Palestinians ergo the importance of distinguishing between the Jews and the Zionists. All in all, for this conceptual necessity to translate itself in the practical language of resistance, it is an imperative for the Jews to wholeheartedly oppose Zionism and the calamities it has befallen on the Palestinians. In this light, the writings and activism of anti-Zionist Jews are of vital importance. It is only through their work that one can hope to see that necessary conceptual distinction to hold also in the language of really existing resistances. Moreover, this equally holds for all resistance movements. If there were no Germans who risked everything to oppose and fight the Nazis, could the necessary conceptual distinction between the Nazis and the Germans have any practical necessity?

As such, the unjustifiable and sometimes abhorrent anti-Jewish character of some segments of the Arabs should rather be identified

with the excesses associated with all resistance movements and their often-exaggerated tendency to present themselves as *the* victims. This, however, has nothing to do with the classical anti-Semitism. Israel today is a powerful country with a flourishing economy and a very strong army. With Israel firmly established, there is no longer any meaning in having recourse to classical anti-Semitism. Israel is today yet another colonial state that is inflicting enormous pain and suffering on other people to ensure its own vicious economic development. Israel is not unique in doing this; it is not really doing something that is entirely absent from many other rich and powerful states in the world. Still, the intensity of what it is doing, and more importantly, the language it uses and its continual use of the Holocaust as a justification should be rejected outright as disgusting, shameless and unfounded. The current Israeli administration has nothing to do with the plight of the millions of Jewish people who perished in one of the most dreadful colonial projects of the recent time. And as such, it is better not to make any allusion to the Holocaust in dealing with the politics of Israel, cause if one is forced to do so, the Israeli state would find itself certainly not on the side of the colonized Jewish people.

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# Reviews



*Prolegomena to Any Future  
Materialism: Volume One – The  
Outcome of Contemporary French  
Philosophy,*

By Adrian Johnston, Evanston,  
Illinois: Northwestern University  
Press, 2013. 280 pp.; ISBN: 978-  
0810129122

There is a peculiar tendency in contemporary philosophy, of young(ish) men in search of their own particular "ism" or "ontology". It seems at times as if you must define your very own version of realism, materialism, naturalism, or other, with some appropriate or at least original prefix (speculative, transcendental, dialectical) in order to place yourself in the order of serious, upcoming philosophers. Quentin Meillassoux has one, Markus Gabriel has one, Ray Brassier has one, now also Adrian Johnston has one – "transcendental materialism". All of the above mentioned are eminent scholars, doing work at the highest contemporary level of thinking, even incorporating insights from the sciences of nature, but nonetheless you cannot help thinking that they are just slightly running ahead of themselves. When you hear Markus Gabriel, for instance, referring to his own "ontology", it is difficult not to hear the voice of Plato or Aristotle,

urging you not to let people under the age of 50 do serious philosophy. Are you really allowed to have *your own* "ontology", when you haven't yet fought, worked, lost, sailed or at least spend some years meditating on a mountain? Why not simply make scholarly work, addressing your audience in an open and critical fashion, without immediately having the urge to define your own particular branch of positions? (I cannot entirely claim not to be guilty of this tendency, myself, but so much the worse).

In his seventeenth seminar, Jacques Lacan said about the need to define people in the terms of their particular "isms" (referring to the distinction between sadism and masochism) that "we are at the level of zoology" (Lacan 1991: 47), when doing this. It is almost as if we are defining the particular fantasy of someone when describing him or her as "a realist", "a naturalist" or "a materialist". "Wow, so you are a realist, tell me about that....". Isn't it in a way like that? Whenever someone is accepted like the proponent of a new kind of "ism", you treat him or her like a particular kind of species, something that might not have been seen before, as if a new kind of being had entered the stage, but nonetheless as something that is safely put into a box next

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to his or her fellow researcher as another exotic species with slightly different characteristics? (Is there even some hidden political truth in this flourishing of particular, individual positions? What is the political economy of “each man his own world view”?)

Adrian Johnston, the transcendental materialist, has published the first volume of his trilogy on the “Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism”. The book is called *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (hinting at Engels’ old *Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*), and it is a massively well written exposition of three important 20<sup>th</sup> (and 21<sup>st</sup>) century French thinkers, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux. Johnston is giving us a well researched and carefully thought out tour of some of the most important thinkers, not just of France, but of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as such. He is treating them with due respect, as all of them contribute to the position he has himself taken, although he does depart from each of them on the points that he claims to mark their reluctance or inability to accept the full consequences of what one might term the absolute abandonment of religious terminology. The common trait to these three thinkers, according to Johnston, apart from their

indisputable contribution to the on-going atheist materialist revival, is that they are giving in, in some way or other, to idealist or religious traits of thought.

The trilogy, *The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* and the projected followers *A Weak Nature Alone* and *Substance Also As Subject*, defines Johnston’s position of materialism as one that takes the full consequence of the inexistence of the big Other in Jacques Lacan’s terms. First of all, this position maintains that any, explicit or implicit, adherence to “idealism” or religious forms of thinking is a kind of chickening out. The present volume sets out to identify such traits in Alain Badiou and Lacan himself (and of course, but of much less interest, in Quentin Meillassoux), and in this sense it is a “negative” introduction to the project, “clearing away an opening within contemporary philosophy/theory for the subsequent presentation, in the second and third volumes, of the specific variant of materialism I seek to spell out” (p. xi). Secondly, and accordingly, Johnston wants to define a concept of “weak nature” to replace the replacement of God as the big Other; a nature that is not One and whole, but not-all and marked by fundamental contradictions and ruptures. Thirdly, this concept of nature,

in turn, marks the opening of a materialist understanding of the genesis of (human) subjectivity. A reasonable materialism, as Johnston approvingly quotes Catherine Malabou, “seems to us to be one which poses that the natural contradicts itself and that thought is the fruit of this contradiction” (p. 32). The problem with most of the materialisms and naturalisms, from Diderot to contemporary analytical philosophy, is that they have failed to identify this conflictual nature of nature and therefore remain bound to a form of thinking that is religious, at least in its form, because it reproduces the fantasy of an all powerful and omniscient Other behind the appearances of confusion and contradiction in our comprehension of the world. It might be called Nature instead of God, but as long as it remains whole and all, it continues the religious form of thinking. “God is unconscious”, as Lacan put it – He still speaks through the very grammar of our language. Although this insight is not dramatically novel (the grammatical point about God’s persistence was of course already made by Nietzsche), it does make for an interesting point of departure in Johnston’s critical examination of his predecessors.

In Part 1, Jacques Lacan is praised for both his explicit

endeavours to elaborate a materialist philosophy and for the radical consequences of psychoanalysis that are still to be unfolded. Drawing especially on Lacan’s “Science and Truth”, Johnston makes a very convincing and refreshing argument for the case that the relationship between psychoanalysis and science is not so much a question of whether psychoanalysis meets the standards of rigor, verifiability, measurability, etc. of the natural sciences, but on the contrary: it is a question of what a science would be like that included psychoanalysis. Directly contrary to much of the stupid scientism that prevails, Johnston does not want to reduce questions of mind and thinking to the chemistry or biology of already known scientific language, but to pursue a path recently opened, especially within the life sciences, that allows for a rethinking of matter itself, such that it makes possible a new understanding of the emergence of subjectivity from within it: “... rendering mind immanent to matter requires a changed envisioning of matter paralleling a changed envisioning of mind” (p. 49). Although psychoanalysis is thereby elevated to an event that natural science is only really beginning to catch up with, Johnston does criticise Lacan for not allowing an investigation of

the material preconditions of the emergence of mind, and therefore in effect, one could say, delaying the progress of a nonreductive materialism. This resistance in Lacan is identified partly in his antinaturalist stance towards especially biology and partly in his “Judeo-Christian hangover” (p. 71), which blocks him from escaping the “prison of sacred history” (p. 72), i.e. the still prevailing inability in even progressive, materialist thinking to deal with problems of “ancestrality” (Meillassoux) or “deep history” (Smail). “One always tells fabricated tales at the level of origins”, as Lacan himself said, but Johnston’s point is precisely that natural science more recently has made it possible to open questions of the origin of language and mind, without succumbing to a one-dimensional naturalism of first nature that misconstrues the sui generis character of the mind. It is convincingly shown that “God is unconscious” even in Lacan himself, and although this fact could be interpreted more benevolently in the direction of seeing Lacan’s work as precisely a kind of traversing of a fantasy that does not simply dissolve because of some normative declarations on behalf of brave, new philosophers of realism and materialism, it is a valid criticism, precisely because it nonetheless remains loyal to the

event of Lacanian thinking.

Part 2 takes on Alain Badiou, the second great French materialist of the 20<sup>th</sup> (and 21<sup>st</sup>) century. This part is the most interesting and rewarding part of the book, because it deals with fundamental questions of the status of Badiou’s materialism in a careful reading of his two main works, *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*. Johnston praises Badiou for taking science seriously in a way that is rarely seen in so called continental philosophy and (thereby) also for rendering futile the opposition between analytic and continental thought (p. 82). Nonetheless, Badiou is criticized more intensively than Lacan, because his idealist or quasi religious hangover is not, according to Johnston, a question of resistance or unfulfilled promises, but directly inherent to the very core of his system itself. Badiou’s fidelity to the “Cantor-event” in mathematics that enables him to think an open-ended infinity of multiplicities-without-limits simultaneously marks his stubborn refusal to take on insights gained from other branches of science (again, life sciences are Johnston’s favourite), and it leaves him with an ontic-ontological divide that reserves “true” ontological thinking for the realm of pure being, as opposed to the ontic, the concrete, the living,

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the historical. This separation of pure being from the ontic domains of the phenomenal world is Johnston's main issue with Badiou, and his fundamental objection is that Badiou ends up with a gap that cannot be bridged without relying on a pseudoreligious understanding of the event. One could almost say that the coming-into-being of concrete, material existence requires a "leap of faith" in Johnston's reading of Badiou, and instead, he pleads for "ontic impurity" in order to maintain a genuinely materialist philosophy: the phenomenal realm is the only one, but it is not-all, contradictory, etc. Apart from this, to some extent, external critique of Badiou, Johnston (partly inspired by Meillassoux) asks at least two very good and interrelated questions internal to Badiou's own endeavour: First of all, he more or less directly asks a question that is extremely obvious, once you notice it: How does Badiou *not* make a suture, precisely of the kind that he himself warns against, to "one subdiscipline of one formal science" (set theory) when thinking being qua being (pp. 106-107), and secondly: is it possible to imagine another event (in mathematics or elsewhere) that would change the very heart of Badiou's conception of ontology? If it is, then the whole status of *Being and Event* is put in doubt; if it isn't, then the suture

seems absolute.

In Part 3, Quentin Meillassoux is discussed, officially because Badiou himself delegates the question of "decoupling transcendentalism from transcendental idealism" to his student (p. 132), i.e. how to think the appearance of the phenomenal world without recurring to a Kantian-style conception of subjectivity as the a priori condition of its appearance. Therefore, Johnston goes to some length in discussing the much celebrated notions of ancestrality, the Great Outdoors, speculative materialism, etc., but although the clarity of his thought is here maybe even at its most impressive, it does require some basic sympathy for Meillassoux's approach to philosophy to find the discussion seriously interesting (a capacity that this reviewer does not possess – in discussions of ancestrality, I will prefer Schelling's God to Meillassoux's hyper-Chaos any day of the week). The critique of Meillassoux, for instance in his distinction between primary and secondary qualities, is lucid and even somewhat entertaining, but it also drags an eminent scholar of German Idealism and psychoanalysis in a direction that threatens to deflate his philosophical potential a little bit. The two, Meillassoux and Johnston,

apparently share an ambition of developing an “ontologization of Hume’s epistemology” (p. 150), which is supposed to, in Johnston’s version, render the natural realm less deterministic and the human realm less free, at least in the sense of an extra-natural spiritual autonomy that makes humans “capriciously spontaneous” (p. 207). I am sure that Johnston will unfold this argument extremely convincingly and make an essential (and valuable) contribution to the Pittsburgh-Hegelianism that seems to be in the pipeline for the second volume of this trilogy, but one cannot help looking forward to the third volume already, where the entire project might very well be redeemed in what could become a well prepared, rich and highly important rereading of the Hegelian notion of “substance as subject”.

materialist/realist projects dirtying their hands with real empirical data” (p. 173), isn’t he in fact by far mostly on the side of *arguing* for materialism/realism, rather than “getting his hands dirty”? Apart from some relatively superficial references to Catherine Malabou’s (doubtful) combination of Hegel and the brain sciences, Daniel Lord Smail, Thomas Metzinger, and others, we don’t really get into the grind of what it is that provides us with a new opening for a materialism that finally acknowledges the inexistence of the big Other. Maybe this material follows in the second (and third) volume(s), but, slightly paradoxically, I think Johnston in this volume makes a very good case for the immense resources of philosophical argumentation itself.

Henrik Jøker Bjerre

One could criticize Johnston for not entirely living up to his own demands, when he claims that philosophy must take the (life) sciences much more seriously and deal directly with them in order to develop a new materialism that inscribes subjectivity into matter itself. When, for instance, he says that there is “a big difference between arguing for materialism/realism versus actually pursuing the positive construction of

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Henrik Jøker Bjerre

*From Myth to Symptom: The Case of Kosovo*

By Slavoj Žižek & Agon Hamza

Prishtinë: Kolektivi Materializmi Dialektik, 2013. 103 pp.; ISBN: 978-9951-8835-2-8.

Can Eastern Europeans think? In this short book, renowned philosopher Slavoj Žižek teams up with an emerging theorist named Agon Hamza to produce a short but powerful interpretation of Kosovo’s political history over the past couple of decades. The book is divided into three parts: a brief introduction written by Žižek and Hamza, a long essay by Žižek called “NATO as the left hand of God?,” and finally a concluding piece by Hamza called “Beyond Independence,” that examines the situation of Kosovo post-2008. Their main argument is that Kosovo represents a direct political struggle rather than a situation of cultural and ethnic antagonism between Albanians and Serbs. The irreconcilable division between Serbs and Albanians at the heart of the Kosovo conflict is shown to be a myth which is both a mystification and a racist stereotype that feeds not only conservative xenophobia but also liberal celebrations of multiculturalism. This myth serves a neo-imperial agenda, and Kosovo

is a symptom of a wider struggle against Western neo-liberalism, but at the same time Kosovo cannot be reduced to simply being a pawn in the geopolitical struggle among more powerful nation-states.

In the Introduction, Zizek and Hamza set out their agenda, which is to offer a leftist counter-reading of the stereotypical narratives of the Kosovo conflict, set within a broader Balkan, European, and global context. Insofar as we understand Kosovo to represent a cultural struggle between different ethnic groups who despise each other because of centuries-old mythical and religious passions, we refuse to understand what is truly going on. At the heart of Eastern Europe, the Kosovo conflict fuels the entire break-up of Yugoslavia after the end of the Cold War, and it indicates what is both necessary and impossible for any European “Union.” The cosmopolitan argument claims that the Balkan wars in the 1990s and early 2000s are a throwback to earlier forms of nationalism and ethnocentrism, a return of the repressed after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The flip side is the rise of other forms of European protectionism, nationalism and fascism as forces of resistance to the hegemony of the EU, NATO, and the eurozone, even as the financial stability

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of Europe teeters on the brink of dissolution in the name of supposedly more stable states like Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain.

Žižek and Hamza affirm strongly, against the proliferation of the “culturalist” interpretations of Kosovo and many other struggles in the contemporary academy, that “this book insists on an affirmative and direct conception of politics” (12). They ask: of what is Kosovo the symptom? Two things, neither of which are unique to Kosovo. First, Kosovo is a symptom of the tendency to offer cultural explanations of conflicts in the world today. These explanations constitute in fact a refusal to think, and an excuse to denigrate and dismiss real human and political understandings of complex global phenomena. Second, Kosovo is an important example of a colonial struggle between occupiers and occupied, as Hamza points out in his essay. Imperial applications of managed Western democracy frames contemporary conflicts in ethnic and cultural terms in ways that depoliticize them for observers and academics, and defuses any real power on the part of the people involved. In order to accomplish a genuine revolution in Kosovo, we must go beyond simple independence in legal or constitutional terms and will “an

emancipatory political act” (103).

I will return to Hamza’s provocative conclusion, but first I want to look more closely at Žižek’s essay. This piece takes up more than half of the book, and as most of his writings are, it is somewhat loosely structured. It can be divided into about three distinct areas: first is a series of reflection on the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, along with a series of specific reflections about the situation in Eastern Europe, including Kosovo, around the turn of the century. Žižek’s political analysis is always acute even when his writing is not entirely clear, and he concludes that “the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia also signaled the end of any serious role of the UN and the Security Council” (43), which we saw even more clearly when the United States made the decision to go to war with Iraq in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the bombing demonstrated the end of “the silent pact with Russia” and confirmed Russian humiliation at the hands of the West, which then led to the emergence of Vladimir Putin who has restored some of this Russian power and pride.

The second section of Žižek’s essay, written after 9/11, concerns biopolitics more generally, and constitutes a



reaction to the work of Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's book *State of Exception* was published in 2003 in Italian, and translated into English in 2005. Agamben argues, in light of the US response to 9/11, that biopolitics concerns the juridical states of exception or states of emergency that Carl Schmitt theorized in his influential writings. Žižek points out that this proclamation of a state of emergency by a state is actually a "desperate strategy to AVOID the true emergency" that is represented by the threat of popular politicization (48). The US and other nations want to depoliticize violent conflicts by referring them to the actions of brutal dictators and crazed terrorists. Applying his sharp reasoning to the scandalous photos taken of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, Žižek argues that rather than being a direct command or an unlawful exception "the Iraqi prisoners were effectively initiated into American culture, they got the taste of its obscene underside which forms the necessary supplement to its public values of personal dignity, democracy, and freedom" (56).

Although it may seem that Žižek has strayed far from Kosovo and Eastern Europe in the middle of his essay, the key point is that insofar as "we" Western

Americans believe that we stand for and practice a civilized culture we ignore this obscene underside. It's not that upon recognizing our obscenity that we should view ourselves as barbaric and by contrast "they" are civilized or good, but the whole dichotomy is less than useless. "We" are no better than the supposedly nationalist-fascist-racist Eastern Europeans to whom we think we can preach condescending humanitarian values. Or, as self-conscious leftists struck by our guilt, we might think we cannot criticize leaders like Milošević simply because they resist and are victimized by NATO and the United States. Žižek rightly claims that we cannot simply identify one group as civilized and the other as barbarous; in fact "every clash of civilizations is the clash of the underlying barbarisms" (59).

The final section of Žižek's essay is called "The Lie of Depoliticization," and it returns to the siege of Sarajevo in the early 1990s to show how the recasting of the crisis of Sarajevo—and later instances of the long conflict surrounding Yugoslavia—in humanitarian terms "was sustained by an eminently political choice, that of, basically, taking the Serb side in the conflict" (64). Wait—the West took the side of Serbia? But it was NATO that

bombed a truncated Yugoslavia was dedicated to promoting Serbian dominance! And it was the prosecution of Milošević for war crimes by the West that ultimately ended the conflict, right?

This refusal to analyze what is really happening politically in Kosovo and the Balkans lies at the root of the ability to accept humanitarian reasons for intervention, and to ignore previous occasions when the West did not intervene. Žižek understands that NATO and the US profited from the conflict, and in part fueled and inflamed it for political and economic reasons, until they could no longer benefit from this Serbian militarism, and then they were forced to crack down. In the same way, as Žižek notes, the United States supported Saddam Hussein so long as he did their bidding, and ignored his abuses of his own people until it became convenient to do so. In this final section, Žižek applies some of the political philosopher Jacques Rancière's ideas to the concept of universal Human Rights, which do not simply exist but can become "the precise space of politicization proper" (87); the problem is that we substitute Human Rights for politics and evacuate the term of any force or meaning. As Žižek claims, "what the 'Human Rights of the Third World suffering victims' *effectively*

*mean* is the right of the Western powers themselves to intervene—politically, economically, culturally, militarily—in the Third World countries of their choice on behalf of the defense of Human Rights" (68). And this "Third World" effectively and selectively includes Kosovo as a part of Europe that is cut out from civilized Europe and reduced to European/NATO/American intervention in the name of Human Rights.

What can be done? At the end of his essay, Žižek asserts an "attitude of aggressive passivity" as a form of Bartleby politics. This gesture of radical refusal or withdrawal is more effective than any action, especially when all actions are prescribed and contained by the conventional depoliticized framework of global capitalism in which we live. As an extension of this possibility of refusal, Hamza urges people engaged in the contemporary Kosovo situation—as academics, as leftists, as activists—to go "beyond independence." This going beyond is in Žižekian terms a withdrawal from independence proper, without simply abandoning the achievement of independence. The point is that insofar as independence names the solution to the problem of Kosovo, it fosters dependence, condescension, racism, and the employment of

economic methods of privatization, indebtedness, and impoverishment that reinforce servility to more powerful states. The refusal of independence is not the withdrawal into dependence, but the ability to criticize the sham of independence for weaker nations and as well as the democratic framework that corporate capitalism adopts as its ideological cover. As Hamza remarks, the political scene of Kosovo “is merely a symptom of the neo-liberal interventions, lacking any ideas about how to break the deadlock” (76). The political situation that is obscured by stereotypes about cultures and myths is really “a problem of the colonised and the coloniser” (80). As I discovered when I visited Israel and Palestine in 1998, such conflicts are not about different groups of people who hate each other due to reasons of religion and ethnicity, they are fundamentally about who controls the land and its resources, including its population.

Insofar as the 2008 independence is seen as the solution to a humanitarian problem, it masks the deeper situation, which involves “the primitive accumulation of capital,” in Marx’s terms (85). Our current discourse about democracy, with its emphasis on cultural expression, “cannot but serve to obscure the relations of power,

capital, etc.” (93). Independence failed to achieve liberation or emancipation, a political act of will on the part of the people as such, which is why independence is insufficient. Hamza concludes the book by claiming that “the revolutionising of Kosovo in all its levels, from democratising the ‘imperial economy’ (by negating it), to dissolving neoliberal economic experiments, or in sum, when taking the fate of the country into our own hands, is then how the space for the politics of emancipation will open up” (103).

Hamza does not present this emancipatory political act beyond independence in the same terms as Žižek does at the end of his essay, but I think they would need to be linked. To think and enact a zone for a politics of emancipation, which is the political name for “universal Human Rights,” we need to adopt a posture of radical withdrawal from neoliberal and neo-imperial capitalism. Even if we possess political independence in nationalist and statist terms, we fail to confront our own dependence on capitalism in the form of money and debt, and ignore our interconnectedness as humans enmeshed in technologies and ecologies of power for enslavement and liberation. Just like the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, and the

Spanish 15-M Movements, the point is not to have a developed plan to put in place that will solve all our problems. The urgency is to demonstrate this refusal to comply with state nationalism *and* neoliberal corporate capitalism that opens a space for emancipation. Let Kosovo be the symptom of revolution and radical transformation, as Hamza and Žižek theorize in this important book.

Clayton Crockett

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*Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis*

By Todd McGowan, Lincoln, NE:  
University of Nebraska Press, 2013.  
364 pp. ISBN: 978-0803245112

For however much we throw the word “accessible” around in academic discussions as the strength of a philosophy book, Todd McGowan’s “accessibility” in his latest book, *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* is quite stunning. In one chapter he compares the DaVinci Code to Derrida as it relates to hermeneutics and signification, without sacrificing any of the meaty aspects of the ideas, and ends up clarifying many psychoanalytic concepts in the process. He frequently sums up big ideas of Lacan or Freud in ways that get to the core of the thought. McGowan’s thought is highly influenced by Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič, and Mladen Dolar (the Slovene School). In many ways, this is where I think McGowan gets his insistence on the Freudian death drive, his reading of ethics as the capacity to sustain the monstrous jouissance of the Other, and his focus on applying psychoanalysis to emancipatory politics. Despite his points of agreement with the Slovene’s, however, McGowan diverges

from them and others, including Lacanian analysts, in interesting ways, which is a line that I want to explore in what follows.

The book is situated in two larger sections, “Subjectivity” and “Society” but there are many arguments started in the first section that continue and are not really resolved until the end of the book. McGowan’s introduction to the book, “Psychoanalytic Hostility to Politics” does not so much as introduce the book as argue for the centrality of the death drive in Freud’s work and for its indelible role in any thinking of politics. McGowan points out the utter neglect of a radical notion of death drive in many twentieth century readings of Freud, from Marcuse, Adorno, to Norman O. Brown. It is in many ways not surprising that they neglected death drive, as McGowan notes, because much of their projects were tied to sexual liberation. As often was the case, these texts would present some pseudo dialectic of the two drives that situate civilization: *thanatos* and *eros*. McGowan summarizes these positions nicely when he states that what differentiates them from today’s post-Lacanian theory of the political is that they posited society could overcome antagonism within the social order (10 – 11). This notion presents a helpful point of contrast to today’s

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Lacanian left, from the far left radical position of Žižek to the more moderate left position of the Lacanian political thinker, Yannis Stavrakakis. Stavrakakis argues for institutional libidinal re-investments and criticizes Žižek's "apocalyptic" reading of the psychoanalytic act. Stavrakakis proposes an alternative to Žižek's radical act that creates a new positivity by positing two dimensions:

"Instead of incarnating an apocalyptic, total re-foundation of positivity, this articulation is characterized by a distinct ethical relation with lack: instead of covering it over, it purports to register and institutionalize lack/negativity" (Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, 32).

McGowan is nonetheless convincing in his sweeping argument that Freud's radicalization of the death drive renders immanent reform or change within the existing system to be totally impossible. Even on its more moderate spectrum, we still find this radical commitment to a politics of mourning or to a more radical libidinal act that re-positivizes the social relations as such on the more far left position in psychoanalysis. But what is the death drive? McGowan is right to note that it is an impulse to return

to an originary and traumatic loss, not to a place of inorganicness. This distinction is a crucial point Lacan made about the translation of *trieb* in Freud's original English and French translations of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Drive is by no means tied to a biological order, and is not tied to aggressiveness. Furthermore, the repetition of the death drive is what produces loss, and by extension, the death drive is central to the subjective production of enjoyment. Our only source of enjoyment is thus to produce loss as McGowan notes (13). The pleasure principle is replaced by the death drive for Freud in his later years, because McGowan states, "we desire the object as absent, actually obtaining the object produces dissatisfaction, not enjoyment" (69).

One learns at the outset of the text that it will focus on a very specific lineage of psychoanalytic thought as it pertains to the political and does not purport to give a wider survey or even incorporate any other post-Freudian thinkers outside of the Lacanian field. This exclusive trend is fairly common amongst Lacanians, and one should ask if there is a consequence to excluding voices such as Melanie Klein, Jung, Bion, and others. For Lacan, the dismissal of other Freudians was both a part of his teachings

and personality, having himself been barred from the IPA. We can locate today's intra-Lacanian debates between Miller and Žižek as emblematic of this same exclusionary potential amongst Lacanians. It is telling that most often these rifts that occur inside Lacanian circles tend to be tied to political differences<sup>1</sup>.

Because the project of pairing politics with psychoanalysis is impossible, one of the best models for drive and emancipatory politics at the subjective level is the figure of the anorexic. The anorexic, McGowan says, without any irony, presents a deep truth of the political act because “the political act involves insisting on one's desire in the face of its impossibility” (30). Thus, the key to a politics based on the death drive is to find satisfaction in the drive itself.

“Through the loss of the privileged object, one frees oneself from the complete domination of (parental or social) authority by creating a lack that no authority can fill. Ceding the object is thus the founding act of subjectivity and the first free act” (31).

Herein lies the core wager of

the text: to think through this loss at the core of every social and identitarian formation. To think the traumatic loss as *the site* of politics is both an ethical and a political project. The Freudian death drive blocks all efforts by authority to give the subject what it lacks, to fill over this lack at the subjective and the collective level, any effort will always wind up short. While he does not naturalize capitalism as the ultimate horizon of social organization available, there are times when McGowan goes too far in the direction of isolating the effects of capitalism in too general of a sense. He invokes terms such as “the capitalist subject” and frames this subject in highly universal terms that is certainly helpful for certain clarity, but it neglects other subjective modes that capitalism can produce. I am reminded in this context of the four subjective positions of Badiou, and for that matter surprised at the relative lack of Badiou in McGowan's text, despite the fact that Badiou is not a psychoanalytic thinker in any direct sense. Yet, McGowan's treatment of the relation between politics and capitalism is tied to a larger claim about the way in which capitalism structures the flow of desire and the relation of desire to drive in capitalism. The formula for this is well encapsulated when McGowan writes, “capitalism mistakes desire

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1 See Žižek's debate over Miller's “ironist position” as it pertains to cynicism in the concluding chapter of *Less Than Nothing*.

for drive in the inability to get satisfaction in the act of not getting the object,” and thus capitalism operates on the principle that it can attain the object. This is why capitalist subjects without hope are no longer capitalist subjects, and it is also why desire is oriented towards an object that we don’t have access to. What a politics that is grounded on psychoanalysis does is re-orient the universal loss that capitalism seeks to overcome through accumulation and moves or transforms subjects at a libidinal level, from a politics based on desire—to a politics based on enjoyment. At a later point in the text he invokes a positive use of fantasy to thinking the impossible loss because in fantasy, “we experience enjoyment through the loss of the object.” Because fantasy makes evident the link between loss and enjoyment—allowing us to conceive of a politics that embraces loss rather than attempting to escape it—fantasy allows us to experience the impossible.

After laying the groundwork for the centrality of death drive to a politics founded on loss and enjoyment, McGowan shows how Marx precipitated these psychoanalytic lessons in *Capital*. Marx predicted the psychoanalytic political imperative when he states that: “For capitalism is already

abolished when we assume that it is enjoyment that is the driving motive and not enrichment itself” (Marx, second volume of *Capital*).

The key point of interpretation for any future use of a psychoanalytic politics is not to provide a critique of the fantasies that underlie capitalist subjectivity, but to reveal where subjective enjoyment is located. Through the loss of the object, which is the foundation of our enjoyment, this act elevates the object with the power to satisfy subjects (70). But what seems unclear in this point is how precisely a new form of enjoyment can be enacted. He writes, “psychoanalysis will enable us to turn the tables on commodity logic and to place the emphasis on the act of sacrifice” (71). This constitutes a perspectival shift in *how* we enjoy, not in changing the nature of our enjoyment as such (71). This is in part answered with recourse to fantasy as we saw above, however, it should be noted that McGowan’s text unfolds in a quite linear fashion. It builds up arguments that are not exactly answered until the concluding chapters. This is why the last section of the book, “Society” is the most enriching.

In the first section of the text “Subjectivity,” McGowan generalizes the other alternative



to Lacanian psychoanalysis in psychology more generally by referring to various manifestations of “ego psychology” and conflates this movement that is largely dead in contemporary psychology with a whole range of manifestations from liberalism, to the Hegelians of recognition, to humanistic psychology. Many decades ago Lacan remarked that ego psychology creates a situation where the capitalist subject sees their enjoyment outside of themselves in the other, (73) and here McGowan builds off of this insight, but without recourse to other psychoanalytic thinkers. McGowan’s text could have used more in-depth discussion of how new syncretic modalities of psychology (humanistic, psychotherapy, existential, etc.) are not all modeled off of an ego modeled upon a perfect other. Herein lies a danger of Lacanian psychoanalysis that often leads to a sort of Manichaeism that divides and conquers. This is the nature of any truly original and revolutionary discourse, but perhaps it should be tempered with more nuanced reflections.

McGowan certainly makes a strong case for how psychoanalysis, compared to liberalism and Marxism, which posits justice as the first point of promoting egalitarianism,

begins with freedom. This makes McGowan’s politics highly devoid of ideology, for example in an interview with McGowan,<sup>2</sup> I asked him about Occupy Wall Street, and his response was telling as it pertains to this strain of thought:

Occupy didn’t identify with the missing binary signifier but involves an identification with the excluded. I have a real problem with the slogan that identifies the movement with the 99%. What happens? Instantly, a new Other is produced that is the 1%, and if we can just eliminate this 1%, then we will achieve the good. That’s the logic at work. In this sense, Occupy, despite its successes (including, I would claim, the re-election of Barack Obama), remained within a very traditional political paradigm. Identification with the missing binary signifier would insist, in contrast, would involve an identification with the inherent failure of the Other or the system itself.

McGowan’s politics is most eloquently summarized in the last sections of the text. The chapter, “The Case of the Missing Signifier”, we find that the only viable political

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<sup>2</sup> See full interview at Berfrois, November 12, 2013 <http://www.berfrois.com/2013/11/beyond-the-good-berfrois-interviews-todd-mcgowan/>

position is to identify with the missing signifier, and not to seek its radical elimination. The crucial point made here is that the missing signifier concerns the law itself, not those who are excluded: “by responding on the level of the immigrant, or by responding to the failure patriarchy on the level of the feminine, the battle is already lost” (277). Here, McGowan makes his own political position more clear within the Lacanian left, and does a good job in identifying how psychoanalytic differs from the Deleuzian vitalist project, the Derridian hermeneutic position. Because psychoanalysis recognizes that “politics requires an enemy or other. It requires a gap within the signifying structure where there can be no understanding. The divide between male and female is a division within the subject itself. The missing signifier is an internal torsion within every signifying system” (281). What this implies is a highly structuralist identification with the absent signifier, wherein we do not insist on subverting the system but on “adhering to the truth of the signifying system and forcing that truth to manifest itself” (281). While McGowan provides an series of accessible examples from the DaVinci Code to situate this approach to a psychoanalytic politics, what is missing is a more nuanced discussion of how this

position differs with singular thinkers such as Agamben, Badiou, Laclau and so on. The text is consistent however in this regard as its overall goal is to concentrate on the elaboration of a psychoanalytic politics, and it certainly succeeds in this regard.

In the chapter “Sustaining Anxiety,” McGowan argues for an ethics that can complement the larger political project of psychoanalysis. Unlike Zizek and Badiou, McGowan sees ethics and politics as constitutive of the same ground, and both are linked to the larger notion of loss developed out of the Freudian death drive. In a sweeping definition of how psychoanalysis treats ethics, McGowan remarks that ethics is posited through enjoyment itself, and not through the sacrifice of enjoyment, for which we can see rival schools of ethics such as Kantian or utilitarian ethics as adhering to (101). Recognition—as a mode of situating justice or a discourse on equality, from Kant to Rawls—operates on a false premise regarding the way that recognition handles enjoyment. Recognition blocks enjoyment as it involves submission to social authority. For psychoanalysis, this means that recognition reduces the subject to a social object, to a title and symbolic function: professor, student, etc. and this completely

misses the uniqueness of the subject (100). As McGowan states, “the search for recognition cannot have any ethical status whatsoever because it involves submission to an entity that exists only through the act of submitting to it” (101). But the critique of the “recognition Hegelians,” (Robert Pippin, Francis Fukuyama, etc.) is not waged at the level of the content of their theory as much as it is at the historicity of today’s subject relative to larger shifts in authority, particularly paternal authority. McGowan writes, “authority has become too close, and its obscenity has become visible” (104). This change in authority, McGowan argues, results in a collapse of the potential for an ethico-political project precisely because the other is now rendered bare. We should not understand this “barren other” from the perspective of Agamben’s *homo sacer*, as an excluded biopolitical other, but rather with recourse to Lacan’s theory of the four discourses. I understand McGowan’s argument to be situated at the university discourse that places knowledge (S2) in the place of the Master-signifier, and renders anonymous and neutral all knowledge as such. This results in the exclusion of a master signifier able to situate knowledge on the side of emancipation, evidenced for example through expert culture which results in the explosion of

a dizzying number of mini-father figures. The result of the “bareness of the other” is a pervasive rise of anxiety at the subjective level. This is why recognition is flawed at the level of subjectivity. It is also why ethics must involve a sustaining of anxiety in a radical way, in a way that opens the path to enjoyment (105). Thankfully, McGowan does not fall back onto an individualized ethics, but sees in the ethics of psychoanalysis an intimate connection the social bonds and what he refers to as the “uncaniness at the heart of the social relationship.” McGowan does a masterful job weaving the interrelationship between this macro-level subjective shift in the logic of late capitalism and its impact on desire and demand. The argument will sound familiar to readers of Žižek; however, McGowan presents it with a certain clarity that is even more refreshing. The argument goes that today, subjects do not experience a clear demand from social authority, and consequently, they do not discover the secret to the desire of the authority hidden beneath this demand (103). He proceeds to develop two prevailing subjective options, the pathological narcissist and the fundamentalist, both of which psychoanalysis, through the anxiety-drive alterity goes beyond. The first choice between the pathological narcissist and

the fundamentalist are the two subjective positions available today (103). While the term “fundamentalist” struck me as dated, going out of vogue following the end of the Bush era and the rise, or rather fall of the economy as the traumatic crisis on the left—as opposed to the outright imperialism of Bush following 9/11—it is still helpful in understanding the essence of these two subjective modalities.

To understand McGowan’s position on subjectivity, we find much of it developed in the chapter “The Appeal of Sacrifice.” Here, we find that subjectivity occurs in two steps: an initial loss occurs that constitutes the subject, and then, the subject makes an additional sacrifice in order to commemorate the first loss and to join the social order (146).

What we hold in common is not a common object, but it is the sacrifice as such. McGowan writes,

“According to psychoanalysis, neither the subject nor the social order exists independently but instead emerges out of the other’s incompleteness. The subject exists at the point of the social order’s failure to become a closed structure, and the subject enters into social arrangements as a result of its own failure to achieve self-identity” (145).

The “premature birth” of subjectivity leads the subject to a relation to the social or society as the site where they think this loss might be redeemed. What we hold in common is not a common object, but it is the sacrifice as such that the social can never adequately redeem. As stated before, McGowan sees in fantasy a positive application for thinking enjoyment, but interestingly he also sees fantasy as playing a role in the development of the two social bonds. By referring to Lacan’s theory of sexual difference he develops the male side of the bond, “that offers a familiar organization for society: it creates a social bond through the process of exclusion. Male identity emerges through the exceptionality of the primal father who is not subject to castration (154 – 155). Precisely because the social bond depends, according to the logic of male sexuation, on excluding a particular group in order to provide an enemy around which the collective identity of members of the society can form (155). Since each woman is a particular, the sacrifice is made possible in female subjectivity: “the logic of the not-all posits that there are only enemies, only outsiders, only exceptions” (159). McGowan notes how the 9/11 attacks enabled citizens to enjoy through the enactment of the social bond of friend/enemy.

“The authentic social bond occurs only in the shared-experience of loss—that is, only according to the female logic of not-having” (160).

Overall, the fundamental barrier to the establishment of an authentic social bond is the resistance to avowing the traumatic nature of the bond” (163) and the reader is left with a helpful set of examples to think through this impossibility at the heart of the social. McGowan’s text should be celebrated if for no other reason than its ability to clearly identify these various points of impossibility that any confrontation with the political manifests.

Daniel Tutt

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Alain Badiou. *Badiou and the Philosophers: Interrogating 1960s French Philosophy*.

Ed. and trans. Tzuchien Tho and Giuseppe Bianco. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 216 pp.; ISBN: 978-1441195210

French intellectual historians have often viewed the mid-1960s as a period in which the prestige and profound significance of G.W.F. Hegel's approach to dialectics was abandoned in favor of a model adopted from structural linguistics. While the existential phenomenologists and Marxist humanists had championed Hegel as the great thinker of consciousness and negativity, the emergent wave of structuralists preferred to describe fundamental conditions of possibility that precede conscious apprehension. However, certain elements of Hegel's influence and reception remained extraordinarily influential throughout this period, despite the apparent dominance of anti-Hegelian thought as developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault. Attention to this legacy might help us understand the emphatic return to dialectical modes of understanding by Alain Badiou, in the late 1960s and later. This particular Hegelian

adherence, more than his political commitments or mathematical ontology, ties him to a particular trajectory of twentieth-century French thought.

Tzuchien Tho and Giuseppe Bianco's indispensable introduction to the new volume *Badiou and the Philosophers* provides more biographical information on Badiou than has ever been available previously, as well as providing much of the groundwork for contextualizing his very early work in the political, aesthetic and philosophical developments of this extraordinarily rich period. As Tho and Bianco recount, Badiou's work has been characterized by, among other things, consistent admiration for and reformulation of the philosophical project of Jean-Paul Sartre (xiv). At age 17, in 1955, Badiou first read Sartre's early work and decided to become a philosopher as a result (xiii). After writing a letter to Simone de Beauvoir, conveying his appreciation and agreement with her defense of Sartre from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's criticisms, Badiou wrote his first work—not a conventional study of philosophy, but rather a novel, *Almagestes* (xiv). Tho and Bianco describe this somewhat-forgotten accomplishment as maintaining key Sartrian theses while

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simultaneously engaging with the concerns of the avant-garde *Tel/Quel* group (xiv). This capacity to reassert the irreducibility of an intentional consciousness lacking in interiority—a negating subject—while convincingly absorbing apparently contrary concerns, such as scientific epistemology and literary formalism, marked Badiou's efforts. In particular, Badiou was attracted to the Sartre's later approach to Hegelian Marxism in his monumental work, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.<sup>1</sup>

However, maintaining the commitment to Sartrean themes in the face of seemingly incompatible perspectives required a significant rethinking. In the mid-1960s, Badiou appears torn between political reasons to adhere to Sartre's problematic (made pressingly apparent in Sartre's demonstration of commitment in protest to the Algerian war), and simultaneous experiments with thinkers who seem very far removed from this outlook (xvi). For example, Badiou was fascinated by Lévi-Strauss' classic structuralism, and wrote a dissertation on Spinoza, whose concept of freedom seems almost the antipode of Sartre's (xvii, xix). In search of a way to preserve

the subject that Sartre had so admirably described, despite his lack of attention to fundamental questions of historicity and structure, Badiou's contact with Jean Hyppolite was especially significant.

Along with Georges Canguilhem, Hyppolite made his mark as what Badiou later called one of the “protecteurs de la nouveauté;” while serving as director of the École Normale Supérieure, he promoted the new music of Pierre Boulez as well as the innovations of the *nouveau roman* (xxii). As Badiou later put it, “thanks to Hyppolite, the bolts on academic philosophy, which were normally shut tight, were released.”<sup>2</sup> The core of his philosophical significance was in his innovative re-assertion of Hegel. Badiou even argued that Hyppolite, in translating Hegel, developed an innovative new philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, Hegel's influence had been prevented from taking root in French academic philosophy, which meant that his considerable popularity was transmitted outside the university, first in the lectures of Alexandre Kojève and later in the works of

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jonathan Rée, New York: Verso, 2004.

2 Alain Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon: Figures of Postwar Philosophy*, trans. David Macey, London: Verso, 2009, 37.

3 Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 38.

Hyppolite's reading of Hegel, unlike the preceding French Hegelians, de-emphasized the primacy of humanism. While Kojève and Sartre had argued for the distinctly human subject as the locus of freedom and the negation of the given and determined, Hyppolite argued that the fundamental issues could not be circumscribed by the definition of the human.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, this version of Hegel was crucial in Badiou's preservation dialectics, re-invented in an anti-humanist mode. It could be argued that the French Hegelians of the 1960s all had privileged mediators in order to develop their respective readings. While Guy Debord drew from Georg Lukács' and Henri Lefebvre's humanist Marxist approach, and Jacques Derrida was inspired by Georges Bataille's excessive approach to Hegelian negativity, Badiou's Hegel was

4 See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980. Merleau-Ponty later declared that all the great philosophical ideas of the past century – the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis – had their beginnings in Hegel." *Sense and Non-sense*, trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus, Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964, 109-110.

5 On Hyppolite's anti-humanism, see Stefanos Geroulanos, "L'ascension et la marionette : l'homme après Jean Hyppolite," *Jean Hyppolite, entre structure et existence*, ed. Giuseppe Bianco, Paris: Éditions rue d'Ulm, 2013, 83-106.

first transmitted to him by Sartre and subsequently by Hyppolite.<sup>6</sup> Badiou himself declared that he studied Hyppolite's translation of the *Phenomenology for Spirit* for many years before approaching the German original.<sup>7</sup>

The French reading of Hegel was often inflected by Martin Heidegger's phenomenology. In the 1930s, Kojève remarked that Hegel's atheism and finitude could only be understood through a Heideggerian lens, and Sartre's subsequent approach to Hegelian Marxism remained marked by his prior encounter with the particular emphasis on nothingness found in Heidegger's work.<sup>8</sup> Hyppolite was distinguished from these predecessors by an even greater commitment to Heidegger's significance, and in particular the emphasis on historicity and fundamental ontology that was previously neglected by French commentators, and the turn towards Being in place of human subjectivity announced in his famous "Letter on Humanism."

6 See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York: Zone, 1995, and Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge, 2001, 317-351.

7 Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 39.

8 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 259.



Heidegger's impact was such that Hyppolite described himself as struck by "Heideggerian lightning" (xxi).

Badiou first corresponded with Hyppolite in 1963, sending him a copy of *Almagestes* and conveying his excitement about Hyppolite's forthcoming work, *Existence et Structure* (xxvii). Clearly, Badiou hoped that Hyppolite would provide the necessary groundwork for a truly contemporary formulation of dialectics. In Badiou's interview with Hyppolite, conducted two years later, we can find a very early record of Badiou's evolving approach to Hegel's significance. We can find Badiou continually intrigued by a Hegelian approach to truth while resisting some of the Heideggerian emphasis on historicity insisted upon by Hyppolite. In a series of televised interviews with major French philosophers, Badiou interviewed Canguilhem, Foucault, Raymond Aron, Paul Ricœur, Michel Henry, and Michel Serres, in addition to Hyppolite. Taken as a whole, this volume reads as a fascinating snapshot of French thought in the mid-1960s, just before the structuralist wave of 1966 produced a less classical brand of "theory." As Tho and Bianco put it, "this collection of interviews is also a representation of the last period where French philosophy as *French*

and as philosophy could still afford to be effortlessly endogamic" (xxxi).

To the extent that Badiou and Hyppolite disagree, it is with regard to the nature of history and historicity; while Hyppolite maintains that mathematics, for example, is unphilosophical in its relation to history, Badiou rejects this thesis (xxxv). Fundamentally, for Hyppolite truths can only be historical, while Badiou will strive towards a notion of truth that overcomes history (xxxvi). As Hyppolite puts it, "When we contemplate a system of philosophy, it is the path taken by the philosopher, it is the manner in which she gains access to truth, and it is also the way that she touches it [truth] of course!" (5). Rather than a history of error, for Hyppolite, "the philosophical systems of the past represent a first degree of thinking" (3-4). In Hyppolite's definition of philosophy, it is an "existent metaphysical thinking" that links "a matter and a form" (4). For him, philosophy can think being and content, while mathematics and logic are purely formal (4).

For Hyppolite, each philosopher uncovers a fundamental truth within his own epoch, and cannot be falsified (6). Badiou,

however, raises the question of Aristotle's justification of slavery. Hyppolite agrees that this example demands the consideration of the "existential roots" of a philosophy (6-7). He declares that while philosophy cannot be reduced to ideology, it must be seen as related dialectically to the non-philosophical roots that sustain it (7). While Hyppolite insists on philosophy as embedded in its time, Badiou counters that this understanding of "history" has little to do with the ordinary connotations of this word, to such a degree that it is dispensable (7). Hyppolite argues that a historical understand of philosophy and being must reveal the possibility of a multiplicity of understandings of being, and even those that are opposed to one another; as he puts it, "the nature of being should be such that it renders this diversity or even this opposition between philosophical systems possible" (9). Badiou responds to this amalgamation of Hegel and Heidegger by emphasizing the significance of Marx, and the non-Marxist conclusions that Hyppolite has drawn. In response, Hyppolite replies that the relations of production and their technical conditions must be considered as among the non-philosophical roots of the various historical philosophies. Fundamentally, then, the disagreement between

Hyppolite and Badiou is the former's tendency towards a historical relativism, in contrast to Badiou's desire to posit truth's attaining of an absolute. However, Hyppolite insists that Plato is perhaps the crucial philosopher, suggesting that some philosophies may provide the keys to others (10). This anticipates Badiou's own famous insistence of the importance of Plato, against various modern anti-Platonic movements.

In a subsequent discussion conducted for the television series, Hyppolite and Badiou return to many of these issues, in conversation with Dina Dreyfus, Foucault, Canguilhem, and Ricœur (79). Hyppolite and Canguilhem express total agreement, which is surprising given the Hegelian commitments of the former and the scientific epistemology of the latter (81). They are in accord on the question of a multiplicity of truths, which Canguilhem finds proven by his historical inquiries and Hyppolite supports on the basis of his readings of Hegel and Heidegger. Foucault affirms the suggestion that while science aims to produce a single explanation, philosophy must rely on a polysemic notion of truths (85). From a twenty-first century perspective, it may appear that the distinction between Badiou and

these other great philosophers of the 1960s was his resistance to a discourse inspired by Heidegger's multiplicity of pathways and his obstinate commitment to axioms that cannot be historicized.

Rather than Heidegger, Badiou would pursue a complex and unusual approach to Hegel and Marx that he believed mirrored some of the insights of the Chinese thought of the time. In his a volume produced in the mid-1970s, *The Rational Kernel of the Hegelian Dialectic*, Badiou aimed to assert the universality of these ideas by placing them in relation to the analysis of Zhang Shi Ying, a Chinese Hegelian Marxist. In his demanding and groundbreaking *Theory of the Subject*, a series of seminars conducted from 1975 to 1979, Badiou continued to expand an anti-historicist and anti-humanist approach to dialectics as a destructive negation of its conditions. Read in context, this new approach to novelty and changed is indebted to both Sartre and Hyppolite.

Andrew Ryder

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