

# **Politics Today: Thirteen Theses and Commentaries**

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**Abstract:** Across 13 theses and their associated commentaries, the article analyzes the contemporary global situation, points to its constitutive contradictions and characterizes the most recent failed attempts to transform it. It proposes a conceptual framework – having learnt the lessons from previous historical failure – that will allow the conception and practical articulation of what a yet to be invented politics must be.

**Keywords:** Communism, Movement(s), Neolithic Age, Nomadic Proletariat, Organization, Slogan

**Thesis 1.** The global conjuncture is one of the territorial and ideological hegemony of liberal capitalism.

**Commentary:** *Evidence? The banality of this thesis exempts me from any commentary.*

**Thesis 2.** This hegemony is not at all in crisis, is still less comatose, but is in a sequence of deployment that is particularly intense and novel.

**Commentary:** *There are hegemonic today two equally opposed and equally false theses about capitalist globalization. The first is the conservative thesis: that above all else capitalism, in combination with parliamentary “democracy”, is the definitive form of human economic and social organization. This is truly the end of History, a motif recently popularized by Fukuyama. The second is the Leftist thesis, according to which capitalism has entered its final crisis, which is to say that it is already dead.*

*The first thesis is nothing more than the repetition of the ideological process engaged in from the end of the seventies by the renegade intellectuals of the “red years” (1965-1975), and which purely and simply consisted in the elimination of the communist hypothesis from the field of the possible. It therefore allows us to simplify the dominant propaganda: that it is no longer necessary to vaunt the (dubitable) merits of capitalism, but only to register that the facts (the USSR, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, China, the Khmer Rouge, the western communist parties...) have shown that nothing else is possible, other than a criminal “totalitarianism.”*

*In the face of this impossible verdict, the only possible response, drawing and extending the balance from the fragmentary experiments of the last century, is to reestablish the communist hypothesis in its possibility, force, and liberatory capacity. It is this, inevitably, which occurs and will occur, and which, in this text, I yet maintain.*

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1 Translator's note: the present is a translation of a text that was published on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 2022 in the French “L'Obs” (Nouvel Observateur), F.R. / H.H.Y.

*The two forms of the second thesis – exsanguinating or dead capitalism – are based on the 2008 financial crisis, the inflationary monetary disorder triggered by the Covid 19 pandemic, and on the daily revelations of further, innumerable, incidents of corruption. From which the conclusion, either, that the moment is revolutionary, that only a strong push is needed for the ‘system’ to collapse (classic leftism), or, that it is enough to take a step aside, to retire, for example to the countryside, and to live a sober life in harmony with nature, in order to then come to the realisation that one can organise new “forms of life” – the destructive capitalist machine running on empty in its final throes of nothingness (ecological Buddhism).*

*None of this has the least connection to the real.*

*Firstly, the crisis of 2008 was a classic crisis overproduction (in the USA, too many houses were built and sold on credit to the bankrupt) whose expansion, with good timing, allowed for a new momentum of capitalism - a concentration of capital, ordered and boosted in a strong sequence; the weak are washed away, the strong strengthened, and in passing an important gain: the “social laws” issued at the end of the Second World War are for the most part liquidated. Once this painful ordering is achieved, “recovery” is in sight. Secondly, the extension of the capitalist enterprise over vast territories, the intensive and extensive diversification of the global marketplace, is far from being achieved. Almost all of Africa, a good part of Latin America, Eastern Europe, India... so many places “in transition”, which are zones of looting, countries “in development”, where the large-scale market reforms can and must follow the example of Japan or China.*

*It is in its very essence, in truth, that capitalism is corruption. How could a collective logic in which the only norms are “profit above all else” and the universal competition of everyone with everyone else possibly avoid widespread corruption? Acknowledged “cases” of corruption are nothing more than side deals – propagandistic local purges, account-settling between rival cliques.*

*Modern capitalism, that of the world market, which in its scant centuries of existence is historically a recent social formation, which after a colonial phase (from the sixteenth to twentieth century) when conquered territories were enslaved to a single country's limited and protectionist market, has only just begun its planetary conquest. Today, the looting is globalized, as is the proletariat, which is now from all countries of the world.*

**Thesis 3.** However, three active contradictions are at work in this hegemony.

I/The oligarchic dimension of the ownership of Capital, which is extremely well developed, leaves increasingly less room for new players to be integrated into this oligarchy. From whence the possibility of an authoritarian ossification.

II/The integration of financial and commercial circuits within a

single world market opposes the maintenance of national figures who inevitably enter into rivalries, at the level of mass policing. From whence the possibility of a world war from which a clearly hegemonic State emerges, including on the world market.

III/Today there is doubt that Capital in its current developmental trajectory could valorise the labour power of the whole world population. From whence the risk on a global scale of constituting a mass of people who are completely destitute and thus politically dangerous.

**Commentary:**

*I| We are now at a stage where 264 people own the equivalent of what 3 billion people own – and the concentration of capital continues. Here, in France, 10% of the population own considerably more than 50% of the total wealth. These are concentrations of property that, on a global scale, are without stable precedent. And they are far from complete. They have a monstrous side, which, even as it does not guarantee their eternal duration, is nevertheless central to the capitalist deployment of which it is the main driving force.*

*II| The hegemony of the United States is increasingly undermined. China and India alone have 40% of the global labour force. This indicates a devastating level of deindustrialization in the West. Indeed, American workers represent no more than 7% of the global labour force, even less goes for Europe. Out of these disparities, the world order, which for military and financial reasons is still dominated by the USA, sees the emergence of such rivals that would challenge their sovereign grasp of the world market. The clashes have already begun. In the Middle East, in Africa, and in the South China Seas. They will continue. The horizon of this situation is war, as proven by the previous century, with the two world wars, relentless colonial massacres, and which is confirmed today by the war in Ukraine.*

*III| Today there are probably already between two and three billion people who are neither propertied nor landless peasants, not salaried petit bourgeoisie nor factory workers. They wander [errent] globally in search of a place to live, and constitute a nomadic proletariat which, if politicized, presents a significant threat to the established order.*

**Thesis 4.** Over the last ten years, there have been numerous, sometimes very vigorous protest movements against this or that aspect of the liberal capitalist hegemony. However, all were resolved without posing any major problem to capitalism's dominance.

**Commentary:** *There have been four types of such movements. Brief, localised riots. There have been violent riots in the suburbs of large cities (London, for example, or Paris), which generally follow from the murder of young people by the police. From these riots (for which there*

*has either been little support from a frightened public or which have been mercilessly repressed) large “humanitarian” mobilizations grow, which are focussed on police brutality and are generally depoliticized inasmuch as mention is neither made of the precise nature of the demands nor of the profit ultimately derived from them by the dominant bourgeoisie.*

*2. Lasting uprisings without organisational design. Other uprisings, notably those in the Arab world, have had a broader social reach and often lasted for weeks, taking on the canonical form of the occupation of public squares. They have often been mitigated by the seduction of the option to vote. The classic case is that of Egypt: a large-scale uprising, the apparent success of the negative collective slogan “Mubarak Out”, Mubarak leaves power and is even arrested, over a long period of time the police fail to take over the square, the Copts and the Muslims are unified, the army apparently neutral... And of course, then, in the elections, the party with the populist vote – and minimally present in the uprising – wins. Which is to say the Muslim Brotherhood. The most active part of the uprising is then in opposition to this new government. This opens the way for military intervention. The army puts General Al Sissi back into power. Thence, the merciless oppression of any opposition, first the Muslim Brotherhood, then the young revolutionaries, and the de facto re-establishment of the old regime in a form much worse than before. The circular nature of this episode is particularly striking.*

*3. Movements which give way to the creation of a new political force. In some cases, movements have created the conditions through which a new political force, different from those habituated to parliamentarism, appears. This was the case in Greece with Syriza where the riots were particularly numerous and harsh, and in Spain with Podemos. These forces have themselves dissolved into the parliamentary consensus. In Greece, with Tsipras, the new government ceded without resistance to the injunctions of the European Commission and is thus sending the country back onto the path of austerity without end. In Spain, Podemos is similarly bogged down in the combinatory game, whether majoritarian or oppositional. Not a trace of true politics has emerged from these organisational creations.*

*4. Movements with some duration but with no notable positive effect. In certain cases, with the exception of a few classic tactical episodes (such as the momentary “overtaking” of classic demonstrations by groups equipped to challenge the police), the absence of political innovation has meant that – on a global scale – the figure of the conservative reactionary has seen renewal. This is the case, for example, in the USA, where the main counter-effect of the “Occupy Wall Street” movement was the rise*

*to power of Trump, or in France, where the pay-off of "Nuit Debout"<sup>2</sup> is Macron. Moreover, the aforementioned Macron was later the sole target of the typically petit bourgeois Gilets Jaunes ('Yellow Vests'). As with all such movements, whose leaders are all frankly hostile to the destruction of bourgeoisie property and rather in reality want stronger State support for such property ownership, the result was nothing more than statist formalities and the sole target was President Macron. The grand result, par for the course for such hoaxes the parliamentary system reserves for its clients, was, finally... the re-election of this very Macron!*

**Thesis 5.** The cause of such impotence in the movements of the last decade is the absence of, even hostility towards, politics. This takes on diverse forms and is recognisable by a number of symptoms. Beneath these negative affects is a constant submission under the fallacious name "democracy" to the electoral ritual.

**Commentary:** As signs of an extremely weak political subjectivity, we may note in particular:

1. Exclusively negative unifying slogans: *"against' this or that, "Mubarak out", "down with the 1%", "we reject the labour law", "nobody likes the police", etc.*

2. The absence of a broad sense of temporality: *as much in terms of a knowledge of the past which is practically absent in movements with the exception of a few caricatures, and to which no inventive assessment [bilan] is proposed, as in future projections which are limited to abstract considerations on liberation or emancipation.*

3. A lexis heavily borrowed from the opponent. *This is principally the case for a particularly evocative category, like "democracy", or in uses of the category of "life", "our lives", which is nothing but an ineffectual investment by collective action in existential categories.*

4. A blind cult of the "new" and an ignorant disregard of established truths. *This is a direct result of the "new" product as cult of the commodity, and a constant conviction that we "begin" things, which, really have already taken place many times. It simultaneously prevents us from learning the lessons of the past and understanding the mechanism of structural repetitions, and leads us to fall into the trap of false "modernities"*

5. An absurd temporal scale. *This scale, traced by the Marxist cycle "money, commodity, money"<sup>3</sup>, assumes that in a few weeks of "movement" one can deal with or even resolve problems that have been hanging for centuries such as private property, or the pathological concentration of wealth that has been pending for millenia; the refusal to consider that a good*

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2Transl. note: Badiou here refers to the 2016 protests against the proposed labour reforms (linked to the so called El Khomri bill).

3Translator note: M-C-M'.

*part of capitalist modernity is no less than a modern version of "Family, Private Property, State", which was established a few thousand years ago, in the Neolithic "revolution". Thus, with regard to the central problems, which constitute it, communist logic is located on the scale of centuries.*

6. A weak relationship to the State. *What is at issue here is the constant underestimation of State resources in comparison to those available to this or that "movement", both in terms of armed force and capacity for corruption. There is an underestimation, in particular, of the efficacy of "democratic" corruption whose symbol is the parliamentary electoral system, as well as of the scope of the ideological domination of this corruption over the vast majority of the population.*

7. A mix of disparate means without drawing up a balance sheet [aucun bilan] of their distant or near past. *There is no conclusion that could be widely popularised to be drawn from the methods implemented at least since the "red years" (1965-1975) or even from the last two centuries, such as factory occupations, union strikes, legal demonstrations, the constitution of groups whose aim is to make local confrontation with the police force possible, the storming of buildings, the imprisonment of the managers in their factories... nor of their static symmetries, for example, in the squares invaded by crowds, long and repetitive hyperdemocratic assemblies where all are summoned whatever their ideals or linguistic abilities to speak for three minutes, and out of which the goal is ultimately the predictable repetition of the exercise.*

**Thesis 6.** It is necessary to remember the most important experiences of the recent past, and to think through their failures.

**Commentary:** From the red years to today.

*The commentary on the fifth thesis may well seem rather polemic, even pessimistic and depressing, particularly for the young people who, for a time, may legitimately be enthused by all forms of action for which I ask a critical re-examination. This is understandable if we recall that I personally in May '68 and its aftermath experienced and participated with enthusiasm in something of quite the same sort, and that I was able to follow for long enough to take measure of their weaknesses. So I have the feeling that the recent movements exhaust themselves by repeating, under the hallmark of the new, well-known episodes of that which we might call the "right" of the May '68 movement, whether this right came from the classical left or from the anarchist ultra-left which, in its own way, already spoke of "forms of life", whose militants we called "anarcho-desiring."*

In '68 there were in fact four distinct movements.

1. A student youth revolt.
2. A revolt of the young workers of large factories.
3. A trade union general strike, attempting to control the first two revolts.



4. *The appearance, often under the name of “Maoism” – with a number of rival organisations – of an attempt at a new politics, the principle of which was to draw a unifying diagonal between the first two revolts by endowing them with ideological and fighting force that seemed able to guarantee them a real political future. In fact, this has lasted for at least a decade. The fact that it was unable to stabilize on the historical scale (which I readily acknowledge) should not mean as a consequence that one repeats what happened then without even knowing that one repeats.*

*Recall how, in the elections of June 1968, a majority was put in place that was so reactionary that it could be said that we had rediscovered the “blue horizon” majority of the end of the war of '14-'18. The final result of the elections of May/June 2017, with the landslide victory of that recognised servant of globalized big capital, Macron, should make us reflect on what repeats in all this. All the more so since, in 2022, the identical Macron has been re-elected...*

**Thesis 7.** The politics internal to a movement must be comprised of five characteristics, supported by slogans, strategy, lexicon, the existence of a principle, and a clear tactical vision.

### **Commentary:**

1. The principal slogans must be affirmative and propose a positive determination rather than remaining in complaint and denunciation. *This is even at the price of an internal division once the movement has overcome its negative unity.*

2. The slogans must have strategic justification. *Meaning that they are fed by a knowledge of the previous stages of the problem that the movement places on its agenda.*

3. The lexicon used should be controlled and coherent. *For example: today, “communism” is incompatible with “democracy”, “equality” is incompatible with “liberty”, all positive use of an identitarian vocabulary – “French” or “international community”, or “Islamic” or “Europe” – should be banned, as well as psychological terms – “desire”, “life”, “no-one” – as well as all terms related to the established state systems – “citizen”, “electorate”, and so on.*

4. A principle, what I call an “Idea”, must be continually confronted with the situation, insofar as it carries with it locally a non-capitalist systemic possibility. *Here we must quote Marx’s definition of the singular militant’s embeddedness [mode de presence] within movements: “the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. In all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, not matter what its degree of development, at that time.”<sup>4</sup>*

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4 Marx / Engels 1987, p. 519.



5. Tactically, one must always bring the movement as close as possible to become a body capable of assembling in order to effectively discuss what it really thinks of a situation, such that it can clarify and evaluate it.

*As Marx writes, the political militant is an inseparable part of the general movement, but is uniquely distinct due to her ability to see the movement from an overall [ensemble] perspective and from there to foresee what the next step must be, making no concession with regard to these two points, nor, under the pretext of unity, to the conservative views that can very well dominate, subjectively, even the most important of movements. The experience of the revolutions shows that the crucial political moments most often take the form closest to an assembly, namely, that of a meeting, where the decision to be taken is clarified by the speakers, who may also oppose each other.*

**Thesis 8.** Politics is entrusted with the appropriate duration of the spirit of movements, which must be of the same magnitude as the temporality of States not simply a negative episode in their domination. Its general definition is that, between diverse compositions of people on the largest possible scale, it organises a discussion on slogans which may well be those of the permanent propaganda as well as those of the movements to come. Politics provides the general framework for these discussions – it is a question of affirming, today that there are two divergent paths regarding the general organisation of mankind – the capitalist and the communist. The former is no more than the contemporary form of what has existed for thousands of years, since the Neolithic revolution. The latter proposes a second, systemic, global revolution for the future of mankind; that we exit the Neolithic age.

**Commentary:** *In this way, politics consists of broad discussions that situate locally the slogan that crystallises these two paths in the situation. Being local, this slogan cannot but come from the experience of the masses concerned. It is there that politics learns how the effective struggle for the communist path, whatever its means may be, can be made to exist locally. From this perspective, politics' impetus does not lie in antagonistic confrontation, but in continued enquiry, in situ, of the ideas, slogans, and initiatives which are locally able to bring to life the existence of the two paths, the one being the conservation of what is and the other its complete transformation according to the egalitarian principles the new slogan will crystallise. The name of this activity is "mass labour". Beyond movements, the essence of politics is mass labour.*

**Thesis 9.** Politics is made with people from everywhere [partout]. The diverse forms of social segregation organised by capitalism are unacceptable.

**Commentary:** *This means, particularly for the intellectual youth who has always played a key role in the birth of new politics, the continued journey towards other social strata – particularly to the most deprived where the impact of capitalism is the most devastating – is necessary. In present conditions, in our country as much as on a global scale, priority must be given to the vast nomadic proletariat who, like the peasants of the Auvergne or Brittany in the past, arrive in whole waves and at great risk in order to try to survive as workers since they can no longer live as peasants without land in the country from whence they came. In this case as in all others, the method is that of patient enquiry on the ground (markets, housing estates, homes, factories), the organisation of meetings (however small at the beginning), the codification [fixation] of slogans, their dissemination, the expansion of the base of this work, the confrontation with various local conservative forces, etc. The moment you realise that active obstinacy is the key, this is passionate work. An important step is to organise schools to disseminate knowledge of the global history of the struggle between the two paths, of the present successes and impasses.*

*What was done in the wake of May '68 by those organisations can and must be done once more. We must reconstitute the political diagonal I have spoken of, which remains today a diagonal between the youth movement, various intellectuals, and the nomadic proletariat. Here and there, this is already being done. It is currently the only true political task.*

*In France what has changed is the deindustrialization of the suburbs of the big cities; the remaining working-class resource of the extreme right. This must be fought on the ground by explaining how and why, in only a few years, two generations of workers were sacrificed, and simultaneously by enquiring as much as possible the opposite process. Namely, the brutal industrialization of Asia. Now as before, the labour with the workers is international, even here. In this regard it would be very interesting to produce and disseminate a world worker's newspaper.*

**Thesis 10.** There is no longer any genuine political organisation. The task is thus to find ways to reconstitute it.

**Commentary:** *An organisation is entrusted to set up enquiries, synthesising the mass labour and the local slogans that emerge from them in order to inscribe them in an overall perspective, enriching the movements and ensuring their consequences are long-lasting. An organisation is not judged by its form or procedures as a State is judged, rather, by controlling its capacity to do what it is entrusted to do. Here, we might revisit the dictum of Mao: an organisation is that which can be said to "give back to the masses in a clear form what they have given us in a confused form."*

**Thesis 11.** Today the classical Party form is doomed because it has defined itself not by its capacity to do what Thesis 9 outlines, namely

mass labour, but by its purported pretense to “represent” the working class, or the proletariat.

**Commentary:** *We must break with the logic of representation in all its forms. The definition of political organisation must be instrumental, not representational. Moreover, “representation” should be understood as “the identity of that which is represented”. For identities must be excluded from the political field.*

**Thesis 12.** As we have seen, the relationship to the State is not what defines politics. In this way, politics takes place “at a distance” from the state. However, strategically, the State must be broken, because it is the universal guardian of the capitalist path, in particular because it is the police of the right of private ownership of the means of production and exchange. As the Chinese revolutionaries said during the Cultural Revolution, it is necessary to “break with bourgeois right”. Vis-à-vis the State, therefore, political action is a mixture of distance and negativity. The actual aim is that State become steadily surrounded by a hostile opinion and political spaces that have become alien to it.

**Commentary:** *In this case, the historical balance sheet is very complex. For example, the Russian Revolution of 1917 undoubtedly combined many things: a broad hostility to the Tsarist regime (including, because of the war, in the countryside), a long-standing intense ideological preparation (particularly in the intellectual classes), workers’ revolts leading to genuine mass organisations (baptised “soviets”), soldiers’ uprisings, all, thanks to the Bolsheviks, with an extant organisation which was solid, diversified, and capable of holding meetings with first-rate speakers whose conviction matched their educational talent. All of this formed through victorious insurrections and in an awful civil war that was finally won by the revolutionary camp despite a large-scale foreign intervention. The course of the Chinese revolution ran very differently: the Long March into the countryside, the formation of popular assemblies, a genuine Red Army, and, over a period of some thirty years, an enduring occupation of a large swathe of the North of the country in which it was possible, as the army was being consolidated, to experiment with agrarian and production reform. Moreover, in China, instead of the Stalinist Terror of the 1930s, there was a mass student and worker uprising against the aristocracy of the Communist Party. Without precedent, this movement – the Proletarian Cultural Revolution – is the final example of a politics of direct confrontation with the figures of State power. Nothing of this can be transposed into our situation. But, through this adventure, there is one lesson to be learnt: that the State, in whatever form, can in no case ever represent or define the politics of emancipation.*

*The complete dialectic of every true politics contains four terms:*

*1. The strategic Idea of the struggle between the two paths – communism and capitalism. This is what Mao called the “ideological preparation of opinion”, without which, he said, revolutionary politics is impossible.*

*2. The local investment of this idea or principle by the organisation in the form of mass labour; the decentralised circulation of everything which results from this labour – slogans and victorious practical experiences.*

*3. The popular movements in the form of historical events, within which the political organization works as well for their negative unity as for the sharpening of their affirmative determination.*

*4. If it is the power endowed by the agents of capitalism, the State must be broken, by means of confrontation or siege. And if this is what is at stake in the communist path, it must perish, if needed by revolutionary means, as seen in the fatal disorder of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.*

*Inventing in situ the contemporary disposition of these four terms is the problem, simultaneously practical and theoretical, of our conjuncture.*

**Thesis 13.** The situation of contemporary capitalism involves a sort of disconnect between the globalization of the market and the still largely national character of policing and military control of the population. In other words, there is a gap between the economic state of things, which is global, and its necessary state protection, which remains national. The second aspect resurrects imperialist rivalries in other forms. In spite of this change in form, the risk of war increases. Moreover, war is already being waged across large parts of the world. The politics to come will also have the task, if it can, of preventing the outbreak of a total war, which could this time put the existence of all mankind at stake. It may also be said that the historical choice is as follows: either mankind breaks with the contemporary Neolithic which is capitalism and opens out its communist phase on a global scale, or it remains in its Neolithic phase, with the extreme likelihood of annihilation in an atomic war.

**Commentary:** *Today, on the one hand, the great powers seek to collaborate to maintain the stability of affairs on a global scale (notably by fighting against protectionism), but on the other hand these same powers are blindly fighting for their individual hegemony. The result is the end of obviously colonial practices like those of 19<sup>th</sup> Century France or England, i.e. the military and administrative occupation of entire countries. I propose that the new practise is called 'zoning': in entire zones (Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Mali, Central Africa, the Congo...) States are undermined, annihilated, and the zone becomes a zone of looting, opened to mercenary forces as well as all other global capitalist predators. Or the State is made up of businessmen who are connected by a thousand cords to the big companies of the world market. In vast territories, rivalries*

*intertwine with constantly shifting power relations. Under such conditions only one uncontrolled military incident suffices to bring everything to the brink of war. The sides are already drawn: the United States and their "Western-Japanese" clique on the one side, and on the other, China and Russia; nuclear weapons proliferate. We cannot but recall Lenin's dictum: "Either the revolution will prevent the war or the war will provoke the revolution."*

*One could thus define the absolute ambition of the political work to come: that, for the first time in History, it is the first hypothesis – the revolution will prevent war – that will be realised rather than the second – that war will provoke revolution. As a matter of fact, it was this second hypothesis which materialised in Russia in the context of the First World War, and in China in the context of the Second. But at what price! And with what long term effects!*

*Let us hope; let us act. Anyone - no matter who, no matter where – can begin doing true politics in the sense that this text outlines – and can talk, in turn, to those around them about what they are doing. This is how it all begins.*

Translated by Heather H. Yeung and Frank Ruda

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