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The Speculative Left

Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed./trans. C. J. Arthur

Communism without Marxism?

A friend of mine once provocatively described Alain Badiou as a philosopher who is first and foremost a communist before being, or perhaps even without being, a Marxist. A passage from *Of an Obscure Disaster: On the End of the Truth of State*, which is Badiou's take on the collapse of the Soviet Union, might seem to confirm this bold assessment. Thus, in an otherwise unsurprising rebuttal against all nostalgic and/or posthistorical judgments regarding the "death" of communism, Badiou all of a sudden affirms the invariant and seemingly eternal nature of a certain communist subjectivity:

From Spartacus to Mao (not the Mao of the State, who also exists, but the rebellious extreme, complicated Mao), from the Greek

democratic insurrections to the worldwide decade 1966–1976, it is and has been, in this sense, a question of communism. It will always be a question of communism, even if the word, soiled, is replaced by some other designation of the concept that it covers, the philosophical and thus eternal concept of rebellious subjectivity.¹

Badiou's affirmation of an invariant form of communism in need of an audacious resurrection would seem to put him in the company of a small but significant number of radical thinkers in the late 1980s and early 1990s who likewise seek to salvage a certain communist notion from the simultaneous collapse of so-called totalitarianism and of the revolutionary project that the various state regimes of "really existing socialism" had long ceased to stand for. "The project: to rescue 'communism' from its own disrepute," Félix Guattari and Antonio Negri write in the opening lines of *Communists Like Us*, before explaining what they mean by such an operation: "We need to save the glorious dream of communism from Jacobin mystifications and Stalinist nightmares alike; let's give it back this power of articulation: an alliance, between the liberation of work and the liberation of subjectivity."² Guattari and Negri even seem to anticipate Badiou's very own style when they juxtapose the dream of "communism" with a notion of "democracy" that similarly would have to be saved from its disrepute:

At this juncture the word "democracy" begs redefinition. The word "communism" has clearly been defaced, but the word democracy itself has been trashed and mutilated. From the Greek *polis* to the popular uprisings of the Renaissance and Reformation, from the proletarian rebellions that coexisted with the great liberal revolutions, democracy has always been synonymous with the legitimation of power through the people.³

Like democracy when properly understood, communism would name this invariant process whereby the people constitute themselves as people or, conversely, people constitute themselves as the people in a movement of immanent self-legitimation.

We can also find a defense of communism in an otherwise very different philosophical tradition, one more indebted to Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger than to Gilles Deleuze or Benedict Spinoza. "Communism, without doubt, is the archaic name of a thinking which is still entirely to come," Jean-Luc Nancy thus suggests in *The Compearance*: "When it will have come,

it will not carry this name—in fact, it will not be ‘thought’ in the sense that this is understood. It will be a *thing*. And this thing, perhaps, is already here and does not let us go. But perhaps it is here in a manner that we are unable to recognize.”⁴ Earlier, in *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy had already ventured out into the vast expanses of this unpredictable future: “The community of the interrupted myth, that is, the community that in a sense is without community, or communism without community, is our destination. In other words, it is that toward which we are called, or remitted, as to our ownmost future.”⁵ In this case, to be sure, the future of communism will not be given over to the pure self-immanence of the people as people; instead, it belongs to the core of all future politics, according to the temporality of what is yet to come, to be marked by the radical finitude of each and every community. Communism, in other words, not as the exposure of sheer immanence but as the tracing of a groundless being-in-common, torn away from the nightmarish dreams of immanence and transcendence alike, and incommensurate to all known attributes and properties, whether of substance or of the subject. Nancy concludes:

We have no model, no matrices for this tracing or for this writing. I even think that the unprecedented and the unheard-of can no longer come about. But perhaps it is precisely when all signs are missing that the unheard-of becomes again not only possible but, in a sense, certain. Here the historicity of our history comes in, as does the future-to-come of the suspended meaning of the old word “communism.”⁶

Despite the shift from absolute immanence to radical finitude, in this orientation too we are witnessing a project to salvage an idea or practice of communism from the agonizing history of its own defacement. In a long footnote Nancy even goes on to cite Badiou himself as someone who would be “better placed” to speak of the “paleonymy” (in Derrida’s sense) that would affect the word and concept of “communism.” Nancy quotes the following words from Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject*:

The word “communism” has contracted some mould, that’s for sure. But the roses and the gladioluses, the hairdresses, the sirens and the consoles, were also eaten by moths in that fin-de-siècle poetry which was given the name of “symbolism” and which all in all was a catastrophe. Let us try to be no more communist in the sense of Brezhnev or Marchais than Mallarmé was a symbolist in the manner of Vielé-

Griffin. If symbolism has held up so gloriously well with the swans and the stars, let us see if we can do as much with the revolution and communism. It is because we take the exact measure of their power, and thus of their sharing, that words may be innocent.⁷

If we were to continue along the lines of this shared genealogy, to which we could no doubt add several other proper names, we might indeed have to conclude that Badiou participates in a wider trend to salvage communism, as an unheard-of type of rebellious subjectivity or an unprecedented form of being-in-common, both from its actual fate in the collapsed socialist states and perhaps even from its place throughout the history of Marxism. Nothing could be more misleading, however, than the premise behind this genealogy—namely, that communism may be understood apart from Marxism—just as, conversely, few tasks could be more urgent than specifying the exact relations between communism and Marxism in Badiou's view.

For Badiou, there emerges a speculative type of leftism whenever communism is disjoined, and nowadays supposedly set free, from the historicity intrinsic to the various stages of Marxism. The critique of speculative leftism in this sense is actually a constant throughout Badiou's work. At the same time, though, a common objection among readers of this work holds that Badiou himself, by sovereignly divorcing the theoretical fidelity to an event from any concrete genealogical inscription of the event, over the years increasingly would have painted himself into a similar corner as a dogmatic, absolutist, or even downright mystical thinker. According to this objection, Badiou himself would be yet another example of "left-wing communism" as the "infantile disorder" of Marxism, to use Lenin's well-known words, even if we might have to turn these words around today, following the example set not so long ago by Gabriel and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, in terms of Marxism as the "senile disorder" of an eternally youthful and invariant "leftism."⁸ Once we grasp the logic behind Badiou's critique of speculative leftism, however, we will also be better equipped to address this objection, according to which he himself, if not earlier then ever more clearly so in recent years, falls prey to precisely such a leftist temptation of wanting to be a communist without also being a Marxist.

The Communist Invariants

In what historical conditions does the universal ideological resistance of the exploited take the form of a radical vindication, which bears on the very existence of class contradictions and of the state, and which envisions the process of their annihilation? Key question of universal ideological history: who then is communist?

—Alain Badiou and François Balmès, *De l'idéologie*

The first task consists in refining our understanding of the invariant nature of communist subjectivity briefly recapitulated in *Of an Obscure Disaster*. Badiou originally proposed the idea of invariant communism, or of communist invariants, nearly thirty years ago in his Maoist booklet *Of Ideology*, written in collaboration with the Lacanian psychoanalyst François Balmès. Based in large part on *The Peasant War in Germany* by Friedrich Engels, particularly as seen through the intriguing case of Thomas Münzer, Badiou and Balmès propose that all mass revolutionary uprisings throughout history aspire to realize a limited set of communist principles: “Our hypothesis holds that all the great mass revolts of the successive exploited classes (slaves, peasants, proletarians) find their ideological expression in egalitarian, anti-property and anti-state formulations that outline the basic features for a communist program.”⁹ Such spontaneous rebellion of the exploited masses typically leads to a war of insurrection, in which communism comes to define a general ideological position against the state: “The elements of this general positioning of the insurgent producers are what we call the *communist invariants*: ideological invariants of communist type that are constantly regenerated in the process of unification of the great popular revolts of all times.”¹⁰ We thus can begin to understand at least superficially why the later Badiou, when faced with the many purported “deaths” of Marxism, would want to retrieve this invariant communism as an eternal form of rebellious subjectivity.

We should not forget, though, that the communist invariants are the work of the masses in a broad sense. There is as yet no specific class determination to the logic of revolt in which slaves, plebeians, serfs, peasants, or workers rise up against the powers that be: “The communist invariants have no defined class character: they synthesize the universal aspiration of the exploited to topple every principle of exploitation and oppression. They emerge on the terrain of the contradiction between masses and the

state.”¹¹ In this broad-based resistance against the state apparatuses lies the unlimited power and energy of the masses; in fact, the authors see no other reason why communists should have infinite confidence in the people as such. Badiou and Balmès, however, also argue that this massive ideological communism remains deficient without the historical means for its realization. As a rule, they even posit a certain counterfinality at the root of history. That is to say, most often the spontaneous revolt of the masses is appropriated and diverted by those historical forces that are in the process of becoming dominant precisely as an unintended effect of the revolt itself. This is the argument, so frequently used for the sake of a reactionary disavowal, about how history always seems to proceed behind the back of the masses. Engels himself is forced to admit at the end of his study that the princes were the only ones to profit from the Peasant War. Similarly, the Jacobins are often said merely to have paved the road for the bourgeoisie, just as the rebellious spirit of the students and workers who took to the streets in the late 1960s, unbeknownst to themselves, would have worked to the benefit of the newly emergent technocrats.

Within any ideological struggle, we can thus distinguish a minimum of three factors. First, we find the relatively *old form* of the revolt, that is, the ideology of the old dominant classes, as when the religious ideology of Protestantism is used heretically to organize the peasants in Münzer’s Germany. Second, we have the *unchanged content* of the communist program, that is, the immediate popular substance of all great revolts, from Spartacus to Mao. Finally, true *historical novelty* is the work no longer of the masses in general but of that specific fraction or class which, under the given circumstances, is able to take hold of the moment for its own long-term benefit: “Ideology, seized as a conflictual process, always puts into play a triple determination: two class determinations (old and new, counter-revolutionary and revolutionary), and one mass determination (the communist invariants).”¹² The real key in the discussion over the historicity of communism, as opposed to its spontaneous eternity, lies in this difficult dialectic of masses and classes, in which both get caught at cross-purposes in the uneven struggle between the old and the new.

With the revolt of the proletariat, however, there supposedly would come an end to the rule of historical counterfinality. Instead of seeing their egalitarian demands co-opted and drained for the benefit of the newly emergent dominant classes, the workers who after the massive revolts of 1848 in Europe organize themselves as proletariat would be the first historical force actually to take control of the basic communist program: “With the

proletariat, ideological resistance becomes not only the *repetition* of the invariant but also the mastery of its *realization*.¹³ This unique moment of course coincides with the birth of Marxism. The latter in fact is nothing but the accumulation of the knowledge conveyed by the millenarian ideological struggle around the communist invariants—including many of the failed revolts from past centuries, whose broken and repressed memory is never entirely lost but rather haunts the present as its uncanny and shadowy double: “Marxism-Leninism is that which avers that the proletariat, heir to a secular ideological struggle surrounding the communist program, is also the realizer of this heritage. Marxism-Leninism not only accumulates the ideological resistance but also transforms it into knowledge and project.”¹⁴ Marxism and communism thus rely on each other in a paradoxical history of eternity—that is, the historical unfolding of an eternal revolt. Let us say: Marxism without communism is empty, but communism without Marxism is blind.

Only under the direction of the proletariat would the complete dialectic of masses, classes, and the state become adequate to its historical task. As for the materialist question regarding the specific conditions that make this adequation possible, suffice it to say that it is capitalism itself that first brings into existence and then organizes the proletarian revolutionary capacity. The proletariat is even said to acquire an unprecedented logical and epistemological capacity. Perhaps, then, we are not so far removed after all from the central idea in Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*. “The proletariat is the producer of the first logic of the revolution,” Badiou and Balmès solemnly claim: “In this sense, the proletarian ideology, in its concrete form of Marxism-Leninism, stops being the resistance displayed on the basis of the radical but historically utopian critique of class society in general, so as to become the revolutionary knowledge of this society and, consequently, the organizing principle of its effective destruction.”¹⁵ This also means that, in the absence of an organized accumulation of critique, the spontaneous and immediate antagonism of masses against the state runs the risk of quickly being reversed. As Badiou and Balmès warn while reflecting back upon May 1968 in France: “This purely ideological radicality inevitably changes over into its opposite: once the mass festivals of democracy and discourse are over, things make place for the modernist restoration of order among workers and bosses.”¹⁶ The regeneration of the invariant communist program, in other words, is a powerful but insufficient weapon: “We say that, left to its own devices, abandoned to the unilateral exaltation of libertarian tendencies, this regeneration does not outlive the movement

itself of which it is the reflection, and it ineluctably reverses into capitulation, into ideological servilism.”¹⁷ Unless of course it is to remain an ideal that will be always yet to come, communism names the real movement that abolishes the present state of injustice only when it is historically tied to the various stages of Marxism.

Marxist Politics

We must conceive of Marxism as the accumulated wisdom of popular revolutions, the reason they engender, and the fixation and precision of their target.

—Alain Badiou, *Théorie de la contradiction*

We might also ask somewhat bluntly: What do Badiou’s critics mean when they deplore the fact that he would not (or would insufficiently) be a Marxist? “Marxism” in this context seems to stand alternatively for a philosophy, a science of history, or, above all, a critique of political economy. Badiou would not be able to give us an up-to-date critique of global capitalism, or of the new world order. No matter how sophisticated they may well turn out to be in their own right, though, such readings nonetheless fail to grasp the strictly political significance of Marxism. Paul Sandevince, in the brochure *What Is a Marxist Politics?* published by the Maoist organization in which both he and Badiou were active until the early 1980s, sums up this significance with his usual concision: “Marxism is not a doctrine, whether philosophical or economical. Marxism is the politics of the proletariat in its actuality,” and later: “Marxism is the politics of communism.”¹⁸ “Science of history?” Badiou also wonders in disbelief about the nature of Marxism in his *Theory of the Subject*, only to serve up a firm rebuttal of his own: “Marxism is the discourse through which the proletariat supports itself as subject.”¹⁹ Though Marxism is no less unable than any other form of knowledge to make a totality out of the constitutive dispersion of history, it nevertheless cannot be grasped outside the framework of periodized referentiality in which communism becomes part of a real historical movement.

There are two perspectives, or two directions, from which we might read the problem of historical referentiality which alone organizes the communist invariants and thereby gives structure to the body of accumulated knowledge that is Marxism. If we start mainly from within this corpus itself, the question becomes one of periodizing the systematizations to which the substance of mass revolts, under the guidance of the proletariat, becomes

subject in the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, and so on. Rather than concentrating on the discovery of a new, structural type of causality in *Capital* or even, for that matter, on the *Grundrisse* as the dynamic center of Marxian thought, Badiou and his friends thus always favor the more historical and interventionist writings, such as Engels's *The Peasant Revolt in Germany*, Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* or Mao's *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War*, in addition to the all-too-obvious choice of *The Communist Manifesto*. Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism are thus tied to the principal episodes in an otherwise orthodox periodization of revolutionary activity:

The great stages of Marxism are punctuated by the proletarian revolutions and, precisely, the great Marxists are those who have directed and synthesized the findings of the theory, ideology, and politics of the proletariat in the light of these same revolutions: Marx and Engels for the Paris Commune, Lenin and Stalin for the October Revolution, Mao Zedong for the Cultural Revolution.²⁰

Much of Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* and several of his recent investigations and talks that will be taken up in *Logics of Worlds* deal extensively with this periodization, most notably through a new appraisal of the rapport between history and politics in the Paris Commune and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. These texts actually form a strong component of historical materialism that is necessarily contained within the materialist dialectic according to Badiou.

This first historical perspective does not pretend foolishly to ignore the crisis that affects every piece of knowledge associated with Marxism. To the contrary, as Badiou declares in a seminar from *Theory of the Subject*, dated as early as November 7, 1977, at the height of fame and media-coverage of the New Philosophers:

Yes, let's admit it without beating around the bushes: Marxism is in crisis and atomized. Past the élan and creative scission of the sixties, past the national liberation struggles and the cultural revolution, we inherit, in times of crisis and the threat of war, a fragmentary and narrow disposition of thought and action, caught in a labyrinth of ruins and survivals.²¹

However, this unabashed admission of the sense of an ending does not foreclose the possibility, and perhaps even the obligation, to give Marxism a new

beginning. “To defend Marxism today means to defend a weakness,” Badiou may well state in the same seminar from *Theory of the Subject*, but then he adds: “We have to *do* Marxism.”²² For Badiou and his friends, this means first and foremost to take cognizance not so much of the solutions as of the problems left unsolved during the last revolutionary sequence from the twentieth century, the one marked by the name of Mao Zedong. As we can read in another brochure from their Maoist organization, published several years after the death of the Chairman:

Today, a Marxist is someone who, in the framework of an organized politics, makes an effort to resolve on his or her own the PROBLEMS left hanging by the initial Maoism, the Maoism of Mao Zedong, the Maoism that is contemporary to the Cultural Revolution. Except for this, there is no other Marxism.²³

One thus necessarily must remain a Marxist even, or especially, when it comes to understanding the unresolved problems of Marxism: “We must study contemporary history and practice historical materialism with regard to Marxism itself.”²⁴ There is no need for a post-Marxism.

Another perspective from which to read the problem of historical referentiality would move in the opposite direction, starting from the emancipatory events of the past two centuries themselves and studying when and where they rely for support on the discourse of Marxism. Once again following the arguments of his friend Sandevince, Badiou outlines three such moments or referents in *Can Politics Be Thought?* which contains his contributions to the early 1980s seminar at the Center for the Philosophical Study of the Political, organized by Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in Paris. These three moments correspond to the workers’ movement, the victorious formation of socialist state regimes, and the national liberation struggles. The sense of an ending is no less painfully obvious from this perspective, to be sure, than from the first one. Indeed, nothing seems to be left standing in terms of Marxism’s capacity to lay claims upon history after the collapse of the Soviet Union, after the revealed capacity for military expansion of liberated countries such as Vietnam, and especially after the appearance of workers’ movements such as Solidarity in Poland that are openly anti-Marxist:

The great historical mass pulsations no longer refer to Marxism since — at least — the end of the Cultural Revolution: Look at Poland, or

at Iran. Because of this we see an expatriation of politics. Its historical territoriality is no longer transitive to it. The age of auto-referentiality is closed. Politics no longer has a historical homeland.²⁵

However, from this point of view, too, there is space for a possible re-composition, even a second birth, of Marxism. Badiou proposes in particular not just to repeat but to reinvent Marx's founding gesture in *The Communist Manifesto*, which consists in listening to the social hysterias of the 1840s only to answer them with the hypothesis of a hitherto nonexistent political capacity. "If Marxism today is indefensible, it is because we have to start it," Badiou claims: "We must redo the *Manifesto*."²⁶ Even in Marxism's irredeemable loss of referents, more emphasis should fall on the question of referentiality than on the melancholic experience of loss. This also means that one should be the subject, rather than the cynical object, of the crisis and destruction of Marxism. "What does it mean to be a Marxist today?" Badiou asks before venturing an answer of his own: "To stand for Marxism means to occupy a place that is destroyed and, thus, uninhabitable. I posit that there exists a Marxist subjectivity that inhabits the uninhabitable."²⁷ In the end, the important point remains that, without the consistency of a previously invisible political subjectivity, without the hypothesis of an unwarranted capacity of nondomination, or without the ability to give organizational form to the wager of an invariant communism, there is not a breath of life to be found in the whole doctrinal body of Marxism.

Critique of Pure Leftism

It is never "the masses," nor the "movement" that as a whole carry the principle of engenderment of the new, but that which in them divides itself from the old.

—Alain Badiou, *Théorie de la contradiction*

Where do we stand today with regard to the dialectics between masses, classes, and the state, between the people and the proletariat, or between the dispersed elements of an invariant and generic communism and the organized forms of knowledge concentrated in the writings of Marxism?

Everything would seem to indicate that, in an era marked by the end of referentiality, all that is left in the eyes of our most radical contemporary thinkers is the unlimited and spontaneous affirmative energy of pure communism, purged of all its historically compromising and/or saturated ties

to the parties, groups, organizations, or state regimes that once invoked the now infamous names of Marx, Lenin, or Mao. The Yanan-Philosophy Group in Badiou's Maoist organization even charges that all revisionist tendencies in French thought—not only among the so-called New Philosophers but also among Deleuzeans, Althusserians, and Lacanians—can be said to presuppose categorical oppositions that seek to stamp out any possible diagonal term—whether class, party, or organization—between the masses and the state:

The political essence of these “philosophies” is captured in the following principle, a principle of bitter resentment against the entire history of the twentieth century: “In order for the revolt of the masses against the state to be good, it is necessary to reject the class direction of the proletariat, to stamp out Marxism, to hate the very idea of the class party.”²⁸

Today, I would risk to add that we find a similar principle at work not only in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's argument over multitude and empire but also among other thinkers who are still variously influenced by the opposition emblemized in Pierre Clastres's *Society Against the State*, starting from the relation of exteriority between war machine and state apparatus, as posited by Deleuze and Guattari in their *Nomadology*, all the way to the very recent repetition of a similar scheme in Miguel Abensour's *Democracy Against the State*. In all these cases, leftism involves a reified external opposition, one as radical as it is politically inoperative, along the lines of the spontaneous and unmediated antagonism between masses and the state discussed by Badiou and Balmès. This is communism without Marxism, as if all that is left were nothing but the communist invariants outside their determination in terms of a specific historical class, fraction, party, or other, guided by the knowledge referred to in Marxism.

Badiou, however, has always argued against the leftist operation that radically unties the dialectical knot between masses, classes, and state, or between communism and Marxism. We can actually find a number of variations on this theme, a detailed overview of which would produce some sort of critique of pure leftist reason.

1. There is first of all the philosophical variation which opposes *place* and *force*, or *structure* and *tendency*, as discussed in *Theory of Contradiction* and *Of Ideology*. On this view, leftism ignores the fact that every force is necessarily determined by a system of assigned places in which it finds its space.

This structural element inherent in every tendency is neglected in favor of a viewpoint of pure, unlimited, and affirmative becoming, as in many a “movementist” tendency fostered by May 1968: “If, indeed, one neglects the structural element, one takes the tendency for an accomplished state of affairs.”²⁹ Everything thereby fuses into the being of pure becoming.

2. In the moral variation, we have the familiar dualism of *freedom* and *necessity*, or of *autonomy* and *determinism*, which Badiou attributes to the hidden Kantianism of the authors of *Anti-Oedipus*. “Deleuze and Guattari don’t hide this much: return to Kant, here’s what they came up with to exorcise the Hegelian ghost,” Badiou charges: “The old freedom of autonomy, hastily repainted in the colours of what the youth in revolt legitimately demands: some spit on the bourgeois family.”³⁰ Moreover, Badiou finds that this moral dualism also underlies the oppositions between *subject-groups* and *subjected groups* as well as between the *molecular* and the *molar*.

3. In the political variation, we find the dualisms of *plebes* and *state*, or of *students* and *cops*, especially during and after May 1968. These too receive a harsh critique. “There is not only the law of Capital, or only the cops. To miss this point means not to see the unity of the order of assigned places, its consistency. It means falling back into objectivism, the inverted ransom of which consists by the way in making the state into the only subject, whence the antirepressive logorrhea,” Badiou warns in *Theory of the Subject*. “It is the idea that the world knows only the necessary rightist backlash and the powerless suicidal leftism.”³¹ Critics of the necessarily repressive or totalitarian nature of the state can then pontificate endlessly about the virtues of the masses, or of civil society, without even for a moment taking their eyes off the fascinating omnipotence of the state’s coercive and hegemonic machinery.

4. Finally, we also obtain a psychoanalytical variation on the same theme in terms of the dualism of *tuchè* and *automaton* that roughly corresponds to the encounter with the real and the automatism of the reality principle. In *Can Politics Be Thought?* Badiou not only draws on this Aristotelian conceptual dyad by way of Lacan but also applies it to the rather more deconstructively inspired arguments of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe regarding the retreat of the political: “The thought of the essence of the political as retreat slips into the distance, which is almost nil and which our time makes into its misfortune, between fortune and repetition, between *tuchè* and *automaton*.”³² In this case, the anticipation of the transcendental conditions of possibility of an unforeseeable event or encounter with the real, which are also

always its conditions of impossibility, is substituted for the actual interruption of the automatism of capital.

Given this ongoing critique of the speculative Left in all its variations, to what extent can we say that Badiou himself is capable of resisting the leftist temptation? Have not most of his critics, including Slavoj Žižek, Peter Hallward, Françoise Proust, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Daniel Bensaïd, suggested in one way or another that Badiou is actually one of the most formidably dogmatic leftists of our time? In the exemplary words of Bensaïd:

The absolute incompatibility between truth and opinion, between philosopher and sophist, between event and history, leads to a practical impasse. The refusal to work within the equivocal contradiction and tension which bind them together ultimately leads to a pure voluntarism, which oscillates between a broadly leftist form of politics and its philosophical circumvention. In either case, the combination of theoretical elitism and practical moralism can indicate a haughty withdrawal from the public domain, sandwiched between the philosopher's eventual truth and the masses' subaltern resistance to the world's misery.³³

This hard judgment, however, cannot absorb a single element in the long-standing critique of leftism that we find throughout Badiou's writings. Even *Being and Event*, a book which the sheer power of mathematical abstraction at every turn of the page almost seems to push in the direction of dogmatism, seeks to avoid the traps of a relation of pure exteriority between its two founding terms. As a matter of fact, it is precisely at the heart of this book that we find an acute definition of the speculative Left as the temptation to turn the notion of a political intervention, for example, into the blind voluntaristic or miraculous event of an ultra-one, or an absolute beginning, utterly cut off from the structure of the situation at hand. "We can call *speculative leftism* every thinking of being supported by the theme of an absolute beginning. Speculative leftism imagines that the intervention is authorized only by itself, and breaks with the situation with no other support than its own negative will," Badiou writes. "Speculative leftism is fascinated by the ultra-one of the event, and thinks it is possible in its name to deny all immanence to the structured regime of the count-for-one."³⁴ Badiou's own philosophy, in my view at least, does not pretend to save the purity of the event by haughtily withdrawing from all immanence and situatedness. The point is to study the consequences of an event within the

situation, not to elevate the event into a wholly other dimension beyond being.

More important, however, I wonder why all those critics mentioned above, in their implicit or explicit quest for a more historically or dialectically grounded mediation between being and event, cannot find a meeting place somewhere in between, whereby they might find an accomplice rather than an adversary in Badiou. I admit that such a renewed understanding of the common project to think an emancipatory politics would entail a radical overhaul of some of our most deeply ingrained intellectual habits—such as the habit of polemicizing among fractions within the Left, always positioning oneself relative to other speakers in terms of a neither/nor response, rather than in the inclusive terms of a both/and stance, or the habit of preferring the self-destructive radicalism of an ever more vigilant deconstruction over and above the making of a common front. Without in turn wishing to speculate about this, in these times of global political reaction few tasks seem to me more urgent than actively and historically to reconstruct the positive elements, beyond the polemics, that many of these thinkers share in their common rejection of speculative leftism.

Notes

- 1 Alain Badiou, *D'un désastre obscur: Sur la fin de la vérité d'Etat* (La Tour d'Aigues: L'Aube, 1998), 14; in English, "Philosophy and the 'Death of Communism,'" in *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, trans./ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London: Continuum, 2003), 131.
- 2 Félix Guattari and Antonio Negri, *Communists Like Us: New Spaces of Liberty, New Lines of Alliance*, trans. Michael Ryan (New York: Semiotext[e], 1990), 7, 19.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 4 Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-Christophe Bailly, *La Comparution (politique à venir)* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991), 62. In English, "La Comparution/The Compearance: From the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence,'" trans. Tracy B. Strong, *Political Theory* 20:3 (1992): 377.
- 5 Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986), 177. In English, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 71 (translation modified).
- 6 Nancy and Bailly, *La Comparution*, 100/393 (translation modified).
- 7 Badiou, *Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 115, qtd. in *La Comparution*, 63 n. 5/394 n. 5 (translation corrected).
- 8 Compare Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Le gauchisme, remède à la maladie sénile du communisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), and Lenin's classic *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, trans. Julius Katzer, in *Lenin's Collected Works*, vol. 31 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 17–118.

- 9 Alain Badiou and François Balmès, *De l'idéologie* (Paris: François Maspero, 1976), 67. Ernesto Laclau early on discusses the hypothesis of communist invariants, which according to him are actually neither communist nor invariant, in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: New Left Books, 1977), 167–72. If Laclau finds Badiou and Balmès's argument wanting, though, this can also be explained at least in part by the fact that he seeks to produce an opposition similar to the masses/state opposition, this time in the Gramscian terms of people/power bloc.
- 10 Badiou and Balmès, *De l'idéologie*, 67.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 69. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari salute the originality of this dialectic of masses and classes in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and foreword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Like Laclau, however, they have serious reservations: "But it is difficult to see, first of all, why masses are not themselves historical variables, and second, why the word is applied only to the exploited (the 'peasant-plebeian' mass), when it is also suitable for seigneurial, bourgeois masses, or even monetary masses" (537 n. 20).
- 13 Badiou and Balmès, *De l'idéologie*, 74.
- 14 Ibid., 75.
- 15 Ibid., 96, 79.
- 16 Ibid., 83.
- 17 Ibid., 84.
- 18 Paul Sandevince (pseudonym for Sylvain Lazarus), *Qu'est-ce qu'une politique marxiste?* (Marseille: Potemkine, 1978), 6. For a more detailed account of Badiou's Maoist organization, UCFML (Union des Communistes de France marxiste-léniniste), see my article "Post-Maoism: Badiou and Politics," *positions: east asia cultures critique* (forthcoming).
- 19 Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, 62.
- 20 UCFML, *Sur le maoïsme et la situation en Chine après la mort de Mao Tsé-Toung* (Marseille: Potemkine, 1976), 3.
- 21 Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, 198.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 UCFML, *Questions du maoïsme: De la Chine de la Révolution Culturelle à la Chine des Procès de Pékin* (Paris: Potemkine, 1981), 10.
- 24 UCFML, *Sur le maoïsme et la situation en Chine après la mort de Mao Tsé-Toung*, 1–2.
- 25 Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 56.
- 26 Ibid., 56, 60.
- 27 Ibid., 55.
- 28 UCFML/Groupe Yénan-Philosophie, "Etat de front," *La situation actuelle sur le front philosophique* (Paris: François Maspero, 1977), 12.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Badiou, "Le flux et le parti (dans les marges de l'Anti-Ceïpe)," *La situation actuelle sur le front philosophique*, 31–32. In English, "The Flux and the Party: In the Margins of Anti-Oedipus," trans. Laura Balladur and Simon Krysl, *Polygraph* 15–16 (2004): 75–92.
- 31 Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, 60, 30. In *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory after May '68* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), Peter Starr devotes much of his argument to the paralyzing effects of this kind of dualism and the search for "third way" solutions

among members or fellow travelers of Tel Quel. Unfortunately, he does not deal with a single text by Badiou. Kristin Ross, in her more recent *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), also fails to study the long and complex prehistory behind Badiou's notion of the "event," mentioned in her introduction, which otherwise is one of the most loyal thoughts transmitted to us from May 1968.

- 32 Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* 11.
- 33 Daniel Bensaïd, "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event," in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004), 101.
- 34 Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), 232–33. A much earlier use of the expression *speculative leftism* can be found in Jacques Rancière, *La leçon d'Althusser* (Paris: Galimard, 1974): "The double Althusserian truth after May 1968 finds itself shattered between two poles: the speculative leftism of the all-powerful ideological apparatuses and the speculative zdanovism of the class struggle in theory, which interrogates each word in order to make it confess its class" (146; see also 110 n. 1 regarding the search for an "absolute beginning" as the sign of an ultraleftist interpretation of the link between Althusserianism and Maoism).

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