

II Communists Without Communism?

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What I have to say is quite simple and you will probably find it simplistic. But if we are requested to make fresh sense of the word 'communism', we may have to restage some very simple issues and take into account some very simple facts. The first fact, I think, that we have to take into account is the following: communism is not only the name of glorious movements and infamous state powers of the past, it is not a left-over or cursed name that we should have the heroic and perilous task to retrieve. 'Communist' is the name of the party that rules over the most populous nation and one of the most prosperous capitalist powers today. This linkage between communism, absolute state domination and capitalism should not be left out of the scope of a reflection on what communism may mean today.

My own reflection here will start from a simple statement that I found in an interview given by Alain Badiou to *L'Humanité*, the newspaper of the French Communist Party: 'The communist hypothesis is the hypothesis of emancipation.' As I understand it, it means that the signification of the word 'communist' is intrinsic to practices of emancipation. Communism is a form of universality constructed by those practices. I entirely agree with the statement. Now the point is to know what 'emancipation' means, in order to define the idea of communism that it implies.

Not surprisingly, I will start from what is in my view the most consistent and powerful idea of emancipation, the idea formulated by the thinker of intellectual emancipation, Joseph Jacotot. Emancipation is the way out of a situation of minority. A situation of minority is a situation in which you have to be guided because following the path with your own sense of direction would lead you astray. It is the logic of the pedagogical process in which the schoolmaster starts from the situation of ignorance which is that of the student and progressively replaces ignorance by knowledge, his knowledge, and progressively takes the student away from a situation of inequality to lead him or her 'towards' a situation of equality. It is also the logic of Enlightenment in which the cultivated elites have to guide the

ignorant and superstitious lower classes in the path of progress. This is, Jacotot said, the way of infinite reproduction of inequality in the name of a promise of equality. The process leading the ignorant to science and the lower classes to the modern life of republican progress is predicated in fact on the gap separating the intelligence of the master from the intelligence of the ignorant. What separates the first from the second is quite simply the knowledge of ignorance. This is the inegalitarian principle. Its opposite, the egalitarian maxim, can be summed up in two principles: firstly, equality is not a goal; it is a starting point, an opinion or a presupposition which opens the field of a possible verification. Secondly, intelligence is not divided, it is one. It is not the intelligence of the master or the intelligence of the student, the intelligence of the legislator or the intelligence of the artisan, etc. Instead it is the intelligence that does not fit any specific position in a social order but belongs to anybody as the intelligence of anybody. Emancipation then means: the appropriation of this intelligence which is one, and the verification of the potential of the equality of intelligence.

The way out of the pedagogical presupposition (that there are two sorts of intelligence) entails a way out of the social logic of the distribution of positions, as it has been formulated in Plato's *Republic* by way of two statements about why the artisans have to do their own job and nothing else: firstly, because work does not wait, secondly because the divinity has given them the aptitude for doing this job, which means the inaptitude for doing anything else. The emancipation of the workers thus means the affirmation that work can wait and that there is no specific 'aptitude' of the artisan. It entails the possibility of breaking the links of 'necessity' tying an occupation to a form of intelligence, the affirmation of the universal capacity of those who were supposed to have just the intelligence of their job, which means the intelligence or unintelligence befitting their subordinate position.

Emancipation means the communism of intelligence, enacted in the demonstration of the capacity of the 'incapable': the capacity of the ignorant to learn by himself, says Jacotot. We can add: the capacity of the worker to let his eyes and his mind escape from the work of his hands, the capacity of a community of workers to stop work even though it does not wait and even though they need it for their livelihoods, to transform the private space of the workshop into a public space, to organize production by their own forces or to take on the task of governing a city that its rulers have deserted or betrayed, and many

other forms of egalitarian invention that demonstrated the collective power of emancipated men and women.

I said: we can add. This means: we can draw a deduction from the thesis of the communism of intelligence to forms of collective implementation of this communism. This is where the difficulty appears. How far can the communist affirmation of the intelligence of anybody coincide with the communist organization of a society? Jacotot entirely denied such a possibility. Emancipation, he said, is a form of action that can be transmitted from individuals to individuals. As such it is strictly opposed to the logic of social bodies which is a logic of aggregation governed by laws of social gravitation similar to the laws of physical gravitation. Anybody can be emancipated and emancipate other persons so that the whole of mankind be made of emancipated individuals. But a society can never be emancipated.

This is not only the personal conviction of a maverick individual. Nor is it a mere question of opposing individual emancipation to collective emancipation. The question is: how can the collectivization of the capacity of anybody coincide with the global organization of a society? How can the anarchical principle of emancipation become the principle of a social distribution of tasks, positions and powers? It is about time, I think, to differentiate this problem from the worn-out sermons on spontaneity and organization. Emancipation certainly means disorder, but this disorder has nothing spontaneous about it. Conversely, organization may simply mean the spontaneous reproduction of existing forms of social discipline. What a discipline of emancipation may mean appeared to be a problem for those who, in the century of Jacotot, set out to construct communist colonies, like Cabot, or simply communist parties, like Marx and Engels. Communist communities, like the Icarian community led by Cabot in the United States, failed. They did not fail, as the opinion goes, because individuals could not submit to the common discipline. On the contrary, they failed because the communist capacity could not be privatized. The sharing of the capacity of anybody could not be turned into the virtue of the private communist man. The temporality of emancipation – I mean the temporality of the exploration of collective power – could not coincide with the timetable of an organized society giving to everyone his or her function. Other communities around them did much better. The reason for their success is that they were not made up of communists. They were made up of men and women obeying a religious discipline. But the Icarian community was made up of communists. Therefore the

communism of this community was split from the outset into two parts: a communist organization of everyday life ruled by the Father of the Community, and an egalitarian assembly embodying the communism of the communists. After all, a communist worker is a worker asserting his capacity to talk and to make laws about common affairs instead of merely doing his own job as a 'useful' worker. We must bear in mind that this problem had been sorted out very long ago in Plato's *Republic*: for Plato, workers, meaning the people with iron souls, cannot be communist; only the legislators who have gold in their soul can and must let go of material gold and live, as communists, on the production of non-communist workers. In such a way the Republic can be properly defined as the power of communists over workers. It is an old solution, but it still works in the case of the communist state I mentioned earlier, with the help of a solid troop of guardians.

Cabet had no guardians at all. As for Marx and Engels, they decided to disband the Communist Party they had created and to wait for the evolution of the productive forces to produce true communist proletarians – instead of those silly asses who thought they were their equals, though they did not catch anything of their theory. Communism, they said, is not the gathering of emancipated individuals, attempting to experience collective life as a response to selfishness or injustice. It is the full implementation of a form of universality already at work in the capitalist organization of production and the bourgeois organization of forms of life, of a collective rational power already existing, if in the form of its contrary: the particularity of private interests. The collective forces of communism already existed. What was needed was only the form of their collective and subjective reappropriation.

The only problem was of course the *only* itself. But, as we know, the difficulty could be overturned, thanks to two axioms. Firstly there is a dynamic intrinsic to the actualization of those collective forces. The power of the 'unseparate' which is at work in them tends to burst the forms of capitalist 'privateness'. Secondly, it does so even more as that dynamic shatters all other forms of community, all the forms of 'separate' communities, embodied in the State, religion or traditional social bonds, in such a way that the problem of the *only* was overturned: the collective reappropriation, meant by communism, turned out to be the *only* form of possible community still remaining after the collapse of all other communities.

So the tension between communists and community could be settled. The point is that this settlement tends to erase the heterogeneity of the

logic of emancipation with respect to the logic of development of the social order. It tends to erase what is at the core of emancipation, namely the affirmation of the communism of intelligence or the capacity of anybody to be where she can't be and do what she cannot do. It tends on the contrary to predicate the possibility of communism on the presupposition of her impotence. Now this declaration of impotence is a twofold one. At a first level it makes the creation of a communist subjectivity the consequence of a disempowerment created by the historical process. The proletariat is the class of society which is no longer a class of society but the product of the decomposition of all classes. As such it has nothing to lose except its chains. And what it has to acquire for its empowerment, namely the awareness of its situation, is something that it is *forced* to acquire by the disempowering process. In other words the competence of the proletariat (or the gold of knowledge) belongs to him only as the product of the experience of the 'iron' condition, the experience of factory work and factory exploitation.

But, on the other hand, the condition of the iron man was set up as a condition of ignorance determined by the mechanism of ideological dissimulation. The iron man, which means the individual caught in the mechanism of exploitation, can only see this process upside down, mistaking subjection for freedom and freedom for subjection. That's why his competence cannot be his competence. It is the knowledge of the global process – with its core, the knowledge of ignorance – a knowledge only accessible to those who are not caught up in the grip of the machine, namely the communists as such.

So when we say that the communist hypothesis is the hypothesis of emancipation, we must not forget the historical tension between the two hypotheses. The communist hypothesis is possible on the basis of the hypothesis of emancipation, meaning the collectivization of the power of anyone. It is possible on the basis of the egalitarian presupposition. At the same time the communist movement – meaning the movement defining the creation of a communist society as its goal – has been permeated from its inception by the opposite presupposition: the inegalitarian presupposition with its various aspects: the pedagogical/progressive hypothesis of the division of intelligence; the counter-revolutionary analysis of the French Revolution as the outbreak of individualism, destroying the forms of social solidarity; the bourgeois denunciation of the autodidactic and anarchic appropriation of words, images, ideas and aspirations by the common people, and so on. The hypothesis of emancipation is a

hypothesis of confidence. But the development of Marxist science and of the communist parties mixed it up with its contrary, a culture of distrust based on a presupposition of incompetence.

Not surprisingly, this culture of distrust restaged the old Platonic opposition between the communist and the worker. It did so in a specific form, the form of a double bind, disqualifying the communist impulse in the name of the worker's experience and the worker's experience in the name of the knowledge of the communist avant-garde. Alternatively the worker played the part of the egoistic individual, unable to look beyond the here and now of immediate economic interest, or the part of the expert trained by the long and irreplaceable experience of work and exploitation. The communist in turn played either the part of the individualist anarchist, eager to see his aspirations become real at the risk of overtaking the slow march of the process, or the part of the knowing militant entirely devoted to the cause of the collective. The repression of the golden communist by the iron worker and of the iron worker by the golden communist has been performed by all communist state powers – from the New Economic Policy to the Cultural Revolution – and internalized by Marxist science as well as by leftist organizations. Let us remember, for instance, how my generation moved from the Althusserian assertion of the power of science unveiling the inescapable illusions of the agents of production, to the Maoist enthusiasm for the re-education of the intellectuals by the workers and work factory, at the risk of confusing the re-education of intellectuals through manual labour with the re-education of dissidents through hard labour.

I think that this is one of the major issues at stake if something new is to be thought of, or something forgotten to be revived, under the name of communism. There is not much point, I think, in reviving the idea of communism on the sole basis of the argumentation that indeed it caused a lot of deaths and did many horrible things, but that, after all, capitalism and the so-called democracies also have much blood on their hands. It is the same kind of calculation that compares the number of Palestinian victims of the Israeli occupation with the number of Jewish victims of the holocaust, or the victims of the Nazi holocaust with the millions of Africans subjected to slavery and deportation, the victims of French republican colonization, the Indians massacred in democratic America, etc. This way of making comparisons and hierarchies between evils ends up toppling over into its opposite: the erasing of the differences, the negation of all historical singularities in the name of the equivalence of

exploitation with exploitation which is the last word of a certain kind of Marxist nihilism.

I don't think much time should be devoted to this debate. Nor do I think that it is worth reviving the discussion on spontaneity and organization and the ways to take over state power. The history of communist parties and states can certainly teach us how to build strong organizations and how to take over and keep state power. It does not teach as much about what communism as the power of anybody may look like. So I would agree with Alain Badiou that what counts for us as the history of communism or the history of emancipation is above all the history of communist moments, which used to be moments of vanishing or disruption of state powers and of the influence of instituted parties. A moment is not only a vanishing point in time. It is also a *momentum*: the weight that tips the scales, producing a new balance or imbalance, an effective reframing of what the 'common' means, a reconfiguration of the universe of the possible. Nor is it the time of a mere chaotic whirling of unbound particles. Communist moments display higher forms of organization than the routine of bureaucracy. But this organization is always the organization of a dis-order with respect to the 'normal' distribution of places, functions and identities. Communism is thinkable for us as the tradition created around a number of moments, famous or obscure, when simple workers and ordinary men and women proved their capacity to struggle for their rights and for the rights of everybody, or to run factories, companies, administrations, armies, schools, etc., by collectivizing the power of the equality of anyone with everyone. If something has to be reconstructed under the name of communism, it is a form of temporality singularizing the connection of those moments. Now this reconstruction entails a reviving of the hypothesis of confidence in that capacity, a hypothesis that has been more or less suppressed and eventually destroyed by the culture of distrust in the communist states, parties and discourses.

This linkage between the issue of temporality and the question of what a communist subjective affirmation may mean is certainly central in the contemporary forms of re-assertion of the idea of communism. But it seems to me that the discussion has often been pre-empted by some problematic evidences concerning the logic of the capitalist process. This has happened in two main ways. On the one hand, communism has been strongly reasserted as a consequence of the transformations of capitalism itself. The development of the forms of immaterial production has been presented as demonstrating the connection between two formulas of the

Communist Manifesto, the statement that 'everything solid melts into air' and the statement that the capitalists are their own gravediggers. What capitalism mostly produces today, instead of goods available for private appropriation, is a network of human communication where production, consumption and exchange are no longer separated but match up in the same collective process. So, the content of capitalist production is said to break through the capitalist form, and increasingly turns out to be the same as the communist power of cooperative immaterial labour. Here the latent opposition between the 'iron worker' and the 'golden communist' tends to be sorted out by the historical development of capitalism to the advantage of the latter: in that sense, the less work and workers we have, the more communism we have. The most disturbing point for me is that this victory of the communist over the worker appears more and more as the victory of the communism of Capital over the communism of the communists. In his book *Goodbye Mr Socialism* Antonio Negri cites a statement made by another theorist that the financial institutions, notably the pension funds, are the only institutions presently able to give us the measure of accumulated and unified labour, such that today the capitalist institution could be said to embody the reality of collective labour: a communism of Capital that should be turned into a communism of the multitudes. In his presentation at this conference, Antonio Negri very clearly made the point that this capitalist communism is an appropriation of the common by Capital, which means an expropriation of the multitudes from the common. Now, the point is: how far can we name it communism at all? How far can we assert the rationality of this process? At issue in what is called 'crisis' today is precisely this rationality. The current 'crisis' is in fact the failure of the capitalist utopia that has reigned for the twenty years following the collapse of the Soviet Empire: the utopia of the perfect self-regulation of the free market and of the possibility of organizing all forms of human life according to the logic of that market. A rethinking of communism today must take into account the unheard-of situation of the failure of the capitalist utopia.

The same situation forces us to question another form of contemporary Marxist discourse. I am thinking of the pervasive description of a final state of capitalism producing the triumph of a global petite bourgeoisie embodying the Nietzschean prophecy about the 'last man': a world entirely devoted to the service of goods, the cult of the commodity and the spectacle, the obedience to the superego injunction of 'jouissance', the narcissistic consumption of forms of self-experimentation, etc. This global

triumph of so-called mass individualism is given in those narrations the name of democracy. Democracy then appears as the lived world built by the domination of Capital and the increasing capitalist destruction of forms of community and universality. This narrative can thus construct a simple alternative: either democracy – meaning the despicable reign of the 'last man' – or a 'beyond democracy' for which communism turns out to be the suitable name.

The point is that many people share the diagnosis without sharing the conclusion: among them, right-wing intellectuals bemoaning the democratic destruction of the social bond and the symbolic order; old-style sociologists opposing good social criticism to bad post-'68 'artistic criticism'; new-style sociologists scoffing at our ineptitude in coping with the reign of global abundance; and philosophers calling us to the revolutionary task of saving Capitalism by instilling into it a new spiritual content. In this context the seemingly good alternative (democratic quagmire or communist surge) soon appears problematic: when you have described the infamous reign of global democratic narcissism, you may conclude that therefore we need communism to get out of this mire. But the question then arises: with whom, with what subjective forces, can you imagine building this communism? So the communist summons is at risk of turning into a Heideggerian prophecy calling on us to reverse as we are on the edge of the abyss, or to engage in forms of action designed mainly to hit the enemy and jam the economic machine. The point is that the sabotage of the economic machine is more efficiently implemented by American traders and Somalian pirates. Unfortunately this efficient type of sabotage creates no space for any communism.

A reconsideration of the communist idea today entails the attempt to disentangle the temporality of its forms of possibility from those temporal plots: the plot which discovers the inherence of communism in capitalism, or the plot which treats communism as the last chance for those on the edge of the abyss. Those two temporal plots are still dependent on the two forms of encroachment of the inegalitarian logic on the logic of emancipation: the progressive logic of Enlightenment, giving to Capitalism the privilege of the schoolmaster educating the ignorant workers and leveling the way from the old inequality to the future communism; and the reactive anti-Enlightenment logic identifying the forms of modern lived experience with the triumph of bourgeois individualism over community. The project of reviving the idea of communism makes sense if it involves the task of re-examining those forms of encroachment and the way they

still determine our descriptions of the present. It should involve a reconsideration of the mainstream descriptions of the contemporary world: contemporary forms of capitalism, the explosion of the labour market, the new precariousness of labour and the destruction of systems of social solidarity, all create forms of life and experiences of work that are possibly closer to those of nineteenth-century artisans than to the universe of hi-tech workers and the global petite bourgeoisie given over to the frenetic consumption described by so many contemporary sociologists. Now, the point is not simply about empirical accuracy. It is about the very connection between forms of analysis of the historical process and ways of mapping the possible. We should have learned at last how problematic all strategies based on the analysis of social evolution may be. Emancipation can be neither the accomplishment of a historical necessity, nor the heroic reversal of this necessity. It has to be thought out of its un-timeliness, which means two things: first the absence of historical necessity for its existence, second its heterogeneity with respect to forms of experience structured by the time of domination. The only communist legacy that is worth examining is the multiplicity of forms of experimentation of the capacity of anybody, yesterday and today. The only possible form of communist intelligence is the collective intelligence constructed in those experimentations.

One may object that I define communism in terms not much different from my own definition of democracy. I can answer first that, in my understanding of emancipation, one has to question the classical statement opposing communism to democracy conceived as either the State organization of bourgeois domination, or the lived world framed by the power of the commodity. It is certainly true that democracy can name different things, but the same goes for communism. And the fact is that the combination of the faith in historical necessity with the culture of distrust produces a specific kind of communism: communism as the appropriation of the productive forces by the State power and its management by a 'communist' elite. Again, this is a possible future for capitalism. I don't think it is a future for emancipation. The future of emancipation can only mean the autonomous growth of the space of the common created by the free association of men and women implementing the egalitarian principle. Must we simply call it 'democracy', or is it helpful to call it 'communism'? I see three reasons for the use of the latter: first, it emphasizes the principle of the unity and equality of intelligences; second, it emphasizes the affirmative aspect of the process of collectivization of this

principle; third, it stresses the self-superseding capacity of the process, its boundlessness, which entails its ability to invent futures that are not yet imaginable. On the contrary, I would reject the term if it meant that we knew what this capacity can achieve in terms of global transformation of the world, along with the path leading to this point. What we know is what this capacity is able to achieve now, in terms of dissensual forms of collective struggle, life and thinking. The rethinking of communism entails above all the investigation of the potential of collective intelligence intrinsic to the construction of those forms. This investigation supposes the full restoration of what I have called the hypothesis of confidence.