DO NOT BE AFRAID, JOIN US, COME BACK?

ON THE "IDEA OF COMMUNISM" IN OUR TIME

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Given the recent history of the organized Left, where even the once mammoth Italian Communist Party had to rebrand itself "Democratic" before folding completely, you might be forgiven for expressing some surprise at the recent flurry of books on the theme and contemporary relevance of "communism." And yet since 2009 half a dozen books of political philosophy have been published in English with communism or its direct cognates in the title, books that are by or include significant established or rising luminaries in the field (Badiou 2010; Bosteels; Dean; Douzinas and Žižek; Groys; Noys; Vattimo and Zabala). To this mix we might add Žižek's edited volume of Lenin's 1917 writings (Lenin 2002), with its position-taking 170-page afterword, and the collection *Lenin Reloaded* (Budgen, Kouvelakis, and Žižek) as further evidence of a mini-boom in communist theory, with the topic of these two indicating also the *kind* of communism that is here ascendant.

Granted, most of these books are from the same Verso publishing stable, but it has been many years, if ever, that works on the theme of communism have been the standard fare of this New Left publisher. Any doubt about the relative size of audience for this body of work was put to rest by the conference that functioned as its public coming out, "The Idea of Communism," held at London's Birkbeck Institute of Humanities in March 2009 and convened by Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek. Originally booked for a room accommodating 180 people, the conference was attended by 1,200.

How can we understand this development? Speculation about the causes of the renewed interest in communism has a place in these books themselves, where explanation ranges from the return of economic crisis to a sense that this revival is perhaps an overcompensation

in the realms of theory for the absence of its historical referent. There is some truth to both of these apparently contradictory explanations. The first can stand without elaboration, given the central place of crisis in communist thought. The veracity of the second is more partial, only the case if we understand it to be an explanation of the dominant form that communism takes in this revival. I come to this point in due course, but the article adds little more to the discussion of causes.

My aim instead is twofold: to understand the specific form of communism that is revealed or constituted in these volumes; and to consider what this theory of communism can or cannot contribute to a political understanding of our time. Let me be clear before proceeding further that I find the form of communism that is dominant in these texts to be highly suspect and not very communist at all. This form is closely associated with Alain Badiou, and so his work on communism is my principal focus here. But I approach it through what is the key or aggregating text of this body of work, Douzinas and Žižek's *The Idea of Communism* (henceforth *IC*), the edited collection of papers from the aforementioned conference, which includes many of the authors in Verso's communism series. This book further suggests itself for consideration in being framed as a work of intervention, a product of our time of upheaval—the “return to full-blown history” marked by the 2008 financial crisis and emerging global struggles against neoliberal capitalism (*IC*, viii)—and an invitation to postmodern postpolitics to “get serious once again,” as emblazoned in Žižek's inimitable style on the back cover: “Do not be afraid, join us, come back!” As well as a volume that sets out a stall and aggregates the key authors, the book claims, then, a certain agential power in establishing the field of contemporary politics qua communism, a principled and “serious” engagement with the present. Its fifteen chapters are by no means dominated by Badiou's approach to communism, but he is clearly the ascendant figure, his philosophy and eponymous chapter providing the book's governing theme of the “Idea” of communism. In considering this work my aim is essentially critical, but I also touch on some non-Badiouian takes on communism collected in this volume and in the wider field of contemporary communist thought, most notably “communization” theory. In these approaches I indicate openings to a more adequate thought of communism for our time.

BADIOU'S COMMUNIST IDEA

Perhaps troubled by a potentially idealist or utopian impulse in Badiou's framing of communism as an "Idea," a number of the essays collected in *IC* deploy Marx and Engels's (1974, 56–57) famed formulation that communism is "not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself," but "the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things"—a movement immanent to the world it seeks to overcome, whose "conditions . . . result from the premises now in existence." Unease with Badiou's formulation is understandable, but on first inspection it is not incompatible with Marx (though that soon comes). Badiou's formulation of a political "Idea" comprises three elements: a *truth procedure*—"a concrete, time-specific sequence in which a new thought and practice of collective emancipation arise, exist and eventually disappear"; a *belonging to history*—"a truth procedure is inscribed in the general becoming of Humanity, in a local form whose supports are spatial, temporal and anthropological"; and an *individual subjectivation*—"whereby an individual determines the place of a truth with respect to his or her own vital existence and to the world in which this existence is lived out" (*IC*, 2–3). The Idea, then, is a situated and subjective political composition, a means of specifying the features of what might more conventionally be called a "movement," if by movement we mean a collective subjectivation (a definition I amend below). There is also a generic or invariant quality that identifies the *communism* of an Idea; an insistence on equality, the abolition of property, overcoming of the division of labor, and withering of the State (Badiou 2008, 98–100). It is an invariant set to which Marx, who opposed any writing of political "recipes for the cook-shops of the future," would not have objected (cited in *IC*, 112). But after this we run into difficulties.

There is a pristine clarity to Badiou's formulation; he makes a virtue of it, and the seductiveness of his political philosophy is due in no small part to this style. But Badiou's clarity is symptomatic of an extra-worldly quality to his Idea that presents major difficulties for communist politics. Let me outline two interrelated problems with regard to Badiou's formulation of the Idea and its concrete expression in his analysis of twentieth-century communism. First, his subjective form of communism is constituted exclusively in relation to the terms of a

political “truth procedure” or “sequence,” such that it exists in separation from the material conditions of life that lie outside it. As Peter Hallward describes Badiou’s position, this is “the subtraction of thought from its mediation through experience,” “the world,” all the better for a truth to be “invested with an absolute capacity to change it” (*IC*, 114). To formulate one’s subjectivity otherwise is to compromise with a “world [that] never offers you anything other than the temptation to yield” (Badiou, cited in Hallward 2003, 25).

There are no doubt other sources, but this politics of “subtraction” is essentially a philosophical rendering of the Maoist principle that “the subjective creates the objective,” where material constraint is to be overcome through fidelity to a transcendent purpose bound up in the universal truth of Mao Zedong Thought, of which more below (Schram, 132). Consider how different this approach is to Marx. Marx’s communism proceeds not by positing an autonomous revolutionary subject or truth, but from the immanent critique of capitalist social relations; critique, that is, of the forms that mediate the antagonistic relation between capital and labor, and that arises *from* that relation as the thought and practice adequate to it. It is for this reason that in *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels (1973) insist that “the party”—or, communist thought and practice—is something existent only immanently to social relations, a movement of social relations as a whole. The full meaning and originality of the “real movement” now comes into view. It does not designate a distinct subjectivity or faction, but the antagonistic quality of capitalist social relations, the tendencies, forces, and acts that push toward their overcoming.

Constituted in this fashion, communism is not a continuity in thought and practice, but is emergent from ever changing situations. It looks not to the past but leans into the future, because capital itself is the ever-renewed overcoming of limits (as the drive to accumulate extends and intensifies the exploitation of labor while simultaneously ejecting that labor from the production process, so causing a fall in the rate of profit that must be overcome). Contra Badiou, it is no compromise to come to grips with these dynamic social relations; quite the contrary, they are the very stuff of communist thought and practice. For it is the most contemporary configurations of capitalism that constitute the forms and conflicts from which communism arises and to which it attends. The first problem with Badiou’s Idea of communism,

then, is that in isolating the subjective it severs communism from its field of emergence. The second problem, to which I now turn, is that this communism of the Idea can nurture and extend *capitalist* social relations.

LENIN IN SEQUENCE

The problem with the formal structure of Badiou's Idea becomes more apparent, and the second problem comes into view, in his approach to the historical record of communism, the sequences of the communist Idea. For Badiou, a communist truth procedure or sequence is a rare thing. Indeed, we have had only two: the sequence of the French Revolution to the Paris Commune (1792 to 1871), and that of the Russian Revolution to the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1917 to 1976). Each sequence (here is the seductive clarity again) is characterized by one essential problem, the first sequence by the problem of an insurrectionary movement capable of seizing state power, whose name is "revolution," and the second by the problem of endurance in power, whose name is "party." Fidelity to the event is such that all communists are subjects of the singular problem of each sequence, until it comes to its close (with the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune, with the discrediting of the party in Mao's Cultural Revolution).

Let us examine Badiou's second sequence, opened by Lenin and closed by Mao. It is helpful to do this in some depth, not only because it sheds light on Badiou's thesis, but also because Lenin and Mao—now unmoored from actually existing socialisms and parties—have come to assume a new vitality in contemporary efforts to rethink communism; certainly they have a strong presence in *IC*. As is clear from what follows, I think this a retrograde development that risks overwhelming new communist thought with a nostalgic image of a "real communism" that in practice was nothing of the sort.

Badiou's second communist sequence is characterized by the "centralized and homogeneous class party," with its "iron discipline" capable of seizing and maintaining state power (2008, 108). In these terms Lenin's party was, clearly, a tremendous success. But by identifying communism in this way solely with the truth procedure of the party and disengaging the latter from its material contexts and effects,

Badiou obscures the reality of the Leninist victory, which was a victory not of communism but of capitalism. How so? Advocates for Lenin tend to appeal to his *April Theses* as the proof of his communist credentials, where, siding with left-communist positions against the opinion of the broader leadership in the period between the February and October revolutions, he moved beyond social democratic principles and asserted the need for socialist revolution, championing the distributed power of the workers' soviets. However, it is a point well made by Aufheben that this was an exceptional moment in an otherwise social democratic political trajectory. Shortly before and only a few months after the October revolution, Lenin's position was essentially that of the Second International, the state ownership of productive forces managed toward their progressive maturation into socialism (the anomaly of Leninism is that in Russia, without a parliamentary route, social democracy took a revolutionary form). For Lenin, and Badiou concurs, this move was communist insofar as the party was in command. But if we understand communism as a movement immanent to social life—the abolition of “the present state of things”—rather than as fidelity to a particular subjective form, then we see that what the party commanded was some kind of emergent state capitalism. I will briefly sketch this.

As Rosa Luxemburg points out in an early diagnosis and critique of the ideology of Leninism, Lenin in 1904 favorably compares the “iron discipline” of his model of the party with that of the capitalist factory, the latter providing “discipline and organisation” to the working class (Lenin 1947, 187). This is anathema to Luxemburg, for whom the communist “discipline” of the working class is not that imposed by capital, but resides in “*extirpating, to the last root, its old habits of obedience and servility*” (90, emphasis added). We can better understand Lenin's position if we recognize that for him what matters to the revolution is not the form and content of labor, only its management and the distribution of its product. It is a position in theory that was later manifest in practice, for this isomorphy between party and industrial work was soon succeeded by a more integrated relation, as the Bolshevik party came itself to command the industrial discipline of the Russian working class, what Trotsky (141) championed as the “militarization of labor.” In early 1918 Lenin calls for the systematic adoption of Taylorism, with “*iron discipline while at work,*” “*piece-work,*” “*economic*

competition,” correspondence between wages and productivity, and “*unquestioning obedience* to the will of a single person,” so as to overcome the problem of “the bad [Russian] worker compared with people in advanced countries” (Lenin 1965, 271, 258, 260, 259). It is “the fundamental task of creating a social system superior to capitalism, *namely, raising the productivity of labour*” (257, emphasis added). It is, in other words, capitalist work dressed up in socialist garb. Lenin was also quite prepared (both before and after the revolution) to be more frank: “State Capitalism is incomparably higher economically than our present economic system—that is one point; and secondly, there is nothing in it that is terrible for the Soviet Government, for the Soviet State is a State which guarantees power to the workers and the poor” (Lenin 1921, 13).

Returning to Badiou, it is apparent then that focusing exclusively on the subjective “truth procedure” of the second communist sequence (i.e., the party as expressed in the Soviet state) not only severs politics from its social field of emergence, but obscures how this superficially communist episode actually enforced capitalist relations of production. As such, Badiou seccumbs to what Guy Debord calls the “spectacle” of revolution that was born of the Leninist victory, as the retreat of the revolutionary wave allowed its “fraudulent outcome” to “present itself to the world as the only proletarian solution,” the party as state capitalist “*proprietors of the proletariat*” (§100, §102). Indeed, Badiou’s second sequence as a whole is better understood as that of the spectacle of communism, the yoking of working-class antagonism to the development of capital through the false representation of revolution. Of course, such assessments of Leninism are not of recent origin. Though Badiou presents communist fidelity to the party as proceeding quite untroubled until the Maoist moment of the late 1960s, it actually took considerable effort on the part of the Soviet state and the Communist International to enforce it. Indeed, the capitalist structure of the party sequence was challenged by communists from the very start, before those making the challenge were imprisoned or killed in the name of fidelity to the party-state (Daniels).

COMMUNIZATION AND LIMIT

Thus far, Badiou’s account of the communist sequences is essentially a revived orthodoxy, but in *IC* and other recent works he introduces

a specifically contemporary dimension to his formulation. Badiou now rejects Lenin and the party form, which are deemed no longer useful in the development of a new, third communist sequence. We need, apparently, to retain the “victorious discipline” of the party sequence, but “Marxism, the workers’ movement, mass democracy, Leninism, the proletarian party, the Socialist state . . . are no longer of practical use” (Badiou 2008, 114, 113). Clearly my argument has some accord with Badiou on this point, that contemporary communist politics needs leave much of this baggage behind, but in Badiou the conditions for the break, and its results, take a highly questionable form.

Comparison with recent “communization” theory is instructive here, for this is also keen to mark the discontinuity of the present—and “let the dead bury their dead,” in Marx’s iconoclastic phrase—but it does so in rather different ways (cited in Endnotes 2008a, 3). Communization theory has emerged in part through the communist critique of Leninism that I sketched above, but argues that it is not simply a matter of identifying with the anti-Leninist minorities or the radical expressions of workers’ struggle, for, however unwittingly, these shared the productivist logic of Leninism.¹ This is the historical limit of the workers’ movement, which even as it sought in its more radical moments to abolish labor, did so through the affirmation of its identity as working class, so constituting communism on a subjectivity generated in and as a pole of *capital*. Communism was thus understood to be a question of organizational *form*—most emblematically, the “workers’ council” versus the Leninist party—rather than as practical critique of the *content* of work and capitalist social relations (Dauvé). As such, twentieth-century communism carried the seeds of destruction within it, as its own content turned against itself; staying with the Soviet experience, Bolshevik “counterrevolution” was “the accomplishment *against* [the workers] of *their* revolution” (Théorie Communiste 2008, 174).

As I said, the cause resides in the historical limit of these struggles, not with a misguided understanding of the situation, or indeed with the mendacity of workers’ organizations (though as is clear from the preceding quotation, a difference is still drawn between revolutionary efforts toward the overcoming of capitalism and the counter-revolutionary formation of orthodoxy). This point is shared in its broad strokes by Moishe Postone, who maps the problem through Marx’s

mature theory of capital. According to Postone, the workers' movement and "traditional Marxism" are founded upon a transhistorical understanding of labor, labor "that constitutes the social world and is the source of all social wealth" (Postone, 8). In so mistaking what is a historically specific feature of capitalism alone for a universal human condition, the resultant politics (as we saw in the extreme in Lenin) takes its field of contestation to be distribution and not production, a "new mode of politically administering and economically regulating the *same* industrial mode of production to which capitalism gave rise" (9). Indeed, insofar as this politics imagines itself to be more adequate to industrial production—casting off the constraining "relations of production," overcoming the "anarchy" of the market, self-managing the factory in the workers' own interests—it is something of a source of the affirmation of labor, when a properly Marxian politics should be of its negation. This is an all-too-brief sketch, but we see in it how the workers' movement functioned as a pole internal to capitalist development, the conclusion shared by Postone and communization theory: "However militant the actions and the forms of subjectivity associated with the proletariat asserting itself have been, . . . they did not and do not point to the overcoming of capitalism. They represent capital-constituting, rather than capital-transcending, forms of action and consciousness" (371).

For communization theory, it is only now that this limiting horizon of the affirmation of labor and the positivity of working-class identity can be overcome, after the cycle of struggles of 1968–73 (where the "refusal of work" and struggles over social reproduction started to push beyond and against workers' identity and the workplace as the privileged site of politics) and the subsequent neoliberal restructuring.² This is in large part because the "real subsumption" of labor in capital has reached a point where capital no longer needs an affirmative pole of labor—having found the rigidities of national labor markets, the welfare state, collective wage bargaining and so forth, to be obstacles to valorization—and is instead increasingly self-positing. There is simply no ground, then, upon which to found a positive and enduring workers' identity. The global fragmentation of labor; the long-term decline in real wages; the move to the heart of the wage relation of flexibility, precarity, and unemployment; the tendential rise in surplus population—from all this comes "the impossibility of the proletariat

to relate to itself positively against capital: the impossibility of proletarian autonomy” (Endnotes 2008b, 214). This is of course experienced as a resounding defeat, but for communization theory it is also a considerable opportunity, for the class relation has itself provided the conditions for a communism no longer understood to be a living alternative to capitalism, but its immanent rupture.

How does that work in practice? With the class of labor no longer afforded the role of a positive identity in capitalism, communism ceases to turn on the affirmation of workers’ identity and becomes instead a question of social reproduction as a whole, a condition somewhat forced by the crisis. Contemporary struggles thus tend toward the defensive, toward immediate demands, or to be without demands or “suicidal,” but there is neither resolution nor the satisfaction of identity to be found here, and so these struggles quickly encounter the insufficiency or “limit” of their own content. And in this encounter with limits—at the limit, the “gap” or “rift” so opened—the communist horizon is revealed, negatively, as necessarily the dissolution of capitalist social relations, a dissolution that is immanent to the proletariat itself, so realizing Marx’s formulation of the class of self-abolition: “The proletariat . . . is compelled as proletariat to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property, which determines its existence, and which makes it proletariat” (Marx and Engels 1975, 36). That dissolution is “communization,” which if it arrives will be something like a multiplication of rifts, as the identities of capital (and hence of struggle) are overwhelmed and undone in the production of communist relations (the free distribution of goods and the breakdown of the subject/object dichotomy, abolition of the enterprise and of work, destruction of the state form, overcoming of the separation between production and reproduction, to talk in the most general terms, since the particular content of revolution is necessarily situated and emergent). The swift movement of dissolution—though of course it would be uneven, and take some time—is at once the emergence of communist sociality, and a necessary measure to remove the grounds upon which capitalist relations would return.

As a characterization of the horizon of contemporary communism this thesis has much to recommend it, albeit that it raises many questions. These warrant exploration, though I will note just one here, which concerns one of this theory’s most appealing formulations, that

of communization as “limit” or “rift.” The quintessence of the communization thesis is held in this quotation: “The proletariat is in itself nothing, but a nothing full of social relations: against capital the proletariat has no prospect but its disappearance” (Théorie Communiste 2006, 70). If communization theory thus posits no content, form, or subject, communism turns instead on the *limits* to struggle, where the limit is less a boundary that solicits transgression than the immanent horizon of self-overcoming. Consider this passage: “Communization occurs only at the limit of a struggle, in the rift that opens as this struggle meets its limit and is pushed beyond it. Communization thus has little positive advice to give us about particular, immediate practice in the here and now. . . . What advice it can give is primarily negative: the social forms implicated in the reproduction of the capitalist class relation will not be instruments of the revolution, since they are part of that which is to be abolished” (Endnotes 2012, 28).

The limit, then, is considered to be an immanent feature of all struggles, a means by which they might be constituted, understood, and superseded: “The theory of communization alerts us to the limits inherent in such struggles, and indeed is attentive to the possibilities of a real revolutionary rupture opening up because of, rather than in spite of, those limits” (Endnotes 2012, 29). In this regard, the absence of tactical or subjective content from the theory of the limit has decided benefits, for it compels an immanent appreciation of the specific and mutating nature and quality of limits in particular situations of struggle—the world as it is and not as measured against a programmatic set of principles or preferred organizational forms—of which there is some enticing provisional analysis (see, for instance, Rocamadur/Blaumachen; Théorie Communiste 2006). It also has merit as a *compulsion* to self-critique, an expression of the “restlessness within its very self” that is inherent to the structure of the proletariat as self-abolition, and this complemented with the “aleatory” and eventual quality to its formulation of revolutionary rupture (Marx and Engels 1975, 36; R.S., 138). Yet identifying communization so directly with the limit or rift risks leaving it with a somewhat anemic existence. Even as the concept of the limit tips into the particularities of struggle, it simultaneously teaches that what is found there is only ever identity, “part of that which is to be abolished,” so flattening the complexities of the social world and producing something of a distancing from the content

of struggles, its critical insight being “primarily negative.” It is as if to do otherwise is to risk losing the purity of the negative, the non-identity of the limit, where the terrain of identity is perilous indeed: “The steps of communisation are those of a tightrope walker” (B.L., 157). I understand the concern and appreciate something of the austerity of this theory in that regard. But without theoretical purchase on the complex and overdetermined formations of life and struggle beyond affirmation of the encounter with limits, the risk is that the rift lifts off into a concept with transcendent explanatory value, stepping in as pilot and guarantor of the progressive nature of revolutionary change, as a multiplication of rifts cause a total and near immediate transvaluation of all that hitherto was wholly and completely a part of the reproduction of capital. From a subtle theory of immanent rifts to a transcendent concept of universal transvaluation, the theory of the limit has to do too much work.

I return to this below, but to move on with my argument, the broader point here is that in communization theory the break in our present is conditioned by an understanding of the specificity of contemporary capitalist relations. The break that *Badiou* enacts with the past takes a very different route.

MAO AND NOW

In Badiou’s account of the communist “sequences,” we have a simultaneous resurgence and disavowal of orthodoxy that leaves him unable to move beyond it, having failed to address the capitalist nature of the party sequence or the problems with his Idea of communism that it reveals. It is little surprise, then, that his sketch of the early lineaments of a third sequence is far from promising. Whereas communization theory takes advantage of a world without workable historical precedent to immerse itself in the vicissitudes of contemporary capitalist relations, Badiou heads in the other direction. Worldly determination is left even further behind as his Idea moves from mediating structure—through the determinations, in the previous sequences, of revolution or party—to itself become the constitutive principle. He describes the “general direction” of his third sequence as “a new relationship between the real political movement and ideology,” a “revolutionizing

of minds,” with Mao looming out of the second sequence with sage advice for the third: “To have order in organization, it is necessary first to have order in ideology” (Badiou 2008, 113; Mao cited in Badiou 2008, 113).

This blocked condition arisen from the structure of avowal and disavowal of orthodoxy is most acute in the chapters in *IC* by Judith Balso and Alessandro Russo, which address the point of *closure* of the second communist sequence, the Cultural Revolution (or the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” to give the official title that Badiou sometimes deploys, reveling in his misplaced sense of historical grandeur). Again, if we look only at the subjective form, perhaps we can see a revolutionary transformation in the experience of the Red Guards—certainly there was a lot of “victorious discipline” in their monomania of Mao Zedong Thought. But really, the unleashed brutality of the Cultural Revolution was the result of a split in the governing class of a despotic state capitalism, as Mao sought to regain his authority following the disaster of the Great Leap Forward (1958–62), where some 18 to 45 million died of starvation, overwork, torture, and summary killing in Mao’s efforts to find an ultravoluntarist route to industrialization via the super-exploitation of labor (Dikötter; Knabb; Leys).

In this instance, Badiou’s fidelity to the Maoist truth procedure does admit some incursion of the world outside. He accepts that the Great Leap Forward was in many respects a “cruel failure,” but such an “abstract description of facts” appears to matter less than the “political axiom” with which it is framed—the world is admitted, only to be declared irrelevant. And so the “real [political] meaning” of the Great Leap Forward lies in Mao’s genuine effort to resolve the “contradiction between city and countryside” (Badiou 2010, 107–9). Were that to have been Mao’s aspiration, Badiou’s move is still an astonishing justification for a historical catastrophe—forget the effects, he tells us, it’s the *aim* of the procedure that counts. But historical fact and political interpretation cannot be so easily sundered; Badiou’s interpretation of Mao’s intentions is way off beam, impossible to square with the super-exploitation of the Great Leap Forward, its aim crystallized in its governing slogan: “Catch up with and surpass Britain in 15 years” (cited in He, 413).

Needless to say, this is not the judgment of Balso and Russo, who, with Badiou, repeat the official line that the Cultural Revolution was

Mao's heroic effort to revolutionize the party so as to restart the communist program, against the restoration of capitalist tendencies. Mao's failure in this regard marked the closure of the second sequence, as the party-state is revealed (at last!) to be an inadequate means to communism. Balso and Russo thus uncritically avow the Cultural Revolution and, insofar as it ultimately failed to overturn the party-state, disavow it simultaneously. Only this time, the blocked experience of avowal/disavowal results in the rejection of communism in total, albeit framed mostly as a rejection of its *name*, which can survive for Russo as a project of philosophy but "[d]eclaring 'communism' as the name for a contemporary political enterprise would soon lead to deadlock" (*IC*, 191). The significant question is not, of course, whether the *name* of communism is or is not a means of regroupment, but such disavowal of the relation between politics and this name does rather suggest an absence of the ambition that was supposed to animate *IC*.

COMMUNIST WILL

If not Marxist, Badiou's communism is better characterized as an *activist* philosophy. This is the direction taken by Peter Hallward's chapter in *IC*, "Communism of the Intellect, Communism of the Will." While certainly critical of Badiou's tendency toward an "extra-worldly" formulation of the truth procedure, at least with regard to the third communist sequence, Hallward is the most faithful of the book's authors to Badiou's subtractive philosophy of truth. "The will" is Hallward's name for this striving through subtraction to force the impossible into the possible. Though he pays lip service to the need for engagement with the concrete determinations of capital, Hallward separates politics from the critique of political economy, in the process reducing the latter to a cliché; his political philosophy instituting a breach with those unnamed characters who appeal to the "necessary movement of history," with "communism . . . conceived only as a more or less 'inevitable' consequence of capitalism's self-destruction" (*IC*, 113, 111).

And yet, unlike Badiou, Hallward does not jettison Marx and Marxism, but instead arrogates Marx to a transhistorical figure of the will, a voluntarism without sequence. Hallward preemptively counters critique on this front by arguing that his thesis is not that the will

“proceeds through empty or indeterminate space” (IC, 118), but this is not substantiated with any real account of the nature of its social determination. The rather inconsequential passages he quotes from Marx on the will are of little help in this regard. It is no surprise, because when Marx addresses this theme in more concerted fashion he can be rather hostile. In an essay known for the distinction it draws between mere “political” revolution and “social” revolution proper, Marx associates the will with bourgeois political forms that seek to capture the state without confronting the social relations of capital, a misdiagnosis of the conditions of exploitation that as a result serves to enforce it: “Because [the proletariat] thinks in political terms it regards the *will* as the cause of all evils and *force* and the *overthrow of a particular* form of the state as the universal remedy.” Such a formulation, as he writes of the 1830s uprisings of Lyon silk workers, “obscured the roots of their social misery, it falsified their insight into their real goal, their *political understanding deceived their social instincts*” (Marx 1975, 417–18).

But it is Rousseau and the Jacobins, not Marx, that are Hallward’s principal philosophical allies. From these we learn that a politics of the will is, among other things, both popular and inclusive, and disciplined and indivisible—the obvious tension between these poles solved by the pilot of “virtue” and “terror.” Hallward makes little comment on concrete instances and the specificities they may introduce into this picture of the indivisible popular will. Most remarkably, there is no mention of Mao or the Cultural Revolution. Given the philosophical and practical rigor and extent of Mao’s voluntarism, not to mention his significance for Badiou, it defies credibility that Hallward considers Mao to be an insignificant figure in this regard. I suspect Hallward feels less confident than Badiou that fidelity to the Maoist truth procedure can cancel out its barbarous historical record, and so he ignores it.

Lenin, on the other hand, does feature momentarily. Hallward argues that Lenin “is no more tempted than Luxemburg to substitute a Blanquist conspiracy for ‘the people’s struggle for power’” (IC, 125)—as if this in any way dealt with Luxemburg’s critique of the Leninist party, which for her is precisely not the “people’s struggle for power” but a dictatorship in the “*bourgeois* sense” (Luxemburg, 72, emphasis added). For Luxemburg, the party “paralyzes” workers’ capacities for

independent, situated, and multiform action, turning them into an “automaton” managed by a “handful of socialist dictators” whose rule is enforced through “terror” (102, 77, 78). The point is connected with that above concerning Soviet Taylorism, but she is isolating a different problematic here, that concerning the organizational forms of communist politics. It is a problematic that has extended through a substantial body of communist and feminist research and politics, from the perspective encapsulated in Otto Rühle’s memorable phrase that “the struggle against Fascism begins with the struggle against Bolshevism,” to Jo Freeman’s work on the “tyranny of structurelessness” and critique of the contemporary ideology of “openness” associated among others with *Mute* magazine. But Hallward’s voluntarism without determination has no time for any of this, as his easy dismissal of Luxemburg attests; his combination of ahistorical “free human action” and appeals to the virtue of Jacobin terror cut straight through it (*IC*, 128–29). Here is the problematic trait of activism revealed in his and Badiou’s politics, the quasi-religious declaration of truth that has no need for a reckoning with the complex and contradictory determinations of social subjects and the specificities of emergent struggles, but instead posits its own unchanging answer as solution to the riddle of history. It is not for nothing that Hallward elsewhere describes Badiou’s fidelity to truth as requiring a “leap of faith” among “converts” for whom the “truth is an all-or-nothing deal” (2003, 126, 127).

To be clear, I am in no sense opposed to the need for concrete decisions or for reaching beyond what is determined as possible by consensus reality—what one might, with Blanchot (96), call the “wrenching” “impatience” that is an intrinsic quality of the communist relation to the present. Hallward has done a considerable service in foregrounding these themes and extending them in the contemporary geopolitical realm. But decision (which is certainly not all that politics is) arises from particular, multiform, and contradictory situations, not from a generic “will,” least of all one couched in the peculiar frames of virtue and terror.

TERRIBLE TERROR

At this point it is worth asking, *why* has this figure of “terror” re-emerged now? A sketch of an answer might borrow from Isabelle

Garo's observation that I noted at the start, namely, that communism has reappeared on the terrain of theory "at the very moment when its referent seems to have disappeared" (cited in Bosteels, 8). She suggests also a more encouraging alternative—that communism returns as the figure of an emancipated future as capitalism becomes once more nameable—but it is the first formulation that helps explain the presence of "terror" in this body of work. It is claimed as a formulation with contemporary political power, but the real function of terror seems to be to compensate for a decided *lack* of power, the absence of communism in its party mode. Affirmation of the Jacobin terror as enforcement of the general will, parables of comrades murdering comrades for the greater revolutionary good (Žižek, 378–80), the violence of the Cultural Revolution as the communist "transvaluation of all values" (Badiou 2007, 63)—these are all certainly part of the (misguided) concept of militant subjectivity under construction in this body of work, but it is hard not to see them also as compensatory gestures for the lost world of orthodoxy, loud assertions (and the shock value is important) that communism *is* significant, because it is prepared, just like capital, to spill blood. The meaning of this affirmation of terror, that is, lies to a considerable extent in its powerful supplement, its compensatory affect.

True, the Left has no monopoly on terror. As Hallward points out, the Jacobin terror was considerably less bloody than the suppression of the Paris Commune, and we should include in the balance the more mundane brutality and slaughter of capitalist civilization, toward an understanding of which Hallward's (2008) book on Haiti is an important contribution. But there is "not much point," as Rancière (*IC*, 172) remarks, in reviving communism on the basis that "the so-called democracies also have much blood on their hands."

In Badiou the appeal to terror is more complicated. He has not been wholly averse to declaiming in its favor; his early critical support for the Khmer Rouge is a case in point (see Hallward 2003, 413), and here is a more abstract affirmation, from a letter to Žižek concerning a critic of their work: "[He] is not mistaken when, in hyperbolic eulogy, he identifies both of us as 'philosophers of Terror'" (Badiou 2010, 279). But compensation for the missing communism has for Badiou of late tended not to take the form of a principled defense of terror, but a more subjective identification with its historical personas,

where a list of significant figures might include Stalin, Mao, and Enver Hoxha in its midst, against whom one can admit criticism, but only “amongst ourselves” (264). There is a faintly ridiculous quality to such instances of subjective compensation, but I will resist the temptation to examine that further, because it appears that change is afoot in Badiou’s relation to terror. His paper at the 2011 conference “Communism, a New Beginning?” made a strident critique of terror as a “mimetic rivalry with the enemy,” a critique, indeed, that he extended to the place of violence throughout the second communist sequence.³ Assessment of the significance of this for Badiou’s Idea of communism will have to await its publication, presumably in the forthcoming *The Idea of Communism 2*.

COMMUNISM IN COMMON

If communism is not derived from Lenin, Mao, and other historical figures of orthodoxy, but instead understood as the “real movement” immanent to the mutating limits of capital, then we do not have to compensate for its absence with a retro appeal to terror, but turn our attention to its conditions in the present. Fortunately, there are resources in *IC* to assist in that task. The chapters by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri both make a plea, contra Badiou, for a communism that is apprehended and extended “through the critique of political economy” (Negri in *IC*, 155). Any periodization of communist politics is not, then, based on the abstract subjective forms of “revolution” or “party,” but on the specific configurations of the capital–labor relation, what the Marxist current of *operaismo*, with which Negri is famously associated, called “class composition” (this is just one instance that makes a mockery of Badiou’s self-regarding notion that the “Maoist current [was] the only true political creation of the sixties and seventies”; 2010, 101). A productive concept for the development of politics, research, and the diagnosis of emergent tendencies, class composition attends to the dynamic imbrication of struggle and capital: “The *technical* composition of the labour force is in constant motion and corresponds to an always adequate, and different, production of subjectivity. This is a *political* composition that must find concrete forms of expression and desire for revolution in its present circumstances” (Negri in *IC*, 160).

As is now well known, the periodization favored by this current is concerned with ascendant class compositions, with the movement from the “mass worker” of Fordism to the “immaterial,” “affective,” and “precarious” workers of post-Fordism, as the real subsumption of labor in capital tends toward a diffuse productivity that extends beyond the bounds of the working day, arising in large measure from socialization itself, what Marx (1973) in the *Grundrisse* calls the “social individual” and the “general intellect.” Michael Hardt’s chapter, “The Common in Communism,” takes up this problematic of socialized productivity in the emergence of the “common” as a new basis of capitalist accumulation and struggle in post-Fordist times. The common, Hardt argues, posits the (post)property form of communism as quite other to capitalist private property, of course, but also to the “public” property of socialism. It is a welcome shift of perspective onto the more ontological and speculative aspects of Marx’s communism, the transformation of being associated with the overcoming of the antinomy of subject and object that the commodity form imparts. This is communism as “the production of a new sensorium” (*IC*, 140), where nature, having lost its mere utility, is in mutual and expansive transformation with human relations, communism as the full “appropriation” of all “human relations to the world—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, wanting, acting, loving” (Marx cited in *IC*, 140–41). This is no primordial regression; the common here—and hence the transformed and transforming sensorium—is at once the “natural” and the “artificial,” a distinction that hence falls away.

This dovetails with Jean-Luc Nancy’s short chapter in *IC*, “Communism, the Word,” insofar as the “co” of communism for him signifies an association, a “being-in-common,” that undoes the dichotomies of individual/collective and subject/object in favor of a processual relation that he calls the “singular-plural” (150). If, as we have seen, the necessarily immanent relation of communist theory to capital means that it emerges from an ever-transforming set of relations, in Nancy this becomes a quality of the *sociality* of communism, which is experienced never as identity, a completed “work,” but only as exposure to “limits,” such that “communism,” as he elsewhere quotes Blanchot, is “that which excludes (and excludes itself from) every community already constituted” (cited in Nancy, 7). At a fundamental

level, then, communism is the “unworking” of identity, a process to which communism is itself subject (31).

This may sound a little obscure, but it would be a mistake to see Nancy’s communist formulations as some kind of literary adjunct to Marx and communism proper. Nancy himself suggests a clear link between the work of identity and capitalist accumulation, and he is up on the place of orthodox Marxism in enforcing such (2, 7, 74–75). In this respect there are intriguing points of resonance with communization theory, that other theory of communism as limit. The two also share the proclivity toward a somewhat ethereal formulation of communism, of which I raised some criticisms above. But let us be clear, the nonidentity of communism is a problem, and a productive one, that is shared also with Marx. It is apparent from my remarks on Hardt that Marx considered undetermined process—the “absolute movement of becoming,” as he puts it in the *Grundrisse*—to be in some essential way a core dynamic and quality of communism (Marx 1973, 488). But more to the point, Marx understood the act of positing this dynamic to be risking its closure, creating a “shadowless ideal” in the mind divorced from the real movement (Berki, 88). This creates what R. N. Berki has argued to be a necessary ambiguity and heterogeneity in Marx’s concept of communism, where communism contains an essentially unintelligible and incommunicable quality, a “vision” without determinate content that is interlaced and in dynamic tension with his more scientific “insight.” As insight and vision come together and, ultimately, come apart through the course of Marx’s work, he locates communism variously: in the intensive moment of revolution as a kind of immanent transvaluation (in his writings around the time of the 1848 revolutions); as a tendency toward techno-social becoming and postwork indicated by the “social individual” and “general intellect” (in the *Grundrisse*), for Berki and others, the soaring height of Marx’s formulation of communism; and, in a resigned register that has proven to be deeply troubling, in the collective management of production (implicit in the formulation of labor, necessity, and freedom in *Capital* volumes 1 and 3, and explicit in the “first stage” communism set out in *Critique of the Gotha Program*), a position that is much akin to the “crude communism” he had earlier dismissed, where “the category of *worker* is not abolished but extended to all men” (Marx 1975, 346). Communism must hold to the limits of capital, but it would seem that

without also holding to a speculative and almost incommunicable beyond, it founders, even in Marx, on a realism of the present state of things.

Returning to Hardt's chapter, the strength of his analysis is that he diagnoses these tendencies toward the common in the current form of biopolitical production and the transformations of contemporary property, as advanced sectors of capital move from the "moveable property" of physical commodities to the "immaterial property" of information, which has the novel quality of reproducibility. It is in this post-scarcity condition and the immediately *social* relations of knowledge, communication, and affect that generate immaterial property that Hardt locates the central antagonism of contemporary capital, the return "to centre stage [of] the conflict between the common and property as such" (*IC*, 135)—and we should recall that the problem of "property" is to be the "leading question" of communism in each instance (Marx and Engels 1973, 77). Hardt also argues that the emergence of the common is characterized by a shift in the dominant mode of expropriation from profit to rent—through financialization and neoliberal expropriation of public goods, but also, and more significant for Hardt's thesis, in the rise of intellectual property and licensing fees as means of income generation from immaterial and post-scarcity property.

I find this turn to property and the common considerably more fruitful than Hardt and Negri's earlier work on the "multitude," for it shifts communism from a problematic of the subject to one of socio-material process, allowing us to attend to processes in the unworking of commodity relations (be they conscious, unconscious, structural, or all these at once) without the need to identify a privileged political agent. And yet this picture of a fecund immateriality that "triumphs over the material" is somewhat muddled by the enduring presence of the materials and bodies that enable, and are commanded by, the flows of apparently "immaterial" information (computer hardware, manufacturing and service labor, precious metals, server farms, e-waste, and so on) (*IC*, 135). This is characteristic of a broader problem, a tendency evident throughout Hardt and Negri's work to slip back into the orthodox framework of forces and relations of production, where the latter, in the form of copyright law and the like, are only "parasitic" and "external" mechanisms of capture of the former, which now

generates the common in a self-directed and “autonomous” manner (137, 139). Forms of labor and property are certainly undergoing considerable change, and rent is a significant feature of this transformation, but it is no more convincing to say that the common and its modes of labor are organized autonomously from capital and hence already a communist substance, than it is to say the same of industrial labor. Recent work by Franco Berardi is a counter to this thesis, well worth noting here because it also originates from the Italian class composition perspective and, like Hardt and Negri, makes considerable use of the *Grundrisse*’s “Fragment on Machines.” Interested in many of the same developments, Berardi detects not a tendency toward productive autonomy but a “cellularization” of labor, where the somatic, cognitive, affective, and semiotic capacities of human being are disaggregated and ever-reassembled by techno-social automatisms tending to the speeds of capital. It is a condition that exceeds human physiological and neurological capacity and so is awash with anxiety, depression, and exhaustion, while the state of generalized precarity and competition nonetheless compels an entrepreneurial self-investment in the same field. One does not need to follow Berardi’s sometimes dubious political conclusions (a kind of enclave politics of withdrawal) to see this cellurization of labor as the more convincing perspective from which to approach the relation between capital and social production, and one that makes important moves toward a communist politics of the psychosomatic structures and pathologies of neoliberal capitalism.

The problematic of the common also has a central place in Žižek’s essay in *IC*, which posits the validity of communism on four points of contemporary antagonism: the threat of ecological catastrophe; the inappropriateness of private property for new regimes of immaterial production; the socio-ethical implications of technoscience; and new forms of apartheid, new walls, and slums—this fourth antagonism of “the excluded” being a necessary part of the other three, establishing their communist edge. Analysis of these points would shift this article into the substantive content of the contemporary critique of political economy, and so I won’t pursue them here; I note only that in headline they suggest a significant new vista in Žižek’s communism. Although he frames these points of antagonism as possible new modalities of the communist Idea and holds to the continued relevance of the “Jacobin-Leninist” paradigm, his routing of communism through

these worldly antagonisms is in marked contrast to the Pauline militancy that characterized the earlier moment of his relation with Badiou.

COMMUNISM OF INTELLIGENCE

In “Communists without Communism?” Jacques Rancière revisits his research on the pedagogical practice of Joseph Jacotot in order to extend a communism that not so much seeks equality than is founded upon it, an *a priori* “communism of intelligence” that refutes the pedagogical logic whereby cultivated elites lead the ignorant to intelligence and equality (*IC*, 168). This practice of equality is interlaced with disruption of the partitions of manual and intellectual labor, since intelligence is no longer the exclusive preserve of the latter. As such, the primary equality of intelligence is conjoined with a primary refusal of work on the part of those who are deemed only fit for such: communism is “the capacity of the ignorant to learn by himself” and the “capacity of a community of workers to stop work” (168).

Rancière’s thesis is appealing, driven as it is by a radically egalitarian impulse that is clearly opposed to the authoritarian structures and capitalist imperatives of Badiou’s second sequence (*IC*, 176; Rancière 2011, 100–104). But if you detect in this egalitarianism a version of Marx’s dictum that “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves,” you would, in Rancière’s judgment, be wrong (cited in *IC*, 116). Rancière argues that Marx is necessarily opposed to this equality of intelligence, since his communism is “not the gathering of emancipated individuals, attempting to experience collective life as a response to selfishness or injustice,” but a product of the universality of capitalist production itself, found through the unfurling of capital’s contradictions and diagnosed in Marxist science, the preserve of an intellectual elite (*IC*, 170). This is a significant charge, for it takes aim at the understanding of communism as “real movement,” where struggle is approached necessarily through a relation with the mutations and categories of capital. Rancière’s argument hence needs countering carefully.

Rancière is in part correct about Marx. Experiments in micro-community—from Icarian communes to Temporary Autonomous Zones—that posit expanding aggregations of extracapitalist sociality

as the route to revolution are not communist in Marx's sense. And it is true also that tensions in the communist movement between the poles of workers' self-activity and scientific Marxism have at times produced something 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" (IC, 172). Rancière notes as example his generation's volte-face from Althusserian science, revealing the structural false consciousness of labor, to Maoist enthusiasm for the reeducation of intellectuals through manual work.

Yet in making his case, Rancière reproduces the dichotomy between activity and critique that Marx himself does much to overcome. Why cannot Marx's critique of what he sees as noncommunist tendencies in the workers' movement and his mature theory of capital be understood as practice and thought that is *immanent* to that movement? Too much hangs on Rancière's interpretation of Marx's dissolution of the Communist League as a straightforward rejection of workers' self-activity; it is not so clear cut as that. Elsewhere Rancière (2003) gets closer to a productive reading of Marx's relationship to the workers' movement (albeit as part of his critique of Marx). Given Marx's formulation of the proletariat as the class of self-abolition, Rancière forwards the notion that Marx's understanding of the party, for all its universality, is directed toward not unity but division, that "first of all the purpose of a party is not to unite but divide" (Rancière 2003, 86). In Rancière's reading, this division names the communist disruption of the modes of identity and security associated with the workers' movement; it is the effect of the proletariat as its own overcoming on the workers' movement as identity. Yet having made this significant observation, Rancière then reduces division to a mechanism of interminable deferral on Marx's part, a mechanism that induces Marx's dissolution of the Communist League and thereafter sets up the science of capital, and the writing of its book, as proxy for the revolution forever postponed. In so doing, Rancière ignores the dynamic and intensive facets of this division in Marx's critical *practice*, vis-à-vis his opposition to the persistence of Freemasonry and the secret society in the workers' movement, Jacobin models of dictatorship by enlightened minority, utopian efforts to bypass the working class, Bakuninist "invisible dictatorship," and so on.

With this more sympathetic understanding of “division,” we can understand how Marx’s intellectual and practical relation to the workers’ movement moved back and forth from moments of close identification to angry denunciation and self-extraction, at no point becoming an identity with which he was wholly at one, for that would be to surrender the fraught, self-critical, and necessarily “uncomfortable” quality, as Blanchot (10) has it, that is the singular condition of the proletariat. But what of Rancière’s specific point about the dissolution of the Communist League? Well, Marx (n.d.) himself challenged the notion that this dissolution was a result of “doctrinaire indifference.” Instead, in reflecting upon his non-involvement in radical organizations in the 1860s, he posited a distinction between the party in an “ephemeral sense” and in a “broad historical sense,” where the former designates any particular organization situated in time and space and the latter is more akin to the “real movement” discussed above, being explicitly and necessarily *not* characterized by organizational continuity. It feels appropriate to end discussion of Rancière’s immanent equality by noting that there is a significant vein in communist theory that has combined this understanding of the ephemeral and historic party with Marx’s mature theory of capital to argue that it is in the very endurance of political associations (including those “gather[ing] of emancipated individuals” favored by Rancière) that inegalitarian structures take hold of struggle. Facing outward, such “emancipated” association cannot but posit and ever-renew a demarcation from the social, since the latter necessarily places the association under threat, while, facing inward, this demarcation constitutes an organizational identity in which social hierarchies, psychological dependencies, and reified thinking are intensified in associations that tend toward homogeneity based on the equivalence of their members to the particular feature that defines them. This critical perspective suggests a variant of Rancière’s communism of intelligence for which Marx is not an obstacle but a significant aid, only this time, contra Rancière, emancipated group identity is found to be a trap (see especially the work of Jacques Camatte).

THE ACTUALITY OF THE ULTRA-LEFT

Such research on the party form has been a feature of left-communist or ultra-left currents, designations that recall Lenin’s pamphlet “*Left-Wing*”

Communism: An Infantile Disorder, a text that provides the impetus for the chapter in *IC* by Bruno Bosteels, “The Leftist Hypothesis.” Bosteels discards Lenin’s metaphor of a communist passage from immature leftism to mature and responsible orthodoxy, and with it—as a result of the 1960s and Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit’s reversal of Lenin’s polarity in *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative*—any simple primacy of orthodoxy. But the sense remains of an intimate relation between the two. Bosteels observes between orthodoxy and leftism a “never-ending dialectical struggle” (*IC*, 58), where the former is the necessary engagement with the state form and the latter the political moral high ground, which would appear “today as the beautiful soul of communism, if it were not for the fact that, without this soul, the communist Idea is perhaps little more than an empty shell” (53). An implicit aim of Bosteels’s argument is to rescue Badiou and the increasingly “ethereal ‘Idea’ of communism” stripped of determinations by offering points of relation with orthodoxy, and this is part of his broader aspiration to advance a “communism of communisms” that gives equal weight to “leftism” and “orthodoxy,” “in which speculative leftism is not just the symptom of a maddening desire for purity but also serves as a constant source of revitalization for communism” (Bosteels, 283).

The problems with Bosteels’s formulation stem from his uncritical adoption of Lenin’s characterization of the ultra-left as a politics of purity—the doctrinal “repetition of the ‘truths’ of pure communism” (Lenin, cited in *IC*, 37)—which Bosteels then transposes onto the contemporary philosophical scene, with Badiou, Negri, and Deleuze presented as similarly purist in their refusal to sully their hands with the state. But as I have indicated, the ultra-left object of Lenin’s critique is *not* a pristine purism, nor is it something that should be understood through an abstract dichotomy of pro- or antistate, but the opening of a breach with orthodoxy through the interrogation of specific and concrete political situations and theoretical problematics. These start with critique and struggle against the Bolshevik state form, and then develop through attention to the antagonistic dynamics of twentieth-century capitalism in such themes as war and accumulation, the counterrevolutionary function of the Comintern, the agricultural question, real subsumption and the impersonal agency of capital, the technological form of domination, the fetish of democracy, the ephemeral and historical party, antipedagogical practice, and so forth.

None of this features in Bosteels's argument. He establishes the parameters of leftism and orthodoxy without any reference to the historical ultra-left (or to its contemporary successors), and so erases this critical scene while creating a big tent communism that nominally includes it. Given Bosteels's stated aim to hold to the "actuality of communism" and to historicize the communist hypothesis, addressing its "failures" and "legacy of unsolved problems," this is a limitation that borders on obfuscation (*IC*, 59). Moreover, it is only by such erasure of the actuality of the ultra-left that it is at all possible to construct his picture of a continuum from leftism to orthodoxy. True, it takes until the late 1960s for left-communist currents to fully identify and begin to excise the ontological assumptions about labor that they shared with orthodoxy, but to understand their efforts as anything other than a groping attempt to move against orthodoxy, one that understands orthodoxy as wholly a part of the problem, would be somewhat perverse. Bosteels leaves us, then, with a dialectical embrace between leftism and orthodoxy that is abstracted from the actuality of political and critical history, so missing the opportunity that this actuality provides to come to an understanding of the nature of orthodoxy and the ultra-left critique, and, in this, move toward a communism that overcomes the problems with both.

MINORITY AND THE UNIVERSAL UNTIMELY

I will draw to a close by returning to the theme of the temporality of communism and its relation to our present. Against the enduring teleologies of European thought and politics, teleologies that are not alien to the communist imaginary, the chapter in *IC* by Susan Buck-Morss makes the case for a communist temporality of the "untimely" present. Nietzsche's untimely is here framed as a concept of universality, a means of thinking the present as constituted necessarily and irrevocably by a shared global experience of difference: "We—all of us alive today—who may have nothing more nor less in common than sharing *this* time, share as a consequence precisely the *untimeliness of the present*—the truly new, that none of our knowledge traditions has anticipated" (*IC*, 77). To live this untimely condition is to experience "extreme discomfort," but that is the point; communist theory must be

adequate to the shock of the radically new, against efforts “to seize the contemporary and stuff it back into the Procrustean bed of tradition, destroying precisely its global newness” (77, 68). This is a test applicable in general to the current return of communist theory, but it is one that Buck-Morss sets with a particular object in view. For a central aim of her chapter is to draw out the extreme discomfort that religion, specifically Islam, presents to Eurocentric thinking of communism, arguing that it is only by engaging with the real content of religion that communism will have any purchase on our untimely present. I will not pursue that argument here, though it could certainly play a part in the formulation of minority that I now turn.

Buck-Morss is careful to note that the untimely present is the lived experience of the universal conditions of capitalism, conditions that would make any politics of subjective authenticity precisely “inauthentic” in its inadequate grasp of the real—hers is not a culturalist theory of difference (*IC*, 70). With capital and the untimeliness of the present held together in this way, her chapter begins to address the considerable failure of the conference “The Idea of Communism” to address what might be called a communism of minorities (a failure well registered by the subverted conference program circulated at the time, with its feminist and postcolonial speakers and content nudging out a panel that was decidedly white male in its composition, Judith Balso the only exception).⁴ Minority here would not be a category of identity, but a way of thinking the concrete and manifold particularities through which the global untimely “now” is produced and encountered as a politicized field. It also offers an opportunity to flesh out the somewhat anemic image of communism as “limit” that we encountered above in communization theory. To this end I will make a few brief comments on the concept of the “minoritarian” in Deleuze and Guattari, political philosophers whose significant contribution to communist thought did not take the form of Lenin and Mao, and as such has been somewhat obscured by resurgent orthodoxy.

As Deleuze and Guattari understand it, “majority” describes a system of identities that are constituted and nurtured by social relations to the extent that “the social milieu serv[es] as a mere environment or a background” (1986, 17). The “minoritarian” condition, on the other hand, is one where social relations no longer facilitate coherent identity, for they are experienced as riven with contradictory imperatives

and constraints. As such, the social ceases to be mere background and floods individual experience, as life becomes a tangle of limits or “impossibilities.” Particularity, then, is here constituted by and interlaced with social relations, and it is on this condition, not some kind of minority identity, that minoritarian politics is founded, a condition that “forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics.” In turn, this immanent relation to the social is not a flattening of particularity, but quite the reverse: “The individual concern . . . becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it” (17).

The minoritarian is, then, a structural condition, but it is also actively affirmed, constituted as a politics through a certain “willed poverty”—a persistent deferral of subjective plenitude that forces ever-new engagement with social relations—such that, as they quote Kafka, “one strives to see [the boundary] before it is there, and often sees this limiting boundary everywhere” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 19, 17). And this is a condition very much entwined with developments in global capitalism, as the imperative of capital to set and overcome limits has produced an evermore fragmented, variegated, and mutable patchwork of unequal exchange, exploitation, and poverty, where the identity structures of Fordism no longer hold and “peripheral zones of underdevelopment” become constitutive features of the “center.” “Ours,” as they say, “is becoming the age of minorities” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 469). In other words—and keeping in mind Buck-Morss’s insistence on thinking the *universality* of communism—the minoritarian is the contemporary condition of the proletariat, provided that we understand the proletariat, with Marx, not as a substantial subject but as a process of self-overcoming: “The power of minority, of particularity, finds its figure or its universal consciousness in the proletariat. But as long as the working class defines itself by an acquired status, or even by a theoretically conquered State, it appears only as ‘capital,’ a part of capital (variable capital), and does not leave the *plan(e) of capital*” (472).

There is clearly some consonance with communization theory here, not least in the sense that the breakdown of the identity structures of Fordism and the associated demise of the workers’ movement is viewed as a significant opportunity for the development of a genuinely anti-capitalist politics, a politics without identity that is stretched across the social whole rather than dominated by the integrating patterns of

work and its privileged political subjectivities. And for both, the immanence of struggles to the mutating limits of capital is intensified through an emphasis on active forgetting. This is the communist impulse in Deleuze's (277) "revolutionary forgetting," going "back to zero" as a counter to the heavy culture of memory in traditional Marxism, a culture that fashions and integrates identity through the essentially bourgeois temporality of linear development.

But they differ significantly with regard to the degree and nature of attention that they place on the particular situations of the present. As I noted above, communization theory holds to an austere understanding of the limits of struggles, making little affirmative evaluation of life and politics for the risk of succumbing to identity. The concept of the minoritarian, by contrast, takes the experience of the limit, of the impossibility of identity, as an opportunity to become immersed in the tangle of social relations that traverse and constitute any one particularity, to concentrate on the specific ways these particularities and relations are subject to minoritarian unworking. No longer left as an ethereal limit, here the dynamic of non-identity is opened up to political analysis and intervention through a rich set of concepts—a list, which is all I can give here, would include the plane of immanence, transversality, minor literature, the being of sensation, the involuntarism of the event, ecosophy, metamodelization—that are articulated in relation to an expanded range of associational and expressive aspects of organic and inorganic life, as much as to contemporary regimes of accumulation and value. Attention to such features is not to abandon the wrenching quality of communism as encountered only at the limit of struggles—communism, that is, as fundamentally a figure of revolution—but to consider how it might be concretely mediated as "real movement" through the manifold particularities of the untimely present.

CONCLUSION

Can we be heartened by the return of interest in communist theory? Undoubtedly so, but we will not get very far with the content of its dominant academic expression. Communism does not come "from the womb of the self-positing Idea" (Marx 1973, 278) and is not best

understood through the traditions of orthodoxy. Communist thought of the “real movement” teaches that Lenin and Mao designate *capitalist* social forms. These false representations of revolution dominated the twentieth century, but with neoliberal restructuring and the collapse of the workers’ movement they look ever more archaic and redundant—thankfully, their strange revival in academic theory cannot compensate for the absence of their referent in the broader social world. Rather than attempt to resuscitate orthodoxy, we would do better to understand communism as a form of thought and practice that is constitutively opposed to continuities of tradition, subjectivity, and organization. The past can be mined for flecks of experimental social form, but only insofar as they come into view from *contemporary* conjunctures and problems. For communism is not born of the past, but leans into the future, with a fragmented temporality engendered of its relation to the transforming limits of capital and the untimely shocks of the present. At these mutating limits, it is necessary to speculate on the possible forms communism might take—to interrogate being-in-common, the general intellect, the production of a new sensorium, immanent equality, the overcoming of labor and its identities—and this through critical engagement with contemporary struggles and minoritarian formations. Without that, communism gives us no purchase on the now, no means to live in *this* world. But the singular vitality of communism, and its wrenching impatience, is experienced also and always in its resistance to representation in the present, for “one does not belong to communism, and communism does not let itself be designated by what it names” (Blanchot, 295).

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Notes

1. See Endnotes (2008a) for a brief history of the communization perspective, which was first formulated in the late 1960s in French communist currents

seeking to critically appropriate the historical ultra-left in the new conditions of capital and struggle. It is developed today principally in the journals and forums *Blaumachen*, *Endnotes*, *Riff-Raff*, *Sic*, *Théorie Communiste*, and *Troploin*.

2. On this point *Théorie Communiste* and *Troploin* (Gilles Dauvé and Karl Nesić) part company, the latter being more inclined to understand communization as an invariant potential of the communist movement.

3. In Badiou's absence from the conference, his paper was read by Bruno Bosteels. See "Communism, a New Beginning? Day 1 Alain Badiou: Politics and State, Mass Movement and Terror," YouTube, uploaded June 4, 2012, by Verso Books, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEU7DMKess>.

4. Buck-Morss was not a participant at the conference. For the counter-program, see <http://thecommmune.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/communismprogramme11.pdf>.

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